The Asian American Christian Collaborative's efforts to confront anti-Asian racism in the church

The pandemic has made an existing problem worse.

by Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil in the November 4, 2020 issue

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Earlier this year, Raymond Chang went to Walmart.

It was his first trip out of the house after he and many other Americans had started self-quarantining to fight the spread of the novel coronavirus. Soon after he walked into the store, two women looked at him, and one pointed at him and said, "Oh, there's another one," he recalled. He glanced around at the other people nearby.

"I was like, *What other one?*" Chang said. "You go through this mental checklist—*Am I the only guy? No, there are other guys. Am I the only one wearing a mask? No, there are other people wearing masks.* I looked around and said, *Oh, I'm the only Asian.*"

Chang, who is Korean American, had been hearing about the uptick in anti-Asian racism during the pandemic, but he never expected to be the recipient. He had grown up hearing racist jokes about Asians, but as an adult these incidents had become less frequent.

Weeks after the episode at Walmart, he was sitting in his front yard in Chicago on one of the first nice days of the year. A white truck passed by, and the driver yelled out of his window, “You yellow piece of shit.”

This time, Chang was concerned.

“At that point, I’m like, *He knows where I live,*” Chang said. “He feels emboldened enough to curse out the window at me while he’s driving. I don’t know if he’s capable of violence, but now I’m worrying. People have had rocks thrown through their windows, businesses have been vandalized—all those things come to mind.”

Chang’s experience is among thousands of incidents of racism directed at Asian Americans since the first cases of COVID-19 emerged in the US. These incidents escalated in March after President Trump and others started referring to the coronavirus as the “Chinese virus” and the “Wuhan virus.” By August, the group Stop AAPI Hate said that it had received more than 2,500 reports of discrimination and racism—likely a significant undercount, since most such episodes are not reported. Incidents have included verbal harassment, threats, spitting, vandalism, and even physical violence. In Texas, a man stabbed three members of an Asian American family; in New York, a woman suffered severe burns after a man poured what was thought to be acid on her.

When Chang, a campus minister at Wheaton College, saw these numbers, he started talking to others about their experiences. He soon learned about another troubling trend within his own Christian community. When Asian American Christians told their predominantly White church leaders and fellow congregants about their experiences, some were dismissed or even ridiculed. This spurred Chang to action. He helped found the Asian American Christian Collaborative, a new group that aims to give Asian American Christians a platform to discuss issues of race and racism in a faith-based context and to challenge the broader Christian community to adopt an antiracist posture.

“Racism lives as much inside of the church as it lives outside of the church,” Chang said, “because we’re not doing enough work to address it.”

The AACC was launched in March when it published its Statement on Anti-Asian Racism in the Time of COVID-19. The 1,300-word declaration outlines the ways Asian Americans have been discriminated against during the pandemic and oppressed throughout US history, from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the incarceration of people of Japanese descent during World War II to Islamophobia after the 9/11 attacks. It calls for churches to actively combat anti-Asian racism and for schools to increase education on Asian American issues and offer culturally competent mental health services—as well as for all people to support Asian businesses, which have been hit especially hard during the pandemic, and to hold elected officials accountable for harmful rhetoric.

“Faithful Christian witness requires anti-racist work, and silence only perpetuates the sins not addressed,” the statement reads. “This includes going beyond shallow acknowledgement of the most obvious incidents of racism to taking responsibility in confronting the longstanding tendencies of people to discount and dismiss the realities of racism. It also includes addressing the disbelief and disobedience of your constituents who continue to ignore members of the body of Christ who are in pain and under threat.”

Jeff Liou, one of the statement’s drafters and national director of theological formation for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, said the document was a way to “formalize our protest” by articulating the hurt felt by Asian Americans and proposing steps forward.

“We wanted to say something about the shape of faithfulness in this current context,” he said. “We wanted to state it positively, that this is what faithfulness looks like. But there’s a flip side: that it would be unfaithful to leave the pain of Asian Americans unaddressed [in contexts] from pulpits to lesson planning to family conversations. Following Jesus requires us to walk with those who are hurting, and that’s essentially what we mean by faithfulness.”

By the end of May, the statement had more than 10,000 signatures, including from Asian and non-Asian leaders at the National Association of Evangelicals, Fuller Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, Yale Divinity School, Emory’s Candler School of Theology, Claremont School of Theology, *Sojourners*, and *Christianity Today*.

Gabriel Salguero, president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, was one signatory. “I think our brothers and sisters in the White evangelical world can benefit from hearing the stories and the realities of their brothers and sisters in the evangelicals of color community,” he said. “It can create and foster—hopefully—Christian empathy and compassion, and a mobilization for justice for communities of color.”

Emilie M. Townes, dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School, was another. “Racism against any one group is wrong and, to my mind, is sinful and makes a mockery of God’s love for all people,” she said. “I believe it is important to stand in solidarity and serve as an active witness when siblings of faith speak out against racist injustice and hatred.”

The coronavirus pandemic isn’t the first time members of the AACC have experienced anti-Asian racism, including in the context of the church. Liou said that when he was growing up in Oklahoma in the ’90s, his Chinese American church was spray painted with an anti-Korean slur. “I remember this Chinese church trying to kind of let it roll off our backs like it wasn’t that big a deal,” he said. “I’ve reflected on that for decades, and I’m just thinking, our inability to articulate our pain and to resist that kind of stuff, that really needs to change.” He went on to study Asian American history in college, and he started connecting the dots between anti-Asian sentiment in the 19th century and in the present day. Earlier this year, he posted about anti-Asian racism on his Facebook page and a member of his church dismissed him, using the word *snowflake*.

“My experience has been shaped by disbelief,” said Liou, who now lives in Southern California and serves as AACC’s antiracism resource specialist. People don’t believe that Asian Americans are people of color, he said, or that they suffer from racism. Some even subscribe to “definitions of racism that preclude the possibility that someone with the level of privilege that Asian Americans frequently do possess could experience racism.” Then there is people’s “general disbelief that racism is a normal part of everyday experience for people of color.”

Chang, who is now president of AACC, said he thought about many of these issues while he was in seminary at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Issues of race, ethnicity, and culture were hardly discussed there, he said, and the perspectives of non-White Christians were rarely explored. So he supplemented his course work with other readings and found Asian American mentors who could help guide his thinking.

“I cherish the contributions of European Christians,” said Chang, “but I don’t think it’s the whole picture of Christianity that we’re called to learn from and to pursue and emulate.” In 2017, he wrote in *Christianity Today* about some of the challenges Asian American evangelicals face in their White and multiethnic churches, in particular the pressure to adopt what he called “white expressions of Christianity.”

“There was this growing sense that Asian Americans primarily in White, evangelical spaces either felt the need to fully assimilate or not have a space at all,” he said. “Especially if they wanted to bring their Asian American reality, their culture, their identity into the mix, I think a lot of people felt like the only part of the Asian American identity that’s really welcome in a lot of these spaces are the ones that fit into the perpetual foreigner stereotype or the model minority stereotype.”

Jane Hong, a historian at Occidental College, said Asian American Christians have long grappled with these issues. Many of the first Christians of Asian descent came to the United States in the 19th century through church and missionary networks, she said. By the 20th century, Asian American Christians were making inroads into mainline Protestant denominations, some of which developed caucuses devoted to Asian American issues.

Following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which lifted many of the old barriers to entry from non-European countries, the population of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans grew and diversified. Those who were Christian flocked toward evangelical denominations, a move that reflects not only the success of American proselytizing in Asia but also the broader shift toward evangelicalism across the US, Hong said. Today, the majority of Asian American Christians are evangelical. While they make up just 2 percent of American evangelicals, Asian Americans are one of the fastest-growing populations in evangelicalism, meaning they’re set up to take on a central role in the future of American Christianity, she said.

“If demographics matter, which I think everyone would say they do, you need to pay attention to who’s growing and who the people are, the future of what life will be like,” she said. “Who’s going to be pastoring the churches, funding the churches?”

In the past decade, Hong said, Asian Americans have risen to high-profile leadership positions in several national evangelical groups. Yet the perception that Asian Americans don’t face real discrimination persists, she said, while Asian Americans church leaders are often expected to put their own culture aside and assimilate into

the White majority.

In response, individuals and institutions have started to grapple with the intersections of race and faith. Seminaries such as Fuller and Princeton have established Asian American centers and programs, while scholars such as Soong-Chan Rah and Amos Yong are working to develop an Asian American theology and train students to serve in Asian American contexts, Hong said. Asian American theologians have also emerged in mainline Protestant and Catholic traditions, including Andrew Sung Park, Peter Phan, and Kwok Pui-lan.

Part of what the AACC is trying to do is bring these existing conversations to new audiences. The group is building a trove of online resources, including videos, podcasts, and articles that Asian Americans and their allies can use to inform themselves and to learn how to start these difficult conversations in their own congregations. One of these resources will be a master class on antiracism; another is a series of collaborations that will focus on topics such as Asian American theology, preaching, and worship styles. The AACC is also developing a tool kit built by and for Asian American college students.

Rachel Leong, who graduated this year from George Fox University in Oregon, is one of the students building the tool kit, and she's also contributing to an AACC devotional. She said the group is "something [she] had been searching for," because her identities as an Asian American and a Christian have often felt separated. "It's really about feeling deeply seen and deeply understood in a way that truly acknowledges and pays attention to the wholeness of who we are, not just one part, like we're so used to," she said.

One of the challenges for the AACC, said Michelle Reyes, a church planter in Austin, Texas, and vice president of the group, is going up against the idea that race and faith should be separated. "When issues of racism occur, like anti-Asian racism right now, there are a lot of conservative Christians who say that our only response should be to preach the gospel—nothing else," she said. "The assumption is that antiracism work is not the work of the kingdom or that actively fighting against unjust systems is not part of kingdom work. Just say[ing], 'Believe in Jesus, believe he died for you,' is somehow enough. . . . We *are* preaching the gospel, and the gospel demands that we fight for justice for all people and call out things like racism. And we need to start by doing that in the church."

Liou, who credits African American theologians such as Willie James Jennings and Love Sechrest for shaping his thinking, said there's a tendency to think that race isn't present in the Bible—and that this is a mistake. "These are considered to be issues foreign to the gospel, just as we're considered to be foreigners to the United States," he said.

Take the story in Galatians, when Peter withdraws from table fellowship with gentiles after "certain men" come from Jerusalem and criticize him for these activities. Paul then confronts Peter, saying that this goes against the gospel. Liou said there's a parallel between the intergroup dynamics in this story and racial dynamics today. "It can be confusing to readers: Why did he do that?" Liou said. "The takeaway for uninitiated readers is that Paul is pressing on the gospel mission—and that's nice, and that's not untrue. But a reader who's attuned to racialization will recognize that there is a retreat to privilege on Peter's part, and there's an analogy to retreating to Whiteness, or most favored status."

For Chang, it's important that the AACC's work has a biblical foundation—and it's not hard to find inspiration there. "When you go from Genesis to Revelation, the whole idea of a multiethnic, multicultural kingdom is woven throughout scripture," he said.

While the AACC is primarily focused on racism and discrimination against Asian Americans, the group has also spoken out against injustices directed at other communities of color, including police killings of Black Americans. The group has published articles with titles like "An Asian-American Guide to Dismantling Anti-Blackness" and "George Floyd, Tou Thao, and the Parable of Our Times," a reflection on the Hmong American police officer who has been charged with aiding and abetting George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis. The AACC also tweeted photos of Chang at a Chicago rally holding a sign that says, "Yellow Peril Supports Black Power."

At the same time, members of the AACC are conscious of the long-standing anti-Black attitudes many Asian Americans have held—and they're working to combat them within their own community. Before Floyd's death, the group hosted a three-part web series called "Interconnected" that addresses the historical conflicts between Asian Americans and African Americans and explores how to pursue healing and solidarity moving forward. Cohosted with Be the Bridge, a nonprofit devoted to racial reconciliation in a Christian context, the series features Black scholars, church leaders, theologians, and counselors in conversation with AACC

leaders and Asian American scholars.

“There is no way we could ever ask our Black brothers and sisters to stand in solidarity with us until we confess the sins of our own community against the Black community and work toward ties of healing and resilience for both our communities going forward,” said Reyes. “The two go together.”

As American Christianity—and the US as a whole—becomes more diverse, AACC leaders say it’s not enough for people of color to fill the pews and the occasional leadership position. The church must create a genuine space for them. For Liou, this means accepting the unique gifts Asian Americans have to bring, such as different leadership styles and methods of decision making. “Without wanting to essentialize or stereotype us, we bring a different set of habits to theology, community life, and understanding of the church, which could be contributions if they simply would [let them] be,” he said. “But because they are frequently considered to be foreign and incompatible with the status quo . . . they are untapped resources.”

Jenny Lei Elsey, associate dean of intercultural life at George Fox University and director of mobilization for the AACC, said this diversity also has a spiritual dimension.

“No one culture represents the full breadth of who God is,” she said. “Until we can pull in these voices and how these lived experiences influence and inform the way that we understand scripture—the way that we understand God—we’ll never get a full picture of who God is.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “A fuller picture of God.”