

THE
Episcopal
CHURCH



ASIAMERICA MINISTRY
in the
21ST CENTURY

ASIAMERICA

The Rev. Dr. Winfred B. Vergara

I am going to make a statement: The 21st century is going to be the 'Asia-America Century.' It means that Asia will join the United States of America as a partner in the global search for a truly free, humane, just and peaceful world community. The Asia-America century will alter the way we do politics, religion and theology.

The DAWN of ASIAN CENTURY

My faith statement is not without basis. Thirty years ago, as a Filipino priest serving in the Anglican Church of Singapore, I listened to a lecture from a noted economist, Gunnar Myrdal, author of a celebrated book, *The Asian Drama*. When asked why he wrote Asian Drama and not African Drama or European Drama, he replied, “I got impressed with this idea that the destiny of humankind will come to be decided in Asia because it is such a tremendously large part of humanity.”

That Asia and Asians dominate the geographic and demographic milieu is a statement of fact. Asia covers 29.4% of the Earth's land area and has a population of almost 2/3rd of the world's seven billion people. Together, China's and India's populations alone are estimated to be almost three billion. The majority languages of the world are Mandarin, Hindi, English and Spanish in that hierarchical order.

China and India also complement each other (*yin yang*) as the via media of Asian pragmatism and wisdom tradition. Chinese pragmatism is exemplified by Deng Xiaoping who opened China to globalization. As China's foremost leader in 1978-1992, Deng instituted China's “open door” policy and introduced free enterprise into China socialist economy with such words “It doesn't matter if they are black cats or white cats, so long as they catch mice, they are good cats.” India's wisdom tradition is exemplified by one of its many sages, Mahatma Gandhi, who saw God in everything. “To a hungry person, God appears in a loaf of bread,” he said.

Today, both China and India are leading the world in reaping the fruits of globalization. China with its manufacturing industry saturates the world's retail shops with its products. India, with its developed computer industry, has become indispensable. It is a fact that when Silicon Valley in California had its computer glut in Y2K (Year 2000), the savvy American computer engineers turned to their counterparts in Bangalore, the technopolis of India.

THEOLOGY *and* MINISTRY

It is my belief that whenever something new happens in the external world, what follows is something new in the internal world. Religion often precedes science but sometimes it is the other way around. The spirit often precedes the flesh but sometimes it is the other way around.

In the Christian world, whenever there is a spiritual awakening, there also follows material prosperity. As a nation seeks the kingdom of God, “all these things are added” (Matthew 6:33). But sometimes the reverse is true. When the world awakens to the truth and expresses it in arts and literature, the church also experiences revival of its own understanding of God. The Church often prophesies to Society but sometimes the reverse is true; Society also prophesies to the Church. Church is oftentimes the *avant garde* for social change; sometimes the opposite is true; Society can also lead the Church to change. There are prophets in both sides.

One example was the renaissance and the religious reformation in Europe. When Italian arts awakened to the works of Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, Donatello, Botticelli and the Medici family, the religious realm of Europe also brought the German Reformation of Martin Luther and the English Reformation of Henry VIII.

It is my belief that the Asia-America Century will bring forth a new revival of humanities and the arts as well as new doing of theology. It is no wonder that Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California is now focusing on Asia as their priority target for seminarians, theologians and thinkers. In the words of David Bundy, the school's librarian, “The most important discourses in theology and ministry in America in the 21st century, will be happening not across the Atlantic but across the Pacific.” The new partnership of the Episcopal Asiamerica Ministry (EAM) and the Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) to develop a Doctor of Ministry with concentration on Asia-America Studies is a step in this direction. I wish to join this call for the American Church to “look east” and engage in partnership in mission, ministry and theology with Asia.

The AMERICAN CHURCH in the CROSSROADS

Following the Immigration Reform in 1965, hundred of thousands of Asians immigrated to the United States. The rapid influx of immigrants from Asia, Africa and Latin America altered the ethnic demographics of the United States. In 1990, TIME magazine published a special issue with the intriguing title, “What would happen to America when whites are no longer the majority?”

Surely it would alter the way we do things. There are many well-meaning Anglo-European-Americans who are beginning to feel the loss of the American society, they once knew. The Eurocentric American education is beginning to lose its status as the ultimate interpreter of American history and culture. The word “American,” which used to mean “white Anglo Saxon Protestant” (WASP) is being challenged by the new citizens who assert themselves “We are Americans!” In the context of a country of immigrants and pilgrims, only the Indians (the First Nations) are considered the Native Americans. For this reason, the Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans, as well as Mexicans, Guatemalans, Jamaicans, Nigerians, Sudanese, etc. (not withstanding the earlier African Americans) who have become American citizens, equally share the same status with their English, Germans, Italians, and Irish predecessors.

These changing demographics are also altering the American Church. For instance, The Episcopal Church was once considered “lily white.” Now the TEC is peppered with Asian and Latino/Hispanic Episcopalians mingling with their African-American and Native American counterparts in the margins of the Episcopal Church. As they form a “New Community,” they are gradually moving into the mainstream life of the church. It is only a matter of time, when this predominantly Anglo-European faith community will become an interracial Church where there would no longer be any single racial or cultural majority.

The four areas of priorities of the EAM Missioner are:

1. Congregational Life- the EAM Missioner assists dioceses in strengthening existing congregations and starting new ones.
2. Advocacy – through the EAM Council and diocesan EAM commissions, the EAM Missioner advocates for Asian empowerment at all levels of the church life and their involvement in the secular society.
3. Support Group – EAM Missioner provides support groups that will enable Asian Episcopalians to discern their vocations and support deployment of Asian clergy.
4. Training – in partnership with EAM Council and the Diversity, Social and Economic (DSE) unit of the Episcopal Mission department, the EAM Missioner provides training in leadership and develops creative resources for ministry of all the baptized.

Certainly this possibility is being viewed differently from within and without. There are those who lament what they see as a “dying church” and there are others who welcome and celebrate, even from afar, a “*Nuevo Amanecer*,” a new dawn, a new birth of a Pentecost Church, a church that is like a diamond with many facets, faces and voices. I believe with Latino author, Virgilio Elizondo, when he wrote that the American Church of the 21st century will not be black and white but “mestizo.”

The EPISCOPAL ASIAMERICA MINISTRY



The Episcopal Asiamerica Ministry, in which I am currently the missionary, began in 1973 as a missionary program of evangelism and service to bring people of Asian and Pacific Island background into the branch of the Body of Christ, the Episcopal Church. In partnership with the dioceses of the Episcopal Church, its two-fold goal was congregational development and advocacy. My predecessor, Rev. Dr. Winston Ching coined the word “Asiamerica” to mean both Asians in America and Asian Americans (those born in the United States with Asian heritage). An EAM Cross was designed by Christopher Den Blaker which shows the lotus at the center, thus honoring the early Nestorian Christian missionaries who endeavored to contextualize Asian Christianity.

There are 49 independent nations in Asia, but in the United States, we consider at least 20 racial-ethnic groups that are represented in the U. S. Census, namely: Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, Hmong, Burmese, Asian Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Malaysians, Indonesians, Thais, Okinawan, Nepalese and Singaporeans.

Asians are very diverse in races, languages, cultures, ethnicities and faiths. The core vision of the EAM is therefore to give a harmonious voice to the diverse Asian voices and help enable the Episcopal Church to truly become an intercultural Church, “a diamond with many facets.”

As a pastoral and evangelistic strategy, the EAM has grouped Asiamerica diversity into six ethnic convocations: Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Southeast Asian (Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Hmong, Burmese) and South Asian (Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans). Annually we gather in a national EAM Consultation and convocational gatherings for leadership training, sharing of best practices, fellowship and networking..



Each of the six Ethnic Convocations is led by their respective conveners who also compose the EAM Council. With its elected Executive Committee (president, vice president, secretary and treasurer), the EAM Council work in partnership with the Missioner of the Episcopal Asiamerica Ministry Office.

The mission statement of the EAM Missioner says: “The EAM Missioner builds a network of relationship with, among and beyond Asiamerica communities and provides resources for evangelism and mission, church growth and revitalization, racial justice and reconciliation.

EAM CHALLENGES *in the 21ST CENTURY*

Evangelism – In Asia, only two countries (Philippines and Korea) are considered Christian. Philippines is predominantly Roman Catholic (85% Christians) while Korea is rapidly growing evangelical (34% Christians). The vast majority are Buddhist, Hindu, Muslims, Taoist and ancestral worshipers. Christianity, as a whole, is a minority in the vast Asia Pacific basin.

In the United States, approximately 80% of the 20 million or so Asian immigrants are not Christians. This represents a challenge and an opportunity for evangelism, Christian formation and congregational development. In an increasingly universalistic world, what should be the shape of EAM evangelism?

Mission – According to U.S. Census, Asian groups in the U.S. are some of the richest (South Asian high tech immigrants) but also some of the poorest (Southeast Asian refugees). Asians as a conglomerate group belong to both the highest and the lowest socio-economic ladders. Many Asians are also victims of human trafficking, illegal recruitment, sweat shop slave labor, abuses against domestic helpers and ‘glass ceiling’ discrimination. This represents a challenge in mission for the advocacy of human rights, social justice and immigration reforms.

Theological Education – Asiamerica churches are largely served by immigrant clergy who suffer from marginalization in their dioceses and hand-to-mouth salaries from their ethnic parishes and missions. Serving more than just pastoral and administrative duties, they get “stuck” with neither time nor money for continuing theological education that will help them assimilate to the diocesan cultures.

The reverse is true to the Asiamerica clergy who grow up in the American culture and studied in American seminaries. Even when they were sent by ethnic churches, they often do not return to their home churches because their training in predominantly Anglo-European seminaries do not give them adequate skill and sensitivity to the Asian cultures.

The challenge is therefore to seek an Asiamerica theological education that is relevant, contextual, cross-cultural and intercultural. We seek to develop a theological education that will make Asiamerica clergy versatile in serving the multicultural milieu. On June 2012, we begin our pilot project with the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts for a Doctor of Ministry with concentration on Asia-America Ministry Studies.

Asia-America Relations – In the context of a ‘glocalized’ world (global+local) we seek a closer and deeper relationship and communication with our brothers and sisters in Asia. The Episcopal Church is being served competently by my colleague, Peter Ng, the Partnership Officer for Asia and the Pacific. During the past few years, the TEC has broken new grounds in developing deeper relations not only with the Anglican partners in Asia but also in the Concordat churches, such as the ***Iglesia Filipina Independiente*** (Philippine Independent Church), the Mar Thoma Church, the Church of South India and the Church of North India.

Recently, the EAM Council elected new officers to help lead the EAM in this new dawn of synergistic leadership. At its meeting in Colorado in October 11-13, 2011, prior to the ***Everyone Everywhere*** Conference (October 13-16, 2011), the EAM conveners elected the following:

Executive Committee:

President –

The Rev. Bayani Rico

Vice-President –

Mrs. Mimi Wu

Secretary –

The Rev. Irene Tanabe

Treasurer –

Mrs. Inez Saley

The Ethnic Conveners/Co-conveners:

Chinese – **The Rev. Ada Wong Nagata**

Filipino – **The Rev. Bayani D. Rico**

& The Rev. Raynald Bonoan

Korean – **The Rev. Aidan Koh**

Japanese – **Mr. Malcolm Hee**

& Dr. Gayle Kawahara

Southeast Asian –

The Rev. Mihn Hahn Nguyen

& The Rev. Letha Wilson-Barnard

South Asian –

The Rev. Anandsekar J. Manuel

& The Rev. John Sewak Ray

**How may I help you?
How may I pray for you?
How may I encourage you?**

We provide Leadership Training; Workshops on Asiamerica Spirituality; Seminars on Ethnic Church Planting; Healing; Stewardship; Asiamerican Worship; Asian American Youth and Young Adults Ministry; Congregational Development and Revitalization, etc.



We also hope that the various EAM Commissions working in the context of their dioceses will continue to make inroads in evangelistic, missionary, liturgical and theological enterprises. May the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ come not only in words but in the power of the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

(Workshop Address given at Everyone Everywhere Conference,
Estes Park Colorado 10.15.2011)

Contact:

The Rev. Dr. Winfred B. Vergara, Missioner
Episcopal Asiamerica Ministry Office
The Episcopal Church Center
815 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017
Phone: (212) 922-5344 E-Mail: wvergara@episcopalchurch.org
Website: www.episcopalchurch.org/asian.htm
Blogsite: <http://travelinasian.blogspot.com>
Facebook: Fred Vergara (The Episcopal Church)