

# **NATIONAL FEDERATION OF ASIAN AMERICAN UNITED METHODISTS**

The National Federation of Asian American United Methodists (NFAAUM) was established as a national caucus in 1975. The Federation grew from the original four Asian sub-ethnic groups to now embrace ten (10) Asian American sub-ethnic groups: Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Formosan, Hmong Japanese, Lao, Korean, Southern Asian, and Vietnamese.

Each sub-ethnic caucus is represented on the Federation's Board of Directors. The National Federation holds a General Assembly every two years. The National Board of Directors meets annually with periodic telephone and e-mail communications. The Asian American News is distributed quarterly to 1,200 Asian American church leaders and is also available electronically. We are utilizing e-communications frequently to 1,000 subscribers to keep them informed of current events.

The **Asian American Endowment** makes grants annually to provide continuing education opportunities for pastors, outreach ministry, and support for human rights projects. The **Asian American Staff Forum** brings together Asian Americans who are employed by general agencies and annual conferences for support, education, and joint planning for the benefit of Asian American ministries. The Federation was instrumental in establishing the **Asian American Language Ministry** and the **Korean National Plan**. We work closely with the General Board of Global Ministries in the implementation of these programs. Federation representatives participate in the United Methodist Task Force on Immigration chaired by Bishop Carcaño, the Connectional Table, and the Division on Ministries with Young People through the General Board of Discipleship.

The Asian American communities are very diverse and complex. Many Americans have the image of Asian Americans as being well educated, economically secure, and self-sufficient. We have even been called the "model minority". In reality there are large disparities within our communities. Although many Asian Americans have high educational achievement, some Asian sub-ethnic groups have high rates of illiteracy and low school attainment. Some Asian American communities face daily challenges of just getting by. Immigration is an important component of our communities. Asian American community profiles drastically changed following new US immigration laws in the mid-sixties that increased the inflow of persons from Asian countries. Many Asians came to the US in search of education, employment and a better way of life. New Asian communities sprang up quickly. It was further expanded with the end of the Vietnam War when hundreds of thousands of refugees fled their homeland. Many ended up in refugee camps and other "temporary" residences. Some first learned of the United Methodist Church through the good works of UMCOR and refugee resettlement efforts by United Methodist congregations. They came to the United Methodist Church in search of help in this strange land with different customs and traditions.

Historically numerous conflicts divided the various Asian groups. Some were easily overcome, but others were deeply rooted in past animosities and would take time. We were challenged when many Americans viewed us as "all being alike". We know that there are characteristics that bind us together and other that make us distinctive and unique – all are gifts of God.

Our churches were started as language congregations. Our worship, fellowship, and mutual support were originally based on ancestry and language. The church was a gathering place where we could be ourselves, sing hymns in our own language, discuss problems with each other and give solace and support. The Asian American church was a place where persons unfamiliar with Christianity might find friendship, care and meaning. For most the church is at the heart of our communities. It is more than simply worship and Christian education. It is the community social center, a place to come for help and support, a place where traditions, values, and customs may be retained and nurtured, some teach Asian languages. The church serves more than just its members; it's for the whole community.

The Federation became a place where Asian Americans would come together to discuss common concerns and interests. Although our churches were part of geographic annual conferences, we rarely got too involved. Some of the things that annual conferences did were puzzling and confusing. For our language pastors, it was difficult to follow the discussions, and often they seemed not to relate to our concerns. In the Asian Caucus we could envision a church that accepted us for who we are. We could share our talents and energies to make a difference in our communities. As we became better acquainted with each other some of the hostilities subsided, and we became aware that we could do so much more working together. We worked to elect some of our number to be bishops, promoted others to serve on

committees and general agencies. We encouraged some of our number to work for the church in various capacities. The Asian Caucus was where we "belonged". We advocated for programs that would aid our churches and our communities.

In the 1980's and 1990's Asian immigration continued at a fast pace. New communities were formed, and it was Asian caucuses that were instrumental in raising funds and supporting new ministries. Eventually conferences recognized many of them. Most of these budding congregations found themselves in shared church facilities. Although there was an initial welcome, the relationship often becomes landlord tenant, rather than collegial. In many cases the new Asian American congregation was younger, more active and more adventurous. Yet, we were tenants.

The younger generations were soon dropping the ancestral/national names to call themselves Asian American. Friendships were formed and many were inter-marrying. Some congregations were able to adjust, but others continued only in their Asian language ministry.

#### **Challenges we face today:**

Asian Americans are eager to start new ministries and churches, but often find annual conferences suspicious and unsupportive. There's always a concern that we will be a burden. Many do not recognize our presence in communities in which we live. We also want to start new churches in Asia.

Conflicts in shared church facilities often curtail or prevent growth of Asian American congregations. Mutual understanding and partnership is required to bring appreciation and understanding.

Many Asian American clergy are rapidly approaching retirement age, without sufficient numbers of seminary trained persons to fill this leadership need. Young people have so many more career options that it takes extraordinary efforts to recruit promising candidates.

Many Asian American clergy, particularly immigrants, did not receive their theological and church training in United Methodist seminaries and have difficulty understanding United Methodist polity. They need a support community in which to learn and grow.

Many congregations have experienced strong clergy leadership, with laity having a secondary role. New forms of ministry require mutuality and partnership. Laity should be encouraged to take leadership roles.

Younger Asian Americans are attracted to our churches, but don't always find them welcoming or accepting of new ideas. New forms of ministry are needed to meet their needs and aspirations.

Immigration is a major issue. Immigration laws are confusing and contradictory, and Asian Americans are viewed differently by government officials. Current laws often stymie proper immigration status for pastoral leadership. Family reunification takes too many years. The special status that allows skilled workers (especially in the high tech industry) to enter the US has the potential of making these workers "indentured servants" of their employers. Undocumented Asian Americans are fearful of being identified.

Citizenship Classes and voter education is important for Asian Americans to become more involved in broader decision-making. Social services are needed especially for elderly populations. The economic downturn has deeply affected Asian American communities with increased housing foreclosures; last hired, first fired in employment; lack of employment advancement.

Racism is at the root of harassment and intimidation perpetrated on our young and old alike. Hate crimes against Asian Americans continues at high rate. Law enforcement tends to call them isolated occurrences. Non-Asian American churches are often reluctant to speak out for justice.