

Prema Kurien. *Ethnic Church Meets MegaChurch: Indian American Christianity in Motion*. New York University Press: New York, 2017. 279 pages. \$32.84.

Migration is changing and revitalizing the religious and cultural landscape of the United States. The mushrooming of places of worship by and for immigrants of every religious persuasion in New Jersey, where I live, stands as an example of such a seismic change. In my experience as the pastor of an immigrant congregation, many mainline denominational churches facing the challenge of declining membership envy the immigrant church for its vitality, religious fervor, and steady growth in its membership.

Using the Mar Thoma church as a model/paradigm, Prema Kurien, a professor of sociology with her expertise in sophisticated analysis and a keen interest in church life demonstrates how immigrant congregations are making a deep impact on the religious life both in the United States and India. Even though the book addresses specifically Indian American Christianity any keen reader whose is interested in the study of global religions, diaspora, ethnicity, and cultures will greatly benefit from reading this book.

The book focuses on the Mar Thoma church, which traces its roots to Apostle Thomas, the disciple of Christ and its influence in the lives of the first and second generation Asian Indians living in the United States. The first generation tries to recreate the worship experience of home in this context in order for them to find stability in the midst of their disruptive and unsettling immigration experience. Furthermore, for the immigrant generation, an ethnic church model provides a buffer or way for them to get integrated into the larger society. While the second generation, who are born and raised in diasporic context (not affected by immigration experience like their parents) find the liturgy, worship, and preaching in the immigrant generation hindering their spiritual experience and growth. This has resulted in a “silent exodus” of second-generation youth in large numbers from the Indian immigrant churches.

American Evangelicalism, writes Kurien, with its emphasis on “born again,” individualistic faith has permeated into the life of the immigrant congregations both here and in India. This transformative experience informs the second generation’s decision to do evangelism among neighbors of other religions and in their own community. Kurien notes that the immigrant generation is willing to make concessions and forego their worship experience in order to meet the demands of the second generation. This is also a way of keeping the second generation within the denomination. There is a move, writes Kurien, within the Mar Thoma denomination to create churches that are led by second-generation with a vision to be a church for *all* people (137). In this model, worship is conducted in English, led by lay people theologically trained in North American seminaries with “longer than traditional messages” (138). This also provides the “sense of community” that they were raised in and which, the megachurch model could not provide (138). This model of church is more *contextual* (emphasis mine) than the church formed by their parent generation and more effectively addresses the generational commonality, needs, and aspirations.

I believe Kurien accomplishes the purpose of this book, which is to undertake a sociological/anthropological study of the immigrant church with her “thick description” of the context. I resonated with her description of the Asian Indian immigrant context as I researched the preaching practices in the Tamil speaking immigrant churches. Preachers did not have an adequate understanding of their context and hence encouraged preachers to become “amateur ethnographers” in order to preach sermons that are contextually appropriate. This book will greatly benefit preachers in so far it provides tools and techniques to understand any

congregation where they are called to serve. In preaching, context is everything and the narrative of the Asian Indian immigrant community described in this book can greatly benefit any preacher in understanding Asian Indian immigrants worshipping in their setting.

With the ongoing migration of Asian Indians to the United States there will be a need for the first generation ethnic churches to help with societal integration. In other immigrant communities like the East Asian Americans, unlike the Mar Thoma church, the reversal is happening. The second generation is leaving the white evangelical churches because “they felt racialized and marginalized in these churches” (241). Finally, with the emphasis on multiculturalism within the nondenominational, evangelical churches and a society that is postdenominational, the ethnic model might be a hindrance for immigrant integration into the larger society than aiding it.

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