

Marriage And The New Immigrants

Anthony P.K. So

Asian immigrants coming into the States have become one of the fastest growing minority populations in this country. Presently over three and a half million Asians are living in America. Since the fall of Saigon in 1975, over 700,000 Southeast Asian refugees have been admitted to the States. Chinese immigrants alone are over one million and out of that 60% are recent immigrants. We need to focus on the influx of the new Chinese immigrants.

Chinese immigrants who come to the United States carry with them many years of tradition and customs from either China or Hong Kong. Finding a different environment, the immigrants tend to isolate themselves from the wider society. Thus they have lost the valuable resources which are much needed to strengthen their family and marriage—namely friends.

The new immigrant couples are more concerned about making a living than for their marriage. Many of them have had their lives totally turned around; they might be a professional in Asia, but they are lucky to find a restaurant job in this country. So survival becomes a big issue for these new immigrant families. The society and the corporate structure controls the individual's schedule (when one works, how long one must work to earn enough money to maintain a certain standard of living, etc.) so that time for the family must be a secondary consideration. Unofficial statistics show that average married couples spend about 10-15 minutes a day in some form of conversation (meaningful or not). For the new immigrants, life is even more hectic, thus, time that is available for marriage interaction may not be the most optimal for the couple since it is determined by outside schedules rather than the needs of the couple.

The average age of these Chinese new immigrant couples is between

thirty-five and fifty. They come with young children, average age below ten years. Most of them come because they want to provide a better future for their children. On the other hand they themselves are entering the "Mid-life crisis" which demands their own attention to deal with the changes in their own personal lives. Where are they going to get the resources to cope with all these pressures? They need help from the Chinese community, especially the church.

Since we have seen the breaking down of the American family, it is bound to affect the Chinese families in America. They might be very conservative in their view of divorce, but day in and day out they rub shoulders with those divorces. Soon their view of marriage could be shaken.

New immigrant couples' problems present a prime opportunity to get close to these immigrants, for only at this period of time, when they do not have friends, when they do not have resources and when they need help to strengthen their family life, will anyone that would offer a helping hand be most welcomed and appreciated.

In order to reach these Chinese immigrant couples, we need to build relationships with them. We cannot just keep asking them to come to church service. Many times religion (especially Christianity) is quite offensive to them. On the other hand, they might be willing to come for a marriage enrichment group, where they could bring with them the problems at home and receive support from the group. However, the format for such group cannot follow the American style because they are less able to express themselves. They want someone to advise them more than to listen to them.

(The author is the Pastor of Honolulu Chinese Alliance Church)