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Racial Integration within the "Local Churches" in the 1960s and 1970s

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Abstract: Extensive studies have shown that Christian congregations formed by first-generation immigrants from Asia tend to be ethnically rooted in the United States. Though some Asian Americans often aspire to go beyond their racial boundaries, many of them find it difficult to create a racially diverse religious space within Protestantism. However, the "local churches," originated in China by Watchman Nee in the 1920s and spread to America in the late 1950s, has been multiracial since then. Drawing from in-depth interviews with early "local church" members who joined before 1980 and available archival data, this paper suggests that the goal of transcending racial boundaries has been part of the core missions of the "local churches" since its beginning in China. Three key sociological factors contribute to its realization of racial integration in America since the late 1950s: (1) embracing diversity while emphasizing core beliefs with the goal of creating a new culture, (2) eliminating clergy-laity division and adopting an egalitarian form of church structure, (3) encouraging collective pursuit of spiritual life and frequent interaction outside of regular church meetings. I argue that these three processes have played a critical role in shaping the "local churches'" congregational culture, which is conducive to promoting interracial interaction and transcending racial and other boundaries.

Keywords: multiracial churches, racial integration, "local churches," Witness Lee

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Introduction

The growth of racially diverse religious congregations in the United States in the past two decades has drawn many scholars' attention. Extensive studies on multiracial congregations based on both micro- and macro-level data have explored the question of why and how some religious congregations purposefully crossed racial boundaries and fostered racial diversity (e.g., Becker 1998; Jenkins 2003; Dougherty 2003; DeYoung et al. 2003; Christerson et al. 2005; Emerson and Woo 2006; Marti 2009). The trend of creating multiracial congregations varies substantially across religious traditions and race. Non-Christian religious congregations are more likely to become racially mixed than Catholics, and Catholics are more inclined to integrate different races than the Protestants (Edwards et al. 2013; Emerson and Woo 2006). Within Christianity, work in this field so far has mostly focused on how whites initiate or manage racial diversity (Edwards et al. 2013), partially because some white churches have successfully drawn racial minority members over the past two decades, but not vice versa according to three waves of National Congregations Study (NCS 2015).

How about racial minorities' intentions and efforts of developing multiracial congregations within Christianity? How does the racial minority status in the broader society affect their impetus and strategies of creating racially diverse congregations? Some scholars have examined second- or third-generation Asian immigrants' efforts of promoting racial integration within their congregations (Dhingra 2004; Christerson et al. 2005; Garces-Foley and Jeung 2013; Jeung 2015), yet, many of them found it difficult to draw and sustain white members due to incompatible cultural differences. Beyond the cultural difficulties, Yang and Ebaugh (2001) point out that the racial and religious minority status of Chinese Christian immigrants made it even harder for them to attract white Americans, despite the fact that some first-generation Chinese immigrants intended to cross the racial boundaries.

What makes racial minority churches successfully draw racial majority members in the United States, where Christianity is the majority religion and white is the majority group? How do immigrant churches, if they aim to become racially diverse, manage cultural differences and racial integration? The case that I examine here, the "local church"[1] (hereafter, LC) serves as a good case to explore these questions. The LC is a Christian group emerged in

[1] The naming of this Christian community has been contentious. Within the community, the name should not be capitalized because leaders and members believe "local church" is neither a proper noun, nor really a name for the community and simply refer to themselves as the "local churches" or the "churches associated with Witness Nee and Watchman Lee." Consistent with members' practice, I use quotation marks when referring to the "local church."

mainland China in the 1920s through a young Chinese man named Watchman Nee (1903-1972). Nee strongly advocated that a biblical church in a locality (i.e. city) must be inclusive, comprising all true believers of Christ in that locality in spite of theological, doctrinal, racial, national, or social differences (Nee 1980 [1939]:107-120). The vision of Christian unity was further carried out by Nee's co-worker Witness Lee and other LC members who emigrated from China.

In 1962, due to the growing interest of Nee's writings in the West, Lee migrated to Los Angeles and began to minister "on the basis of the oneness of God's people rather than on any ethnic or cultural differences" (Pitts 2014:E621-622). Within two decades, his ministry attracted thousands of white Americans, Asian immigrants, and even some African Americans and Hispanic immigrants. The number of "local churches" under Lee's ministry "grew from 7 in 1969 to 27 in 1973, and then to 50 in 1977" (LSM 2017). Today, there are over 300 LCs throughout the United States and more than 4,000 churches with over two million believers worldwide, including Christians from various national, racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds (Church Addresses 2016-1017; Pitts 2014).

In this paper, I focus on answering the questions of how the LC is different from typical immigrant churches and why it became exceptional with regard to racial and ethnic integration in the 1960s and 1970s when racial segregation was still the norm in American society. Drawing from available archival data and an interview study of early LC members who joined before 1980, this paper looks into the micro-level mechanism of racial integration as well as the macro-level social and historical environment that facilitated such integration.

My analysis reflects the early history of the LC in the United States as a whole, but, more specifically, that of my primary field site, the LC in Chicago, which was established by 20 families and four single people who migrated from Los Angeles in 1970. Among the 42 adults, there was only one Chinese and the rest were all Caucasians. Eight interviewees personally witnessed and participated in the history of the LC in Chicago from the 70s. At the time of my study, the congregation was composed of over 10 nationalities with approximately 400 believers. By estimation, the racial and ethnic makeup of the congregation were about 35 percent white, 30 percent East Asian, 12 percent South Asian, 15 percent Hispanics, 4 percent African, 2 percent African Americans, and 2 percent interracial.

How did such racial diversification happen within the LC? My analysis suggests that the goal of transcending racial boundaries has been part of the core missions of the LC since its beginning in China. As it spread to the United States in the 1950s, existing LC members strived to realize the vision of inclusive church life. I find three key sociological factors that contribute to its

realization of racial integration in America since the late 1950s: (1) embracing diversity while emphasizing core beliefs with the goal of creating a new culture, (2) eliminating the clergy-laity division and adopting an egalitarian form of church structure, (3) encouraging collective pursuit of spiritual life and frequent interaction outside of regular church meetings. I argue that these three processes have played a critical role in shaping the LC's congregational culture, which is conducive to promoting interracial interaction and transcending racial and ethnic boundaries.

Culture Diversity and Racial Integration

Immigrants often carry their own language, culture, tradition, customs, and worldviews to their host countries. Even when people of different racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds all claim to be Christians, they naturally tend to find their own groups to congregate with. Being uprooted from their home country, ethnic churches often function as safe havens for immigrants in the process of their transplantation, facilitating their adjustment to American society as well as the reinforcement of ethnic identity and culture (Herberg 1960; Williams 1988; Warner 1993). This is related to the assumption of homophily—that people largely prefer to associate with people like themselves (Emerson and Woo 2006; Wright et al. 2015).

Research shows that Asians find it harder to create racially diverse congregations (Jeung 2015), and they are less likely to be welcomed by non-Asian dominant churches in the United States (Wright et al. 2015). While it is common to see first-generation immigrants form or attend ethnically exclusive congregations, in which a disproportionate emphasis is placed on the homeland culture and identity (Abramson 1979; Min 1992; Bankston and Zhou 1996; Yang 1999; Warner 2000); some first-generation immigrants and many of their American-born or American-raised children often aspire to overcome language and cultural limitations by reaching out to people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Yang and Ebaugh 2001; Dhingra 2004; Christerson et al. 2005; Garces-Foley and Jeung 2013; Jeung 2015). However, despite the good intentions of going beyond their racial boundaries, many of them have been struggling to maintain their ethnic cultural identity while embracing racial diversity.

Dhingra (2004), for example, found that the three English-speaking second-generation Korean American churches in the Dallas/Fort Worth area could not simultaneously satisfy Korean Americans and non–Korean Americans. The Chinese Gospel Church (CGC) in Huston which Yang and Ebaugh (2001) examined faced similar obstacles. Founded by Chinese immigrants and serving mostly diasporic Chinese, the CGC only attracted

about 30 to 40 non-Chinese members over a history of more than 20 years due to "racial and cultural difficulties" (374). According to Jeung (2015:36), the boundary of ethnicity seems easier to transcend than that of race for most Asian American churches. From his observations, "When non–Asian Americans enter a predominantly Asian American church with an Asian American minister, they might first assume that the congregation is Asian American rather than multiethnic." Therefore, even many Asian Americans started with the goal of developing multiracial churches, they often ended up with forming multiethnic pan-Asian churches.

How do we understand the role of culture in multiracial congregations? Does racial diversity necessarily entail integration (Dougherty 2003)? Obviously, the mere presence of racial diversity does not equal integration. Through in-depth studies of twenty-two multiracial congregations, Emerson and Woo (2006) suggest that the plurality of cultural traditions in multiracial congregations can be a seed of conflict. In order to understand the nuance between diversity and integration, some scholars have developed three ideal-type multiracial congregation models to describe "the overall congregational culture and the degree of racial integration" (DeYoung et al. 2003:164). An *assimilated* multiracial congregation is led by a dominant racial group and mainly reflects the dominant group's culture and preference. Whereas a *pluralist* congregation embrace different races in its leadership and incorporate different racial cultures into the congregational life, yet its members of different racial groups do not form interracial social network in their daily lives. The third type is an *integrated* multiracial congregation, one that recognizes cultural diversity yet creates a new shared culture, represented by the leaders of different races and fostering a high degree of interracial interaction in and out of congregational life (ibid.:165-168).

The Case of the "Local Churches"

The "local churches," also commonly known as the Little Flock or the Christian Assembly, distinguishes itself from other Christian groups with its unique understanding of the nature and structure of the Christian church, which has aroused much controversy among other Christians (Melton 1985). To put it simply, the insiders believe that there is only one universal church that represents the Body of Christ, and thus "there should be only one church in each locality practically" (DCP 2009: 41), hence the use of a generic label as the "local church" and a rejection of formal names as divisive. Such a view of the church and the importance of naming customs are inherited from the teaching of Watchman Nee.

Born and raised in a Christian family, Nee was converted at the age of

seventeen and immediately immersed himself in rigorous Bible study, quickly coming to the conclusion that it was unbiblical to divide Christians by denominations. Influenced by a variety of Christian teachings, especially the British Plymouth Brethren and the Christian inner life tradition, Nee strongly advocated that the church in a locality (i.e. city) must be inclusive, rather than maintaining parallel congregations of different denominations in the same location. "In the Church of God there is neither Jew nor Greek. There is no racial distinction there, and there is no national distinction either. All believers living in one place, no matter what their nationality, belong to one church" (Nee 1980 [1939]:117). In order to recover the teaching concerning the church in the New Testament, Nee rejected religious professionalization and challenged the division between clergy and laity. Being an adamant opposer of hierarchical institutions, Nee advocated for an egalitarian priesthood of all believers and strongly emphasized the unique headship of Christ as well as the principle of mutuality in a local church (May 2000).

Determined to be faithful to what he had learned from the Bible and to recover the practices of the early church, in 1922 Nee left the Methodist church to which his family belonged and started a simple Lord's Table meeting (Holy Communion) in the home of another young Chinese couple according to what they considered to be the New Testament church pattern (Nee 1992:305-312). That meeting is commonly considered as the beginning of the LC as a social community and phenomena. Nee's ministry gained fruitful results in China before the Communist Party came to power. By 1949, more than 700 LCs were established throughout the country with over 70,000 members. Many Christians disagreed with Nee's perception of church, and the LC was not able to unify all Christians in China. Yet, it was able to draw people from different backgrounds, including Euro-American missionaries, who participated in the local congregation as members just like their fellow Chinese believers (Patterson 1969:72-73). In 1952, Nee was imprisoned by the Chinese government along with many other Christian leaders. He spent the rest of his life in prison until death in 1972.

Foreseeing the incoming political change in 1949, Nee urged his co-worker Witness Lee to migrate to Taiwan to preserve and continue their ministry before the Communist Party came to power. Through Lee's work, the LC became multinational in the 1950s, with churches established in Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Korea, New Zealand and Australia (Pitts 2014:E621-622). Though Watchman Nee was incarcerated, some of his books gained great popularity in the West, particularly in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. One of his best-known books, *The Normal Christian Life*, "sold over one million copies worldwide and became a twentieth-century

Christian classic" (Smith 2009:E2110).

In 1962, Lee moved to Los Angeles and began to spread his and Nee's ministry together with about 20 believers, most of whom were new Chinese immigrants. As a close co-worker of Watchman Nee, Lee was invited to speak in some American Protestant churches across the country in 1963. Beginning in 1964, many white Americans from different areas of the country left their previous denominations and migrated to Los Angeles to participate in Lee's ministry. In 1965 Lee established The Stream Publishers, which later became Living Stream Ministry (LSM), for the publication of Nee's and his own works in English and other languages. By 1970, the number of believers in the LC in Los Angeles had grown to over 800, which was composed of about two-thirds Caucasians, one-fourth Chinese, and a few Blacks and others, according to some interviewees' recollection. Instead of consolidating as a megachurch in Los Angeles, over 400 of LC members were inspired to migrate to ten cities throughout the United States to plant "local churches" and practice the inclusive church life in 1970.

Half a century ago, it was uncommon to find a multiracial Protestant congregation, and it was even rarer, if not unheard of, to find such a congregation following the teaching of a foreigner originally from China and attracting non-Chinese attendees. This fact spurs a number of related questions. How and why were white and black Americans attracted to a Chinese preacher's ministry in the 1960s and 1970s? How did recent Asian immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s, who left their home countries and stepped to an entirely new land, construct their identities in a multiracial church? How did people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds make attempts to realize racial integration during that period?

Data and Method

To examine the micro- and macro-mechanisms through which how such a Chinese-initiated church became racially diverse and promoted racial integration within its congregations in the 60s and 70s, I conducted in-depth personal interviews and reviewed available archival documents. Through snowball sampling, I interviewed 20 senior members who joined the LC before 1980. Fourteen are Caucasians, five are Chinese and one is African American. Currently, they live in eight different cities on the West Coast and in the Midwest, each with a LC. Personal interviews were conducted to understand each member's experiences as well as reconstruct early church history. After transcribing the 20 audio-taped interviews, I carefully reviewed each individual's responses for common themes and coded them systematically using NVIVO qualitative software.

Apart from interviews, I also obtained historical information through archived sources, which consisted of selected books by Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, memoirs and testimonies by other senior church members, and various church websites. In addition, I gathered field notes through participating in nine local and regional church events in six cities across the country from August 2017 to March 2018, including events in Washington D.C, Chicago, Indianapolis, Houston, and Anaheim, California.

The Attenders: A Profile

All of our lives bear some mark of the history we live in. The "intersection of biography and history within society" shapes the life of each individual and even the feature of a generation (Mills 1959). When faced with drastic social change and unforeseen historical circumstances, the normal process of socialization toward adulthood is often interrupted and "generations tend to become more sharply set apart from one another" (Roof 1993:3). Such "disjunctive" interplay of history and biography may result in what Doug McAdam calls "a period of thoroughgoing resocialization" (McAdam 1988:11). The turbulent 1960s and 1970s was a time of upheaval and unrest, filled with uncertainty and collective anxiety, during which nearly every aspect of longstanding political, social, cultural and religious arrangements was challenged and went through radical changes (McAdam 1988; Roof 1993; Wuthnow 1998). Such was a time that changed a generation of Americans fundamentally, and many of them were inspired to transcend racial, gender, and class boundaries.

The chaotic and unpredictable social environment created a vacuum in people's hearts that drove millions of Americans, especially those in adolescence and early adulthood, namely the baby boomers, to search for the meaning of life through some form of religion or spirituality (Roof 1993). Yet, faith was no longer something that could be easily inherited from the older generation, because the religious landscape of American society during the 60s and 70s went through dramatic shifts and produced a highly fragmented market with a kaleidoscopic array of religion and spirituality (Wuthnow 1998). Within Christianity, while some theologians declared that "God is dead" and a growing number of people left mainline denominations (Berger 1967), Charismatic renewal and the Jesus movement swept the country and drew great numbers outside of established churches. Outside of Christianity itself, the New Age movements gained great popularity in the 70s, a variety of new religions originating from South and East Asia, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, spread in through new immigrants and provided different understandings of the sacred (Wuthnow 1978).

Such kaleidoscopic variety of spiritual paths made it difficult for the young people to take faith for granted. Thus, a "generation of seekers" started to search for their own "meaningful spiritual style" (Roof 1993:1) and they were open to "experiment" with various kinds of religion and spirituality (Wuthnow 1978). It is against this backdrop of radical social change that we can understand the lives of those who joined the LC in the 60s and 70s.

Background Characteristics

All the 20 respondents grew up in Christian families with at least one parent being a Christian, yet they differ largely among themselves in terms age, race, nationality, former denominational affiliation, family religiosity and social status, and life experience. Half of them were born between 1936 and 1945, belong to the tail of the "silent generation" (born between 1925-1945). The other half are "baby boomers," most of whom may be called the "first wave of boomers," born between the years 1946 and 1954. The fourteen white respondents all grew up in predominantly white communities and attended white-majority schools and churches. Yet, they were brought up in different regions both in and out of the country: five on the West Coast, three in the Midwest, four on the East Coast, one in the Southwest, and one in Scotland. Some of them were raised in upper-middle-class families and some were from working-class backgrounds. Following their parents, they used to attend churches affiliated with various denominations, including Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Congregationalist, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Southern Baptist denominations.

Of the rest six non-white respondents, five are Chinese and one is African American. The Chinese were also from different regions, including three from Taiwan, one from Hong Kong, and one from Indonesia. Two migrated with their families as refugees in the mid-1950s, and the rest came to the United States for higher education in the 1960s. Speaking of religious background, four of five attended various denominations before joining the LC, including Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal and Methodist denominations. The African American respondent was raised in the Bay Area, grew up in a black majority community and went to a black Baptist church with his parents. According to my interviews, this racial makeup of the interview sample may roughly reflect the overall racial composition of the LCs in the 1960s and 70s.

The Spirit of Seekers

Despite the obvious demographic disparities those respondents had, *they did share something in common*. The most salient characteristic of the members is an attitude, or as they might prefer, a spirit of seeking the ultimate goals of life.

They were well-educated, all but one went to college and 40 percent of them earned Master's or Ph.D. degrees. However, growing up during the turbulent yet affluent 1960s, they were more concerned about seeking the meaning of human life rather than pursuing material success or career development. Peter, a Caucasian member from Chicago said:

> *For a young person at that time, there was a lot of confusion, lot of unrest and no peace. That's why a lot of young people were seeking. Now, it seems a lot of young people just seek to get a good job and earn money and have a nice career. But at that time, people didn't care about that as much as today, they wanted to know what the purpose of my life is, what satisfy me, what is just and right in the world. So, when I went to college, I constantly asked myself "What do you gonna do with your life, you are gonna become a hippie or pursue a successful life or what?"*

Many other respondents echoed Peter's concern for the deep, existential causes in their interviews. Raised up as Christians, most of them tried to find answers in religion. As they turned to adulthood, many of them became serious about their Christian faith and experienced personal conversion at some point in their lives. Yet, many found the experiences in their previous churches lacking. When three Caucasian members recalled their time in Catholic churches, the common impression they had was "boring and confusing." Like Peter's wife Dora recalled, "we grew up with a realization there was a God and there was always a crucifix. But I had no idea why or anything." James and Anna, a white couple from Indianapolis that joined the LC in Chicago in 1977, used to be active members in a prominent Presbyterian church in that city. Likewise, they also did not know much about why and how to live their Christian life, despite the fact that James was an elder and Anna was also involved with lot of church service. "We had already received the Lord," James said, "but how do we go on from there?" Lin, who migrated with her family to the United States in 1957 and attended a Free Methodist church in Oregon, experienced similar confusion:

From week to week, I didn't get too much. I felt like I didn't really grow in the Christian life. I just kind of, you know… But, I went faithfully, and I think I had a feeling in high school; I said, "There's got to be more to this than just going to church once a week?" I just wasn't getting very much.

As a result, fifteen respondents explicitly mentioned that they actively "shopped" around different churches or free groups with the hope of finding the one that satisfied them the most before they ended up in the LC. And many of them started the searching as they turned to early adulthood. Steven, the African American respondent grew up in the Bay Area, realized it not right to call himself a Baptist after he experienced personal conversion at the age of 14.

Intuitively, he felt it was wrong to divide Christians by denominations:

> *I did not feel right calling myself a certain type of Christian, it did not make sense. All I knew was Christ was real and he wants to get into other people. That's all I knew. If that love was that pure and if that flow inside me was that real, to put a label on me as this Baptist and you are that, it is to differentiate between Christians. It just didn't make sense.*

Thus, Steven stopped attending the Baptist church to which his family belonged and tried various kinds of free groups in the Bay Area. According to him, the Jesus movement "had an enormous impact" on him as well as many Christians he knew who later joined the LC during the 1960s and 70s.

When brother Lee's ministry came in the early 60s and especially the late 60s, many of the brothers and sisters were in the Jesus movement. It was a turn to Christ outside of established denominational religion, and it was highly involved with young people and college-aged folks. Primarily it was experiencing salvation, personal conversion and born again. And then get to know the Lord through the Bible and through singing. And in a sense coming back to know the Bible and to love the Bible and love your own Bible.

Initial Contact with the "Local Churches"

The aforementioned spirit of seeking and dissatisfaction with established churches paved the way for many Christians like those respondents to join the LC. Among the 20 respondents, four joined the LC in the 1950s. Samuel and Eason, two ethnically Chinese men joined the LC in Taipei, Taiwan through their parents; John and Mary, a white couple in New York got to know the LC through some missionaries returned from mainland China. According to John, who used to be a Scottish seaman, one Sunday morning in January of 1956 was when he finally found his "home":

They [one white family] invited me to a meeting in China House, Central Park East. Three-fourths of the people in that meeting were Chinese. The rest were Americans. When I walked into that meeting, I felt so 'at home.' There were neither 'this' nor 'that.' They were just there as the Lord's testimony in New York City.

In the late 1950s, the LC in Taiwan was well-established with about 20,000 believers (DCP & LSM 2013). Yet, there were only dozens in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, respectively, a big proportion of whom were first-generation Chinese immigrants. After Witness Lee migrated to Los Angeles in 1962, the number of believers, especially Caucasian members, increased rapidly.

Of the other sixteen respondents, nine joined the LC in the 1960s and seven in the 1970s. They learned about it through different types of social networks. Some were introduced in through close ties like relatives and friends, while some were through loose ties like an acquaintance in a swimming class or strangers approaching them on a college campus. Interestingly, at least five non-Chinese respondents learned about the LC through people of other races, who were merely strangers to them at that time. Steven, the African American grew up in the Bay Area, was approached by three Caucasian students on a college campus in Spokane, Washington. Rachel and Cindy, two Caucasians who went to the same university in Los Angeles, joined the LC through some Chinese students from Taiwan.

Reasons of Staying in the "Local Churches"

Why did those white and black American Christians stay in the LC and follow a Chinese man's ministry? Why did the Chinese immigrants not attend Chinese churches? The fact that those respondents ended up joining the LC does not mean that they did not encounter struggles in the beginning. Actually, three-fourth of them experienced both pulling and pushing forces during their initial contact with the LC in the United States. People or things that had potential to keep them from joining the LC are "pushing factors," whereas people or things that eventually made them stay in the LC are "pulling factors."

My coding suggests that there are two commonly mentioned "pushing" factors that might deter both Chinese and non-Chinese attendees: (1) language barriers, and (2) differences in worship style. Almost all the non-Chinese respondents had some difficulty understanding Witness Lee's English, whereas the three Chinese immigrants who came to the United States in the 1960s all had some problems speaking English. As for the worship style, both Chinese and non-Chinese respondents found the worship experience in the LC to be a drastic contrast to what they were familiar and comfortable with. The fact that Witness Lee is a Chinese was not a problem with all these non-Chinese respondents, however, some of their parents used to against him being a Chinese strongly. Peter, coming from a Catholic family and decided to leave Catholicism, told me that his father was bothered greatly:

I brought home a bunch of books and had Lee on the book, Witness Lee. It bothered him, that's all, that's it. (Interviewer: because of the Chinese name?) Yeah. Because my father is World War II generation, and they were just very hyped up about communism and against it strongly…. Anyway, it was not a very in-depth study of what was going on, but just a couple of outward reading of the situation, a Chinese man leading people away from religion, and he put it all together and thought it must be a communism.

Peter and his wife Dora both struggled a lot when they first joined the LC in Chicago because of strong opposition from their parents. Yet, their personal experience in the LC was appealing enough to keep them stay. If race was an issue for those who were not interested in the LC at all, different theological understanding and ways of worship might be a problem for those who were initially attracted but later decided to leave. According to Henry, a white member who used to be a pastor in a Southern Baptist church in Tyler, Texas, Witness Lee was greatly welcomed by about 600 white Christians in his hometown when he was first invited to speak in 1963. However, when the second time Lee went to Tyler, there were only 125 in the audience. The third time in 1964, only 25 showed up. Eventually, 12 of them formed LC the in Tyler in 1964.

Though distinctive worship style was also a problem for some respondents during their initial contact with the LC, they were nevertheless attracted by something in this group. In 1977, Anna was invited to attend a "sisters' tea" Bible study by a white woman from the LC in Chicago during a swimming class. Initially, Anna declined because she already had Bible study in the Presbyterian church. However, due to that LC member's persistent invitation, Anna finally agreed to go. The first "sisters' tea" time was in a Caucasian member's home, and its style of worship shocked Anna greatly. "There were quite a few sisters sitting around the table. And they started calling on the Lord and I got scared; I've never heard that before." Later, they were reading an expository commentary of the book of John in the New Testament titled *The Life Study of John* by Witness Lee. Though Anna was shocked by their calling, she was nevertheless attracted by the reading, which she found was "full of light."

Like Anna, many other respondents went through these kinds of mixed feelings. However, the "pulling factors" they identified were much more powerful and convinced them to stay. Three themes occurred repeatedly in the interviews: (1) Witness Lee's exposition of the Bible was enlightening and full of life; (2) the atmosphere in the church meetings was vital, free, joyful, and attractive; (3) the caring and loving from existing LC members was genuine and color-blind.

Henry, now 82-year-old, recalled his first encounter with Witness Lee in 1963 in Tyler, Texas:

> *The Christ that he spoke, spoke to the Christ in me. I didn't care if he was a ring-tailed baboon! He spoke life, and that's what I responded to. I wasn't looking at him, I was looking at the words and the reality that he expressed. I wasn't actually so much interested in him as I was in his ministry.*

Henry was not the only one touched by Lee's speaking. All the 15 non-Chinese respondents said that they were attracted to Lee's teaching, to an extent that they did not care about Lee himself was Chinese. For some respondents, what really drew them in the beginning was not Lee's speaking, but the atmosphere in the church meetings they attended. In spite of the worship style being different from what they knew before, they found it appealing. Steven, the African American from California, described the first church meeting in Spokane, Washington in this way:

Could not believe it, whole room full of about 105 brothers and sisters, thoroughly enjoy the Lord. They were speaking freely of Christ, expressing intense love of Christ. They were enjoying the Lord's word and making experiences of daily life transferable to a touchable experience of Christ, not just in a church setting but in daily life. I think one was African-American, but I didn't even care about that. I think maybe six or seven were Asian, maybe two Latino, most were white, but all I knew was all I saw was a river. I didn't see skin color, I saw a river.

Rachel, a Caucasian from California, met some Chinese LC members on a college campus in Los Angeles. She remembered her first meeting vividly:

> *The first day, the first meeting, we sang "Do come oh do come" (a hymn). That had just been written. So, they put one of the verses on the board and so we sang the song. And then somebody said, "Where is that verse from?" And someone else said, "Revelation 22:17." And I remember thinking, "Wow, somebody knows the verses," cause…anyway, and so then everyone pulled out little pocket Bibles, and Olive and I—Olive was my friend—we were just amazed…we were all bug-eyed. "They all carry Bible? What kind of people…" It was so attractive. We just couldn't stay away.*

Many other respondents shared similar experiences with Rachel and Steven. In addition, LC members also had frequent interactions outside of church meetings. What drew Dora the most in the beginning was such interaction outside of church meetings. Growing up as a Catholic in a small white community in Indiana, Dora visited the LC in Chicago in 1971. This is the way she described her first impression:

What really got me was after the meetings. We would go to the saints' apartments and just fellowship. And they would explain things, drawing a napkin about different things and the Spirit was just there. My heart was just burning. I think the Lord was moving that way at that time. I was just totally captivated even though still I didn't understand much. But, I just felt we have to move here. That was my first-time visit (excited).

Several months later, Dora and her fiancé Peter moved to Chicago for the church life. Like the stories presented above, there are many factors drawing those non-Chinese respondents to the LC, such as the aforementioned theological, spiritual, interpersonal, and experiential reasons. Then, the next question is, what keeps them to stay in the LC until today? How then did the early LC members from distinctive racial, cultural and denominational backgrounds interact with each other and promote racial integration after they settled down in the same church?

Creating a New Culture— "Christ is Our Culture"

Just as DeYoung et al. (2003) suggests that it is through creating a new shared culture yet respecting cultural diversity that a high degree of racial integration may become possible. Such was the way the LC strived to adopt. Witness Lee was aware of the potential for problems due to the vast diversity of race, ethnicity, and religious background among the early members. The way he used to achieve unity out of the variety was to emphasize the core belief all Christians share and encourage the embracing of diversity without making an issue of any minor point. Thus, in the first four months of 1963, Witness Lee would have meetings with some early members from Los Angeles, Reseda, and Whittier once a week regarding the practice of Christian unity. In his memoir, one white member who was involved in the fellowship wrote:

> *Brother Lee shared the following: 1. We should receive one another as Christ has received, even those different from us (Rom. 15:7). 2. Paul had a very liberal attitude, e.g., eating meals and observing days (Rom. 14) with no judgment of one another and no uniformity of practice. Uniformity leads to division (e.g. Presbyterians, Baptists). 3. With this attitude we will have no difficulty in meeting together…. The fourth meeting was held in Glendale on February 16, 1963, Witness Lee said, 1. We need "the variety in unity rather than the uniformities in division." History has taught us this—there is beauty in variety (Reetzke 2001:25-26).*

While acknowledging the beauty in variety and upholding a liberal view towards various kinds of Christian practice, Lee never uplifted any particular culture. According to John and Mary, the white couple who joined the LC in New York in the 1950s and moved to Chicago in the 1970s, Witness Lee specifically talked about culture several times in his sermons during the1960s. Growing up in northern China in the early twentieth century and having lived through the invasion of the Japanese as well as the Western imperialism, Lee personally experienced racial discrimination. He was demeaned by some British as "a Chinaman" in a derogatory way even while he was still in China. And Lee attributed such discrimination to cultural hegemony in that "the

British thought they were superior." In John's memory, Lee would go through all the major cultures in the world and made some comments on them. Such as how the Scots are proud, how the Germans are strict and achtung, how the British are discerning, etc. However, after commenting on different cultures, Lee would always spoke with strong emphasis that "our culture is Christ." John fully agrees with Lee:

That's the kicker. Because that's the appropriate thing, it's Christ. So, if we start glorifying in our culture, we miss it; our culture is Christ. And I don't think we got it yet, even though he mentioned it many times. Cause it's ingrained in our DNA. We are still in the process.

The way the LC members created such a new culture was by integrating their personal Christian life with the collective church life. Actually, "church life" was a commonly used term among the LC members, denoting being in the church is a life and a way of living. In other words, church life was not merely a weekly event, but rather a day-to-day living to them. A key feature of such living was spending a lot of free time with fellow church members and pursuing growth of spiritual life together. Rachel and her Chinese husband Samuel, described the weekly church life they had in Los Angeles in the 60s through a song a member wrote during that time:

> *[Singing with the Do-Re-Me tune] This is our life in the church, three plus four days make a week. Monday night, coordinate; Tuesday, training, what a treat; Wednesday, we learn how to meet; Thursday, exercise and sleep; Friday night, we'll grow in life; Saturday, the students fly; Sunday, the whole gang we meet. At the Lord's Table we feast. Here we go again, Monday night…*

The Egalitarian Church Structure— "Everyone Can Function"

The second key strategy of promoting racial integration was by forming an egalitarian church structure. Given the dominant and privileged position that whites possess in the broader society, white hegemony and white supremacy often come to surface as the top reasons for the misuse of power and conflict within many racially mixed congregations. Even some multiracial churches that were initiated by non-whites, they tend to satisfy the preferences of their white members (Christerson et al. 2005). Thus, some scholars argued that racially diverse congregations often "serves the interests of whites" (Edwards 2008) and the internal structures of multiracial congregations tend to manifest "people's racial location in society" (Edwards et al. 2013:220; Priest and Priest 2007).

However, within the LCs in the 60s and 70s, the potential problem of white

hegemony or any other ethnic or cultural supremacy was countered by its elimination of the hierarchical clergy-laity division, promoting the function and involvement of all believers and emphasizing the unique headship of Christ. As I mentioned above, Watchman Nee hoped to restore the actual practice of the New Testament priesthood to all believers. "Everyone must come to God to offer up spiritual sacrifices and sacrifices of praise. Everyone should take part in spiritual service" (Nee 1994:863). Such teaching was put into practice by encouraging everyone in the church meeting to function, namely to speak and testify the word of God. When Steven, the African American respondent, walked into the first meeting, he did not see a pastor standing in the front and speaking from the pulpit. Rather, he saw people of different color sitting around a table in several circles and everyone was engaging:

> *And there was something blew my mind. That there was no clergy, no laity, no pews, no pulpit, no choir, and no passing the plate. There's no special group of people and no silent group. I just couldn't believe these people are free, open, and everyone knows the Lord, and they are actually overflowing and full of life. My cheeks began to hurt [from smiling] all the time.*

Henry, the Caucasian from Southern Baptist background, described the LC in Los Angeles back to the 60s in this way:

There was one word to characterize the church life then, unlike any time in history in this country that I know of…"Spontaneity." Absolutely. A brother may have a song…he plays a guitar. So, he starts to come to the meeting… he starts in his home playing his guitar and singing and others join him on the way to the meeting. You couldn't plan that! That's spontaneous, that's life, that's the issue of life.

Life is one of the most frequently mentioned words in all the interviews. Every respondent values their born-again experience and regards the new life they obtained through believing in Jesus as the most important thing to their existence. Many of them often used the word "life" and "indwelling Christ" interchangeably, in accordance with Lee's teachings. To them, such life is divine, experienceable, and transcending, which has become the focus of their personal Christian life as well as the foundation of their church life. The more they focus on Christ as their life, the more they are able to transcend racial boundaries. Five respondents quoted Witness Lee's phrase "grace swallows up race" in their interviews. Grace means their common possession and enjoyment of Christ as their life. "We used to say grace swallows up race. The more you enjoy Christ, the more you are unconscious of race and all the differences," Lin said.

Home and Interracial Interaction— "Church in our Home"

Apart from creating a new shared culture and promoting an egalitarian form of worship and service in the church, the third key factor that encouraged racial integration was by breaking barriers in daily life and inviting people of other races to home. Apart from attending regular church meetings, home has played a key role in the process of early racial integration among the LC members. All the respondents kept frequent and intimate contact with their fellow church members by inviting people over to their homes or going to other people's homes. When I asked Henry and his wife Beth if they had any contact with fellow church members from different racial backgrounds outside of church meetings, Henry responded:

> *Sure. I was more than happy to recognize I have a brother who's a Chinese or a black person. I have a sister who is Spanish or Mexican, and we're all one in Christ. We invited them to our homes. They come to our homes, they eat with us, they stay, even sometimes for months, in our homes. And we share Christ with them. Some came from Ghana, some came from Nigeria, some came from other places and they stayed in the homes of the saints.*

The metaphors of church as the Body of Christ and the household of God also kept recurring in the interviews. Rachel, a Caucasian from California put her understanding of what church meant to them in this way:

> *I would say the church should be, or is the Body of Christ, that should be manifested, which means we're members, one of another. We need each other and then we interact…actually, I would say we felt more like a family—really like a family—that we would have saints over to our house all the time.*

In another interview, Becca, a Chinese from Taiwan who joined the LC in Los Angeles in 1967, also mentioned the frequent home meetings they had, where believers often came together to pray, to read the Bible, to sing and to eat.

> *Becca: Well… it was really like a spontaneous house to house church life. We just loved to gather. So, if there were evenings when there was no meeting, we would just…there were many saints rented in the same apartment building. We would just walk over to the next apartment and we might just sing. Sometimes we wrote hymns…So, we just really enjoyed the flocking life, just coming together to pray-read, to sing, and to eat.*

What may be more interesting in terms of race relations is the African American respondent's story. Steven experienced overt racial discriminations personally and witnessed the rise of racial tensions and the Civil Rights

movement in the broader society. He was longing for the "beloved community" that Martin Luther King dreamed of and mentioned. Some of his siblings were even actively involved in the Black Panthers and the student activism movements in Berkeley. Yet, the unexpected death of one of his brothers as well as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X made him wonder if that dream was true. On the day he joined the LC in Spokane, Washington in 1975, he felt the dream came true. Every week, he was invited by different white members of the church to their homes for meal and fellowship:

> *Actually, usually Wednesday or Thursday night, a brother or sister would have us over to their house to eat. And that was unbelievable, we read something, eat, and pray, and read something, single a little. It was unbelievable! … Here they are, feeding you the best food, the best desserts, telling you about the riches of Christ, reading something that's wonderful, singing and teaching you new songs. I thought… it was like heaven on earth. I went to places and I saw how Jesusly-filled people live, and that was marvelous. And I treasured it, it was like being at home. Nothing was better than this. It was like a dream come true.*

The high degree of interracial interaction in and out of church settings does not negate the fact that disagreement and conflicts also exist among the LC members. "People fight, this is a simple fact of social life" (Ghaziani 2008:1). And intimate relationship may elicit more infights. The frequent interaction between LC members actually tend to result in more interpersonal clashes or conflicts due to "different expectations, different tastes, different patterns, different experiences, different feelings and interpretations, or in short, different habitus" (Emerson and Woo 2006:147). Many respondents acknowledged that troubles and offenses did exist in their church life. Race is only one of many factors that may result in conflicts. Sometimes, small things can cause disagreement and problems, like Dora told me:

On the one hand, it's glorious, the church life; on the other hand, it's not glorious, it's the cross and you have to take the cross. I serve in the bookstore, and sometimes sisters were there and we were shelving books or something. And they all had different ideas about how to do it. Just like grading on me, I was not happy at that time because I didn't like the way they were doing and even their attitude. I was just in a grumpy mood myself, but I just had to turn to the Lord. This was a little thing. Just opinions.

Cross, or sacrifice your own taste and preference for the sake of Christian unity seems to be the universal answer I got from my interviews. Very often, through the experience of taking the cross, one may "realize my way of life and my standard isn't what I call normal," Steven said. And the willingness to sacrifice often comes from one's personal relationship with God, like Dora

mentioned above.

Discussion and Conclusion

Multiracial congregations are difficult to create and to sustain, especially for ethnic minorities who migrate to the United States as the first-generation immigrants (Yang and Ebaugh 2001). It is hard for them to step out of their own racial, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries in the first place. Even if they have the intention to cross the boundaries, it is equally hard to draw members outside of their own race. The burgeoning literature on multiracial congregations mostly focuses on how whites initiate or manage religious racial diversity. In such congregations, the problem of white hegemony and other power-related issues often comes to the surface within these congregations. The studies concerning how Asian congregations attract non-Asian attendees suggest that it is often hard for those congregations to draw white members and to balance ethnic cultural uniqueness and cultural diversity.

The successful racial integration within the LCs in the 1960s and 1970s is not just an example of how Christian congregations started by Asian immigrants can transcend the boundaries of race, but also how rank-and-file white Americans came to share the same vision of Christian unity and worked together with their fellow church members from different racial backgrounds to make an inclusive religious community. The analysis above indicates three key sociological factors that made racial integration within the LCs possible: (1) embracing diversity while emphasizing core beliefs with the goal of creating a new culture, (2) eliminating clergy-laity division and adopting an egalitarian form of church structure, (3) encouraging collective pursuit of spiritual life and frequent interaction outside of regular church meetings. I argue that these three processes have played a critical role in shaping the LC's congregational culture, which is conducive to promoting interracial interaction and transcending racial and ethnic boundaries.

Two interesting themes of "Christ as our culture" and the "church as our home" emerged from my analysis of the interviews and some archival documents. Witness Lee and early church members all had the awareness of cultural diversity and the potential problems within the church, but they worked hard to make sure that divisions in culture did not become an issue, both by allowing for variety and by stressing the importance of the new, shared culture of Christ. This emphasis on theology helped ensure that each culture was respected and that there was no cultural hierarchy in the church. Rather, they transcended the cultural diversity and made Christ the foundation of their new culture as well as the center of their Christian life. Such a new culture was created in the environments of a "house to house" communal life and a worship style that

emphasized mutuality. What I heard the most in the interviews and Sunday church meetings is that "*Christ is our life and church is our living.*" Early LC members kept intimate contact with their fellow church members in everyday life. Both in and outside of church meetings, believers had frequent interaction, fellowship, and coordination with each other. It was through such repeated, positive contact that believers of different racial backgrounds built strong connections with each other and made racial integration possible.

In all that, the LC members were also helped by a long-standing rejection of professional clergy. One obvious point of potential contention in many multiracial congregations is the choosing and retaining of a head pastor or senior pastors. By rejecting a professional group of pastors, the LCs avoided one of the biggest points of church infighting, and one of the most obvious ways of cultural hegemony can arrive. Every member had the opportunity to "function," or to speak in church meetings, therefore, all the members got used to listening to and learning from each other, who might not be their races.

As the LC grew in number and size in the United States, the leadership structure might be a point that I can develop more in the future research. In accordance with Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's teaching, each LC produces its own elders, who are usually mature in spiritual life and advanced in human experiences. There is a tradition of collective eldership in LC congregations, who are expected to coordinate with each other and be responsible for local administrations. Today, the LCs are much more racially diverse than forty years ago. And all LCs that I have visited in the United States have multiracial leadership, finances and decision-makings are thus in control of a group of people that doesn't respond to a particular racial "faction" within the church, but rather tries to function in unity. How the organizational leadership structure may affect racial dynamics in the LCs today would be a fascinating topic to explore further.

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