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the Hybrid issue



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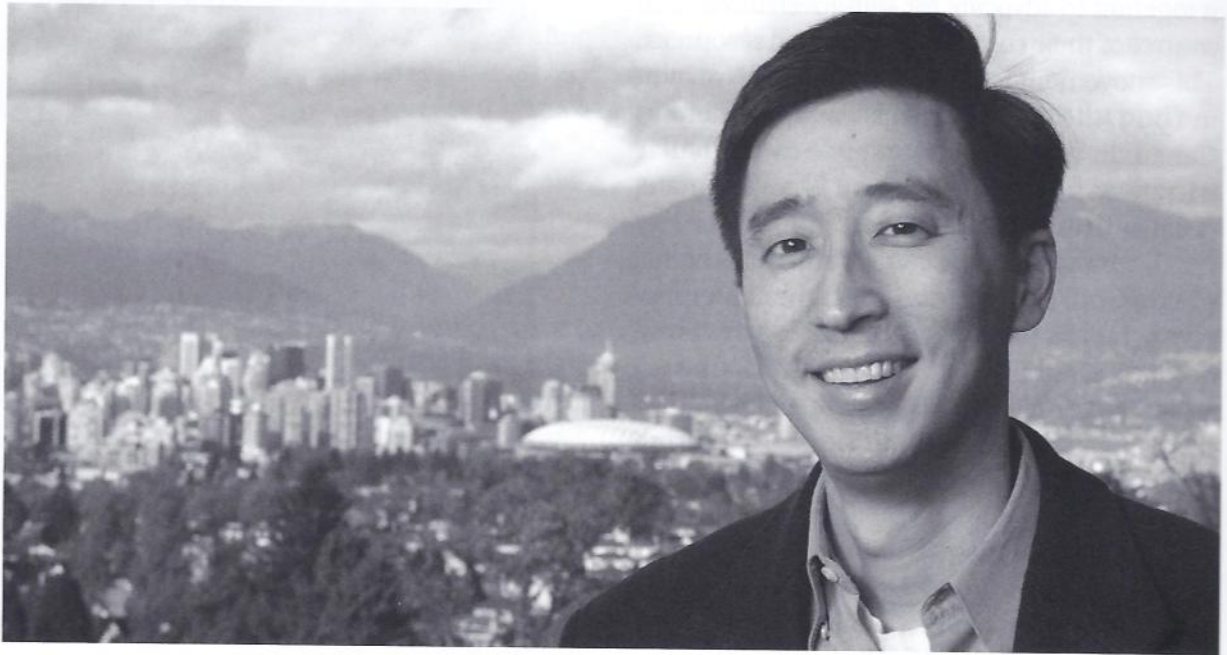
MIXED RACES, MIXED FACES

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HEARING A DIFFERENT KIND OF EVANGELICAL:

Pastor Ken Shigematsu, Tenth Church, Vancouver

BY JUSTIN TSE



“WHY DID WE HIRE SOMEONE WHO WAS our enemy during the war?” Ken Shigematsu didn’t expect to hear that question when he greeted the little old lady after church.

The old lady perceived Ken simply as a single, 29-year-old Japanese Canadian man, and believed a mistake of a hire for senior pastor of Tenth Avenue Alliance Church in Vancouver, now shortened to Tenth Church. As Ken recalls, the Mount Pleasant congregation had declined since its glory days in the 1950s with over 1,000 members to roughly 175 people by the time Ken got there in 1996. Most were seniors. They were all Caucasian, an aging remnant of a historic Anglo-dominated Vancouver.

Ken was hired as the diversity card. Vancouver was changing, the church board reasoned, because there were more “Asian” people moving in. The previous pastor, the twentieth in

20 years, had just left because, as he told Ken, his kids didn’t have anyone their age to hang out with. Ken had just thrown in his application. The board took him on, although the secretary did tell Ken, “You’ll be blamed if this ship goes down because you were the last one at the helm.”

Ken neither wanted to be the last at the helm, nor did he really want the job in the first place. He was responding to a mystical vision that he had while fasting. Once an employee of SONY in Tokyo, Ken had responded to a call to become a Christian pastor by getting seminary training in Boston in the early 1990s. Eventually, he found himself in Southern California planting an Asian American evangelical church called Newsong with his friend, Dave Gibbons. When his work permit expired a year afterwards, he moved just north of the border

to White Rock, where he stayed with a friend. At this point, he began fasting and praying and, on the third day, he heard the words “Tenth Avenue Alliance Church,” almost as if it were an audible voice. On the fifth day, he heard “senior pastor.” Knowing from his young adulthood in Vancouver that this was a declining, all-Caucasian, aging church, he thought these voices were due to lack of food and promptly had a salad. Visiting the church afterwards confirmed his doubts. He had been so sure that the board would reject his application. Now he discovered that being hired did not directly translate into the church becoming an inclusive space overnight.

15 years from the time he was hired, Tenth Church has grown to 1,600 people on a regular Sunday morning. The demographic is far from being strictly Caucasian and certainly not all middle-class. What did Ken do? How did Tenth Church get so diverse? How did the congregation go from so old and monolithic to such a hybrid community? Ken likes to say that he didn’t do anything. For one, as a person inhabiting an Asian Canadian body walking into an all-Caucasian space, Ken *was* diversity, quite literally the difference the board wanted to see in the church and the difference that the little old lady did not want to hear about.

But Ken is also a Christian pastor in the evangelical Protestant tradition, an unfortunately misunderstood term in today’s constant media barrage on right-wing politicians taking back the nation for God, Zionism, homophobia, the Tea Party, and overturning *Roe v. Wade*. When the *Vancouver Courier* ran a cover story on Tenth Church’s recent satellite campus in Kitsilano, they discovered that Kitsilano residents tended to associate evangelicalism with “being flamboyant—the stereotypical televangelist” as well as being intolerant of homosexuality and “blending faith with politics.”¹ Evangelicalism and the embrace of difference have often been seen as oxymoronic, unless the combination means that evangelicals are scandalously dif-

ferent from the mainstream. As evangelical historian Mark Noll puts it, “the scandal of the evangelical mind” is that there isn’t much of one at all.² The hype is so bad that Ken rarely refers to himself as an evangelical.

But you can’t understand Pastor Ken Shigematsu as an evangelical apart from him being Asian Canadian; you can’t understand him as being Asian Canadian without him being evangelical; and you can’t understand either of these terms if you don’t understand that making space for difference is integral to both terms. The question is: how do you *hear* and *see* these terms? Like the old lady, how do we *hear* and *see* Ken?

For Ken, to be an evangelical Christian is to be all for difference, which is why Tenth Church’s mission statement reads: “a community of people from many different backgrounds but connected together by a common experience of God’s love.” To be an *evangelical* is to have one’s being and identity tied to the *evangel*, what the New Testament calls the *good news*, the *Christian Gospel*. During time in the seminary, Ken discovered early on that Christians who only lived within their own ethnic and class lines were considered “hypocrites” by Apostle Paul because they betrayed the message of Jesus—that forming a new community was not founded on ethnicity or class. Ken sees the construction of churches along homogeneous ethnic and class lines as “selling out” to a conservative establishment that fails to understand the Christian Gospel. These churches “invite conflict,” he says, because when ethnic culture is the community glue, these churches are “prone” to “conflicts over issues like the Chinese culture, Japanese culture, Korean culture...and there can be power issues between pastor, board, first-generation, second-generation.” He has seen it especially in the people from such churches, sometimes even pastors’ kids, who come to Tenth Church “that have been hurt by the church, disaffected, disillusioned.”

¹ Mark Hasiuk, “Evangelical church moves into Kitsilano: Tenth Avenue Church has grown into Mount Pleasant institution,” *The Vancouver Courier*, 2009 October 16, D06.

² Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Grand Rapids and Leicester: Eerdmans and InterVarsity, 1.

Not only does his theology embrace difference, but he has no intention of towing a strictly Protestant party line. While he identifies as an evangelical Protestant, he is just as comfortable quoting Catholic mystics like Thomas Merton, Meister Eckhart, Henri Nouwen, Ignatius of Loyola, Richard Rohr, and Basil Pennington who have helped him discover the value of “centering prayer,” a meditative practice of simply sitting silently before God. He is now pursuing a doctorate at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, a place where Catholic and Protestant teachers help him deepen his prayer life.

Ken also sees his embrace of difference as part of the history of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the denomination that Tenth Church belongs to, but that has no affiliation with the now-passé Canadian Alliance political party. In fact, as *The Vancouver Courier* also notes, Tenth Church dropped the word “Alliance” from its name to avoid any connection with any political party.

And yet Tenth Church is very political, in continuity with the Christian and Missionary Alliance tradition. Ken’s particular reading of the denomination’s founder, A.B. Simpson, is as an urban pastor in nineteenth-century Manhattan who served the poor. While Simpson was making four times the salary of a lawyer pastoring in a wealthy Presbyterian church, his concern for Italian and Irish migrants led him to split with his church because they didn’t like the idea of class mixing. Simpson started the Alliance Church because he couldn’t be an evangelical Christian in good faith without ministering to a diverse crowd of people.

Tenth Church walks in Simpson’s shoes. Once a middle-class, all-Caucasian congregation, Tenth Church’s demographic makeup began to change organically, simply because Ken was different. As Ken puts it, people from all walks of life began to come—“university students, internationals, people of different ethnic backgrounds, international students, UBC students, artists, professionals, athletes, educators, business leaders, and the urban poor, and even sex trade workers.” A story circulated that a troubled woman running

through Stanley Park was encouraged by a pimp to go to Tenth Church to get help. To all of these people, Ken and his pastoral staff get up onto the stage every Sunday and preach the message of Jesus’ love and forgiveness.

This was also the impetus for starting a social justice ministry for the homeless, called “Out of the Cold.” If there was anyone who was different, it was the homeless guy sleeping under the ventilator at Tenth Church. Although a board member invited him to stay at his house, the guy kept on returning to the ventilator. One day, he didn’t wake up. That was when Ken sent Don Cowie to Grandview Calvary Baptist Church to learn about what the church could do for the homeless. The result was “Out of the Cold,” a ministry that now reaches, according to the church’s public records, an average of 100-170 people with a hot meal on Monday evenings, 90-110 people for Tuesday noon lunches, and 25 people who stay overnight and receive a hot breakfast the next morning.

It was this ministry that got Ken and the church into trouble with the city when Tenth Church’s building went under reconstruction. Upon inspecting the building, city planners told Ken that he had to get a social services permit in order to feed the homeless. He initially agreed, but there was an outcry among other religious communities who weren’t able to afford the permit but were also feeding the hungry. Ken and his staff began to rethink the permit; as Ken’s senior associate pastor Mardi Dolfo-Smith told the press, serving the poor is in fact part of the faith at Tenth Church, not an extra add-on, and what the city was doing was to define which parts of Tenth Church’s practices were religious and which were social instead of letting the congregation speak for itself.³ An interfaith committee headed by Chinese Christian activist Bill Chu was started to preserve social justice as an integral part of the faith for Tenth Church. Eventually, the city allowed “Out of the Cold” to continue, and all of Vancouver’s religious communities breathed a sigh of relief.

What took a long time for the city to realize was that Tenth Church was not seeking to violate city policies; it was trying a heart for difference as an integral practice in Ken’s

theology. Ken's emphasis on reaching out to people from "different backgrounds" isn't limited to people of different ethnicities. It's about reaching out to different class groups, as well; in a recent sermon, Ken talked about how he felt a bit guilty that he had no friends who were homeless and through a partnership with an organization named Journey, he and his wife were able to invite people from the Downtown Eastside to their home for dinner. "It was a real gift to us," he says, with "great stories talked about around the table." His hospitality goes out to other religions as well: after all, Ken resisted the social services permit in order to enable other religious congregations, including those that were not Christian, to continue to serve the poor as an integral part of their religious practice. Believe it or not, the pursuit of inter-religious diversity, including with atheists and agnostics, is part of Ken's everyday practice too. He admits, "I really enjoy spending time with people who aren't religious. I like to sail, I'm training for a triathlon, and I tend to do those things with people who aren't particularly religious but we have a common interest in sport."

Yes, Ken may tell many stories of his Asian Canadian past, but it's not so much that he's making Tenth into an essentially Asian Canadian space. Instead, he draws examples from his Asian Canadian upbringing while speaking to a crowd that hasn't been brought together by ethnicity or class. He talks about the "turning point" in his life as the day when he was caught shoplifting at K-Mart, a day where his father accused him of bringing "shame" on his family. This event precipitated his father becoming a Christian and bringing Ken to a Christian youth conference where he learned of Christ's forgiveness that would "wipe his slate clean."

Ken has also since learned from doing his family genogram that he is descended from

Japanese samurai. While such knowledge is prone to all manners of orientalist caricature, Ken de-emphasizes the monk-warrior image, calling his family "weekend warriors," while pointing out the fact that they were business people on his mom's side, selling mountains and building golf courses, and scholars of Confucian classics on his dad's side, all of them disciplined with a "rule of life" that built spiritual rhythm into their daily activities. While Ken doesn't want to romanticize the samurai, he recognizes the irony of living by a monastic rule, making executive decisions, and reading the ancients, just like his ancestors did.

But Ken doesn't essentialize his Asian-ness; he turns the would-be Orientalism on its head. As he recently preached, living life in the presence of God the Father in heaven is not so much about not bringing shame to the samurai family of God. It's about living in such a way that the Father "stands and cheers" just as an earthly father might root for an underdog son on the football field. He articulates his own story to bring his hearers into a larger story that transcends his Asian Canadian past: you can see yourself in Ken's reflection.

If Ken's job is to preach, then ours is to hear. The fact that Ken Shigematsu lies somewhere in the strange mix between inhabiting an Asian Canadian body within a historically Caucasian church, while promoting an evangelical message that sounds oddly inclusive. And by doing so, Ken Shigematsu compels us to listen, to examine the filters through which we understand the terms "Asian Canadian" and "evangelical." We end up being present with Ken: hearing, listening, contemplating. Ken the Asian Canadian is more diverse than Asian; Ken the evangelical pastor is more hybrid than the neo-conservative stereotype, calling us into a mixing space where God loves people of different backgrounds.

That's different.

³ See CBC, "Vancouver restricting church's mission to help poor, charges pastor," CBC News, 10 August 2007. Accessed 13 August 2011, from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/story/2007/08/10/bc-churchpermit.htm>; CTV.ca News Staff, "Church needs permit to help the homeless," CTV.ca, 17 August 2007. Accessed 15 September 2011, from http://www.ctv.ca/CTVNews/CanadaAM/20070817/church_homeless_070817; Gerry Bellet, "City to re-examine decision to require permit for helping the poor; the development board sparked a conflict between city hall and a wide spectrum of religious organizations that offer the needy food, clothing, and shelter," *The Vancouver Sun*, 25 August 2007.