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## Asian American Women Have Fewer Church Leadership Opportunities, but Men and Women Disagree on Why

While men in Asian American congregations cite biblical beliefs as the main reason why fewer women are in leadership, women in these congregations say overrepresentation of men is the dominant reason.

These findings come out of the first-of-its kind National Survey of Asian American Congregational Leadership Practices conducted by the Innovative Space for Asian American Christianity (ISAAC). The survey explored women's and young adult leadership in Asian American congregations, church conflict, and church involvement in the Stop AAPI Hate movement. The full report released this month.

### *A Unique Pilot Study*

While other nationwide surveys have sampled Asian American congregations and individuals, this survey (including almost 350 congregations) contains the largest sample of Asian American congregations with questions related to church ministry. "People with no data are not a people," said Baylor University sociologist Jerry Park, who analyzed survey responses. The survey provides empirical data on communities that have been largely invisible in past research.

The National Survey of Asian American Congregational Leadership Practices took place between March 2022 and July 2023, with funding from the Lilly Endowment. Andrew Lee, Associate Director of the Global Diaspora Institute at Wheaton College and Young Lee Hertig, Co-Founder and Executive Director of ISAAC, designed this pilot survey. Daniel D. Lee, Academic Dean for the Center for Asian American Theology and Ministry at Fuller Seminary, compiled a database of 6,000 Asian American congregations nationwide, out of which surveys were distributed to 800 English language worshipping communities.

The research team assembled a pastoral council to disseminate the survey through their networks, achieving improved response rates via relational connections than random sampling. Of the congregations participating, 62% were Asian American (or multiracial with Asian Americans as the largest percentage) and 38% were white, multiracial (excluding those with Asian Americans as the largest group), Black, Latino, or other.

### *Key Research Findings*

Survey results show that women clergy in predominantly Asian American congregations were not allowed similar access to leadership responsibilities as their counterparts in non-Asian American congregations. Thirty-two percent of Asian American congregations did not allow women to teach alone with adult men, for instance, while 17% of women from non-Asian American congregations faced that restriction.

In Asian American congregations, 43% of male respondents reported biblical beliefs as the main reason fewer women were in leadership, while only 23% of female respondents from these congregations agreed. By contrast, women emphasized the shortage of female leaders in visible leadership as a major barrier to leadership opportunities, with 42% of women in Asian American churches citing overrepresentation of men as a primary restricting factor and 35% citing work-life balance as a major barrier.

Findings related to congregational social engagement are also revealing. Asian American congregations participated less in the Stop AAPI Hate movement during the height of the pandemic (34%) compared to their non-Asian American counterparts (60%). However, a higher percentage of Asian American-dominant congregations continued to participate in the movement after 2022 (29%) compared to other congregations (21%).

The survey also showed that Asian American churches tend to be younger, by founding date and age distribution of attendees. Forty-two percent of Asian American churches were in the age range between 13-34 years old, compared to only 22% of non-Asian churches. However, there is more reluctance from Asian American churches in admitting young people to upper levels of church leadership. About 35% of Asian churches report no leaders under the age of 30 on the ruling church board, compared to only 17% of other churches.

### *Addressing Asian American Leadership Equality*

The survey results highlight the need to increase gender equality and equity in Asian American churches by equipping Asian American women ministers with adaptive leadership skills. ISAAC's PastoraLab, now in its fourth year, trains Asian American and Latina pastors for this purpose. Since its launch in 2021, through a Lilly Endowment Thriving in Ministry grant, the program has convened local and online cohorts of over 70 participants in leadership development, prophetic preaching workshops, and community-building retreats.

Esther Jacobe, Co-Director of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in Orange County, recently completed a two-year cohort. She came out of this period with an image of thriving in ministry as an oyster: "Taking in irritants and debris will eventually form the treasured pearl," Jacobe wrote. "However, [it] will not happen without pushing back, questioning, and learning to how to work through each of those things. With the support of my cohort, I've been learning how to tactfully address my discontent, advocate, and lead out of my Korean American-ness. For the first time, I'm feeling as if this is how God had intended me to be."

Debbie Gin, Director of Research and Faculty Development at the Association of Theological Schools, and Jamie Smith, Ed.D. conducted an external evaluation of the PastoraLab program. Gin and Smith identified increased agency and confidence, leading with authenticity, growth in adaptive leadership skills as some of the personal and professional growth outcomes of program participants.

ISAAC's research team plans to translate the National Survey of Asian American Congregational Practices into three primary Asian languages and broaden the pool of respondents to better capture the diversity of Asian American congregational experiences around the country.

PastoraLab continues to expand, starting new cohorts around the country as Asian American and Latina clergywoman express growing interest in ministry training that addresses their unique experiences and gifts.

“Asian American women don’t have the full capacity to exercise their gifts in Asian American churches,” said ISAAC’s Executive Director Young Lee Hertig. “ISAAC exists to interrupt this pattern, fostering tangible and prophetic change in our congregations through mutual learning and empowerment.”

*This article is available to be republished with attribution to the Innovative Space for Asian American Christianity as the source. The research team is available for media interviews.*

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