WHY IS THERE A SILENT EXODUS OF ENGLISH-SPEAKING ADULTS FROM WESTERN CANADIAN CHINESE CHURCHES?

Matthew Todd

Abstract

This study recommends solutions towards the retention through empowerment of Canadian Born Chinese (CBC) adults in Chinese bicultural churches. To address retention, the key risk factors and common dynamics that contribute to a "silent exodus" of CBC adults were established through qualitative research, including a survey of participants from diverse church affiliations. Based on an analysis of the literature review and survey results, this study advocates working toward the retention of English-speaking adults from Chinese Canadian churches through associated parallel independent English congregational models; this recognizes a link between the process of acculturation and the imperative to leverage mission.

— This chapter is taken from Todd's doctoral dissertation titled, "Towards the Retention of English-Speaking Adults from Chinese Canadian Churches Through Associated Parallel Independent English Congregational Models" (Bakke Graduate University, Seattle WA, 2014).

> *"Sometimes the silence is the loudest thing in the room."*
> —Cory Basil

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The intention of this article is to report on my study that identified key factors why English-speaking Chinese adults exit (defect from, apostatize from, leave) Western Canadian Chinese bicultural churches—a problem Helen Lee has termed a "silent exodus."[1] Transformational leaders can develop healthier congregations that maximize missional capacity. The model and structure for English ministries is an area of concern. Almost all Canadian Chinese churches operate their English congregations as a youth ministry or as an "associated dependent parallel congregation." This system can also be called a "parent-child model." However, the English congregation maturing into adulthood and becoming intergenerational, enforcing a "systemic dependence on the Chinese-speaking congregation"[2] is a significant factor in the silent exodus phenomenon. If these churches switched to a more independent parallel congregation model, more people would likely remain in these maturing English congregations, and fewer of them would leave the church.

AUDIENCE/MINISTRY OPPORTUNITY ADDRESSED

This topic should be of primary interest to Chinese church pastors and leaders who want to guide their emerging English congregations into becoming mature, associated English congregations. Furthermore, it should be of interest to theologians who are interested in the transformation of their own associations, religious organizations, or denominations and the expansion of missional capability. Faculty in theological institutions should be on the "cutting edge" of equipping parish leaders to steer through change. In addition, this article is relevant for denominational leaders who want to encourage the missional activity of their Chinese bicultural or tricultural churches, yet need to comprehend the complexity of why emerging generations of Canadian born English-speaking adult Chinese are leaving the church. These denominational leaders should be interested in trying to promote the development of a healthier church model. Leaders of other Asian churches should also find this article useful because many Asian church pastors have

---

[1] Helen Lee, "Silent Exodus: Can the East Asian Church in America Reverse the Flight of its Next Generation?," *Christianity Today*, 40, no. 12 (August 12, 1996).

[2] Marcus Tso, "English Adult Ministry in the Canadian Chinese Churches," *MB Chinese Herald* 48 (August 2005): 6–8. The author points out that with this model, "the Chinese-speaking board continues to be the real decision maker, without any plan for a cultural/language and generational transition."

similar exodus issues[3] with their English-speaking adults; some may want to transition their churches smoothly into incorporating the model recommended in this study.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

This research on the silent exodus was based on a qualitative study using sixty in-depth, open-ended questionnaires emailed to former church dropouts and remain-ins selected from a wide spectrum of circumstances and bilingual church affiliations. The goal was to identify common patterns and risk factors (cultural, organizational, spiritual, and personal) that might contribute to the silent exodus. It was recognized that there would likely be multiple "causes" or factors; each church may have its own unique circumstances due to its own history and cultural practices. However, the desired outcome for this project was 1) to identify patterns and common dynamics in Chinese bicultural churches that are contributing to a silent exodus, and 2) to compile a list of risk factors.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

Anecdotal reporting on the exodus of English-speaking adults from Chinese churches is abundant, but I wanted to establish the facts through qualitative research towards minimizing the problem and maximizing mission potential. This research looks into an emerging conversation regarding the interrelationship between religion and ethnicity.[4] It is natural for Chinese immigrant groups to selectively assimilate/acculturate[5] into Canadian culture while also preserving Chinese values and cultural practices. For Chinese immigrants in particular, some of the focus on identity and resistance

---

[3] Consider the following: Karen J. Chai, "Competing for the Second Generation: English-Language Ministry at a Korean Protestant Church," in *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration,* ed. R. Stephen Warner and Judith Wittner (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), 300–301; Larry A. Witham, "The Minority Challenge," in *Who Shall Lead Them?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Witham cites the challenge for second generation Koreans struggling in a dual bilingual and bicultural world, experiencing "the tug-of-war between isolation and assimilation" (114), and living with "an ambiguous [ethnic] vision of ministry"; though "some lament a silent exodus" (119), it stems from a desire "to avoid the ghettoization and cultural isolation" (117).

[4] David Chuen Yan Lai, Jordan Paper, and Lai Chuang Paper, "The Chinese in Canada: Their Unrecognized Religion," in *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada,* ed. Paul Bramadat and David Seljak (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 1–2, 5.

[5] Fengang Yang, Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1999), 10, 183, 187–198.

to cultural assimilation, in both the past and the present, has been due to the negative impact of prior discriminatory immigration legislation.[6] Guest, Bramadat and Seljak, and Yang have focused on religion among Chinese immigrants and the historical issues related to assimilation and adhesive identities.[7] Current research on Chinese Christian communities continues to identify resistance to the process of incremental cultural assimilation.[8] It has been noted that large-scale sociological studies on Canadian religion have overlooked the tensions that occur regarding identity and assimilation within Canadian Chinese bicultural churches.[9] It seems rather idealistic to assume, from general discussions on the functional role of religion in culture, that religious ethnic communities always facilitate healthy group cohesion, community, and social integration into mainstream society.[10]

There is often a significant amount of tension in the transmission of religious and ethnic identity from one generation to the next.[11] This research

---

[6] Jonathan Y. Tan, *Asian American Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis books, 2008), 59–60; Lai, Paper, and Paper, 90,106.

[7] Kenneth J. Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 2, 4, 7, 9; Paul Bramadat and David Seljak, eds., *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 1–5; Yang, 27–28.

[8] Karen Isaken Leonard et al., *Immigrant Faiths: Transforming Religious Life in America* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2005); David K. Yoo, *New Spiritual Homes, Religion and Asian Americans* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1999); Wing Chung Ng, *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945–80: The Pursuit of Identity and Power* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1999); Chai.

[9] Bramadat and Seljak, *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada*, 5, 21; Reginald. Bibby, *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada* (Toronto, ON: Stoddart, 2002), 6–7, 9.

[10] Emile Durkhiem assumes that religion plays a functional role in being a conduit into mainstream society for people on the fringes. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912, English translation by Joseph Swain 1915, New York: The Free Press, 1965). Bryan Wilson assumes that as one becomes more integrated into society, there is a move from a communally based to a societally based disposition. "Secularization and Its Discontents," in *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 148–179.

[11] Min Zhou, "Conflict, Coping, and Reconciliation: Intergenerational Relations in Chinese Immigrant Families," in *Across Generations: Immigrant Families in America,* ed. Nancy Foner (New York: New York University Press, 2009). Zhou notes that the family relationships between OBC and LBC (local born Chinese) in Chinese immigrant families are "characterized by intense bicultural and intergenerational conflicts" due to the "different pace of acculturation" (21). The LBC "find themselves straddling two socialcultural worlds…which is at the core of head-on intergenerational conflicts" because of filial piety (29). Zhou argues that "social and cultural institutions" (which could include Chinese churches) help reinforce the cultural expectations of the OBC (22).

recognizes there are cultural tensions and differences between first and next generation members within Chinese churches.[12] A focal point in this study is the theoretical debate regarding maintaining Chinese identity versus assimilating into Canadian culture. This debate plays itself out in Chinese Christian churches in Canada, too often with adverse outcomes for many next generation Chinese Canadians from the English-speaking congregations of bicultural churches. Enormous challenges arise in a Chinese faith context when a first generation takes an inflexible posture with a second generation that has been selectively adapting to Canadian society.

In particular, this research is concerned with probing Helen Lee's allegation of a contemporary unresolved issue referred to as the "silent exodus." The term refers to the high dropout rate of second-generation English-speaking young adults from Asian North American bilingual, bicultural churches.[13] U.S. studies indicate that from 75 to 90 percent or more of second-generation Chinese and Asian young adults leave their churches,[14] compared to 51 to 77 percent of the younger generation in European and multicultural Canadian church communities.[15] Finding comprehensive

---

[12] Additionally, my experience working with Italian churches in Canada, serving in the Mennonite Brethren denomination that only recently (late 20th century) transitioned from its German roots to the mainstream, and being present with a Latino pastoral panel in Fresno, California (2012), have deepened my conviction that transitioning a cultural church is a common challenge with ethnic congregations.

[13] Helen Lee.

[14] Esther Liu provides statistical data that Chinese churches in North America have been consistently losing eighty to ninety percent of their youth and young adults. "Cultural Tensions within Chinese American Families and Churches," *Fullness in Christ Fellowship*, accessed March 21, 2013, http://www.ficfellowship.org/cultural-tensions-e.html. Ken Fong noted that "well over 75 percent of the [local born Chinese] end up leaving the Chinese church … something is not right." Ken Fong, "Rejuvenating Sick Bodies," in *Pursuing The Pearl* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999)*,* 175. See also Peter Cha, "Finding a Church Home," in *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents,* ed. Jeanette Yep et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 146; Joseph Wong, "Bridging the Gap," *About Face* (February 1990): 1–2; Peter Cha et al., 148. In 1986, Gail Law set a precedent in citing longitudinal data on the silent exodus, stating, "It has been estimated the dropout rate among [local born Chinese] Christians for the past 40 years has been as high as 95%." "A Model for the American Ethnic Churches," in *A Winning Combination: ABC/OBC: Understanding the Cultural Tensions in Chinese Churches,* ed. Cecelia Yau (Petaluma, CA: Chinese Christian Mission, 1986), 131.

[15] *Focus on the Family* (July 2005), 17. Also see Mike Breaux, "A Mad Multi-gen Strategy that Works Dude," *Leadership,* Spring 2005, 44, accessed March 23, 2013, http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2005/spring/6.44.html. Breaux cites George Barna that there is up to a 58 percent drop in church attendance during the 20-something years. Sociologist James Penner did a study of Canadian young people between the ages of

data[16] for non-Asian young adults in the Canadian context is not easy. This difference is between 24 and 39 percent. Primary interviews with clerics and leaders from a heterogeneous spectrum of denominations lend further support to the conclusion that there is an ongoing "silent exodus."

From a cultural and sociological perspective, the silent exodus poses the challenge of bridging familial and ethnic values into a new philosophical and cultural context. Furthermore, it raises questions about the possibility of gracefully expressing some community ideals cross-generationally and cross-culturally. Whether this can be achieved has implications for the future harmony, direction, growth, and leadership development of these faith communities and families.

As stated, the purpose of this study is to establish the facts about a silent exodus, identify some of the factors that contribute to it, and provide findings to stakeholders in these communities. Anecdotal contributing factors that were explored included philosophical and theological disparity, identity issues, socio-cultural elements, intergenerational conflict, life stage transitioning, the influence of a shame culture, developmental views of autonomy and religious concepts, and a postmodern orientation.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

To ascertain the extent and nature of the problem of the silent exodus, I developed three interviewing guides to use in a series of qualitative research interviews. The guides were designed to reveal the prevailing/dominant cultural values and community practices in Chinese bicultural churches and to discover the empirical reasons and personal explanations for the silent exodus. These guides were developed according to previous theoretical insights, anecdotal observations, and postulates on various contributing factors. I used three information sources (anecdotal observations from clergy, responses from dropouts, and responses from remain-ins) to *triangulate* the circumstances for the occurrence (or non-occurrence) of the problem. The goal was to establish an objective analysis of the factors leading to the silent exodus.

18 and 34, commissioned by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's Youth and Young Adult Ministry Roundtable, and found that "only one in three Canadian young adults who attended church weekly as a child still do so today." James Penner, *Hemorrhaging Faith Report*, 2012, accessed November 29, 2013, http://tgcfcanada.org/hemorrhagingfaith.

[16] The problem with the following authors is that they do not cite where they are obtaining their data. David Kinnaman speculates that about 37 percent of those aged 18–41 in the United States are outsiders to Christianity. David Kinnaman, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity… and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 18. In Canada, David Sawlers speculates that "over seventy percent…leave by the time they reach the age of eighteen." David Sawlers, *Goodbye Generation* (Glace Bay, NS: Ponder Publishing, 2008), 6, 7.

This research began with a quest to discover the top factors why English-speaking Chinese adults leave Canadian Chinese bicultural churches; my concern has been with the high dropout rate of second generation adult English-speaking Christians. I began the research by constructing a survey for thirty English ministry pastors serving in thirty Chinese bicultural churches in the Greater Vancouver area of British Columbia. These pastors represented seven denominations and one independent stream.[17] Seven participants were lead pastors also serving the English ministries; twenty-three were associate English pastors. At the time of the survey, their years of pastoral experience with the English ministries ranged between three and twenty-five years. The age range of the pastors was between twenty-eight and seventy-one, with the average age being approximately forty.

The survey dispersed to these pastors consisted of two questions put into the following statement:

> A number of people have raised the discussion as to whether there is a Silent Exodus of CBC[18] young adults from the Chinese churches here in Canada. In your opinion, would you agree with the observation? If you say yes to the above question, could you give three reasons for the Silent Exodus of some young CBC adults from the Chinese church—what would you say the factors are?

After receiving the feedback from these thirty pastors, I listed the factors in order according to the number of times each was mentioned. I then condensed the top reasons and developed them into questions. In brief, topping the list of the thirty pastors' speculations were the following.

Issue #6: An Overemphasis on Chinese Ethnicity

The problem of overemphasis on Chinese ethnicity was compounded by the church being bilingual (language barriers) and the experience of OBCs trying to keep English ministries as Chinese-Christian instead of Christian-Chinese. The experience of cultural dislocation and neglect contributed to a feeling among Canadian born Chinese of not being at home—but rather being in a cultural bubble, where their faith could not be fully expressed in local church practices.

---

[17] The denominations represented were Alliance (nine), Mennonite Brethren (ten), Evangelical Free (two), Independent (three), Christ Church of China (one), Reformed (one), Baptist (two), and Presbyterian (two).

[18] From this point forward, CBC is an abbreviation for Canadian born Chinese or local born Chinese.

Issue #10: Leadership Matters, Theological Problems with the Mission, and Vision for English Ministries

The leadership issues included frequent leadership turnover, limited leadership opportunities, ineffective leadership, and frustrations with leadership. Many spoke of there being a lack of a clear sense of purpose and mission rooted in the Great Commission. One Chinese executive lead pastor made the following representative statement:

> The silent exodus has happened twice in our church…I have concluded after nine years of staying with the English ministries, to mature and develop a vocational English group, that it is not workable because the Chinese churches don't have a vision for the CBCs that drift further away from their culture of origin. The hierarchical, patriarchal nature, lack of vision, and leadership style creates a difficult atmosphere for English adults to stay and grow into fully mature and independent adult English congregations. I have now planted a second-generation church to reach second generation Chinese, those that have left the Chinese church, and those who are of other ethnicities.

Issue #9: Authority, Power, Politics, Control, and Empowerment

The English ministries are in the weaker position in relation to the Chinese congregation. They are kept dependent and not given real autonomy, independence, freedom, and power to make decisions for EM.[19] This lack of power is tied in with organizational structure.

Issue #2: Life Stage Needs

There was a sense that life stage needs were not being met in the EM. A Chinese CBC worship pastor spoke of his past church experience this way,

> [T]he silent exodus has been real for the past thirty years; I have seen it every year. Once young adults finish their education and get married, they have reached the Asian age of independence; after that there is this huge drop in ages over thirty and upwards. I would guess [my church] has lost over 90 percent of this age group. The most obvious part of the silent exodus is the ones you can see. There are fringe people that are harder to track (e.g., friends who were brought in)…At the young adult age the circle of friends of CBCs become culturally diverse. To reach only other CBCs is to ignore the whole world around them. They relate to so many other people they work with and care for (challenge: "it's odd you can't bring them to your church"). The English service in an immigrant

---

[19] From this point forward, EM is an abbreviation for English ministries.

church [feels like] an alien anomaly…The world outside is so different from our [church] world inside. The motivation for doing ministry with the EM must not be simply "how can we keep them?" That is not being missional, nor is it based on Scripture or Christ's teachings. It is idealistic but possible for a fully mature English congregation to be nurtured, but it would require many charitable things to be in place (e.g., have to allow people into leadership who do not look like OBC[20] leaders; both sides need to understand that things look different).

Issue #3: Unhealthy Church Community Matters

Not Inclusive Enough to Bring Non-Chinese Friends

The seven out of the thirty lead pastors were the most articulate regarding their concern over the silent exodus and its root causes. One Chinese lead pastor felt that one reason for the silent exodus was that CBCs are questioning whether OBCs really care about them.

CBCs are wondering why it has taken so long to realize the problem and have been discouraged at their importance to the church. Many Chinese churches have been quick to respond to [the many] immigrants…and now the flood of Mainland Chinese that are coming. Why have the Chinese churches not responded with as much enthusiasm to the local born? It sends a hypocritical message to them. You don't miss me when I'm gone because someone new has quickly filled my seat from overseas.

Another CBC lead pastor made this statement:

Personally, I don't think there is anything "silent" about the attrition. It is more than evident over the past twenty years here in the Vancouver area, if we would only admit it. The fact is, most English ministries still look exactly the same (primarily teens/college age with a sprinkling of 35 and up) as when I grew up…nothing's changed over the past 20 years. And as I have had the opportunity to speak at various Chinese churches, I find this to be true. The question is, where did all the older ones who grew up in my generation go? Answer: They're all around us. Most of my neighbors are CBC/CRCs[21] with young children. They're just not in the Chinese church for whatever reasons. My heart is not to criticize what we haven't done, but what we can do better to reach the CBC/CRCs— not just the ones that left the church, but also the younger ones who are there right now. I pray that the Lord will put this burden on more people to see the opportunities and think missionally.

---

[20] From this point forward, OBC is an abbreviation for overseas born Chinese.

[21] CRC is an abbreviation for "Canadian Raised Chinese" and refers to those individuals who were brought to Canada as children and raised in a Canadian cultural context.

Talking and discussions are necessary, but we must act strategically, too. I hope we don't keep asking, "Is there a silent exodus" twenty years from now.

These were the thirty pastors' anecdotal speculations on the silent exodus.

LOGISTICAL DETAILS

The groundwork for the survey design was challenging. The survey questionnaire was designed based on a review of relevant literature and discussions with informants. Careful thought went into the sampling process and data collection method.[22] Along with the questionnaire design, the issues that needed to be addressed included who the participants would be, how large the sample would be, the need to present the questionnaire with a clearly stated purpose and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity,[23] the construction of relevant questions in funneled order, and a method of data collection.[24]

All of the participants were English-speaking, adult, Canadian-born Chinese. Referrals came through friendship and ministerial networks. The participants were sent a survey by email or were interviewed face-to-face or on the phone. The participants answered the questions, reporting their perceptions and experiences. Data was collected over a twenty-five month period, then the difficult task of understanding the multiple realities of thirty dropout CBC adults was attempted.[25] I reviewed and analyzed each survey, identifying associations, regularities, variations, singularities, and exceptions, and keeping track of the participants' focus and range of responses to each question. Cases were numbered. Demographics and other data were noted—city, church, gender, date of completion, etc. I listed in order which factors and questions the participants prioritized. I then made connections, identifying patterns and themes from the collective surveys by counting the number who indicated that each issue was a factor for him or her.[26] The data was organized chronologically, and a list of major factors emerged.

---

[22] A.N. Oppenheim, "Problems of Survey Design," in *Questionnaire Design and Attitude Measurement* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1976), 1–23.

[23] These issues are ethical considerations discussed by Creswell, 165–166.

[24] Oppenheim, 24–48.

[25] The attempt to understand included getting a sense of the whole and coding a list of factors. Creswell, 155, 162–163.

[26] I attempted to conceptualize the data and see how the bits interconnected. Ian Dey, "What is Qualitative Analysis?" *Qualitative Data Analysis: A User-Friendly Guide for Social Scientists* (London: Routledge, 1993), 30.

DROPOUT PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

The approximate ages of the respondents ranged from twenty to fifty-one, and the average age was about thirty. Each respondent had formerly been an adult member in an English congregation in a Chinese church, either in Metro Vancouver or in Alberta. The respondents came from ten denominations,[27] but notably, all of the participants' churches were evangelical.

FINDINGS FROM ENGLISH-SPEAKING DROPOUTS

FROM THE CHINESE CHURCH

After the demographic information was taken, participants were asked to address eleven issues in seven sections. The majority of these participants was raised in the church and would have been expected to be emerging stakeholders in its future. The denominational scope of the dropout participants was broader than that of the clergy surveyed; the dropouts came from fourteen different churches in ten denominational or independent streams.[28] Twenty-eight plainly stated that they had been baptized members.[29] One summary observation that could be made here is that this raises the bar on their level of understanding of the faith and their commitment to being a Christ follower and a contributing member of the faith community.

Survey participants were also asked about their involvement or volunteerism. The majority spoke of being heavily involved in leadership in broad spectrum, ad hoc terms. A summary observation is that one cannot help but conclude that the loss of this leadership capital and these human resources must have had a cumulative negative impact on the growth and evangelistic momentum of the Chinese bicultural church.[30]

Dropout survey participants were asked who their role models were. Only four out of thirty indicated that they found a role model in their English ministries pastor (or young adult and family pastor); this lack of regard in emulat-

---

[27] Included were Baptist, Alliance, Evangelical Free, Mennonite Brethren, Christ Church of China, Lord's Grace Church (independent), Evangelical Chinese Bible Church (an independent church), Anglican, Pentecostal, and Lutheran.

[28] The additional denominations of the dropout participants included Anglican, Lutheran, and Pentecostal.

[29] I mention baptism (which is often tied closely to membership), because in Chinese church contexts, it is one of the gateways into fuller participation in the life of the church. One participant remembered refusing membership based on the perception that it was being used as a mechanism for social control. Two did not offer any information as to whether they had been baptized.

[30] Although about half of the survey participants did not clearly indicate how long they had been in the Chinese church EM, those who did said their service ranged from two-and-a-half years to thirty years.

WHY IS THERE A SILENT EXODUS OF ENGLISH-SPEAKING ADULTS?

ing pastors is a surprising finding, given how clergy-centered and hierarchical many of these ministry contexts are. Given how busy the survey participants reported their church environments were, the appointed clergy might have seemed too distant to be role models. It is difficult for people to identify with someone from whom they are distant. Implied is a deficit in incarnational leadership.[31] Survey participants were asked at what life stage they left the bicultural church. Participants generally left the bicultural church between the time they were in university (all dropout cases were over age twenty) and age fifty-one. A summary observation is that largest clusters of church transitions correlate with other common life stage transitions, such as mobility concerning employment and study, seeking a life mate, a change in marital status, and having children. When the thirty dropout survey participants were asked if they decided to leave after a long process or more quickly, only one admitted to having left suddenly; for the majority, leaving came after a long process.

Section four went straight to the reasons for and circumstances leading to leaving the church. The thirty participants could pick from eleven issues, or any combination thereof, as to why they had chosen to leave their church. The question was stated, "What was the main reason(s) that you decided to leave the bicultural church? There can be more than one reason; can you place them in some priority order, and then we can proceed to talk about them one by one?" For the sake of brevity, I will list the issues here in a footnote.[32] One discovery from this survey was that, besides the direct answers to the questions asked, the survey also revealed other information. In this case, I learned explanations for why CBC adults dropped out of their church, other than the ones I had posed. I will now discuss my findings from the survey questions, starting with the most frequent reasons reported. (Almost all dropouts listed more than one reason for leaving.)

---

[31] Eugene Peterson's following description of the unbusy pastor is helpful here: "To be a pastor who has the time to be with [congregants] leisurely, unhurried conversations so that I can understand and be a companion with you as you grow in Christ—your doubts and your difficulties, your desires and your delights." Eugene Paterson, *A Memoir: The Pastor* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 278.

[32] Issue #1: Identity issue of being a CBC within a Chinese church
Issue #2: Life stage transition needs unfulfilled within a Chinese church
Issue #3: Intergenerational conflict (within church/family)
Issue #4: Shame culture—over-evaluation or rejection
Issue #5: Western postmodern values or worldviews at conflict with Chinese traditional values manifested in the bicultural church
Issue #6: Overemphasis on Chinese cultural identity and ethnocentrism
Issue #7: Personal choice of a secular lifestyle versus Christianity
Issue #8: Perceived problem with *church* beliefs, theology, or hypocrisy
Issue #9: Control issues with church power and politics
Issue #10: Church leadership, organizational structure, and program issues
Issue #11: Intellectual, rational, and pragmatic issues

Fourteen CBC dropouts listed as a reason for leaving Issue #2: their life stage transition needs were unfulfilled within a Chinese church. Thirteen CBC dropouts listed Issue #6: there was an overemphasis on Chinese cultural identity and ethnocentrism.[33] Thirteen CBC dropouts also listed Issue #10: church leadership, organizational structure, and program issues. Nine dropouts listed Issue #9: control issues, church power struggles, and politics (with the senior pastor and board). One summary remark here is that participants who cited Issues #9 and #10 were aiming their grievances towards the senior pastor and board.

Five participants listed Issue #7: personal choice of a secular lifestyle versus Christianity. Five listed Issue #8: perceived problem with church beliefs, theology, or hypocrisy. Three listed Issue #3: intergenerational conflict (within church/family). Three listed Issue #4: shame culture: over-evaluation or rejection. Two listed Issue #1: identity issue of being a CBC within a Chinese church. Two listed Issue #5: Western postmodern values or worldviews at conflict with Chinese traditional values manifested in the bicultural church. Only one participant listed Issue #11: intellectual, rational, and pragmatic issues.

Further reasons for dropping out were discovered in the survey responses that had not been included in the construction of the survey questions. Eight (26 percent) participants mentioned leaving over loneliness and an attempt to seek friends, fellowship, and relationships. Belongingness appears to be the issue.

The combined findings from the dropout surveys have uncovered that the top five reasons CBCs leave their Chinese bicultural churches include the following:

> Issue #2: Their life stage transition needs were not being met within a Chinese church (14).
>
> Issue #6: The overemphasis on Chinese cultural identity and ethnocentrism (13).
>
> Issue #10: Issues with church leadership, organizational structure, and programs (13).
>
> Issue #9: Control issues concerning church power and politics (9).
>
> Discovered Issue: Loneliness and the attempt to seek friends, fellowship, and relationships (8).

---

[33] Some clergy participants predicted such a finding. Terry Woo won the Asian Canadian writer's award for his book *Banana Boys* (Cormorant Books, 2005), which highlighted the cultural and social limbo that Canadian born Chinese can experience (alienation from both the mainstream Canadian and Chinese cultures) and how identity is something that has to be explored when in an in-between hybrid culture. A passing reference from this volume (especially in the theatric version of the book) is made to the tension experienced by some CBCs, specifically with the Chinese church cultural identity.

TABLE 1

Dropout findings ranking

Issue	No. of cases citing factor	Ranking
Issue #1	2	7a
Issue #2	14	**1***
Issue #3	3	6a
Issue #4	3	6b
Issue #5	2	7b
Issue #6	13	**2a***
Issue #7	5	5a
Issue #8	5	5b
Issue #9	9	**3***
Issue #10	13	**2b***
Issue #11	1	8
(New finding) loneliness, seeking friends, fellowship, and relationships	8	**4***

Questions in section seven were focused on gleaning constructive feedback for Chinese church leaders to consider.[34] Twenty percent of the group requested that there be more biblically based teaching on matters pertaining to ethnicity, mission, inclusiveness, and other practical life applications. They made an appeal for teaching the foundational truths of Scripture and cultivating a high view of God and his Word. Sixteen percent (five) of this group advised that the English congregation be given autonomy and that the Chinese congregation give up control in order to allow the English congregation to coexist independently side-by-side. Thirteen percent recommended that the Chinese congregation and leadership empower (give power to) the English congregation. Three percent recommended an English congregation church plant. Several participants cited their discovery that a multicultural (or primarily Western) church would be a more suitable environment in which to grow to maturity when there is not a sufficient degree of independence for the English congregation in a Chinese bicultural church. Several

---

[34] Hindsight can be 20/20. Looking back, if the situation(s) leading to your departure had not happened or had happened differently, would you see yourself still in that Chinese bicultural church now? In hindsight, what had to change or be changed in the bicultural bilingual Chinese church in order to provide CBCs like you (growing up and maturing) a real and fulfilling Christian life and service experience in church? If you were the bicultural Chinese church, what would you have done to prevent the younger generations from leaving?

participants felt an exodus should not be prevented. Thirteen percent (four participants) recommended that the Chinese elders take a close look at hiring relevant leadership and reviewing leadership structures. Thirteen percent recommended that the Chinese church work on facilitating an environment where there is more connection, community, and authenticity for the English congregation. Thirteen percent requested stronger Christian character from the Chinese leadership. Discipleship should include modeling humility, giving genuine care, and showing more openness. Surprisingly, only ten percent expressed that the vision, direction, and goals of the English congregation needed to be addressed; the lack of interest in the EM direction was probably less of a concern for them, as they had already left the bicultural church. Ten percent recommended that the EM have relevant mentors instead of being managed and "babysat." Ten percent recommended that the Chinese leadership be supportive of the EM and willing to listen. Ten percent recommended that the Chinese congregation be more accepting, less judgmental, and more graceful;[35] they encouraged the Chinese congregation to express Christian attitudes towards the members of the English congregation—welcome them, treat them like family, and be lovingly engaged in their lives. (The concern was with the *quality* of the community.)

COMPARATIVE RESULTS OF ALL THREE GROUPS

Table: shows how the three groups surveyed understand why CBCs drop out.

Both dropouts and remain-ins see Issue #2 (life stage transition needs unfulfilled within a Chinese church) as the primary reason CBCs leave Chi-

TABLE

Comparison of all three groups

Top Five Reasons for Silent Exodus Listed Ranked in Order		
Dropout Reporting	**Clergy Speculations**	**Remain-in Speculations**
Issue #2	Issue #6	Issue #2 (86%)
Issue #6	Issue #10	Issue #7 (80%)
Issue #10	Issue #9	Issue #10 (70%)
Issue #9	Issue #2	Issue #3 (63%)
Discovered issue: Loneliness/relationships	Issue #3	Issue #9 (60%)

[35] This corresponds with the 2011 Angus Reid survey *Hemorrhaging Faith* regarding young adults leaving the church. That study concluded that "There are four primary toxins that keep young people from engaging with the church: hypocrisy, judgment, exclusivity, [and] failure." Penner.

nese bicultural churches. Both dropouts and remain-ins also agree that Issue #10 is the third most important reason for leaving. Notably, the clergy failed to grasp the number one reason why CBCs drop out, although the clergy had a somewhat similar understanding of the third most important reason (Issue #10).[36] The differences in perception between clergy and dropouts/remain-ins are illustrated in the following figure:

FIGURE.

The main issues as seen by all three groups

---
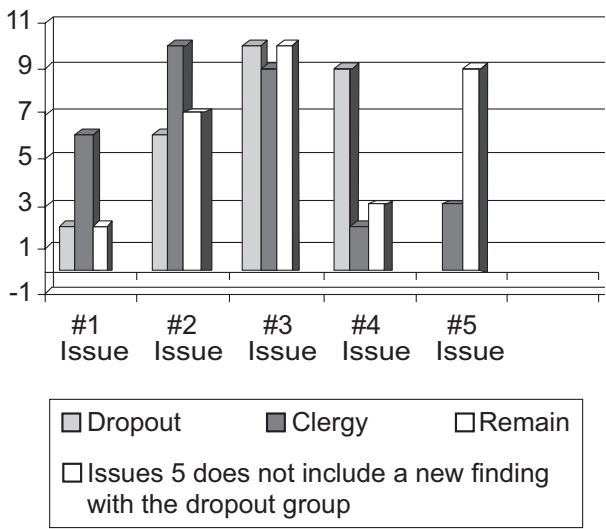
[36] Why is it that the clergy ranked the most significant dropout factor in fourth place as a lesser issue? There are several plausible explanations. Perhaps the clergy have made an assumption, projecting the top challenging issue *they* deal with in bicultural settings (issue #6 the overemphasis on Chinese culture) onto why CBCs exit. Most likely further research with EM clergy could ferret this out. Most EM clergy intensely deal with mediating, advocating, and bridge building between the two cultures—so culture likely has a high profile in their speculations. A second explanation may be that there is some relational distance between EM leadership and CBCs' concerns. This may be further supported by the fact that not many CBCs surveyed cited their clergy or board as role models—more often their role models were an older cohort, peers, or teachers. It begs the question as to whether the EM leadership is kept too busy to focus on the relational level. If so, this could be related to workload expectations and/or the high English pastor turnover that is so frequently cited in these surveys. This is an *incarnational leadership* deficit. No wonder the surveys reveal that a fifth reason CBCs exit is to seek meaningful relationships and to be understood. Leaders cannot address this problem unless they get closer to those they serve—the relational distance must be bridged.

One finding in my survey that was identical with the research findings of Wang and Evans is that cultural rigidity (or overemphasis on Chinese culture)[37] is the significant *second* key reason CBCs leave their church.[38] This finding also matches the research of Ebaugh and Chafetz, who noted that "congregations that focus…strongly on recreating ethnic ambience of the old country are most likely to alienate" the next English-speaking generations.[39]

DESCRIPTION OF MY EXPERIENCE DURING THIS RESEARCH

AND THE ANALYSIS OF DROPOUT FINDINGS

I believe that what motivated participants to contribute was the "opportunity to give voice to their feelings and concerns. Many express[ed] the hope that their participation [might] make it easier in the future for others who have to cope with a situation similar to their own."[40]

CONCLUSION OF THE SURVEY RESULTS ON DROPOUTS

This survey has successfully identified some causative patterns and risk factors for CBCs leaving bicultural Chinese churches, which indicate where preventative kinds of leadership measures can be taken. For example, the research revealed that the life stage when the majority leave is young adulthood; that most CBCs deliberated for a lengthy period of time, assessing

---

[37] Paul C. Wang, "A Study on Cross-cultural Conflict Patterns and Intervention Between Two Generations of Leaders in Two Chinese Churches in Vancouver: Toward a Vibrant Intergenerational Partnership in Ministry." DMin dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, 2003, 150.

[38] This has been a frequently voiced concern for nearly three decades. In 1986, Dan Jue warned North American Chinese churches that they were facing both a danger and an opportunity in regards to next generation Chinese leaving over cultural baggage. Jue predicted that if the Chinese churches did not "put priority in retaining" members, they would experience "great irretrievable loss." Dan Jue, "An Appeal to Sacrifice," in *A Winning Combination: ABC/OBC Understanding the Cultural Tensions in Chinese Churches,* edited by Cecelia Yau. (Petaluma, CA: Chinese Christian Mission, 1986), 89, 85. James A. Evans saw ethnocentrism as the source of the problem, in that cultural preservation was prioritized over mission—there simply was "too much of an emphasis on Chinese identity and not enough on teaching and living out the Christian life." James Andrew Evans, "The Impending 'Silent Exodus' of Canadian-Born Chinese Christians from the Canadian Chinese Church." DMin dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2008, 175, 18.

[39] Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet S. Chafetz. *Religion and the New Immigrants* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000), 119.

[40] Leon Wahler, "Conducting Research on Sensitive Subjects," *Vue: The Magazine of the Marketing Research and Intelligence Association,* November 2008, 25.

their options, before exiting; and that follow-up with them appears to have been minimal. The survey also revealed the top five reasons why dropouts leave, and all of these reasons are related to deficits in leadership. There is thus a need for a greater application of the qualities of transformational leadership—incarnational leadership, servant leadership, prophetic leadership, reflective leadership, shalom leadership, and calling-based leadership.

A CRITIQUE OF THE PROJECT, INCLUDING A REFLECTION

ON THEOLOGICAL ISSUES THE PROJECT RAISED

A number of survey participants stated that completing the survey either caused some painful, unresolved memories to surface or that the experience was therapeutic and cathartic.[41] Overall, a measure of love and appreciation for the Chinese church was clear. Every participant was aware of the key issue of CBCs scattering from and leaving the Chinese church. I had a sense with *some* participants and some potential participants who dropped out of the survey (there was approximately a 60 percent return rate) that their contribution to this investigation might be dishonoring to their parents (telling on their parents or culture). This hesitancy touches on the theological tension between honoring parents (Mt 15:3–6) and prioritizing God's value on addressing systemic familial and institutional injustices (Mic 6:8, Mt 12:49–50). Prophetic leadership is needed to speak the truth with love to those who hold the power in broken systems. Certainly this project has refuted the flawed assumption that "if we just get CBC adults involved in ministries, they will stay in our church." Scripture does not put the emphasis for a sustainable faith community on works, duty, performance, or activism. A qualitative faith community needs to shift its emphasis to loving God (being theocentric) with heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving each other (being relational) (Lk 10:27).[42] A healthy faith community must express real Christian character (Gal 5:22–26) in relationships (Php 2:4, 1 Jn 3:18).

---

[41] I am unsure if incomplete statements or unanswered questions in the survey are partly a reflection of this. I saw evidence of Wayne Wong's statement that "many Canadianized Chinese people who have left their churches without first reconciling…have not emotionally left." Wayne Wong, "The Current Challenges of Doing Inter-Generational Chinese Ministries in Greater Vancouver: A Reconciliation Ministry." Master's thesis, Northwest Baptist Seminary, Vancouver, BC, 1998, 40. There is a need for shalom leadership.

[42] Eugene Peterson has lamented that activism and having people involved in programs has "developed into the dominant methodology of doing church…[the] problem here: a program is an abstraction and inherently nonpersonal. A program defines people in terms of what they do, not who they are." We should be understanding church in terms of "personal relationships and a personal God" not simply "getting things done." Peterson, 254–255.

Because the average age of the participants in my surveys was around thirty, which is more or less the "Asian age of adulthood," I have a sense that their survey participation represents the expressions of a group "coming of age" who are motivated to voice their experiences. Further reinforcing my belief that the participants were highly motivated (willing to talk about perceived negative experiences) is that almost all were referrals. I sense that the social roles and identities[43] of CBCs in bicultural churches (Chinese hierarchical[44] cultures) have a decisive effect in influencing their choices to leave. The theological issue here seems to be related to mentoring (2 Ti 2:2), discipleship, empowering, and launching a next generation into the fullness of leadership in the faith family (Eph 4:11–16). Although I can assert that love is what holds the bicultural church together, love comes through a hierarchical cultural lens that needs to give way to a biblical picture of community (Mt 12:48–50, 1 Ti 5:1, 4:12, Lk 14:26). CBC adults in bicultural Chinese churches are a high-risk group for a number of reasons identified in these surveys. First, 16 percent either have left the church altogether or infrequently attend. Second, about 30 percent specifically indicated they had been wounded and were seeking healing elsewhere.[45] It is obvious from the self-reporting of the remain-in cluster that they are also an at risk group. Many are grappling with difficult contexts, and others are on the edge of considering an exit.

From a theological point of view (the doctrine of the body of Christ), the segregation of the Chinese bicultural church from the broader church has negatively affected a holistic understanding and experience for *some* survey participants. All Christians are a part of the same body of Christ (Eph 5:30, 1 Co 12:27). It is an interesting observation that the majority of dropout survey participants who moved on to other churches have intentionally chosen multicultural or mainstream churches (56 percent). This choice may represent that they have done some theological reflection about whom the church should comprise and how regressive persistent segregation can be (Eph 2:13–17, 3:6, 4:15–16). *Sometimes* it helps people to know what they are supposed to be doing by seeing a vision of where they are going. Revelation 5:9–10 and 7:9 provide a picture of the whole family of God singing and worshiping before God—a multicultural, multiracial group drawn "from every tribe and language and people and nation."

---

[43] See Dey, "What is Qualitative Analysis?" in *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 50.

[44] For a historical discussion on the hierarchical nature of relationships in Chinese culture see Yang Shi, "Chinese Cultural Traditions: A New Interpretation of Chinese Culture," *Regent Chinese Journal*, 5, no 2 (1997): 19–22.

[45] In Evans's doctoral research, I have found documentation for this theme of CBCs leaving the Chinese church over being wounded. Evans, 176, 177.

Bibliography

Bibby, Reginald. *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada.* Toronto, ON: Stoddart, 2002.

Bramadat, Paul, and David Seljak, eds. *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada.* Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2008.

Breaux, Mike. "A Mad Multi-gen Strategy that Works Dude." *Leadership,* Spring 2005, 44. accessed March 23, 2013. http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2005/spring/6.44.html.

Cha, Peter. "Finding a Church Home." In *Following Jesus without Dishonoring Your Parents,* edited by Jeanette Yep et al. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998.

Chai, Karen, J. "Competing for the Second Generation." In *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration,* edited by R. Stephen Warner and Judith Wittner. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998, 295–331.

Dey, Ian. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A User-Friendly Guide for Social Scientists.* London: Routledge, 1993.

Durkhiem, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.* 1912. English translation by Joseph Swain, 1915. New York: The Free Press, 1965.

Ebaugh, Helen Rose, and Janet S. Chafetz. *Religion and the New Immigrants.* Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000.

Evans, James Andrew. "The Impending 'Silent Exodus' of Canadian-Born Chinese Christians from the Canadian Chinese Church." DMin dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2008.

Focus on the Family (July 2005), 17.

Fong, Kenneth. *Pursuing the Pearl.* Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000.

Guest, Kenneth J. *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community.* New York: New York University Press, 2003.

Jue, Dan. "An Appeal to Sacrifice," In *A Winning Combination: ABC/OBC Understanding the Cultural Tensions in Chinese Churches,* edited by Cecelia Yau. Petaluma, CA: Chinese Christian Mission, 1986.

Kinnaman, David. *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity… and Why It Matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007.

Lai, David Chuen Yan, Jordan Paper, and Lai Chuang Paper. "The Chinese in Canada: Their Unrecognized Religion." In *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada,* edited by Paul Bramadat and David Seljak. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2008.

Law, Gail. "A Model for the American Ethnic Churches." In *A Winning Combination: ABC/OBC: Understanding the Cultural Tensions in Chinese Churches,* edited by Cecelia Yau. Petaluma, CA: Chinese Christian Mission, 1986.

Lee, Helen. "Silent Exodus: Can the East Asian Church in America Reverse the Flight of Its Next Generation?" *Christianity Today*, 40, no. 12, August 12, 1996, 50–53.

Leonard, Karen Isaken, Alex Stepick, Manuel A. Vasquez, and Jennifer Holdaway. *Immigrant Faiths: Transforming Religious Life in America.* Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2005.

Liu, Esther. "Cultural Tensions within Chinese American Families and Churches." Fullness in Christ Fellowship. accessed March 21, 2013. http://www.ficfellowship.org/cultural-tensions-e.html .

Ng, Wing Chung. *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945–80: The Pursuit of Identity and Power.* Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1999.

Oppenheim, A.N. *Questionnaire Design and Attitude Measurement.* London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1976.

Penner, James. *Hemorrhaging Faith Report.* Commissioned by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada Youth and Young Adult Ministry Roundtable, 2012. accessed November 29, 2013. http://tgcfcanada.org/hemorrhagingfaith/.

Peterson, Eugene. *A Memoir: The Pastor.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.

Sawlers, David. *Goodbye Generation.* Glace Bay, NS: Ponder Publishing, 2008.

Shi, Yang. "Chinese Cultural Traditions: A New Interpretation of Chinese Culture." *Regent Chinese Journal*, 5, no 2 (1997): 19–22.

Tan, Jonathan Y. *Asian American Theologies.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008.

Tso, Marcus. "English Adult Ministry in the Canadian Chinese Churches." *MB Chinese Herald*, no. 48, August 2005, 6–8.

Wahler, Leon. "Conducting Research on Sensitive Subjects." *Vue: The Magazine of the Marketing Research and Intelligence Association,* November 2008.

Wang, Paul C. "A Study on Cross-cultural Conflict Patterns and Intervention Between Two Generations of Leaders in Two Chinese Churches in Vancouver: Toward a Vibrant Intergenerational Partnership in Ministry." DMin dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, 2003.

Wilson, Bryan. *Religion in Sociological Perspective.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Witham, Larry A. *Who Shall Lead Them? The Future of Ministry in America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Wong, Joseph. "Bridging the Gap." *About Face* (February 1990): 1–2.

Wong, Wayne. "The Current Challenges of Doing Inter-Generational Chinese Ministries in Greater Vancouver: A Reconciliation Ministry." Master's thesis, Northwest Baptist Seminary, Vancouver, BC, 1998.

Woo, Terry. *Banana Boys.* Toronto, ON: Cormorant Books, 2005.

Yang, Fenggang. *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities.* University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1999.

Zhou, Min. "Conflict, Coping, and Reconciliation: Intergenerational Relations in Chinese Immigrant Families." In *Across Generations: Immigrant Families in America,* edited by Nancy Foner. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

About the Author

Rev. Matthew Todd has served in English ministries in bicultural and bilingual settings as a speaker, vocational youth worker, community service worker, and ordained English ministries associate track lead pastor (Port Moody Pacific Grace MB). Additionally, he has served in the executive leadership of the Mennonite Brethren Chinese Churches Association (English pastors liaison) in the former Greater Vancouver English Ministries Fellowship (VCEMF—now called Shepherds Circle), helping to plan joint ministerial initiatives and next generation Chinese Canadian events in southern British Columbia. He formerly served as a teacher for 13 years with Pacific Life Bible College and currently maintains an itinerate speaking ministry. A key focus of his written work has been towards the mission longevity and health of English ministry congregations in Chinese bicultural church contexts.