

What I Learned about Ethiopian Immigrant Children

By Tesfai Z. Tesema

This story starts with a conversation between my wife, Abby, and our eldest son, Abel. Abel, our first child, was born in Khartoum, Sudan. Although he was born outside of the United States, his Amharic language skills were limited and he refused to use it in public. My wife, Abby, had enrolled him and his younger brother Daniel in the Sunday School of an American church to supplement the spiritual education they were getting at the ethnic Ethiopian church I pastored in San Jose,

“Are you ready for church?” Abby asked Abel that particular Sunday morning. “Which church?” Abel said. “Your church or my church?” Abby was horrified. “How can you say ‘your church’? Your father is the pastor!” “So what?” Abel said. “I don’t understand what my father preaches. How can it be my church?” That’s when it hit us. We were building a congregation of Ethiopians in America and we were happy. Unfortunately, our kids were not.

About that time I was preparing a sermon from John 4—the Samaritan woman and Jesus story. The Samaritan woman asked Jesus: ‘Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well?’ She was paying Father Jacob a big compliment for making the well available to her people, for maybe thirty or forty generations. Something clicked as I read the story this time. The well and our Ethiopian church were one and the same! That well gave life-giving water to her people for generations. And our Ethiopian church is giving life-giving water to my generation. But my children couldn’t enjoy the water we offered them. It was freshwater. They were like tropical fish who could only live in saltwater. When we died, this church was going to end with us.

During this period of discovery I met Pastor Bob Newton. He was pastoring a Lutheran church a few miles from ours, in downtown San Jose. I shared our challenge with him. Dr. Newton is an educator; he’d worked on the mission field in the Philippines for fifteen years. “Your problem is cross-cultural,” he said. “Right now, the church you pastor is one culture--Ethiopian. But your children are more American than they are Ethiopian. Consider developing a ministry that reaches across the culture gap, across the generation divide.”

At Dr. Newton’s suggestion, I arrived at Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, Indiana in 2003 with that burning issue on my mind:

What are the immigrant children, the 1.5 and 2.0 generations, really like? How can we build Christian ministries to reach and retain them?

I spent three years at Concordia, researching the children of Ethiopian immigrants and writing my PhD thesis on them. This article chronicles the story of that research and the results contain what I believe God’s Spirit has given us, a message for the pastors of the Ethiopian Church in diaspora across the U.S. and to the perplexed parents of immigrant children. The message is this: I’m hopeful! Your children are not first of all victims of American racism, or generation gap, or any other crippling social malady. They will bring the gospel of Jesus Christ

to this country. They are equipped to do that because they are bicultural. The passion of the Global South, where the Church of Jesus Christ is growing like crazy, flows through their veins as they walk the streets of the North, where faith has grown cold and small in many places where churches are dying.

Your children trade with the values of two cultures because, among the most successful immigrant children, they are truly bicultural. Their ability to live simultaneously with two identities is a mighty weapon in the arsenal of the Church of Jesus. Moreover, the message to the evangelical church in North America is this: “Generation 1.5 and 2.0 immigrants in this country are Spirit-sent (not by will of men or women) missionaries to preach the ‘good news’ to a land that has become increasingly secular and anti-Christian Faith.”