

SACRED GROUND

A FILM-BASED DIALOGUE SERIES ON RACE AND FAITH

SESSION SIX STUDY GUIDE



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SESSION 6: AMERICANS, NOT FOREIGNERS: EXPLORING ASIAN/PACIFIC AMERICAN HISTORY

To watch beforehand or in the session

- PBS series: *Ancestors in the Americas*, Episode 2: “Chinese in the Frontier West” (61 min.)

To read beforehand

- Article: “The real reasons the U.S. became less racist toward Asian Americans” by Jeff Guo, in conversation with Ellen Wu about her book, *The Color of Success*
- Article: “Asian Americans speak out against a decades-old ‘model minority’ myth” by Yanan Wang
- Core book: *Jesus and the Disinherited* – first part of Chapter 2 (up to paragraph that starts “The crucial question, then, is this...,” on p. 36 of 1996 paperback edition)
- Core book: *Waking Up White* – Chapters 14 and 16

Session themes and overview from the author

This session’s film is the second episode of Loni Ding’s PBS series *Ancestors in the Americas: “Chinese in the Frontier West: An American Story.”* It picks up chronologically where the episode from *Latino Americans* left off last session: the period after the Mexican-American War. It conveys the history of how Chinese immigrants to the western United States were treated in the 19th century – by Europeans and European Americans who were also migrating there (such as during the Gold Rush), and by the federal government. We learn which immigrant groups were allowed to naturalize as American citizens and “assimilate” during this period and which were not, and what insidious racial hierarchies were involved – including the concept of “perpetual foreigners.” The economic motivations behind racism appear again. We also see the legal and cultural ways in which Chinese communities pushed back and forged their lives.

This film focuses, not exclusively but primarily, on Chinese Americans. Asian/Pacific Americans come from a broad array of countries – in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands, in addition to East Asia – and from more than 40 different ethnic groups. Like others, they have immigrated in many different eras of U.S. history, including in the earliest days. They, thus, have a broad range of circumstances, experiences, and histories in various regions of the United States. As a reflection of that enormous diversity (and of the fact that categorizing *any* group is ultimately a fool’s errand), consensus does not exist on self-naming. In the United States, the following are some of the primary self-designations that are used: Asian American, Asian/Pacific American (APA), Asian Pacific Islander (API), Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA), and some people simply call themselves “Asian” or reference their more specific heritage (e.g., Native Hawaiian, Indian American, Filipino). In The Episcopal Church, the term “Asiamerican” is used.

The first article for this session brings us into the 20th and 21st centuries, looking at the myth of the model minority: the evolution of discrimination against Asian Americans from prejudice and racist stereotyping to, in a sense, the granting of “permission” to assimilate into mainstream white culture. The multiple motivations behind this shift are illuminated – how and why a new “positive” stereotype was constructed. This history provides a powerful demonstration of how different communities of color are played against each other to serve white self-interest and how stereotypes take root. Whatever your heritage, please use this article to consider and reconsider what stereotypes you may hold about Asian Americans.

The second article highlights the harmful effects of the model minority myth, such as how it renders invisible those Asian/Pacific American communities that are struggling – economically, educationally, health-wise, and more. Many ethnic groups don’t come from cultures that fit the model minority stereotype at all, or they immigrated here under circumstances that don’t allow their communities to meet the impossible standards of the model minority myth in ways that other communities can. Who is visible and invisible in your community?

"The history of the Asian mission in The Episcopal Church is marked by the Church’s apathy and silence in the face of the series of anti-Asian immigration policies by the U.S. government from the 1880s to 1940s. ... [After] the 1965 Immigration Act ... many new Asian congregations of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds were established, and today there are more than 140 Asian churches in The Episcopal Church. Asian-American experience in The Episcopal Church contains stories of grief and hope, of death and resurrection."

– The Rt. Rev. Allen K. Shin, Bishop Suffragan, Episcopal Diocese of New York, from a report to the House of Bishops’ Theology Committee, for their work on *Becoming Beloved Community*

As facilitator, it might be wise to take stock of how participants are doing as they absorb the history that has been shared over the sessions thus far. Perhaps this session (if not the previous two), is a good time to pause to revisit the “stages of grief” blog post from Session 2. It can be a time to draw on scripture, prayer, and spiritual practices to explore how to be present to suffering while also noticing one’s own needs and perhaps limitations. It may be worth naming the idea of “re-injury” for those whose people have been targets of oppression, or the idea of “compassion fatigue” for others. The theological reflection on lament by Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Graham Hill in the “Religious Resources” section may be of service, if you haven’t already read it. Or perhaps it’s a good time to walk the labyrinth if you have one.

This could also be a good time to speak with each other and share stories related to the “Proclaiming the Dream” quadrant on the labyrinth – to reground in the vision of beloved community. Of what new world do you dream? When have you had a taste of it?