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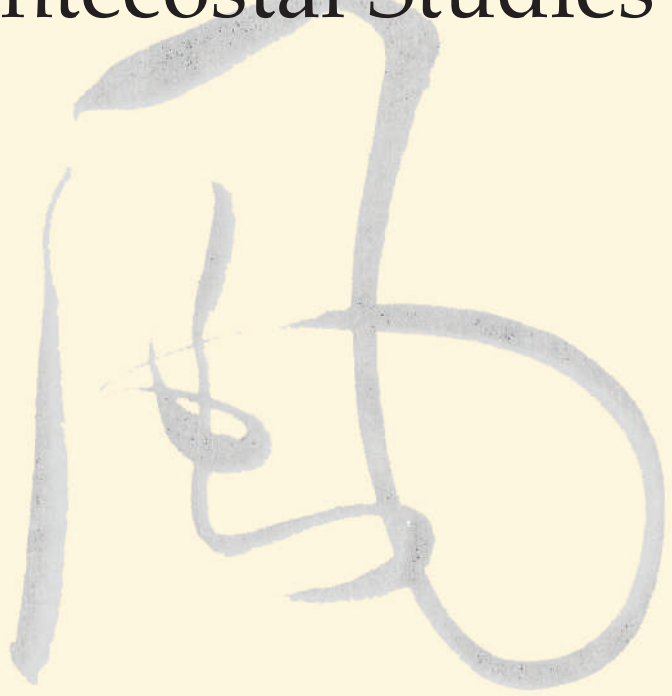

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The Liminal Space of Kerala Pentecostals in the United States of America and the Role of the Inter-Collegiate Prayer Fellowship

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Introduction

During March 17-20, 2016, I attended the American Inter-Collegiate Prayer Fellowship camp in Davis, Oklahoma. At first, there seemed to be nothing distinctive about it as a Christian camp—e.g., everyone speaking English, singing popular evangelical songs, and listening to dynamic preaching, as would be the case at any charismatic gathering[1]—except for one striking exception. Almost all the participants were of Indian descent, and more specifically of Malayalee Indian descent.

It was indeed surprising to see some 500 ethnically Indian young people assembled in a majority-white Oklahoma town; however, such a sight represents the racially diverse nature of American Christianity. Simultaneously, this gathering, being under the banner of Inter-Collegiate Prayer Fellowship (a Kerala-based Pentecostal para-church organization), points to the importance of mapping the cultural and religious nature of Kerala Pentecostalism in America.

This paper aims to identify the liminal nature of Kerala Pentecostalism via focusing on the Christian formation of second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals in America. It then attempts to demonstrate the role of the Inter-Collegiate Prayer Fellowship (ICPF) in shaping those second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals in their Christian identity. To fulfill this two-fold objective, I will do the following:

1. Describe the Malayalee Pentecostals in India and chronicle their immigration to America, which led to the establishment of Malayalee Pentecostal churches there.
2. Discuss the liminal identity (ethnic and religious) of the second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals.

[1]Occasionally one would see, as Raymond Williams puts it, "a form of 'holy aerobics' break out as people clap their hands, sway, and dance around in place to the rhythm of the music" similar to the feature he observed during his ethnographic study among Asian Indian Pentecostals in 1996 (Williams 1996, 165). However, that feature is not an exclusively Indian or Malayali one. Instead, it is common among Pentecostals worldwide. While the 'holy aerobics' can be considered an American rendition of Pentecostalism, other Pentecostals around the world may demonstrate more expressive forms of worship.

3. Introduce the ICPF and critically examine its impact on the second-generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans.

The paper concludes with the argument that, despite its limitations, the ICPF provides a unique space for the second-generation to have a more profound Christian Pentecostal experience, to be affirmed in their leadership calling, and to have a sense of belonging in their liminal cultural identity.[2]

Malayalee Pentecostals in India: Their Immigration to America and the Church They Established

Malayalee Pentecostals are from the South Indian coastal state of Kerala.[3] In Kerala, Pentecostalism traces its roots back to the late 19th century where Pentecostal expressions were prevalent among various revivals led by local Christian reformist groups. A. C. George notes three revivals—one in 1860, another in 1873, and the third in 1895 (George 2001, 221)— where people experienced Pentecostal-like expressions, notably speaking in unknown tongues. These revivals provided a renewal of faith that led to "conversion of non-believers, a jump in the sale of Bibles, increased concern to preach the gospel, sorrow for sin, restitution of property taken illegally, and significantly the disregard of caste in church meetings" (McGee 2010, 37).

In the early 20th century, with the arrival of western Pentecostal missionaries, notably George E. Berg, Robert F. Cook, and Mary Chapman, plus the leadership of local preachers like K. E. Abraham, Pentecostalism grew and became established as a new Christian group in Kerala. Against a backdrop of the reformative teachings in the already-existing Protestant Reform churches, Pentecostalism embodied renewal teaching and expressions (mainly in the embracing of Spirit baptism), which attracted believers who were reformists in Mar Thoma and Brethren churches (Varghese 2019). As Stanley John notes, “The doctrine of cessation (of miraculous gifts) embraced by the Brethren

[2]The methodology of this research is integrative; interacting with existing literature, with the author’s personal experiences (autoethnographic analysis), and with the thematic analyses of the ten interviews he conducted over a three-month span (October-December 2019) with second-generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans (five from Oklahoma, two from Texas, and one each from Washington D. C, New York City, and Houston. All of the interviewees consented to have their responses used in this paper; however, the names that appear are pseudonyms.

[3]The term *Malayalee* is commonly used to refer to someone who speaks Malayalam (the language spoken in the State of Kerala). Often in the diaspora, terms such as Malayalee or Keralite are used to refer to people from Kerala. I use the phrase Malayalee in this paper because I believe 'Malayalee' conveys a more ethnic tone from an insider's perspective than does the word 'Keralite'.

Church and the reluctance to embrace the spiritual phenomena in the Mar Thoma Church led many who experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit to leave these churches and join the Pentecostal churches" (John 2018, 106).

With Pentecostalism standing as a Christian reformative movement, Malayalee Pentecostals also adopted certain social customs, such as no jewelry for women[4] and white-colored attire (often understood as a symbolic denunciation of 'worldliness'); these customs set them apart from the wider Kerala Christian community. Subsequently, when Malayalee Pentecostals immigrated to America, they brought with them a socio-religious distinctiveness along with their ethnic attributes (e.g., Kerala food, clothing, Malayalam language), which defined their ethno-religious sub-culture.

However, before discussing the Malayalee Pentecostal's immigration to America, it is important to look at the broader Asian Indian immigration within which the Malayalee Pentecostals are located.

Malayalee Pentecostals Within the Asian Indian Americans

Asian Indians have been part of American society for more than a century.[5] However, from the 1960s to the 1990s, the country saw a rapid increase in the Indian immigrant population, due mainly to the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. According to recent data from the Pew Research Center, as of 2019, there are about 4,606,000 Indian residents in the America. Among them, "While the majority are immigrants, a rising share is born and raised in the United States" (Badrinathan et al 2021, 1).[6]

It is also important to note that these Indian Americans are not an ethnically homogenous group; rather, they reflect the diverse nature of India, where diversity can be broadly yet strongly categorized in terms

[4]For a discussion of the role of jewelry and South Indian Pentecostals, see Jorgensen 2012. Although the study is from the nearby state of Tamil Nadu, it provides some valuable insights about the South Indian Pentecostal lifestyles that are common among Kerala Pentecostals as well.

[5]The earliest immigration records indicate that the first immigrant arrived in Massachusetts from Madras in 1790 (Williams 2019, 2; Thomas 2013, 116). The following 100 years saw little growth in the population and hence remained below 1,000 by 1900. In the next 60 years, there was a slow growth, which resulted in 13,000 Asian Indians living in America (Williams 2019). The low immigration numbers were due to various laws being implemented to restrict the entry of Asians in general, starting with the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. For a brief analysis of different immigration laws that impacted Asian Indians, see Bhatia 2007, 89.

[6]The Pew Research Center records that among the 4,606,000 Indian residents in 2019, 32% are U.S. born and 68% are foreign (Indian) born. For a detail statistical breakdown, see Budiman 2021.

of geographic, linguistic, and religious differences.[7] While one may attempt to make sense of this population collectively in their pan-ethnicity in order to understand their "shared culture . . . shared categorization by others . . . shared institutions . . . and shared interests" (Dhingra and Rodriguez 2014, 10),[8] this paper begins the enquiry from a particular Indian ethno-religious group—the Malayalee Pentecostals who immigrated to America from the southwestern India state of Kerala.

Malayalee Pentecostals in America

The immigration of Malayalee Pentecostals to America in the 1950s and 1960s can be attributed primarily to what appeared to be two unique opportunities—education for men and nursing for women. As to the first, earlier in the 20th century, some of the men who were part of the Kerala Pentecostal movement came to America for theological training (George 2009, 29); however, most went back to Kerala because long-term settlement proved not a prevalent option. Regarding the second (and more important factor) was a shortage of nurses in America combined with the 1965 Immigration Act (Kurien 2017, 77; Mathew 2016, 47; George 2009, 29; Gabriel 2013, 138). As was often the case, the women arrived alone but then returned to India, got married, and brought their husbands with them back to America.[9]

Upon arriving in America, many found themselves in unexpected situations primarily relative to finances, accommodations, and 'community'. Acquiring a Registered Nurse (RN) license also made it hard for some in the early days (Gabriel 2013, 139). During this phase of their immigration experience, most of them turned to other Malayalee Pentecostals for emotional support. Even though there are commonalities

[7]Geographically, India constitutes 28 states and eight union territories, each one with its own distinctive culture, clothing, languages, religious beliefs, etc. Religiously, while "Hinduism has been the dominant religion for several thousand years," as O. P. Sharma puts it, "Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, and Sikhism have also flourished" (Sharma 2009). Linguistically, according to the 2011 census of India, there were 270 identifiable mother tongues with 10,000 or more speakers (Census of India 2011, vii). For more on the linguistic differences from the 2011 Government of India survey, see Census of India 2011.

[8]Pan-ethnicity refers to the increasing collaboration and identification along ethnic and racial lines where new group formations start to emerge (among Asian Americans in our analysis). "Pan-ethnicity can result from a shared racial formation among ethnic groups but also from a sense of cultural connections, and so is not reducible to racial formation. Asian Americans identify pan-ethnically due to a shared culture…, shared categorization by others . . . , shared institutions . . . , and shared interests" (Dhingra and Rodriguez 2014, 10).

[9]This gender role reversal also trickled down to domestic responsibilities, which was unique in traditional Kerala or Indian households. For a more in-depth analysis, see George 2005, 77-117.

among Malayalee Christian communities due to the ethno-linguistic component, they often chose to congregate based on their denominational preferences, which signify the close-knitted nature of ethnicity and religion among the immigrant communities (Kim 2011; Beyers 2017; Joshi 2006; Smith, 1978; Williams 2007). As a result, various Malayalee Christian congregations started springing up in various parts of America. They included Syrian Orthodox, Kananaya Orthodox, Malankara Orthodox, Mar Thoma, Syro-Malabar Catholic, Latin Catholic, Church of South India, Kerala Brethren, and Pentecostal.[10] These churches provided an essential support system for the early Malayalee Christian immigrants. In other words, these ethnic churches became "ethno-religious communit[ies]" (Joshi 2006, 54) to which they turned in times of hardship and for cultural cohesion.[11]

Malayalee Pentecostal Churches as Ethno-Religious Communities in America

For Malayalee Pentecostals, it was their ethnic churches that provided "a sense of home's remembered comforts amid the tribulations of the new home" (Joshi 2006, 54). Although most of these Pentecostals were optimistic in being allowed to come to America, an assumed Christian country, they soon developed a love-hate, ambivalent relationship with its predominant culture. The reasons for such an attitude are numerous; however, among the common ones were: racial discrimination, stark differences in cultural and moral values, emotionally over-taxed lives due to the continuous-job culture, separation from extended family, and a sense of failure regarding responsibilities to their parents back home (Thomas 2010, 143-156). Subsequently, for many Malayalee Pentecostals, their churches became a 'comfort zone' where they found social support and spiritual encouragement, reminding them that they had the Holy Spirit to guide them in this new land.

The first Malayalee Pentecostal gathering, which was led by Pastor C. M. Varghese, took place in 1967, in Newark, New Jersey (George 2019, 182); and the first church—the Indian Pentecostal Assembly—was formed on February 18, 1968, in the New York/New Jersey area, among the nurses (Mathew 2016, 47). The years following saw many Malayalee Pentecostal churches established across America, most being associated

[10]For a insightful discussion on the emergence of all these Malayalee Christian denominations in America, see Williams 1996, 111-180.

[11]American Education professor Khyati Y. Joshi defines the term 'ethno-religious community' to indicate the "role and social impact of religion as the community's organizing force and the vehicle through which many 'do ethnicity'" (Joshi 2006, 53).

with different Pentecostal denominations from Kerala. The Indian Pentecostal Church of God, Church of God-Cleveland, TN, Assemblies of God, Sharon Fellowship, New Indian Church of God, and Pentecostal Maranatha Gospel Church (Matthew 2014, 272) are the major ones, along with numerous independent churches.[12]

The Malayalee Pentecostal churches in America also enabled their adherents to continue nurturing their religious identity from Kerala by separating themselves from other Malayalee Protestant Christians. In Kerala, Pentecostal churches were formed out of revivals in Mar Thoma and Brethren churches, which caused strong doctrinal disputes and denominational rivalries that even led to persecution of many pioneering Pentecostals. Such denominational separations continued in America. Although the Malayalam language and Kerala food are common factors among all Malayalees, the social and moral decision-makings, emphasis on not wearing jewelry, and deep commitment towards a pneumatic[13] approach to prayer/worship/preaching, set strong dissociation between Malayalee Pentecostals and other Malayalee congregations. Day-to-day decision-making in a Malayalee Pentecostal household was one of pneumatic-centric ethics that is grounded in 'biblical realism' and believes in the active working of the Holy Spirit in today's world (George 2009, 32). For example, having long prayers before every road trip, picnic, basketball tournament, housewarming occasion, etc. is a recurrent scene.

Liminal Identity of the Second-Generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans

It is within this ethno-religious framework of the Malayalee Pentecostal churches that the second-generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans were born and raised. Their cultural and religious formation could be understood as a three-part process—(a) becoming second-generation *Malayalee Pentecostals*, (b) becoming Malayalee *Americans*,

[12]To the author's knowledge, there has not been an effort to count the exact number of Malayali Pentecostal churches in America so far. However, Mathew (2014) has noted that a 2007 PCNAK (Pentecostal Conference of North American Keralites) report stated that "there are about fifty Keralite Pentecostal churches in New York State alone" (Matthew 2014, 271).

[13]By pneumatic approach, I am referring to emphasis on the Holy Spirit and his presence in every engagement. In most cases, this pneumatic nature of devotion expects the manifestation of the Spirit's in-filling through speaking in tongues, expectations of miracles, etc. I am adopting this term from Geomon K. George, who used the phrase 'pneumatic-centric ethics' while writing of a model for the Pentecostal Indian American approach to moral decision- making (George 2009, 27).

and (c) becoming Malayalee American *Christians*—not necessarily in this order.

Becoming Second-Generation *Malayalee Pentecostals*

As already noted, most immigrant parents viewed their Malayalee Pentecostal church as an 'ethno-religious community', which provided emotional refuge in their time of struggle. Therefore, they assumed it would do the same for their children. Hence, the parents encouraged their American-born children to attend the Malayalee Pentecostal church, where it was seen as a safe space for the children to have "peer interaction that guarded against the evils outside of that space . . . perceived to be (the) corrupting aspects of American culture: crime, violence, drug use, divorce, and sexual promiscuity" (Joshi 2006, 54). Therefore, for most of the second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals, their church was a second home with an extended family.[14] One of my respondents, Arjun, who grew up in such an environment, said:

> My mom went to church a lot . . . and so I also ended up in the church at least four or five times a week. Church was primarily in Malayalam; songs were in Malayalam. . . . Life was centered around going to church from age 4-16 years old. At home, we even had morning prayers and evening prayers. So altogether my Malayalee ethnicity was solidified through the church (Arjun 2019).

Arjun's story is similar to most of the Malayalee Pentecostal Americans; and for many, strong friendships and relationships are made among their second-generation peers. The churches provided a sense of Malayalee ethnic identity and (more importantly) belonging, especially in light of the bullying and racism they encountered outside (at their schools and workplaces).

While the church aids in constructing the Malayalee ethnic identity for the second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals, it also builds their Christian identity, beginning with Sunday school. The Sunday Schools of North American Keralites (SSNAK) has been producing customized curricula to serve the Malayalee Pentecostal children in diaspora

[14]Indian Pentecostal congregations in America meet frequently for various church-related activities throughout the week in addition to the main Sunday worship service (often between 9:30-12:30 p.m.). A rough weekly schedule would list: Mondays for fasting prayers, Wednesday night for house prayer meetings, Friday morning for fasting prayer, Friday evenings for community outreach activities or women ministries, and Saturday evenings for youth prayer meetings. These regular activities enable the Malayalee Pentecostals to see the church as a second home.

(Mathews 2014, 272). In addition, the Malayalee Pentecostal teachings and practices, such as emphasis on charismatic expressions of prayer, worship, speaking in tongues, and wearing no jewelry, have become the paramount expression of their Christianity. In doing so, most of the time, the churches emphasize their Pentecostal Christian identity over their Malayali identity.

Amos Yong notes a similar trend among other Asian American evangelicals where "ethnic identities are minimized, . . . and that historical and cultural aspects of Asian identity are accepted only as accidental to identity in Christ. Asian American Evangelicals are first and foremost Christians, and only secondarily, if at all, Asians" (Yong 2015, 210). Similarly, Malayalee Pentecostals claim that their Pentecostal Christian faith trumps their Malayalee-ness.

On one side, through their church activities, the second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals attempt to negotiate their identity; on the other side, they also attempt to make sense of their American-ness as they encounter the majority-white America outside of their ethnic churches and homes.

Becoming Malayalee *Americans*

Two broad themes can be highlighted when speaking of second-generation Malayalee Americans making sense of their American-ness—reconciling the racial difference and navigating the model-minority myth.

Reconciling the Racial Difference

It is far too common for the second-generation Asian Indians who live in the diaspora to experience questions like "Where are you *really* from?," which carry a heavy connotation that they do not belong to their own country of birth (George 2009, 103- 106). More specifically, many Malayalee Pentecostal Americans have memories of moments that made them realize they are different from their white peers. One respondent said, "Growing up, I was confused. I am American and I spoke good English, but kids asked me, 'Why do you talk like that.' I have memories of kids saying to me, 'Your skin looks like p**p'."[15]

Growing up in predominately white neighborhoods and schools, the Malayalee Americans are shaped by such experiences. They perceived themselves to be racially different from others due to their brown-ness. Another example demonstrates the further depth of cultural

[15]Arjun. 2019. Interview by author.

misunderstanding that second-generation Indians went through. Linson Daniel writes:

> Saturday and Sunday were super brown; however, Monday through Friday I was in an all-whole private school. My brother and I were the only Asians at the school, and there was one Black family in the entire school, kindergarten through twelfth grade! In this pace, I was constantly helping my white friends understand that my parents were not Cherokee, Apache, or any other Native American tribe—we were from India, the country! (Daniel 2022, 156).

As scholars have noted, this perception of being different racially and ethnically lies in the predominant American notion that "Whiteness is . . . American; Asian-ness is not" (quoted in Lee, Won, and Alvarez 2009, 76). Therefore, for the sake of survival, second-generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans attempt to resolve the tension of their in-between-ness by either 'repositioning differences' (Bhatia 2007, 155) and assimilating as much as possible[16] or by internalizing the 'forever foreigner' perspective while building their Malayalee Pentecostal identity. Yet another option for some was to intentionally reject the perpetual foreign-ness often attributed to them in the public sphere and to fight for a multicultural American society.[17]

Navigating the Model-Minority Myth

Khyati Y. Joshi writes, "According to the model-minority myth, Asians and Asian Americans are innately high performing, intelligent, and driven to succeed. The myth is perpetuated by teachers, by the media, by the parental generation of Indian Americans, and by second-generation Indian Americans themselves" (Joshi 2006, 105-106).

Even though now considered a myth,[18] it was a fact that has broadly influenced the social psyche of both the American and the Asian

[16]For example: as one of my respondents said, "Talk like White people; . . . like the White people sports, and . . . eat White people food." Neil. 2019. Interview by author.

[17]The perpetual foreign-ness theme emerges in Joshi's research with the American Indians. (Joshi 2006, 112).

[18]Research by Lee and Zhou indicates that the model-minority stereotype is not because Asian Americans are culturally prone to educational achievement but rather because of the role U.S. immigration law had in selecting Asians to enter America as immigrants in 1960s. The researchers referred to such a phenomenon as 'hyper-selectivity.' As a result, they note, "The racialization of Asian in the United States stereotypes of Asian-American students are positive, leading to 'stereotype promise,' which also boosts academic outcomes" (Lee and Zhou 2017, 2327)

American cultures. Consequently, from a young age until adulthood, second-generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans go through the biases and expectations of the model-minority that are imposed on them by mere ethnic stereotyping. For some, the ethnic stereotype of the model-minority is a source of pride; for others, however, it is a source of anguish (Joshi 2006, 106).

Malayalee families and churches constantly encourage the second-generation children to "undertake higher education and professional training, particularly in medicine and engineering" (Leonard 1997, 152). These encouragements are often presented via stories of how their immigrant parents were given the opportunities to come to America and succeeded by taking advantage of those opportunities. Subsequently, the second-generation children are compelled to ignore the hardships and "be grateful to this great nation which gave [their parents] opportunities to blossom, fulfill their dreams, and take pride in their achievements" (Thomas 2013, 123).

However, for the second generation-ers who embody the in-between cultural space, such remarks turn out to be sources of frustration and hurt as their own family and community normalize the model-minority assumption and remain in the perpetual foreigner status.[19] For the second-generation, America is their only nation, and they are not outsiders looking into its society. Therefore, sadly, the normalization of being perpetual foreigner and model-minority by their own families only amplifies the dissonance and, in some instances, contributes to long-lasting emotional distress as they continue to identify their in-between cultural identity.[20]

Becoming Malayalee American *Christian*

In reality, the cultural identity of the second-generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans resides between their Malayalee Pentecostal-ness and in their American-ness as they live with elements of both Indian and American culture. Notes Sam George, “The Indian-ness and American-ness are mixed up into one concoction. Without either, it will lack the effect. It is so perfectly mixed up that they cannot be separated” (George

[19]Scholars have noted the correlation between characterization of America as benevolent with the minority status to remain as forever foreigner. As Bhatia notes, "The need to characterize America as a benevolent and magnanimous nation stems from the perception that minorities are located socially as foreigners and outsiders in their society" (Bhatia 2007, 195).

[20]Daga and Raval (2018) have done a preliminary study that verified the internalization of the model minority and psychological effects among South Asian-American emerging adults. See Dag and Raval 2018 for more details.

2006, 73). It is in this in-between-ness that the Christian Pentecostal formation occurs.

However, those Malayalee Pentecostal churches that are predominantly led by the immigrant generation seem to struggle in catering to the cultural liminality of the second generation. Such is especially the case when second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals reach a stage of independence (i.e., later teens and early young adult) and begin to challenge some of the previous generation's ethno-centric assumptions regarding other communities and the church's ethnically grounded practices. Often these challenges serve as indicators of their deep desire to decouple their religious belief from ethnicity (Kurien 2018, 134).[21] In other words, this desire stems from their attempt to identify Christianity as their personal faith without having the ethnic garb of Malayalee Pentecostalism. There are at least three key areas of decoupling that can be readily identified among the second-generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans.

First area. The ethnic pride felt within Malayalee Pentecostal churches becomes a factor for second-generation believers struggling to discern how to draft their own Christianity. Often, the sense of ethnic pride goes beyond a healthy identity factor to fostering an us-versus-them attitude towards other communities, including the White majority (Daniel 2022, 153). Furthermore, some of them (the first generation led Malayalee Pentecostal churches) also fail to make sense of "struggles/issues faced by other ethnic communities, especially our Black and Latino sisters and brothers" (Daniel 2022, 153). These ethnocentric attitudes often leave the second-generation believers conflicted, such as having to think twice before inviting their non-Indian friends to a church service without fearing that those friends will feel ostracized or overlooked by the congregation (Daniel 2022, 152). Such tension often leads to them not only feeling misunderstood, but also sets them on a path towards decoupling their personal faith from the ethnocentric attitudes of their parents' generation or community.

Second area. The issue of wearing jewelry becomes an area of the decoupling of ethnicity and religion. Among Malayalee Pentecostals, it was a commonly held practice not to wear any jewelry, with ear and nose piercings also avoided. However, the second generation started to question such a stand, since avoidance was historically instituted due to the socio-cultural understanding of jewelry's association with status in Kerala. In their early days, the Pentecostals in Kerala "felt that it [was] essential to let go of the use of jewelry as it held a strong connection to 'worldliness' and status" (Varghese 2019, 15). For some second-

[21]Sociologist Prema Kurien observed this trend in her study among the second-generation Malayalee Mar Thoma Americans.

generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans, this is a matter of contextualization, not a doctrinal issue; therefore, they chose to remain indifferent or to wear jewelry within the Malayalee Pentecostal church. However, among many in the immigrant generation, such a turn against this historical practice has even led to church splits and leadership changes among the Kerala Pentecostals in America (Mathew 2016, 53).

Third area. Closely associated with the second, the reluctance of the immigrant generation to seriously engage with the second generation's theological questions is another pivotal point of decoupling. One such example is regarding the practice of speaking in tongues. Many second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals "grew up hearing that speaking in tongues should be a normal experience for Christians" (Andrews 2019).[22] However, when some young Pentecostals did not receive the gift, they experienced dismay and discontent with the lack of theologically satisfying answers from their pastors, which caused them to look for answers from the widely prevalent American reformed tradition. A transition from Pentecostalism to the reformed tradition can be akin to the 'silent exodus' among other Asian immigrant churches (Lee 1996, 50). Both Prema Kurien's (2017) and Robbie B. H. Goh's (2018) studies on the Indian Christian diaspora identifies similar trends. For the second-generation Pentecostals, such a departure is part of the formational journey of decoupling their religion from their immigrant parent's ethnicity. The second-generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans, like other younger Indian Christians in the diaspora, are looking for "an opportunity to be 'Christian' without at the same time consciously or overtly being 'Indian'" (Goh 2018, 87,88).

For some, the decision to pierce their ears, wear jewelry, and move to reformed American churches are signs of being a Christian in America without overtly being Indian or a Malayalee Pentecostal. Often these changes occur silently, as they do not wish to disrespect their immigrant parents or their Malayalee communities. However, for others (mainly those in their teen or young adult stages), such changes are not an option. Consequently, they remain in their Malayalee Pentecostal enclaves, imbibing all that their churches can offer.[23]

It is to this latter demographic population that the outreach ministries of Malayalee Pentecostal para-church organizations, notably

[22]Alen Andrew's blog article is a personal reflection of growing up in the Malayalee Pentecostal community in the USA. His account demonstrates a model of theological and cultural wrestling common to the second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals. For details, see Andrews 2019.

[23]Some Malayalee Pentecostal churches, like the Indian Pentecostal Church of God (IPC) in Houston and the Sharon Fellowship Church in Oklahoma have intentionally begun English (youth) worship services with new associate pastors who specifically minister to second-generation Pentecostals that embody the liminal identity.

the Inter-Collegiate Prayer Fellowship (ICPF) and the Pentecostal Youth Fellowship of America (PYFA) become pivotal. For those second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals who are in between the Malayalee Pentecostal and American culture but not independent enough to move away from their Malayalee parents and churches that these organizations' ministries (e.g., summer camps, mentoring, short-term overseas mission opportunities) become a unique space where they are accepted in their liminality, supported to have a deeper Christian Pentecostal experience, and empowered to take up leadership positions in the upcoming diaspora church.

While PYFA and ICPF are Pentecostal in theology and spirituality, their origins and geographical reaches differ. PYFA was an American initiative, birthed in New York City in 1981 by "a handful of youth leaders who had a vision to create an organization to bring the youth of our Indian community together."[24] ICPF was founded in Dallas, Texas, as a transnational Indian youth ministry by the immigrants once impacted by ICPF in Kerala and now desiring to impact their American-born children.

While a deeper comparative analysis of these two organizations would provide further insight into their roles in shaping second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals in America, for this paper we will limit our analysis just to the ICPF. Even though PYFA is the older, its reach is limited to working among the Indian youths in the greater New York City region, whereas the ICPF has expanded its impact nationally and thus warrants the analysis that follows.

ICPF and its Impact on Second-Generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans

ICPF was started in Kerala, India, in the 1980s by Mathew P. Thomas, a professor at the Mar Thoma College, Thiruvalla. Between 1958 and the 1970s, Thomas was actively engaged in college ministry through the Union of Evangelical Students of India (UESI), also known as the Evangelical Union. However, in May 1973, with some of his friends, Thomas formed an independent ministry—Youth Christian Camp (YCC) at the Charalkunnu campsite in Kerala—to specifically address the spiritual and emotional needs of young people through the Pentecostal message. In 1980, YCC led to the formation of ICPF as the leaders envisioned impacting the young people spiritually in their college settings, going beyond a once-a-year camp experience. Today, ICPF-India claims to minister to over 15,000 students per week through its 750

[24]For the history and vision statement of PYFA, see "about," *Pentecostal Youth Fellowship of America* at https://www.pyfa.org/about (accessed August 20, 2022).

units, leading the *Christian Post* magazine to state that "Inter-Collegiate Prayer Fellowship is India's second-largest indigenous mission agency."[25]

In 1997, ICPF-USA was formed in Dallas, Texas, by Malayalee Pentecostal immigrants as a prayer fellowship to meet monthly to pray for second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals. The Kerala version of ICPF had impacted most of the Malayalee Pentecostal leaders who took the initiative to begin the American chapter. Therefore, when in 2001 ICPF launched its summer camps (named Awake) at the Waxahachie Camp Center in Texas, most of the immigrant Malayalee Pentecostal generation were amenable to sending their American-born children to the camps. Soon, these camps had grown in size and took various forms, providing a unique space where the second-generation felt comfortable in their liminality or in-between-ness as Malayalee Americans. Further, ICPF provided space for them to experience the Christian faith so authentically that their locus of identity was not in ethnicity or race but in Christianity.

The main objective of ICPF is to "reach students with the full Gospel of Jesus Christ, mentor them to be Disciples of Christ and spiritually equip them to be obedient to the Great Commission of the Lord."[26] To help realize that objective, ICPF-USA has such programs as the Ignite initiative for middle schoolers,[27] a college campus ministry, and Equip & Empower leadership trainings. However, its highlight ministry among the second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals remains the annual three-day Awake camps, which serve as a yearly launching pad for all the other ICPF programs.

Every year, the camps center on a particular theme which is unpacked across various sections. For example, the 2022 Awake camps' theme was 'Limitless' (based on Ephesians 3:20), with various speakers ministering to the campers who are divided into four groups—middle school, high school and college, young married couples, and adults. This was sometimes called 'freedom hour. Although each camper may highlight various transformative experiences, through my thematic analysis of the interviews and my personal observation, I present here

[25]An anonymous reporter made this claim in 2003. (*Christian Post*. 2003, "Inter-Collegiate Prayer Fellowship India" at https://www.christianpost.com/news/inter-collegiate-prayer-fellowship-india.html (accessed November 25, 2019).

[26]"The Mission" at https://icpf.org/pages/17 (accessed October 29, 2020).

[27]With an emphasis on helping the middle schoolers, Ignite is organized to meet regularly for bible study groups, sports events, prayer meetings, and specifically catered annual camps only for those middle schoolers. For more information, see https://www.icpfglobal.com/Home/EventPages/Ministries.aspx (accessed December 2, 2022). For a summary of Ignite ministry, see https://www.icpfglobal.com/Home/Event Pages/Ignite.aspx (accessed December 2, 2022).

the following three primary areas of impact—a deeper personal spiritual experience, a sense of belonging, and being empowered and equipped to lead.

Personal Spiritual Experience of Christian Faith

ICPF Awake camps in their various forms[28] would state that they provide a space to experience Jesus Christ in a real manner. Jacob, who is in his 20s and very active in ICPF, says of his first ICPF camp experience:

> It felt different. People looked like they were here for Jesus Christ. I remember going to "freedom hour," and I felt almost like a "touch of heaven." On a normal basis, I didn't know what it meant to have a personal relationship with God. I knew how to play the church—because I grew up in one. But I don't think I was applying Christianity to my life. But when I came to camp, I felt like these people genuinely want to experience God and touch heaven (Jacob 2019).[29]

It is not uncommon among ICPF youth to recount stories similar to Jacob's. In some instances, the camps' late-night worship encounters often go beyond the assigned time. As Arpitha noted, there were instances where "the organizers had to ask us to stop worshiping because it was too late at night. Even after night worship, we continued to pray in our cabins, and people started to speak in tongues" (Arpitha 2019).

ICPF's emphasis on personal experience signifies its evangelical Pentecostal influence. Even though having severed connection with the Evangelical Union in Kerala on account of Pentecostal doctrines, it maintained an evangelical stand contrary to other mainline denominations. This is reflected in ICPF's adaptation of one of the basic tenants of evangelicalism—i.e., experiencing Jesus Christ in a personal manner.

Russell Jeung, who studied the evangelical and mainline Asian American churches in the San Franciso Bay area, also notes the emphasis

[28]As of 2019, there are five Awake camps open each year that are based at locations in the South (Dallas, Houston, or Oklahoma City), in the Northeast (Philadelphia, New Jersey, or New York), in the Southwest (Arizona or California), in the Southeast (Georgia, Carolinas, or Tennessee) and in the Great Lakes area (Michigan, Illinois or Wisconsin). Along with these, ICPF also has some year-round university-based ministries and conducts leadership camps to equip young people for missions (Equip for teenage boys, Empower for teenage girls, and Ignite for middle schoolers) as part of its International Ministries Mission Outreach.

[29]Jacob. 2019. Interview by author.

of a personal experience with Jesus Christ among the evangelical Asian Americans as being contrary to the mainline teachings, which often rather emphasize the influence of biblical teachings in embracing ethnic and racial identities. He further notes that the evangelical emphasis on belief in Jesus as one's personal savior has led to the focus on "individual's concerns for self-fulfillment and therapeutic health" (Jeung 2002, 224).

Similarly, the three-/four-day ICPF camps are often filled with sessions related to living in Christ to deal with destructive personal issues, such as abuse, bullying, cyber-bullying, and pornography, and on matters that could lead to a sense of therapeutic fulfillment. For most second-generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans, the camps also become a place to be 'real' about the struggles that come with being in the liminal space and being part of the model-minority, which often serves as a source of anguish. Consequently, ICPF also collaborates with mental health counselors and medical doctors to provide mental health consultations for young people who often struggle emotionally but do not open up about their struggles at home due to the stigma attached to mental distress in Malayalee communities.

At the same time, those involved in ICPF testify to personal spiritual experiences, such as speaking tongues, prophesying to one another, and experiencing physical healing.[30] Through all these personal encounters, as one respondent said, "our Christian faith became more real" (Yesena 2019).

Sense of Belonging

Second-generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans, who often find themselves in an in-between space (i.e., between their Malayalee and American identities and living "neither here nor there" [Turner 1967, 95]), can experience identity struggles. Thus, from the outset, ICPF has always (perhaps even unintentionally) provided space for them to feel 'belonged' in their bicultural liminality. At ICPF camps especially, they can be at home in their liminal culture. Linett, who attended ICPF during its early years, says:

> At ICPF, you naturally feel at home. We all had this high educational, relational, and spiritual expectations labeled on us. But we were able to be who we were with all the baggage in the same place. It didn't feel like this when I was in school with the White people because they didn't understand all these

[30]One of the respondents said; "I had a knee pain for the last 10 years and after one of those meeting, I was healed" (Jacob 2019).

> expectations. In ICPF, I felt more confident culturally (Linett 2019).

For most of the ICPF attendees, having space where they are acknowledged for their liminality was as important as their personal spiritual encounters during camp week. For others, to realize that more of their peers were living in this liminal space was an encouragement. As Jessna puts it, "When we joined ICPF, the family of 'hybridity' grew. The majority of the people I know now are from ICPF. I met my husband there! I knew of him, but it was at ICPF that I first met him" (Jessna 2019). The liminal commonality at ICPF also contributes to lasting friendships and, in Jessna's case, finding her spouse.

However, the sense of belonging for second-generation Malayalee Pentecostal Americans achieved through ICPF gatherings is an accidental factor, as the main objective has always been to create space for them to experience Jesus Christ in a Pentecostal manner. In other words, ICPF's premise seems to encourage these young people to "establish the very core of [their] identity and . . . allegiance [in Jesus Christ], beyond the place of birth or current habitation, ethnicity or citizenship, and vocations"(George 2020, 142). In doing so, there is an assumption that such identity formation will "not only liberate [them] from common trappings of psycho, social, cultural, and ideological notions of identification, but [also] endow [them] with faith filled fidelity to a vision for life that is deeply meaningful and enduring" (George 2020, 142). However, as a result, ICPF had forgotten to pay due attention to their ethnic and racial identity struggles.

Although ICPF provides space for the second generation to experience Jesus Christ in a Pentecostal manner in their liminality (i.e., not having to engage overtly with ethnically Indian practices or to be in a White space), it thus far provides no sessions at camp to respond to these racial and socio-ethnic struggles. In not doing so, ICPF has ignored the racist realities that second-generation ethnic minorities experience in America. In other words, like the other Asian American evangelical churches, it is unable to see racism as a spiritual problem that needs to be addressed (Alumkal 2003, 83).

Equipped and Empowered to Lead

Along with providing a space to belong and experience Jesus Christ in a personal experiential manner, ICPF also creates avenues to equip leaders for church-based ministries. Often, the students who have been involved in ICPF for more than a few years participate in its small-group leader's cohort. For some, these leadership roles become pivotal for their

Christian ministry and recognition of their leadership skills. Jessna's story is an apt example:

> I was a very quiet kid until I went to ICPF in 2006. I was always shy. But somehow, through ICPF, I made a bunch of friends, and in 2008 some people called me and asked if I wanted to be a leader. I served in leadership for two years—was leading a high school small group. Initially, it was a nerve-wracking experience. But this leadership role demonstrated that my voice does matter, and I can lead. My leadership formation wouldn't have happened if I had not gone to ICPF (Jessna 2019).

In Malayali Pentecostal churches where older men assume leadership, women and young people struggle to find space to recognize and develop leadership skills.[31] However, ICPF camps provide an apt space for them (especially for women) to exercise their leadership skills in a communal setting, from leading small group discussions to being part of entire camp planning.

Furthermore, in identifying such a leadership training gap among ICPF participants, ICPF International proposed additional training under its Equip and Empower (E2) Project. The vision of E2 is to "train and encourage students to take spiritual leadership roles in local churches such as youth leaders, Sunday school teachers, and small group leaders." ICPF sees such leadership training as a way to bring about a paradigm shift in young leaders from today's "world of instant gratification" towards "servant leadership."[32] After the E2 training, these young leaders will receive practical exposure in a wide range of missional settings, from international mission trips to being part of ICPF's ministry in colleges and universities.

Although ICPF camp and other programs have become arenas for equipping and empowering future leaders, two critical aspects cannot be overlooked. First, it is unavoidable to note that ICPF's senior leadership is still exclusively in the hands of the immigrant generation, especially with men taking the leading roles. Second, while numerous young people receive their initial leadership empowerment through the Awake camps or E2 training project, there are instances where the second-generation leaders feel stifled by the elders' paternalistic approach. Such

[31]Although outside the churches, women find highly qualified jobs (in many cases, it was the women who first immigrated to America due to their medical expertise), inside the churches, men took the leadership in religious spheres, sidelining women. For an analysis of such gender role reversal, see George 2005, 77-117.

[32]Inter-Collegiate Prayer Fellowship International. "Empower and Equip." at https://www.icpfglobal.com/Home/EventPages/Goals.aspx (accessed September 1, 2022).

experiences are more profound for women leaders like Yesena, who felt limited to act independently throughout the camp proceedings. Yesena recounts her experience thusly:

> I became the small group leader and then part of the executive committee. The executives were very traditional Malayalee Pentecostal patriarchal, and I felt like my voice was not heard well. In some instances, they dismissed my comments. However, later next year a couple of them recommended me for leadership again. On this occasion, I said, "if you want me on the committee, I have to be taken seriously and need to be heard." That year it was better. I felt like comfortable in my shoes and I was bit older in my late early 30s. However, even in this year, the immigrant Malayalee Pentecostals outnumbered the American-born leaders, and they were still having some difficulty listening to women in leadership (Yesena 2019).

Yesena's experience is likely but one among numerous stories of women who grew up in the Malayalee Pentecostal American context. In the Indian Pentecostal landscape, such a story is, sadly, not unusual as various women Pentecostal pioneers in Kerala went through such 'sidelining' tendencies. Even though early Kerala Pentecostalism had pioneering women leaders who (like Annamma Mammen) were pivotal in shaping the movement, as it became institutionalized, their roles got sidelined. Kerala Pentecostal scholar M. Stephen writes this:

> It is quite right to say that the Pentecostal churches ensure the involvement of the women in the evangelizing activities of the church, but they have failed to offer them important positions in the church. . . . They may be even appointed as the secretary of the women's fellowship. But . . . their voices are always controlled by the church leaders. The structure of patriarchy plays a dominant role (Stephen 1999, 50, 51).

Further, as Edith Blumhofer puts it, "Pentecostalism values women's speech within boundaries" of patriarchal institutional control (Blumhofer 2003, 120).

Such a trend seems to follow Malayalee Pentecostals in the American diaspora. Yesena's account above testifies to the contemporary existence of patriarchal sidelining of women, even in youth movements like ICPF. Although changes are occurring in some

diaspora churches with a third generation taking the lead,[33] nevertheless, as George Oommen writes, "Patriarchy within the church seems to have survived unscathed, especially as the church reinforces gendered value systems with theology, ecclesial structures, and liturgy" (Oommen 2019, 22).

However, despite that, the positive outlook of ICPF's leadership initiative cannot be overlooked. ICPF not only provides space to experience God, but also nurtures future leaders to fulfill their call to serve the diaspora community and next generation of American churches. In doing so, it encourages young leaders to rise above the social pressures of white spaces or the fears often associated with being seen a 'perpetual foreigner'. At the same time, as ICPF continues to impact second-generation Indian Americans (and the rising third-generation Indian Americans), the hope and challenge are to ensure a more egalitarian approach towards leadership where both men and women participate.

Furthermore, the scope of ICPF leadership training could also be expanded beyond church circles. Currently, the Awake camps and the E2 leadership training project have exclusively focused on fostering leaders for Christian discipleship and evangelistic mission activities, both of which are traditionally associated with the church. While such efforts are essential, ICPF, as a para-church organization, could also empower the next generation of Indian Americans to be Christ-formed to impact the marketplace (outside the church).

Summary and Conclusions

This paper's two-fold objective has been to provide a preliminary account of (1) the liminal (in-between) space taken by the Kerala Pentecostals in their identity formation in America and (2) the role of the Inter-Collegiate Prayer Fellowship (ICPF) in serving the immigrant or second-generation individuals who embody such a space. In the first two sections of the paper, I briefly mapped the cultural reality of the Malayalee Pentecostals who live in the American diaspora and focused on the complexities pertaining to the identity formation of the second-generation that lives in this culturally liminal space. In the third section, I demonstrated how ICPF impacts that second-generation formatively in

[33]Even though there are third generation Malayalee Americans starting to take up ministry responsibilities, for George Oommen, there is a third generation of immigrants arriving in America with an essential transnational skillset that is beginning to assume leadership in numerous traditional Malayalee American Pentecostal churches. Oommen writes, "The third generation (more recent arrivals of younger generation immigrants) is more open to American versions of non-denominational evangelical Christianity to which they are already exposed in their urban Indian settings such as Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai, Mumbai, etc.," (Oommen 2019, 19).

their liminality, enabling them to experience the Christian faith (Pentecostal) without negating their culturally in-between identity.

Although the paper does not intend to be an exhaustive account on the Malayalee Pentecostals in USA or about the role of ICPF, it does indicate important exploratory questions for future enquiries. One such area is to understand the missiology of ICPF. As indicated, ICPF's primacy of catering to the Christian spiritual identity without addressing the second generation's racial and ethnic liminal struggles demonstrates a lag in its holistic missional imagination. Although ICPF engages a person's individuality as regarding moral issues (e.g., addictions, sexual purity, relationships, etc.), the social issues that arise on a systemic level are seldom addressed. Additionally, ICPF's unwillingness to engage with other South Asian ministries on American university campuses and its limited vision to equip leaders exclusively for the church ministries also indicate such a lag in holistic missiology.

Even though ICPF in its beginning years in India was built on the principle of uniting churches, in its implementation in America, it has only been successful in uniting Malayalee Pentecostal churches, leaving out other Indian or Asian American Pentecostal and evangelical churches and organizations. However, as ICPF International plans to train future leaders to reach the upcoming generations in the South Asian diaspora community in America and elsewhere,[34] it will become imperative to build bridges with other ethnic churches and like-minded para-church organizations in order to impact the generation with a more 'wholistic' Pentecostal Gospel.

Despite its current limitations, ICPF continues to meaningfully affect the second-generation Malayalee Pentecostals. This paper testifies to the existence of ICPF as a much-needed space for that second-generation in diaspora to feel 'belonged,' to discern its leadership calling, and to experience God in a meaningful manner, standing as a model of diaspora mission.

[34]ICPF Global has launched 'Empower' (for girls) and 'Equip' (for boys) camps where it focuses on "various topics essential to leadership, such as doctrinal foundations, spiritual warfare, and servant leadership." Inter-collegiate Prayer Fellowship. "Empower and Equip." https://www.icpfglobal.com/Home/ICPFMission.aspx?&Mission=2 (accessed December 12, 2019).

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