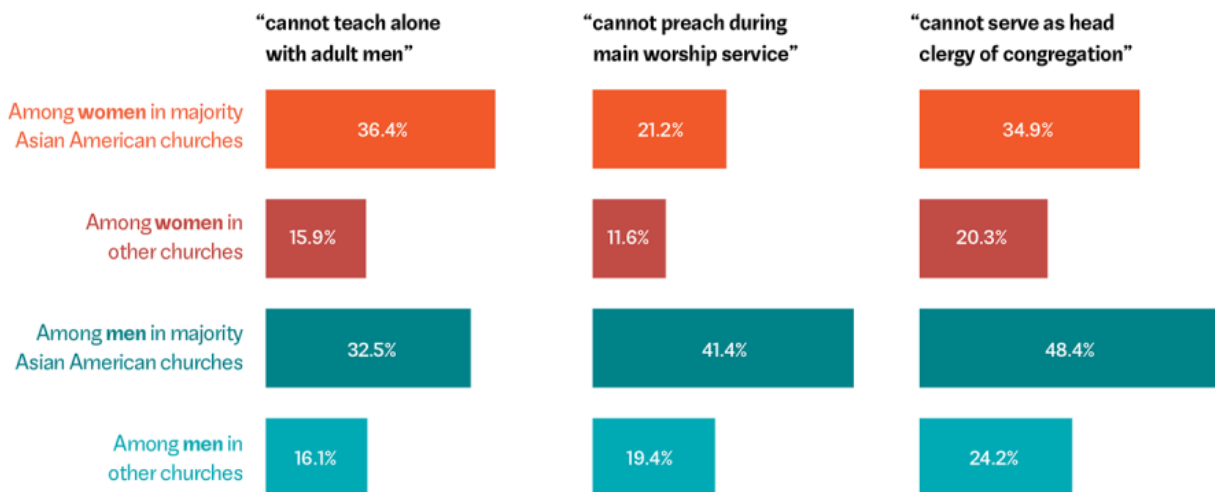


## Fewer chances for women to preach and pastor at Asian American churches, new survey shows

by [Liuana Huska](#)

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### Level of support for the claim that **women in one's church . . .**



Data source: Innovative Space for Asian American Christianity

Women have fewer high-level leadership opportunities in Asian American churches than in other churches, according to a survey from the Innovative Space for Asian American Christianity. The survey also found that men and women in Asian American churches disagree as to why women are missing in upper leadership. Men most frequently cited "biblical and confessional beliefs" while women most often cited "overrepresentation of men" and "work-life balance."

The pilot study, called the National Survey of Asian American Congregational Leadership Practices, sampled nearly 350 English-speaking congregations between 2022 and 2024. More than 60 percent of churches in the sample were predominantly Asian American. Twenty-eight percent of the Asian American churches sampled were from mainline Protestant traditions.

An accurate total of Asian American congregations is unknown, especially after the pandemic forced closure of some churches, said ISAAC executive director Young Lee Hertig. ISAAC's research team, funded by the Lilly Endowment, drew from a database they assembled of more than 6,000 Asian American congregations to recruit survey respondents.

Research on Asian American churches is sparse, said Baylor sociologist Jerry Park, who analyzed the data. Pew surveys and studies such as Faith Communities Today include Asian American churches or ask individual Asian Americans questions about faith, Park said, but "the ISAAC survey contains the largest sample of Asian American congregations with relevant questions for church ministry."

In the survey, more non-Asian American congregations than Asian American congregations reported having a majority of men in leadership (66 percent vs. 45 percent). However, Asian American churches reported fewer opportunities for women to advance in leadership. Sixty-six percent of Asian American churches allowed women to preach at a main worship service, compared with 85 percent of other churches, while 56 percent of Asian American churches allowed women to be the head clergy, compared with 79 percent of other churches.

"Many Asian American women do not serve Asian American congregations precisely because of gender discrimination in those churches," said Lee Hertig. She leads ISAAC's Asian American female clergy mentoring program, called PastoraLab. Lee Hertig estimates that about 10 women in the program have been ordained in the past three years, but only one of these currently serves at an Asian American church.

"What they call biblical is male-filtered," said Lee Hertig of the finding that men in Asian American churches tend to cite "biblical and confessional beliefs" for the absence of women in upper leadership. "Who is doing the hermeneutics?"

The survey also found that Asian American churches tend to have younger attendees than other churches but admit fewer young adults into decision-making bodies. Nineteen percent of Asian American churches reported one to five members of the ruling church board under age 30, compared to 36 percent of other churches.

The survey also explored church leadership culture, community involvement, engagement with the Stop AAPI Hate coalition, and church vandalism.

Fewer Asian American churches engaged with Stop AAPI Hate during the height of the pandemic (34 percent vs. 60 percent of other congregations), but after 2022 other churches' involvement dropped significantly to 21 percent, while Asian American church involvement dropped slightly to 29 percent.

Since the pandemic, Asian American churches have reported elevated rates of theft and property defacement.

"I find the survey to be a confirmation of the conservative shift in Asian American congregational cultures in the last 25 years. Increasing affiliation with denominations that do not ordain women may be a major factor for this shift," said Tim Tseng, Director of the Asian American Christian History Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary.

"Asian American congregations will increasingly find themselves at odds with their fellow Asian Americans and American society, not to mention the Asian American women within their churches who are called to ministerial leadership," he continued.

The ISAAC research team hopes to broaden the sample size and translate the survey to Asian languages in order to gain insight into first-generation immigrant churches and statistically significant breakdowns by race and denomination. They will present survey findings at the 2024 American Academy of Religion conference.

Andrew Lee, part of the research team and the associate director of the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center Global Diaspora Institute, said he hopes the survey results will initiate change.

"I hope this survey will catalyze conversation among pastors and leaders to re-examine some traditionally held ideas and practices in their churches," he said.