The Role of Interpreting in a Church Setting: Case Study of Ethnic Chinese Immigrant Churches in the USA

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This research aims to investigate the role of the interpreter within the setting of ethnic Chinese immigrant churches in the USA. In this study, "ethnic Chinese immigrant church" refers to Christian church communities situated outside of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau and founded by immigrants from Chinese-speaking countries and areas. Interpreting most likely appeared in the immigrant church setting as a way to address the widening "acculturation gap" (Birman & Poff, 2011) between the Chinese-speaking first generation (i.e. immigrant members) and the English-speaking second generation (i.e. teenage and adult children of first generation members). Though there is currently scant research on the role interpreters and interpreting itself plays in this distinct interpreting setting. Thus, this study aims to answer the following questions: (1) what is the role of the interpreter in ethnic Chinese immigrant churches in the USA; and (2) what is the role of interpreting itself in this setting? To address the first question, the researcher administered online questionnaires to church interpreters, users of interpreting (e.g. audience members), and commissioners of church interpreting (e.g. church leaders, pastors, speakers). Survey items juxtapose role perceptions and expectations of professional interpreters that work in non-church settings (e.g. hospitals, conferences, courtrooms) with that of interpreters in the church setting in an attempt to isolate distinct expectations and perceptions ascribed to the role of the church interpreter. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with interpreters and pastors from ethnic Chinese immigrant churches in the USA to get a better understanding of the role of interpreting itself in this setting. Questionnaire results validate previous research on church interpreting and show that immigrant church interpreters are expected to be believing Christians who perform their role out of altruistic love for God and their fellow Christians; they are also believed to be spiritually empowered and enabled by God to reach their goal of edifying the congregation. Roles such as co-performer, co-communicator, servant, volunteer and advocate for Christianity were found to be the most prominent role descriptors for immigrant church interpreters. Data collected from semi-structured interviews with pastors, interpreters and users of church interpreting added an additional dimension to the role of the immigrant church interpreter. They are a bridge between not only differing speech communities within the church but also with potential members from outside the immigrant ethnic community.


