

Korean Ethnic Church Growth Phenomenon in the United States

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The growth of the Korean ethnic church in the United States, or the Korean American church, from its beginning in 1902 to 2001, is both a social and spiritual phenomenon. It started with one congregation in San Francisco, and after one hundred years, it has grown to more than three thousand churches. This paper seeks to provide a historical outline of how this large growth, both socially and spiritually, has taken place and also to provide a general description of its organization.

First, I'll discuss the beginning of the Korean ethnic church movement in San Francisco in 1902 with Changho Ahn and his wife. Second, I'll note how it grew from the early 1900s to the Korean War. Third, I'll outline its rapid growth from post Korean War to 2001. And fourth, I'll share what I believe to be twenty-two characteristics of a typical Korean ethnic church in the United States.

1. Beginning of the Korean Ethnic Church Movement

The first Korean church in the United States started on October 14, 1902 in San Francisco after the arrival of Changho Ahn, also known as Dosan ("island mountain"), and his wife, "Helen."

Dosan became a Christian while attending the Salvation School in Seoul, established by Horace G. Underwood, the first ordained Presbyterian missionary from the United States to Korea (B. I. Kim 1995:23). After his conversion, Dosan sought to convert others to the Christian religion, which he believed would help Korea to become a strong nation. Yong-Taek Chon attributed the following quote to Ahn: "Only in the days when our people all

have a Bible in their hands will our nation be able to stand on its own feet” (Gardiner 1979:25).

With the help of Underwood and other missionaries, the Ahns were able to immigrate to the United States to do “further studies in theology and education” (J. Pak Interview 2001). When they arrived in San Francisco, there were less than fifty Koreans in Hawaii and on the mainland (Choy 1979:72). When Dosan first met the Koreans living in San Francisco, he was appalled. They lived reckless lives and were prone to much fighting. He became concerned with their welfare and also with the negative image they gave to Americans about Korean people (Choy 1979:80).

Dosan’s concern for Koreans in America, together with his passion for theological study, led him to initiate a church for the Koreans to study the Bible and to better themselves as one nation. As well, he found himself very busy meeting the practical needs of the San Francisco Korean community. At first, some were suspicious of his motive for cleaning, planting, and doing whatever he could at no charge, but eventually he was able to win their hearts and became their pastor, friend and trusted advisor (Choy 1979:81). It was during his stay in San Francisco that Dosan changed from pursuing “further studies in theology and education” to becoming a “social activist and community organizer” (J. Pak Interview 2001). In 1905, Dosan founded the first Korean political organization, *Kongnip Hyop Hoe*, the “Mutual Assistance Association,” in the United States (Choy 1979:81).

When Dosan moved to Riverside, California, in 1905, he founded another church for the Korean people who worked there as fruit pickers and domestic helpers. From 1907 until his death in 1938, he gave most of his attention, with limited involvement in the church, to freeing the motherland from Japanese oppressors.

2. Growth of the Early Korean Ethnic Church

The second Korean ethnic church in the United States, led by Seung-Ha Hong from *Neri* Methodist Church, was founded on January 13, 1903 after the arrival of the first large Korean immigration which brought one hundred and one Koreans to work on Hawaii’s sugar and pineapple plantations. By 1906, just three years later, there were 4,700 Koreans on the plantations (Patterson 2000:55).

Living on the plantations was no paradise. Using a collection of first-hand accounts of the daily life on the plantations, we may see what they experienced: (1) “During those early days on the plantations, we lived in one big camp. The families were given small houses for themselves, and the single men lived in big barracks.” (2) “A working day on the plantation followed the same pattern day in and day out. The cook would get up at three in the morning, prepare breakfast, and make lunches for the field hands, who got up at five. A train would take them to the place of work in the fields, after the *lunas* [foremen] had gone to the head boss to get their assignments for the day.” (3) “We worked in the hot sun for 10 hours a day. I was not used to this kind of work, and I had a difficult time.

But I did the best I could and struggled along with the other men.” And (4) “[t]here were three *haole* [white] bosses. They were good men. They gave us free houses and anything we needed, if we were good and did not cause trouble” (Patterson and H.-C. Kim 1977:29-32).

More than any other denomination, the Methodists were successful in reaching the Koreans working on the plantations. By 1916, there were as many as thirty-one Korean Methodist churches and thirty-five Methodist mission stations with over 2,800 members collectively throughout the Hawaiian islands (K. Chong and M. G. Son 1991:50). Hawaiian Methodist Mission Superintendents, often in cooperation with the plantation owners, employed Korean ministers to work with the immigrant churches and mission stations.

Syngman Rhee, a well educated man with a Ph.D. from Princeton University, who would eventually become the first president of the South Korean Republic, did not work well under the control of Methodist Superintendents. He broke from the Korean Methodist Church in Hawaii in 1916 and formed his own church and denomination, the Korean Christian Church. By the time of World War II, the Korean Christian Church had 1,000 members in Hawaii (Patterson 2000:67).

In search of easier and better lives, the Koreans left plantation and farm work and moved as soon as possible to the cities, consolidating the many plantation and farm churches and mission stations to a small number of city churches. By 1950, there were only fifteen Korean ethnic churches serving about 10,000 Koreans living in the United States (Chang 2003:86; Shin 1971:200).

Woong-Min Kim cites nine Korean ethnic churches on the mainland before the break of the Korean War, (1981:55):

- The Korean Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles
- The Korean Methodist Episcopal Church in San Francisco
- The Korean Christian Church in Los Angeles
- The Korean Methodist Episcopal Church in Delano
- The Korean Presbyterian Church in Reedley
- The Korean Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles
- The Korean Methodist Episcopal Church in Chicago
- The Korean Methodist Episcopal Church in Oakland
- The Korean Church and Institute in New York

For the early immigrants the church, more than any other social organization, acted as the center of the community. According to Bon Y. Choy, the church served three key functions (1979:263): (1) as “the social center and means of cultural identification for Koreans in America;” (2) as an “educational function by teaching American-born Koreans the Korean language, history, and culture;” and (3) as the place that kept “Korean nationalism alive.”

The church, for many early Korean immigrants, was much more than a place to worship God and learn about the Bible. It was their home. It was the one place where they could be themselves, eat their own food, speak their own language. The church consequently became an extended family with the church pastor as the father and priest.

3. Rapid Growth of the Korean Ethnic Church following the Korean War

At the end of the Korean War, the United States gave special permission to four different groups of Koreans to immigrate: the wives of U.S. servicemen, orphans who were usually mixed race, students, and highly skilled professionals. The last two groups were primarily responsible for starting new churches from 1951 to 1973.

Taek-Yong Kim notes a total of twenty new churches being started from 1951 to 1967 (1985:93):

- The Korean Church of Washington, D.C. (1951)
- The Korean Church of Boston (1953)
- The Korean Baptist Church of Washington, D.C. (1956)
- The Korean Church of Philadelphia (1957)
- The Berendo Street Baptist Church in Los Angeles (1957)
- The Korean Central Church of New York (1962)
- The Korean Presbyterian Church of Chicago (1964)
- The Korean Presbyterian Church of Washington, D.C. (1965)
- The Korean Bethany Church in Chicago (1965)
- The United Church of Dallas (1965)
- The Gospel Church of Chicago (1965)
- The Pittsburgh Korean Christian Fellowship (1966)
- The Korean Church of Christ (1966)
- The Reformed Korean Presbyterian Church in San Francisco (1966)
- The Buena Memorial Presbyterian Korean Church in Chicago (1966)
- The Korean Christian Church of Chicago (1966)
- The Korean United Church of Baltimore (1966)
- The First Korean Presbyterian Church of Los Angeles (1967)
- The Korean United Presbyterian Church of Detroit (1967)

By 1967, there were 35 churches, by 1970, 100 churches, and by 1973, 200 churches (Chang 2003:86; T-Y Kim 1985:95). As in previous cases, the church acted as the community center where Koreans gathered to meet their social and spiritual needs.

After the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, tens of thousands of Koreans annually immigrated to the United States. From 1976 to 1989, a steady flow of 30,000 to 35,000 immigrants arrived each year. By 1991, the number of Korean churches had swelled to 2,515 (W-S Chung 1996:11).

By 2001, there were 3,375 Korean churches in the United States listed in *The Korean Church Directory in America* (2001:1-264). California alone had 1,108 churches. Nine states had over 100 churches: New York (356), Illinois (221), New Jersey (171), Virginia (157), Texas (153), Maryland (141), Pennsylvania (113), Washington (111), and Georgia (110). Three states possessed 50 to 99 churches: Hawaii (77), Florida (61), and South Carolina (54). The remaining 37 states had less than 50 churches.

In regard to Korean American church membership, Ryan Chang found that 68 percent of Koreans in Los Angeles were church members (1989:197, 201). However, Woo-Song Chung argues, depending on location, church attendance fluctuated from 45 to 75 percent (1996:15).

4. Twenty-two Characteristics of a Typical Korean Ethnic Church

Korean churches in the United States usually have more in common with another than they do with the mainline denominations which they are affiliated with. Twenty-two characteristics which I found to be common of a typical Korean ethnic (or Korean American) church are:

(1) Most churches are small in size with forty to sixty members. In Los Angeles, one half of the Korean congregations have less than forty members. In Chicago, 75 percent have less than 40 members (Jo 1993:2). (2) Members want to be part of an ethnic church. This also includes the American born Korean Americans (K. Chai 2001:77). Won-Moo Hurh writes, "Since churches are social institutions as well as religious ones, the ethnic factor seems to predominate in determining one's place of worship" (1998:111). (3) Having a seminary-trained ordained pastor is a prerequisite for pastoral ministry.

(4) Church leadership is male dominated, although "a strong majority" of church members are women (Chang 2001). (5) Theologically, the churches are conservative, a reality stemming from the traditional cultural and religious conservatism of most Koreans. K.C. Kim and S. Kim found that in response to the biblical questions of the existence of heaven and hell, existence of Satan, the virgin birth, and the return of Christ, 87 percent gave the most conservative answer. They conclude that they are "classical evangelicals" (2001:85-87). (6) They tend to be more pragmatic than theoretical. In other words, they are not very concerned with whether or not a particular program is theologically or denominationally correct so long as it fulfills the desired purpose.

(7) There is a growing struggle between the Korean-speaking and English-speaking members. (8) The "circulation of saints" is dynamic and constant. Five reasons for this problem were due to: "moving away from the area," "services do not satisfy spiritual

needs,” “too much conflict in the congregation,” “do not appreciate the pastor,” and “don’t like the program it currently offers” (K.C. Kim and S. Kim 2001:81-82). (9) There is a lack of community service. Karen J. Chai argues that many Korean Americans go to church to have “fellowship, maintenance of cultural tradition, social services, and social status and positions” (1998:298).

(10) The focus of church is often about keeping the Sunday worship service as the central event of the week, (11) Churches are prone to church splits. Kwanjik Lee estimates that a schism occurs once every five years (1994:47). (12) They place a high priority on possessing their own buildings. In California 20 percent of the Korean American churches have their own building, in Chicago, about 25%, and in the Washington D.C. area about 20 percent (Jo 1993:47-48).

(13) They are affected by the state of Christianity back in Korea. Church growth in the motherland affects, whether positively or negatively, Korean ethnic church growth. W. S. Chung found that a large number of Koreans who take part in the church in the States does so because they were already Christians in Korea. Further, Christians from Korea who have immigrated to the United States have been very important in providing spiritual leadership (1996:16). (14) They are comfortable with a hierarchical organization. (15) They are religiously motivated. In a questionnaire given to seventy-one churches in twenty different states, it was consistently observed that the top four reasons Koreans attended church were listening to sermons, witnessing, prayer, and Bible study (Collins 1990:198-199).

(16) There is a tendency toward a superstar pastor syndrome. Sun-Bai Kim says that the church “has become far much a minister-centered ecclesiastical structure” (1993:72). (17) They prefer to pray aloud in one accord. One thing that is distinctively Korean is their style of prayer. When they pray in their gatherings, especially during the weekly early morning services, they prefer to pray out loud. Each person raises his or her voice to God, usually following the lead of a pastor or lay leader who is at the front, making known the prayer concerns. (18) The first generation (Korean speaking) members are concerned for the spiritual well-being of the second generation (English-speaking) members. (19) There is a lingering problem of materialism.

(20) An essential church activity is eating together. (21) The first generation lay leaders make great financial sacrifices. Additionally, (22) they are giving more attention to world missions. The first organized, intentional, short-term mission team was sent in 1984 from the Global Mission Church (Baptist) in Maryland, and since then there has been a ripple effect with more than 50,000 Korean Americans who have participated in short-term missions (C. Kim 1999:1).

Conclusion

Various reasons have affected the growth of the Korean ethnic church in the United States from 1902 to 2001. Two main sociological factors that should be highlighted are: (1) United States’ immigration policies and (2) the simple fact that Koreans want to be

with other Koreans. But sociological factors alone cannot adequately explain the growth of the Korean ethnic church since we know that other immigrant groups have experienced similar sociological phenomena but not similar church growth.

Two particularly important spiritual factors that must be considered to understand its growth are: (1) one hundred years of Christian revival in South Korea and (2) the sacrifice of Korean immigrant pastors and lay members.

As pointed out in the paper, directly and indirectly, the Korean ethnic church in the United States is affected by the state of Christianity back in Korea, which experienced unprecedented growth for one hundred years, from the late 1800s to the late 1900s. The first Korean immigrant pastor, Changho Ahn was converted in Korea by western missionaries and later sent with his wife, by the same missionaries, to the United States for further theological education. And also after the Korean War, because of the fervent state of Christianity in Korea, many pastors with strong spiritual commitment were recruited from the motherland to start new, or to take over recently started, Korean immigrant churches.

Additionally, we must note the large sacrifice of many Korean immigrant pastors and lay members who gave a good deal of their time and money to build their churches. An example of this kind of sacrifice is Hak-Yung Chang who recently passed away. He was a deacon and elder of the same local church in Dallas for thirty-one years. He gave most of his free time and available money to serve his congregation and his people. After retirement, he spent more time helping out at the church and used most of his Saturdays and other days to do evangelism. His dream was to serve one day as a missionary in rural Korea.

Today, as in the past, because there is a large number of Korean ethnic pastors and lay members who are fully dedicated, similar to Hak-Yung Chang, in the third millennium I believe that the Korean church in the United States will continue to grow strong, both socially and spiritually, making greater inroads in serving their local communities and the world.

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