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The Korean Church: Growing or Declining?

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to the Korean War in 1950 not many people knew what the word 'Korean' meant. Virtually a hermit nation, Korea's doors to the West gradually opened with the Open Door Treaty in 1882. However, because of the '88 Olympics the eyes of the world focused on Korea. There has been special interest in South Korea's remarkable economic growth, especially since the devastation of the country during the Korean War. Similarly, Christians worldwide are amazed at the remarkable, explosive growth of the Korean church especially over the last two decades. Thousands of Christians from all over the world have visited South Korea and attended worship services and prayer rallies at some of the world's largest churches in Seoul and other major cities.

What motivates over 16,000 Christians to jam the Myung Sung Presbyterian Church of Rev. Sam Whan Kim for four pre-dawn prayer meetings at 4:30, 5:30, and 6:30 and 8:30 a.m. every day? How has what was a tiny suffering church a century ago been able today to evangelize one quarter of the total population of 44 million in the South and to send over 3,272 Korean missionaries all over the world? Many Korean Christians believe that Korea has become a CHOSEN nation ([2 Pet. 2:9](#)) today for God's purpose of evangelizing the world with the gospel in this generation. In fact, Korea during the Yi Dynasty (1392–1910) had been called the 'CHOSEN' Dynasty. In this article the author evaluates causes for the rapid growth of the Korean church in the light of its historical and cultural background and points out some crucial issues concerned with this fast church growth.

I

HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

a. Roman Catholic

The Roman Catholic faith was first introduced into Korea through China in the 17th century. Korean government officials in China heard [p. 337](#) the Catholic message and transmitted it to Korea. Mr. Chong Too Won brought Mateo Ricci's True Doctrine of the Lord of Heaven to Korea in 1631, and several reformed-minded Confucian scholars such as Chong Yak-chon, Kwon Il-shin, and Yi Tokcho were deeply attracted to the gospel and studied the Christian dogmas in Seoul in 1777. The first Korean diplomat who was baptized in Beijing in 1783 was Mr. Yi Sunghun, who came back to Korea and spread his faith; thus, Roman Catholicism officially started in Korea in 1784.

In 1795 a Chinese priest Chou Moon-mo arrived in Korea but was executed in 1801. However, by 1800 there were already 10,000 adherents to the Catholic faith. The Beijing Roman Catholic bishop sent priests to Korea in 1811, 1815, and 1824. In 1828 Pope Leo XII instructed the Missions Étrangères de Paris to begin its work in Korea. In spite of periodic persecutions against the Roman Catholics in Korea, the Catholic population swelled to 20,000 by 1885.

Korean Catholics suffered persecution at the hands of the conservative Confucian government rulers in 1819, 1827, 1839, and 1866. In spite of severe persecutions against the Catholics in Korea, the Roman Catholic Church has continued to grow numerically to 5% of the total population (2.2 million Catholics) in South Korea. Pope John Paul II's visit to Korea in May 1984 further accelerated the Roman Catholic Church growth in South Korea and many Catholic social agencies also helped the Church to be accepted by society.

b. Protestant Missions

Protestant foreign missionary activities began in Korea, after Western powers entered this hermit kingdom in 1882. Prior to 1882 there were sporadic attempts to propagate the gospel to the Koreans who were residing in Manchuria. In fact, a British missionary, Rev. Robert Thomas, landed at Taedong River in North Korea in September, 1865 to witness to Koreans but was arrested and executed by the government. Western missionaries such as John Ross and John McIntyre witnessed to Koreans in Manchuria and baptized two Seo brothers in 1878, and in 1883 Mr. Seo Sang Lon brought a Chinese New Testament to Korea and started a Protestant church in central Korea even before the Western Protestant missionaries founded their first church.

Official Protestant missions began in Korea in 1884 with Northern Presbyterian missionaries from the United States, Drs. J. W. Heron, Horace J. Allen, and Horace G. Underwood and with the first American Methodist missionaries, Drs. H. G. Appenzeller and W. M. Scranton. The first medical missionaries, Drs. Heron, Allen, and Scranton, with Western medical knowledge made an enormous impact upon the royal families, as well as upon Korean society. Other foreign missions agencies sent their missionaries to Korea at the end of the 19th century: the Australian Presbyterian Mission (1889), Southern Presbyterian Mission (1892), Southern Methodist Mission (1896), and Canadian Presbyterian Mission (1898).

The most recognizable contribution of the foreign missionaries in [p. 338](#) Korea was the training of national church leaders. In 1890 a British missionary, Rev. John Nevius, visited Korea from China and introduced what is known as The Nevius' Methods of Missions. Dr. Kim Myung Hyuk, former President of Haptong Presbyterian Seminary, stated nine important principles of the Nevius' Methods: 1) Emphasis on personal evangelism through wide itineration; 2) Self-support; 3) Self-propagation; 4) Self-government; 5) Systematic Bible study for every Christian; 6) Strict discipline in the church; 7) Close cooperation with other Christian bodies; 8) Non-interference in lawsuits; and 9) General help for those in economic need. (Asian Evangelization, Nov.-Dec., 1988, pp. 2-3.) The Three Indigenous Principles of Missions (self-support, self-propagation, and self-government) especially well known in modern missions strategy, have been faithfully applied in the Korean church and resulted in rapid church growth.

II

CHURCH GROWTH EXPLOSION

a. Church Growth Statistics

Explosive church growth from 1980-1990 has resulted in the development of some of the largest churches in the world: the Yoido Full Gospel Church (706,000 members), Yongnak Presbyterian Church (60,000 members), and Kwanglim Methodist Church (73,000 members). In the capital city of Seoul alone with eleven million people there are more than 6,533 churches. One can observe hundreds of red crosses topping the steeples of church buildings at night. Three mass Christian gatherings in Seoul, namely the Billy

Graham Crusade in 1973, Explo '74, and the World Evangelism Crusade in 1980, filled the Yoido Plaza with a great mass of Christians numbering between one and two million people each time.

In the 100-year history of the Korean church, there have been four major periods of very rapid church growth: 1905–1910, 1919–1931, 1945–1960, and 1980–1990. According to the 1992 Christian Almanac, there were over 12.2 million Protestant Christians, 36,832 churches, and 67,008 pastors and evangelists in South Korea. There are more Christians among the middle class in urban cities than among the country people in rural areas. In the cities almost one third of the population claim to be Christians.

In the nation-wide election for the National Assembly in April 1992, 90 Protestant Christians out of 299 seats were elected. One surprising fact in church growth in Korea is the high percentage of Christians in the Armed Forces. According to an official report in 1991, 200,000 young men are drafted into the military service each year, and 40% of the privates and 70% of the officers claim to be Christians. There are 50 military chapels and each Saturday between 2,000 and 3,000 soldiers receive baptism (The Christian Times, Feb. 1, 1992).

Dr. Samuel Moffett, a retired veteran missionary in Korea, and now at Princeton Theological Seminary, described the explosive church growth:

When my father reached Seoul in p. 339 1890, there were between 10,000 and 17,000 Roman Catholics. Records for 1889 show only 74 communicant Protestants. Forty years later, when I was a boy in Korea in 1930, the number was 415,000 Christians, or 2 percent of the population. When I returned in 1995 there were 1,117,000, or about 5 percent. Today (1987) there are over 10 million Christians in Korea, or about 23 percent. Very roughly that would mean one Korean in a thousand was Christian in 1890, 1 in 50 in 1930s, 1 in 20 in 1955, and 1 in 4 today (Christianity Today, Nov. 20, 1987).

Many Christians around the world have asked questions such as, 'Why are the churches in Korea multiplying so fast?' or, 'What are the secrets of church growth in Korea?' or 'Do you have problems with this "wildfire" church growth in Korea?'

Nevertheless, since 1990 the church growth rate has levelled off for various reasons.

b. Historical Factors

Rapid church growth in Korea is not entirely due to spiritual factors. Historical factors as well as contributions from Christianity have contributed to this growth. Christianity introduced new ideas of political democracy into Korea through mission schools. Christianity has filled the spiritual vacuum created by the traditional religions of Buddhism and Confucianism, which have made little impact in their lives. The sufferings experienced by Korean Christians during the Japanese occupation in Korea (1910–1945) and during the Korean War (1950–53) and the constant threat of Communism from North Korea have encouraged the people to find their security in God rather than man.

After the United States signed an Open Door Treaty with Korea in 1882, other European colonial powers followed the Americans making their way into Korea. In addition to external pressure from neighbouring invaders and internal political disintegration through factionalism, Korea had no strong philosophical rationale that provided a basis for any political or intellectual ideologies. The country was in deep trouble in every way.

During this time of national crises, Christianity played a very significant role. Among the many contributions of Christianity to the nation, four areas listed below are particularly related to the growth of the church in Korea.

a. The Independence Movement Against Japanese Colonialism

Unlike China where the colonial powers were Western nations, Korea faced colonialism from Japan. Therefore, Koreans welcomed Western influence, including Christianity, in order to liberate themselves from the hands of the Japanese. While the gentry class in China rejected Western colonial powers and Christianity, many Korean intellectuals eagerly grasped Christianity.

Western missionaries fostered the concept of national independence and trained the younger generation to be free from the old-fashioned and conservative bureaucratic Korean culture. For example, the Korean Independence Association at the beginning of this century had several key leaders such as former president Syngman Rhee who were Christians. p. 340 Christians played a leading role in the independence movement.

When a nation-wide revolt against Japanese rule occurred on March 1, 1919, the national independence declaration was proclaimed by thirty-three patriots, fifteen of whom were Christians. Christian schools promoted patriotism in their classes; many intellectuals accepted Christianity not only for spiritual reasons but also because of its political persuasion.

b. Christian Contribution to Modern Education

Christianity introduced the new concept of modern education, uplifted the status of women in society through education, and injected a new Christian ethical standard. The elite majority had educational opportunities to learn the Chinese classics, but the vast majority was illiterate. Pioneer missionaries translated the Scriptures into the Korean language and taught Koreans, through Sunday schools, vacation Bible schools, and Bible institutes, how to read the easy Korean phonetic script rather than the difficult Chinese characters.

Two of the best known pioneer missionaries, Rev. Horace G. Underwood of the Presbyterian Mission and Rev. Henry G. Appenzeller of the Methodist Mission, further popularized the Korean script by starting their own respective newspapers in the Korean script. These were the weekly Christian News and the Korean Christian Advocate in April 1885. It is not an overstatement to say that Christian Koreans were the only Koreans able to read the Korean script.

A number of Christian schools were opened by missionaries. A boys' Christian school, Baeje school, was started in 1886 and a girls' Christian school, Ehwa school, was started in 1887. Several Christian colleges were opened at the beginning of the 20th century: Sung Shil College (1906), Ehwa College (1910), and Yunhee College (1915). Ehwa University today is one of the best universities in South Korea. These two Christian universities along with others have produced a large number of Christian lay leaders in all segments of Korean society. Today there are more than ten Protestant colleges and universities. Many of the 270 theological colleges and seminaries have added liberal arts degree programmes to their theology departments.

c. Medical Missions

In 1884 a pro-Japanese political party incited a coup against the ruling pro-Chinese party and seriously injured the prince. Dr. Horace N. Allen, a medical missionary from America, treated Mr. Min, the prince with Western medicine. Within three months, Mr. Min recovered. As a result, Dr. Allen was allowed to start a mission hospital. This was the beginning of the well-known Severance Hospital in Seoul. The introduction of Western medicine into Korea as an alternative to traditional Oriental medicine was certainly one of the main contributions of missionaries to the Korean people.

d. YMCA and Social Service Agencies

The contributions of the YMCA, established in 1903, cannot be ignored. p. 341 The YMCA introduced both vocal and instrumental Western music and modern sports such as baseball, soccer, volleyball, basketball, ping pong, and track.

Hundreds of Christian social service organizations, including orphanages, old people's homes, and caring centres for handicapped people have sprung up throughout the country to assist needy people. During the Korean War (1950–1953) the churches received enormous amounts of assistance from the West and played a major role in distributing food and clothes to hungry people.

c. Religious Factors: Spiritual Vacuum

Like other people, Koreans were religious even before adopting the imported religions from China and the West. A half dozen religions are prominent today in Korea: Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Chondokyo, and Christianity.

Buddhism entered Korea from China during the Kokuryu dynasty in 372 A.D. and became a dominant force in every area of Korean life during the Three Kingdoms Period. It reached its peak during the 'Golden Age of Buddhism' (935–1392) during the Koryu dynasty (932–1392). Buddhism became not only a religious force but also a political power in the dynasty. Consequently, the political opponents to the controlling Buddhists in the Yi dynasty cooperated with Confucianism to drive out the Buddhist rulers. In 1456 the Yi dynasty even forbade monks from entering into the capital city of Seoul.

The decline of Buddhism in the early years of the Yi dynasty encouraged an increase in the influence of Confucianism among the intellectual classes. The decline also left ignorant peasants and women without a viable religion so they turned to superstitious Shamanism. For many centuries Buddhism lost contact with the people; however, some signs of a resurgence of Buddhism in recent years in Korea are evident.

Confucianism emphasized ethical conduct in individuals and government, and maintained a high standard of education. The Yi dynasty adopted Confucianism as 'the national religion'. Neo-Confucianism prevailed during the Yi dynasty. It adopted philosophical, metaphysical and religious terms concerning human existence and the nature of reality. Confucianists erected many Confucian schools throughout Korea, such as Songyunkwan in Seoul. Even though Confucianism met the intellectual needs of the elite, it ignored the vast majority of the Korean people.

Chondokyo or 'The Sect of the Heavenly Way' is another important religion which was founded by Choe Che Wu (1824–1864). He created a syncretistic religion which was known then as Tonghak or the 'Eastern Learning' in opposition to Sohak or 'Western Learning' which meant Roman Catholicism. Choe believed that all religions, from primitive Shamanism to Western Christianity, were valid and embodied truth. But each person had to seek truth according to his own ways. For Koreans Tonghak was the best way. The leaders of this religion played important roles in the independence p. 342 movement, as also did Christians, during the Japanese domination of Korea. Yet Chondokyo's spiritual impact on the people was negligible.

During the spiritual vacuum in the Yi dynasty, Shamanism, which is said to be the original religion of Korea, grew among the common people. The religion teaches that a shaman can communicate with the spirit world in an attempt to better the fortunes of man. Taking over some of the supernatural characteristics of Buddhism and Confucianism, Shamanism to this day appeals to the common masses who are ignored by rational Confucianism.

Thus, the majority of the people do not practise Buddhism and Confucianism religiously. Many experience a spiritual vacuum, and for a significant number, Christianity has filled the void.

Since the traditional religions have lost their grip on the people, many Koreans have become sceptical of their forefathers' religions. The majority of the people do not practise any religion at all. When the former President Park Chung-Hee of South Korea was asked whether he was a Christian, his reply reflected a typical feeling, 'My father and mother were Buddhists, but I am nothing.'

d. Political and Economic Factors: Christian Suffering and Division of the Country

In order to understand the characteristics of the Korean church, one has to remember how she suffered for many decades from external invasions and internal revolutions. The Japanese government tried to enforce Shinto shrine worship upon the Koreans; some Christians believed that it was idolatry to bow down to the Emperor of Japan. Others believed that it was merely a political matter; they participated in the Shinto shrine worship under pressure from the Japanese. Those who refused to compromise were imprisoned and beaten. Many Christians were killed or later died in prison. On the day Korea was liberated in 1945, more than three thousand Korean Christians were released from prison.

Instead of gaining its hoped-for freedom in 1945, Korea once again became a victim of the ideological struggles between Communists and the free people which mushroomed and ultimately divided the country. By the thousands, Koreans under the Communists in the North began to escape to find freedom in South Korea. The tragic Korean War impoverished the people and brought added sufferings to the nation.

After 1945 the Communist Party of North Korea under Kim Il Song imposed tight control on the people. The Party set the national election day on Sunday, November 3, 1946, to hamper Sunday worship services, and demanded loyalty from the Christian churches. The Christian church in North Korea requested the government to observe five principles. The fifth principle was to guarantee religious freedom.

The Korean War also produced many Christian martyrs in South Korea. At the end of 1950 some 500 Christian leaders in Seoul were either killed or kidnapped by the Communists. During the war, 727 pastors and evangelists were martyred. Psychological tension during p.343 the war and the ensuing economic poverty were indelibly imprinted upon the minds of the people. The Japanese persecution and the Korean War were the two decisive events which influenced every phase of life in the country.

In the midst of intense suffering and toil, the Korean church was able to give hope to the hopeless, food to the hungry, and shelter to the homeless. Christians looked forward to their heavenly home as a relief from the painful earthly conditions that surrounded them. They learned to trust God in time of trouble. Churches were filled with people who needed help and peace of mind.

The presence of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), North Korean tunnels into the South, the constant threat of Communist attack and possible persecution of Christians by the Communists are still providing a very important motivating factor to many Christians to renew their faith. People look for spiritual security rather than earthly uncertainties. The land is ripe for spiritual harvest. Therefore, the present uncertainty has been a real blessing to the Korean church. Tertullian of Carthage in the third century once said, 'The blood of the martyr is the seed of the church.' The church, like steel tested by fire, becomes stronger.

However, a number of important political and economic changes took place in the 1980s and 90s. President Rob Tae-Woo (1988-1993), who succeeded President Chun Doo-Hwan, and the present president Kim Young-Sam introduced new freedom and democracy, and implanted socioeconomic and moral reform movements. Economically, the country experienced rapid growth in the 1980s with the GNP of \$8484 annually in

1995; consequently, these political and socioeconomic changes brought new challenges to the church. The economic poverty and suffering of the people following the Korean War have been forgotten by the younger generation.

Young people under the age of 30 have experienced neither the tragic war nor the economic suffering and religious persecution which the older generation still vividly remembers. God has used both nonspiritual factors of war, poverty and suffering of the past plus the economic development and political freedom of recent years and the spiritual renewal movement within the church to produce the explosive church growth situation in South Korea. In spite of new waves of materialism and secularism challenging the church, the author believes that the Korean church will continue to grow and make spiritual contributions to the world.

e. Spiritual Factors for Rapid Church Growth

Any church growth at any place is the work of the Holy Spirit among his people. There are several spiritual factors within the Korean church which have contributed to the growth of the church.

1. Strength of the Local Church

The strength of the Korean church lies in the local church. The local church, under the spiritual leadership of its pastors, has organized various activities for its members for *p. 344* worship, fellowship, instruction in the Word, evangelism and missions outreach, and social service. Among 50 mega churches in the world today 23 are located in Korea. At least ten local churches in Seoul alone are gigantic in size with a membership of over 30,000 each, and there are hundreds of other churches with membership of between 500 and 1,000. On the other hand, there are many small-size churches especially in rural areas and small towns.

The strength of the local church has also produced a negative aspect of church growth—it has weakened cooperative efforts among local churches and denominations on the national and international levels. Nevertheless, the abundant supply of pastors from theological seminaries and the fervent dedication of pastors for their congregations have resulted in much fruit.

2. Spirit-filled, Hard-working Pastors

The role of a pastor for his congregation is crucial for the growth of the church. In fact, many Christians believe that the most important factor for church growth is the leadership of its pastor. Every church schedules a daily early dawn prayer meeting. This means that the pastor gets up at 4.00 in the morning for the pre-dawn prayer meeting in his church and works all day in the church until late evening. The pastor often goes to the prayer mountain for prayer and fasting. He trains lay leaders for weekly district Bible study groups and organizes other church activities. Twice a year he organizes a house visitation programme to visit the homes of his members and conducts family worship services there.

The Korean pastor is well respected as a spiritual leader in the church as well as in the society. Korean Christians have learned to support their pastor's physical and material needs while he provides the spiritual nourishment of the congregation. Therefore, it is not difficult for Korean seminaries to recruit the best students academically and spiritually, quite contrary to the situation in many countries in Asia. The ratio of students trying to get into Asian Center for Theological Studies (ACTS), a theological college, last year was nine to one. Out of nine students applying only one was accepted.

3. Prayer for Spiritual Renewal of Christians

Prayer is a necessary ingredient for any church growth. The Korean church has been known for its emphasis on prayer. Every church has a pre-dawn prayer meeting every day even in rain or snow. The origin of this pre-dawn prayer meeting goes back to 1906 when Rev. Kil Sun-Jun started the pre-dawn prayer meeting at his church in Pyong Yang, North Korea. The Koreans were going through a very painful experience of being annexed by the Japanese Empire after Japan defeated both China in 1859 and Russia in 1905. Christians poured out their hearts to God for his help at the time of national crisis. Since that time the pre-dawn prayer movement has spread to all other churches. The most well-known pre-dawn prayer meetings are at the Myung Sung *p. 345* Presbyterian Church in Seoul which started with a handful of members some ten years ago. Today, the church has 30,000 members. The secret of this rapid growth is the ministry of Rev. Sam Whan, who has faithfully conducted the pre-dawn prayer meetings every morning. March and September each year are designated for spiritual renewal of the church through the pre-dawn prayer meetings. The number of Christians who attended the last March 1995 pre-dawn prayer meetings at 4.30, 5.30, 6.30 and 10.00 a.m. reached between 10,000 and 13,000 each morning. Pastor Kim conducts the first three services and faithfully expounds the Scriptures for 20–30 minutes. The rest of the time is spent in individual prayer. The fourth service at 10.00 a.m. features Rev. Kim's message through video. Many Christians have testified that they learned much about God's Word through pre-dawn prayer meetings. Thousands of other Christians who attended pre-dawn prayer meetings in their own churches give similar testimonies; therefore, there is no doubt that God has blessed the Korean church through pre-dawn prayer meetings.

Another aspect of prayer emphasis in the Korean church is all-night prayer meetings, usually on a Friday evening each week or every two weeks. Christians sing hymns, listen to messages, give testimonies, and pray all night. There are also 521 prayer mountains (or prayer retreat centres) throughout the country, and thousands of Christians go up to prayer mountains for prayer. Korean Christians often pray audibly together with loud voices during the worship services. Besides the church prayer meetings, Dr. Kim Joon-Gon of the Korean Campus Crusade for Christ who is Director of the Korean Preparation Committee of the Global Consultation of World Evangelization '95 (GCOWE) introduced 'the 1.1.1. a day at 1.00 p.m. for one minute.' The emphasis on prayer has certainly brought spiritual renewal within the Korean church.

4. Witnessing Church

For evangelizing Korea with the gospel, local churches strongly emphasize the importance of personal and group evangelism at the grass-roots level. 'The Christianization of Korea by AD 2000' is the motto of every church. During the first spiritual awakening in the Korean church in 1909–1910, the Korean church launched out the 'Million Souls for Christ Movement'. Consequently, the General Assembly of the Korean Presbyterian Church (KPC) was officially inaugurated for the first time in 1912 and KPC commissioned the first three Korean missionaries to Shantung Province in China.

When Korea was liberated from Japan in 1945, Rev. Kim Chi-Sun, Pastor of Southgate Presbyterian Church in Seoul, proposed a 'Three Million Evangelization Movement.' At that time there were only 300,000 Christians among the population of 30 million. Today pedestrians in major cities often observe Christians standing at the street corner, singing hymns, witnessing, and distributing gospel tracts. Many local churches have personal evangelism thrusts by organizing small teams during weekends to visit friends' homes, hospitals *p. 346* and parks. The annual revival meeting at the local church has been used

to bring spiritual renewal to Christians and to invite many non-Christian friends to the meeting to hear the Christian gospel. There are different evangelistic organizations in Korea to reach different groups of people such as movie stars, policemen, business people, and sportsmen. One interesting and influential method of sports evangelism is the Hallelujah professional soccer team. Largely financed by a Christian businessman, this team has been recognized as one of the best soccer teams in the nation. In April 1992 millions of people were watching the Hallelujah soccer team of the Torch Center playing the final match for the South Korean Presidential Cup on TV. 'Hallelujah' has become a catch word in Korea as TV and radio sports reporters covered the 'Hallelujah' team. There are also professional Christian Taekwondo teams for sports evangelism. During the '88 Olympics the Seoul '88 Olympic Christian Outreach Committee was very active to mobilize 6,000 local churches to witness to 300,000 athletes and foreign visitors. Dr. John Chongham Cho, President of Korea Sports Evangelism, cooperated with other international Christian sports organizations and helped the Living Bibles International distribute 500,000 copies of a 32 page booklet called 'How to Be a Winner'.

5. Cell Group Bible Studies

Evangelism and teaching ministry of the Word must go together in order to produce a healthy church. One of the key concerns for every pastor is how to organize effective cell group Bible study programmes in different districts. Dr. David Yong Gi Cho's Yoido Full Gospel Church has organized about 52,000 cell groups for 706,000 members throughout Seoul for Bible study and prayer. Dr. Cho claims that the strength of his church lies in the cell-group ministry.

Pastors are eager to learn the best Bible study methods as well as to acquire the best materials for cell-group Bible studies. Three main texts, used at many churches are 'The Cross Ways Bible Study,' 'Trinity Bible Study,' and 'Upper Room'. The Cross Ways books and colour transparencies were all reproduced in the Korean language. A 1995 report shows that 8,000 people have completed the training in 21 seminars. Ninety percent of the students were pastors from different denominations.

6. Theological Education: Abundant Supply for Christian Workers

The Korean church is unique in Asia for its abundance of Christian workers. There are 270 theological colleges and seminaries, six of which have more than 1,500 students each. These theological institutions annually produce more than 8,000 graduates. Therefore, the best ways to utilize this large number of seminary graduates each year are to plant more churches and to send out more Korean missionaries to the ends of the earth.

As someone said, 'As the seminary goes today, so goes the church tomorrow.' Seminary education in Korea which has produced pastors and para-church workers has played one of the most significant roles for [p. 347](#) the rapid growth of the church. Most Korean theological seminaries have been known for upholding the evangelical historic Christian faith as modern theological liberalism has continuously encroached into other Asian theological institutions.

7. Rising Missionary Movement

With enough man-power from theological institutions plus the economic development in the nation, the Holy Spirit has challenged many Korean Christians to be involved in the work of missions. Although the Korean church sent its own missionaries to Manchuria and mainland China in the 1920s and 1930s, the number was very small. According to Dr. David Lee, Director of the Global Missionary Training Institute in Seoul, there has been an

increasing number of Korean missionaries. In 1979, 93 missionaries worked in 26 countries, in 1992, 2,576 missionaries in 105 countries, and in June 1994, 3,272 missionaries in 119 countries. Many pastors and mission leaders are praying that the Korean churches would be able to send 10,000 missionaries by the year 2000, i.e., that the churches in South Korea would be able to send 9,000 missionaries while 3,000 Korean churches in North America would send at least 1,000 second generation Korean American missionaries.

The Asia Missions Congress, which was held at Choong Hyun Presbyterian Church in Seoul in August 1991, under the sponsorship of Evangelical Fellowship of Asia, drew 1,300 participants from all over Asia, including one hundred Koreans. God challenged the Asian church leaders to join with Christians in other continents to fulfil the Great Commission in this generation. (Met Castillo, ed., *World Missions: The Asian Challenge*, Manila: EFA Missions Commission, 1992).

In North America the Korean World Missions Conference was held at the Billy Graham Center in Wheaton in July 1988 with 1,500 participants in order to mobilize 2,000 Korean churches in the United States and Canada to promote missions. At the end of the conference the Korean World Missions Council (KWMC) was formed with an office in Wheaton and elected Rev. Samuel Choi to be Executive Director of KWMC. The 2nd Korea World Mission Conference was held at the same location in Wheaton, July 25-August 1, 1992, with 3,000 participants.

There has been similar interest among mission leaders in South Korea to cooperate among some 100 missions agencies; consequently, the Korea World Missions Association (KWMA) was formed in 1991. In October 1991 the KWMA and KWMC jointly sponsored a Korean World Missions Conference among 300 key missions executives and pastors at the Korea World Mission Center in Seoul. From May 15–17, 1995 the second KWMA's World Missions Conference was held in Korean churches in both South Korea and North America are praying that they would be able to send 10,000 Korean missionaries by the year 2,000.

8. Stewardship

The Korean church has implemented the Nevius method of self-support and emphasized the importance *p. 348* of stewardship and tithing. Pastors preach tithing from their pulpits and the church provides envelopes for tithing and thanksgiving offerings for its members. The amount of tithing in comparison with the amount of Sunday morning general offering is ten times. In other words, the Korean church collects most of its income through tithing.

Korean Christians in general give their sacrificial offering to support the work of the church. Poor farmers and fishermen in small rural villages, especially after the Korean War, brought their grain and fish to the church as offerings. Some Christians even sold their houses and offered the money to the Lord for the construction of their church building. Although some Korean pastors are criticized for preaching the 'theology of prosperity' i.e., the more you give, the more you prosper, which is related to the traditional shamanistic teaching, God has touched the hearts of many Christians in such a way that they would gladly offer their tithes, thanksgivings offerings, and missions offering.

9. Innovative Contextual Expressions of Christian Faith

Protestant history in Korea is just over a century old, quite short in comparison with Western church history. Traditionally Korea has been a strong Buddhist and Shamanistic country. Yet Christianity has made a tremendous impact upon all walks of life in the country. Today, Christianity is no longer looked upon as a Western religion.

Korean Christians have introduced some innovative and contextual ways of expressing their faith according to their own cultural heritage: predawn prayer meetings, all-night prayer meetings, prayer mountains, annual revival meetings, audible prayer, initial minute prayer in the living room when a Christian visits his friend's home, a few seconds of prayer for a cup of tea/coffee, church name tags with a red cross on the front door of the house, twice a year home visitation by pastor, Hallelujah soccer team and Taekwondo team (like the Venture for Victory basketball team in the United States), Bible women, etc. The author encourages Christians in other countries to give serious thought to their own culture and history in order to produce more creative ways to express their Christian faith for the purpose of Christianization of their countrymen.

III PROBLEMS OF THE KOREAN CHURCH

There is no perfect church on this earth; the Korean church is no exception. If one looks at the Korean church carefully beyond the numerical growth and outward appearances, one can easily observe a number of weaknesses. The author will concentrate on three main problems of the Korean church.

a. Schismatic Division

The strength of the Korean church is the local church under its able pastor. Nevertheless, if the local church becomes an entity within itself, lack of cooperation among local churches can result. This is what has happened to the churches in Korea. There are too many strong local churches which see little need [p. 349](#) of cooperation among themselves within the denomination as well as with other different Presbyterian groups in the nation. A veteran Presbyterian missionary said on the schismatic character of the Korean church, 'The Church of Jesus does not get along with the Church of Christ; and yet, the Korean church is growing by splitting.'

The main division within the largest Presbyterian Church in Korea in 1959 between the ecumenical and the evangelical (National Association of Evangelicals-NAE) groups led to painful conflict at many local churches on the question of which group would control the church building. This schism resulted in the birth of two separate denominations known as the Tong Hap Presbyterian Church (Ecumenical) and the Hap Tong Presbyterian Church (NAE, evangelical). Each of these Presbyterian denominations has more than 5,000 churches with over 2 million members. It is extremely difficult to create cooperative programmes for evangelism, missions and social services, which require wider cooperation from different denominations. If the pastor of a local church is not involved in the organizational structure of a joint programme, his church often is not involved in the programme. The Korean church must learn the concept of partnership in Christian ministry among different Christian bodies within the country, as well as with other Christian organizations in other countries.

b. Need for More Christian Social Responsibility

Christian contributions towards the patriotic movement, democratic reform and social welfare are well recognized even by the secular society. However, there have been increasing cries from society as well as from many Christians that the Korean church must be more concerned for the needy by establishing more orphanages, handicapped peoples' homes, hospitals, marriage counselling centres, homes for unwed mothers, ministry to prostitutes, rehabilitation centres, etc.

Increasing criticism both from within and outside the church has been directed toward the Protestant churches because of their main interest in quantitative expansion with big church buildings and inward-oriented programmes without much effect upon society. Challenges have come in the form of questioning the allocation of the large sum of money collected from offerings and tithes each week.

In Asia today where only 3% of the three billion people claim to be Christians and where the traditional religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and etc. are prevalent among the people, many non-Christians are questioning, 'What are the real differences between Christianity and Buddhism? Can you show me the difference by deeds?' Unless the Korean churches make their contributions to society and the nation in the area of social responsibility, future church growth in Korea will be hampered. A holistic approach to Christian ministry must be emphasized in the Korean church.

c. Problems of Mega-churches

The world's largest churches from different denominations exist in Korea: Yoido Full Gospel Central **p. 350** Church (Assemblies of God) 706,000 members, Yong Nak Presbyterian Church (Tong Hap) 60,000; Choong Hyun Presbyterian Church (Hap Tong) 30,000; Kwang Lim Methodist Church, 73,000; and Kangnam Central Baptist Church, 3,500. Each of these mega-churches has an effective charismatic spiritual leader. The Sunday worship services are magnificent with splendid choirs and orchestras climaxed with a powerful message in a huge sanctuary. Many of the large churches have five or six worship services on Sunday, and a large number of pastoral staff are assisting the various activities of the church.

However, the question of whether thousands of church members can have their spiritual needs met at one local church has been raised by many Christians. In other words, how can a local church minister to thousands of people who are scattered throughout the huge city? When the pastor emeritus, usually the founder of the mega-church does not get along with his younger successor, conflict, division and discouragement can easily occur. In fact, several mega-churches in Seoul have already experienced this painful division of the congregation into two. Undoubtedly, mega-churches and other large-size churches will have many more problems which smaller churches do not usually face.

d. Will this Church Growth Continue?

The economic prosperity in the nation and the secularization of the society in recent years have greatly affected the life style of Koreans and the spiritual life of many Christians, particularly among the younger generation. There are a number of signs in the nation as well as in the church today that have hindered the growth of the church: materialism, secularism, resurgence of traditional religions, busy schedules, schism in the church, easy beliefs, rise of theological liberalism, etc. Will God continue to bring church growth in the Korean church? In fact, we are beginning to see the downward trend of the Korean church. Korean church leaders are shocked to read the recent government statistics which the Ministry of Information put out concerning church growth:

1989: 9.0% growth;
1990: 5.8%;
1991: 3.9%;
1992: 0.6%;
1993: -4.0%.

The slowing of church growth had already started from 1984, with the continual declining trend of church growth for the last ten years. Dr. Jon Ho Jin, Professor of missions at ACTS in Seoul, gives several reasons behind the downward trend:

1. Too fast growth of the church and the lack of discipleship training of these new converts.
2. Past growth due to the crises in the nation and the resolution of these crises.
3. Spiritual decline in general and the decline of revival meetings.
4. Stiff competition of big churches and the difficulty of newly planted churches.
5. Loss of church image and trust due to internal problems of the church.
6. Church ministry geared for the p. 351 older generation and the departure of the younger generation.
7. Churches' lack of adjustment to new social changes.
8. Rapid social changes and the decline of rural communities and churches.
9. Change of world view from absolute truth to relative religious pluralism.
10. Rise of cults and influences of new ideologies.
11. Rise of women's liberation movement and disorientation of Christian family

e. Remedy to the Declining Situation

There is no guarantee by God that he will continue to use the Korean church in the future. Unless the Korean church once again comes to God in repentance and seeks God's help in humility, the Korean church will face similar problems to those which the churches in the West have been facing.

The author believes that there is a way to remedy the situation for the Korean church. Two important areas of modern church ministry in the Korean church must be emphasized: first, the Korean church must continue to uphold the importance of missions, not only for 70 million Koreans, but also for billions of others who need to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must enlarge our vision for Asia, Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the West. If we have a lesson to learn from the history of the Christian church, it is this lesson. If the church which once had a spiritual vitality and missionary vision for the lost world loses that vitality and vision, that same church will decline in its spiritual effectiveness.

Secondly, the Korean church must express its Christian concern for social responsibility. Churches must utilize a part of their offerings to build orphanages, hospitals, old people's homes, and many other social agencies in order to take care of needy people, not only within Korea but also abroad. The non-Christian society must see that the Christian church is making its contribution to the nation and the world. Christians must be different from Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and non-Christians in their life style and spiritual life.

CONCLUSION

The Korean Christians believe that God has chosen them in a special way today to become a channel of blessings to the nations. The explosive growth of the Korean church has been widely reported throughout the world with articles such as 'Korea: Asia's First Christian Nation?', and 'Wildfire Church Growth in Korea.' Thousands of Christians have visited Korea to observe various activities of the Korean church such as the pre-dawn prayer meetings, prayer mountain, all-night prayer meetings and fasting.

There is no doubt that God's hand has been in all the activities of the church as well as earthly affairs of the nation in which he has brought this explosive church growth in South

Korea. In connection with this rapid growth of the church the Korean church has been experiencing p. 352 the above-mentioned numerous problems and challenges both within and outside the church. With the wider vision for world missions and the consistent implementation of moral and spiritual life of Christians as light and salt in this world, the Christian church hopefully will continue to make an enormous spiritual and moral impact upon the church and the nation. The task of national and world evangelization challenges the Christian church, to depend on God's power to overcome the difficulties found in urban ministry, youth and rural evangelism and to join with other Christians of the world to reach the unrelated millions with the gospel of Christ.

With the astronomical numerical growth, the church has often been proud. In reality, the person who planted the seeds and watered the ground is God himself, and there is nothing for which Korean Christians can be boastful. As Korean Christians learn to lift up the name of Jesus Christ instead of themselves and their churches, God will continue to bless the Korean church abundantly and the eyes of the world church will continue to focus on the Lord of the Korean church.

'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called -you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Pet. 2:9).

May this verse be true of the Korean church as well as the church around the world. p. 353

Appendix Korean Protestant Church-1994

<i>Denominations</i>	<i>Churches</i>	<i>Members</i>
Presbyterians: Denominations	61*25,331	*7,771,665
Six of the large Presbyterian denominations:		
Hap Tong	5447	2,158,000
Tong Hap	5330	2,101,000
Reformed	2000	650,000
Conservative	1454	562,000
Republic of Korea (ROK)	1379	345,000
Koryo	1319	372,000
Methodists: denominations	4*4,564	*1,369,092

Largest denomination	Methodist	4,361	1,240,000
Korean Methodist Christian Church			

Pentecostal: denominations	8*1,429	*1,252,535
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Yoido Full Gospel Church	10 Churches	Satelite	706,000
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Evangelical Church: 2 denominations	Holiness*2,542	*1,067,534
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Baptist: 5 denominations	*1,910	*850,384
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1994 Statistics from the Christian Newspaper, 1995

* 1993 Christian Almanac, Christian Literature Press, Seoul, President, Young Je Han

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Theological Issues in the Philippine Context

Rodrigo D. Tano

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There are those who believe that systematic theology (traditionally formulated and taught) is the only valid theology because it is the only type that is biblically informed. Any other type, particularly contextual theology, is not valid since it may not be biblically based; hence, it should be rejected. Little do they realize that traditional systematic theology is itself arbitrarily organized around a system.

The traditional understanding of theology, systematic theology in particular, is that it is a discipline that presents an orderly, unified formulation of truth about God, man and