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**Korean Preachers & Worship Leaders**

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# Korean American Worship

Paul Junggap Huh

## Abstract

In honor of James F. White ( -2004), his method of seven elements of worship is employed as a basis for the following outline and prescription for liturgical vision for the Korean-American churches. (piety, time, space, prayer, preaching, music, and people) The article was published as “Worship in the Korean-American Churches,” *Korean and Korean American Studies Bulletin*, Vo. 17, Nos. 1/2, 2009, 35-51.

## Introduction

In the aftermath of the Los Angeles civil unrest in 1992, Korean Americans became stereotyped as hysterical, gun-toting merchants. In a collection of stories based on interviews, Elaine H. Kim and Eui-Young Yu undertook a project to “demonstrate how Korean American lives are linked but at the same time, multiple, layered, and non-equivalent.”<sup>1</sup> Korean Americans have immigrated to the U.S. during different periods and through different courses. The question before them right now is what is the ‘Korean-ness?’ Is it simply blood, geography, or language?

Worship defines one’s own identity as well as that of the gathered community. Tensions and comforts are created as the community attempts to express its relationship with God and with the rest of the world. The new millennium is like living in the New Testament Community’s cultural divisions and language polarities. There was a great polarity and division of culture, economy, polity, and worship styles. There is no perfect liturgy that works for all people at all times.

The world is facing an enormous wave of ‘liturgical change’ that is shaping not only the churches in North America but also the churches in the so-called ‘Pacific Rim,’ especially in Korea. As the anticipation for the liturgical change is growing, clarity must

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<sup>1</sup>Elaine H. Kim and Eui-Young Yu, *East to America: Korean American Life Stories*, New York: The New Press, 1997.



be expected in any liturgical change. The community must continue to experience a corporate-ness when the changes are made. Change should allow room for flexibility. The liturgy is the place for celebration of both life and death within the family of God. Continuity with tradition is expected in all changes that take place in liturgy.

The Korean-American Worship from the congregation's perspective is basically oriented to a devotional function. It is about bringing their respect and personal piety to a public setting. Based on its oral tradition, the prayer and preaching practice has shaped the liturgical tradition of Korean churches. As the Jewish scholar, Lawrence Hoffman, states, "It is not the text, then, but the people who pray it, that should concern us."<sup>2</sup> The Lutheran liturgical scholar, Gordon Lathrop, supports the importance of an event that the congregation creates:

*The greatest monuments of liturgical documentary history are not the collections of authorized or idealized model texts for the words of the liturgy, but rather the descriptions of patterned actions, the models and designs of an event.*<sup>3</sup>

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Korean American worship, which is modeled after the mother churches in Korea, is like a combination of James White's 'Frontier Tradition' and a Bible study tradition which is called, 'Sa-Kyung-Hoe,' in Korean.

Worship in the Korean American churches is very similar, therefore, to the services in Korea. Most pastors received their theological education in Korea so that the order of service is evidently closely related to the order of worship in Korea. However, liturgy is meant to balance between Word and Sacraments. In this case the sacrament is a visible sign which helps us to receive the Word. It is the intention of this study to create a cultural adaptation of the Korean tradition, carefully re-examined in the Reformed tradition and its theology of worship.

Other Korean traits of worship in patterned actions are: numerous kinds of offerings, projected themes of obedience and submission, which are not necessarily logical, and people coming mainly to hear the word preached. Because the

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<sup>2</sup>Larry Hoffman, *Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy*, Bloomfield, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: a Liturgical Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, p. 34.

denominational differences no longer have the rigidity and intensity they once had in Korea; an ecumenical dimension of worship is more favorable in the United States. And it certainly helps us to trace Korean American worship from a congregational perspective with the hypothesis that the Korean American church worship is in fact alike in spite of denominational and theological differences. In the future, someone might propose an opposite thesis. However, until then, the writer wishes to employ James White's seven elements of worship as a basis for the following outline and prescription for liturgical vision for the Korean-American churches.<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Piety

Sociologist Won Moo Hurh did research in 1984 on the involvement of Korean immigrants in a church. The research showed that about 70 percent of the total population attended Sunday worship in Korean American churches.<sup>5</sup> Hurh states that the people come to church to express their religious piety:

*A great majority of both male and female respondents expressed their primary motives for attending church as religious (worship of God, salvation, sermon, and believer's obligation). A moderate proportion of the respondents identified their secondary motives for attending church as psychological in nature (peace of mind). Only a small portion of the respondents expressed social motives (friendship, social obligation, and reciprocity) as their major reasons for attending church.*<sup>6</sup>

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Every religious community demonstrates a certain piety as its own identity. It is a way of life in shared practices and virtues. Piety is not exercised in writing up a list or order but is often practiced by observing other respected members of the church.

Most Korean-Americans spend much of their time participating in the worship life of their church. According to Won Moo Hurh, sociologist, total church affiliation increased significantly for the Korean Americans, from 53% in Korea to 77% after

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<sup>4</sup>James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition*, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989, pp.15-21.

<sup>5</sup>Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim, *Korean Immigrants in America: a Structural Analysis of Ethnic Confinement and Adhesive Adaptation*, Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1984, P. 130.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

immigration.<sup>7</sup> As soon as they enter the sanctuary, they sit in a pew and begin to pray in silence. Silent prayer can be observed in homes or business sites as well. When one visits a new place, sitting or standing, a silent prayer is offered in respect for the host and their family.

When one walks into an unfamiliar worshipping community, the comfort level depends upon the familiarity with the setting and willingness to accept the change. Congregations always seek to establish a sense of security when they first enter into a foreign setting with which they are not familiar. As they enter into an unfamiliar setting, they will seek for a comfort zone which they will feel part of. Therefore, it is an act of first participation when one prays to God upon entering into unfamiliar ground, an experience expressed by the concept of “liminal.”

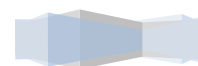
Silent prayer may be credited to cultural and religious backgrounds of Korean history. Some claim its influence comes from Shintoism in Japan. Here in America, one of the Korean identity practices which is demanded by the first generation of immigrants of their English-speaking children is a properly respected greeting saying, “An-Nyung-Ha-Se-Yo?,” and bowing of the head before someone who is especially older than they are. Just as in saying "hello" to others, the formal respect which is demonstrated in such a greeting custom is also reflected in devotional life. Thus the first silent prayer is equivalent to saying "hello" to God.

This is both an act of corporate gathering and individual piety which establishes the gathered community in worship. Perhaps that is why many Korean churches have the Apostles' Creed recited at the beginning of worship even before singing the first hymn. When the creed is spoken by the congregation, people bow their heads and close their eyes as in the posture of prayer. The Creed is practiced as more a time of gathering up individual piety, than affirming communal faith. Jung Young Lee writes,

*When we come to the church, the first thing we do is to pray. It does not matter whether the congregation is standing and singing the hymn or reciting the creed. The first thing a member does, as soon as the church is*

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<sup>7</sup>Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim, “Religious Participation of Korean Immigrants in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1990, 29 (1), p. 24.



*entered, is to sit down and pray for a few minutes before joining the worship service which is in progress.*<sup>8</sup>

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In the gathering of the people, worshippers bring their personal requests to God as well as individual pieties which are harder to perceive.

On Sunday morning, Christians can be easily identified on the streets of Korea. They take their Bibles and hymnals with them no matter where and when they worship. It is a common expectation and is one of the essential marks of Korean piety. Barbara Wheeler, the President of Auburn Seminary in New York, suggests that the ultimate evangelical icon would be one of those covers into which evangelicals zip their Bibles when they take them outside - she called them "Bible cosies."<sup>9</sup> Koreans follow the evangelical piety in carrying not only their Bibles but also their hymnals, showing their respect by carrying these holy objects. The older the Bible, the covers being worn and red marks marking every page, the deeper a piety is demonstrated.

Dedication in the form of offering to God is the most widely exercised piety for the Korean American churches. They give "first things" to God, such as the first hour of each day as a form of morning prayer. When a person gets a new job, they give their first salary as a special offering. Many devoted mothers make a prayer to dedicate their first born son to the ministry. Some Koreans pray, before starting the automobile engine in the morning, for safe travel for the day. Giving first things to God who gave all things first is the driving motivation behind all these practices.

In Buddhism, flowers, lights, water, food, and money are offered for various occasions. Christian believers also give their thank offerings when they move, open a new business, for health, travel, and birthdays. Piety is most commonly expressed in the daily lives of the people. Piety is also reflected in gestures such as bodily posture, clothing, refraining from or selecting certain pleasures or food, and choice of language.

Abstaining from smoking and alcoholic beverages is also taught by the church leadership. Both baptism and ordination as a church officer normally require many years of waiting. Once again substantial gifts are given to the church when joining with others

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<sup>8</sup>Jung Young Lee, *Korean Preaching: An Interpretation*, Abingdon Press, 1997, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup>Barbara G. Wheeler, "You Who Were Far off: Religious Divisions and the Role of Religious Research," *Auburn News*, vo. 4, no.2, Winter 1998. p.3.

who are being ordained.

During the Sunday service not only does the choir wear robes but also the ushers, and the elder who is praying the public prayer also wears a liturgical gown. Here is the place where Korean Americans intentionally wear a culturally designed robe which reflects divine power working in their lives.<sup>10</sup> Korean-ness and Christianity are closely associated in their lives. What is ‘spirituality’ in Catholic Church renewal is ‘piety’ in the Protestant churches. There will be more mutual sharing in the future.

## 2. Time

Piety in Korean American liturgical life extends to the use of time also. Corporate worship is done both daily and weekly. Keeping the “Sabbath” holy by attending the Sunday service faithfully is the best time for piety. However, every piety needs to be reviewed Biblically.

Gordon Lathrop, reviews the validity of Dawn Prayer practice according to the Biblical faith,

*In the prayer at dawn our community and the world come to expression, but the hope so expressed is not a trust in the community itself, nor in the visible things of the world, not in the sun. Since we stand in prayer, remembering God's deeds and beseeching God's mercy, all of these things are seen as witnesses to God. The prayer at dawn is creation come to expression. Hope resides in the promise of God's faithful mercy and not in the things of the world nor in ourselves - nor, one should note, in flight from the things of the world and from ourselves. In prayer at dawn the community and the world and the individual's own history are one before God. Such an exercise is a ritual reinsertion into the biblical faith.<sup>11</sup>*

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Keeping the Dawn prayer as an 'ordo' of daily prayer is a long standing practice of the Korean American churches. However, due to the great distance people travel to get to church, Saturday has been set aside as the most popular day for the dawn prayer. In this case, it is not a daily but a weekly prayer for some churches.

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<sup>10</sup>Koreans wear robes (durumari), black for men and bright colors for women, on New Year's Eve worship. A new design is sought out to embrace Korean traditional expression in clerical and choir robes in worship.

<sup>11</sup>Lathrop, *Holy Things*, p. 37.



Weekly Wednesday services are held in the late evening. Suburban areas hold it earlier than the metropolitan churches. The people come to the service after closing their shops and sometimes skip their dinner to join the prayer into the night. Some immigrant churches are switching this time to Friday evening. Yet, attempts are always being made to keep weekly prayer or Bible study at other than Sunday gathering.

The times for birthdays, anniversaries, and memorial services are family occasions. The family is usually extended to all known relatives and friends, which could mean the entire congregation. In gathering for worship, solidarity is stressed and confirmed. The pastor's home visitation, expected of worship leadership, is in this setting.

In marriage, parents pressure young people to settle for a Korean spouse. However, the increase of inter-racial marriage requires bilingual resources. Guidance during marriage counseling normally includes liturgical choices which the couple would make together with the pastor and musician. Increasingly, the kind of reception the wedding party holds has become an issue for the Korean American churches. There will always be someone in the congregation who did not get an invitation to the reception and feels left out. This upsets an extended family relationship.

The mother church in Korea celebrates the 'choosuk' and the lunar calendar new year; however, Korean Americans have not followed this closely. The church calendar has not embraced them except Saturday Korean language schools in which the children learn to understand the customs of Korea. Liturgical color has not yet been introduced to the Koreans. Yet, white is usually the color for purity and death in the Korean custom. Yellow (perhaps gold) is the color that presents the symbol of resurrection, as illustrated by Jung Yong Lee.<sup>12</sup> Korean's three traditional colors are red for heaven, blue for earth, and yellow for humanity.

The need for lectionary materials based upon the church year cycle is felt by the entire family of all age groups. Korean children and youth worship separately from their parents. Their worship style is different and their curriculum does not necessarily match with that of their parent's service. Preachers tend to pick their own choice of texts for

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<sup>12</sup>*In Korean Preaching*, he tells the story of yellow dandelion living in the green field. The color yellow signifies the Asian Americans.

their sermon. The challenge is to combine all efforts to unify the sermon text in order that discussion of Biblical stories can be continued at home.

Communion is often observed in Korean American churches only on New Year's Eve, Good Friday, World Communion Sunday, Thanksgiving Sunday, or Christmas Day. Baptism is administered on Easter, the first Sunday of May (Children's Day), the Sunday before Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day. Local ordination election and installation is likely held on the church's anniversary day.

The liturgical days that are celebrated are Christmas and Easter. Festival days such as Pentecost, Epiphany, and Christ the King Sunday are not observed by the Korean American churches. However, Lent is observed especially for the dawn prayer meeting to encourage the entire congregation to pray together for 40 days.

Worship occurs not only during designated times, but also at other times. The most important worship often happens at the "prime time." In the "off-peak" hours of the liturgical service, we often find the intimacy of God's presence in awesome ways. Korean Americans take table fellowship seriously. Sharing food at Sunday lunch or dinner has created a strong sense of community for the Korean American churches.

### **3. Space**

When someone visits Korea, they are often surprised by the number of churches topped by a steeple or a tower lit by a red neon cross. At night, these crosses provide quite a sight for travelers. In terms of church architecture, the exterior follows Western styles, yet, the inside reflects the Korean ethos in many ways. In designing a new worship space, the most attention is given to providing as much space in the Sanctuary as possible.

How you are going to fill the space determines the shape of the building. Young members would like to fill the space with loud amplified sound, and pastors without a sacramental understanding want to fill the space only with the listening people. A number of churches in rental situations are limited as to how their faith is expressed in space. Altar areas are sacred to the Koreans. Some pastors or elders take their shoes off as they approach the altar area.

Korean Americans are strangers in this land of America. To them the tabernacle



worship - carrying holy things with them as they travel - teaches an important lesson concerning the fact that space is only temporal. Korean Americans create holy space in their mind, since they may have to take down physical objects some day for relocation. Prominence of pulpit, altar-table, and font was not discussed until recently. Baptismal fonts are not always common in Korean American churches.

*Often water is poured into a bowl before the service begins, with the bowl place on the alter during the service. At the time of baptism, a lay elder or associate pastor holds the bowl for the baptism.<sup>13</sup>*

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A theology of ‘In-Between’ among the bilingual bridge generations<sup>14</sup> needs to be studied in relation to creating a holy space. There have been times when youth members waited outside in the church parking lot during the Sunday service, oblivious and indifferent as to what transpired during the church service. A serious problem for the second generation congregation members is that they have a tenant's mentality. The pride of ownership is not there, so the use of space is reflected in carelessness and uncleanness.

In the fellowship place, smells of ‘kimchi’ and bean-paste soup trigger home sickness as well as disturbances during the worship service. Korean food such as ‘Bibimbop’ and various ‘casseroles’ represent the sharing aspect of the community. Each flavor a family brings is mixed and stirred in one pot to produce a composite taste for everyone’s share.

In the Sanctuary, porcelain, calligraphy, and the shape of Korean doors and windows as decoration are found. At home, smaller scales of Bible verse calligraphy and Christian drawing porcelains are decorated to help bring the family devotion together. Monthly cell group Bible study is held at the private homes of the members. And finally, the church picnic is held once or twice annually in a distant park to enjoy worship outdoors and small group competition in sporting events.

#### 4. Prayer

Children and youth in Korean churches are usually ministered by seminarians

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<sup>13</sup>Kathy Black, *Worship Across Cultures: a Handbook*, Abingdon Press, 1998, p. 153.

<sup>14</sup>They are called 1.5 generation, because they stand between the Korean speaking first generation and English speaking second generation.

who entered the ministry under the influence of evangelical para-church organizations. Therefore, music and liturgy are even more informal than that of their parents.

In youth and young adult groups, the oral tradition of extemporaneous prayer is favored over praying the written text. Demonstrations of emotion and sincerity are expected in these prayers causing those who pray to be called ‘fervent’ and faithful ones. In the youth and college group prayer meetings, a new form of ‘*TongSung*’ prayer is employed in groups of four or five praying aloud while holding hands together. It is a new adaptation of the individual voices in unity now expressed also in bodily gestures by holding hands with others in prayer.

Prayers are spoken, sung and silent. Spoken prayers have more freedom for variation than sung prayers. Calvin’s scriptural sentences opened the service with the solemn verse from the Mass as an opening prayer: “Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Amen!” then follows the prayer of confession as a congregational act. The written prayers were interchangeably by Calvin, Bucer, and Cranmer, thus exemplifying the spirit of ecumenism in the reformed tradition.

For Calvin, church music is under the heading of prayer. Nichols emphasizes the importance of sung prayers as an act of participation of the congregation,

*In classical Reformed worship the ‘liturgy’ in the strict sense, the people’s part, was all sung. It is not the spoken prayers, taken by the minister, but the sung liturgy of the people which must be studied in the first instance to comprehend the meaning of early Reformed worship.<sup>15</sup>*

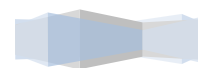
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However, Calvin resisted the efforts of the musicians to make the sung liturgy more aesthetically interesting, only allowing plain chants with one note for each syllable in unison without any accompaniment, for reasons of simplicity.

Silence is also an important avenue for prayer. Bilingual prayer perhaps needs to be explored in light of the effective use of silence. The more explicit content of spoken word somehow does not uplift the mystical elements of prayer in silence. To sit quietly contemplating the cross, the communion table, the Bible, or whatever symbol toward which the attention is directed, encourages the use of silence.

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<sup>15</sup>James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968, p. 35.



Justice and social issues are not included in Korean worship and prayer. Nicholas Wolterstorff has pointed out in *Theology Today*, "Liturgy I view fundamentally as action."<sup>16</sup> He means the action of justice. Korean churches are conservative in this position in that their belief is that worship of God is a first action, and justice as a consequence given by God. In Eucharistic praying, Korean American churches need instead to tell their stories of deliverance, how to overcome the 'han' ridden spirit of suffering, and to give thanksgiving for the Lord's grace and blessings.

## 5. Preaching

In Word and Sacrament, the church is telling a 'deliverance story' in a confessional nature. Both are considered to be equally important to the life and work of the church, yet in the actual practice of Korean American churches, the Word is given considerable precedence over the Sacraments. The mystical elements of worship are found in the Sacraments.

The language of the Korean preaching is more prescriptive than descriptive. Strong ethical teachings and authority are displayed with a high level commitment. Korean preaching provides a definitive answer to the moral and ethical struggles of the world; however, it is subjective and limited by each individual preacher's experiences.

A lectionary system would provide the connection with the preacher and a community now becoming more diverse in languages, cultures, and generational differences. The Old Testament lesson is especially appreciated by the Korean people. According to the well-known Reformed liturgical scholar, John Hastings Nichols, Scripture reading and preaching go together without a break.<sup>17</sup> No anthem or prayer is to be placed in between the Gospel reading and the preaching of the text in the Calvinistic tradition.

## 6. Music

English services in the Korean American churches tend to ignore hymnals. A half

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<sup>16</sup>Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Justice as a Condition of Authentic Liturgy," *Theology Today*, April, 1991, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 31.

hour of “Vineyard” praise music accompanied by an amplified guitar and synthesizer begins the worship with words projected on a screen. The screen is now the stained glass window in this age.

The hymns and gospel songs are replaced by Contemporary Christian Music known as CCM and praise songs from Vineyard Christian Fellowship and Hosanna Integrity Music. The goal of evangelical mission of the second generation is fueled by the practice of piety of the first generation. Music is where the stylistic expression seems most vividly to divide the two groups into polarities.

John Chrysostom (A.D. 380), who taught the unity and diversity of the church, said,

*The Psalm caused one single fully harmonious chant to arise; young and old, rich and poor, women and men, slaves and free, all sang one single melody. . . All the inequalities of social life are here banished. Together we make up a single choir in perfect equality of rights and of expression whereby earth imitates heaven. Such is the noble character of the church.*<sup>18</sup>

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The Korean Hymnal (published in 1983) may currently be one of today's most widely used Christian hymnals. It was created with an intention to unite divided denominations in Korea. About ten million copies of the Korean Hymnal are now in use. It is not only found in church pews, but, even more, it is used in the homes of Korean families, with each member having his or her own copy. Almost 100% of the Korean American churches currently use the *Korean Hymnal* (1983).

The hymnal may not be a tool to bridge the generational differences in the Korean American church; however, the challenge of bringing diversity into unity is asked of music in the worship. During the Saturday Korean school activities, the Korean Fan Dance and Farmer’s Band ‘*Sa-Mool-No-Ri*’ are taught to the Korean American children. The authentic song of call and response in a pentatonic scale<sup>19</sup>, if employed correctly, is one option that will bring Korean-ness into the Korean-American worship.

We cannot expect to have integrated and quality music in worship without going through a church educational process. The church music is primarily viewed as a

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<sup>18</sup>Cited from Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982, p. 176.

<sup>19</sup>The Christian Conference of Asia & The Asian Institute for Liturgy and Music, *Sound the Bamboo*, Quezon City, Philippines: R.R. Yan Printing Press, 1990. (lists a number of examples, e.g.#101 “Oharadiya, Sangsadiya - Psalm 150)

performance. In the performance aspects, the musical styles are important. However, church music is prayer that is for everyone. It is for the young and the old and all ages in between. Music is for both learned and unlearned. Most important of all, the music in worship is for God.

## 7. People

In a changing culture, people are beginning to say that it is actually all right to be Korean. People are learning to see problems as new opportunities. Technology advances through the Internet and people find new ways to reach out to others. In the midst of all these elements of change, where is the place of worship for the Korean Americans?

In this age of creative tension, a new identity will emerge for the Korean American churches. And the identity will shape as well as be shaped by the way they worship. In the 'devotional' nature of Korean worship, denominational differences will no longer be emphasized.

People are empowered when they live in a community of faith in worship. The 'woori' (we) concept among the Koreans is central to the Korean language. There is no definite article like 'a,' 'an,' or 'the' in the Korean grammar - all inclusivity of the common property is expressed in the subliminal expressions of the language by simply omitting particular articles and even pronouns. The "woori" collectivism holds the homogeneous heritage of the Korean-ness which is at issue in the States.

Being a sojourner in the wilderness is the continuing necessary theme in the immigrant churches. Korean-Americans boast of the fact of having 80-85% of the total immigrant population as Christian. However, the ultimate identity is to live their lives as citizens of God's reign. The challenge is that they need to pursue reconciliation with the rest of other Asian-Americans in the States who are unchurched.

Korean Americans will have to move from 'ethnic' to 'multi-ethnic' congregations. There will be more inter-racial marriages which will call for production of bilingual worship resources. It is expected that the need will be for more than a simple simultaneous translational system, because individuals need to express their own challenges and conflicts that are unique to their own experiences.