

The Gifts and Difficulties of Being Wesleyan

Dal Joon Won

According to the 2000 census, the Korean population in the United States numbered 1.2 million (over two million including business persons and students); this official number will reach about 1.4 or 1.5 million by 2004. Seventy three percent of these new immigrants will have arrived since 1970. The Korean population in the United States is culturally complex. It consists of the first generation, 1.5 generation, 2nd generation, third generation, and Korean women who are married to US service persons. (These persons have often not been counted as Korean Americans.)

The first Korean United Methodist Church (Christ Korean United Methodist Church) was founded in 1903. Fifty-eight Methodists of 102 Korean immigrants arrived in Honolulu on January 13, 1903 to work for various sugar plantations. Since 1903 the number of Korean United Methodist churches has grown from 7 in 1970 to 420 with 100,000 members today. A popular saying among Korean Americans seems to contain a kernel of truth: "When two Japanese meet, they set up a business firm; when two Chinese meet, they open a Chinese

restaurant; and when two Koreans meet, they establish a church." Korean immigrants have been known as churchgoers. About 70% of the Koreans in the U.S. are affiliated with Christian churches. Church participation has become a way of life among Korean Americans.

Gifts of Wesleyan Thought and Practice in the lives of Korean United Methodists

Bible study and prayer life are the starting points for becoming a Christian and growing as a Christian. Korean United Methodist churches approach the Bible with the faith conviction that God wants to meet us in and through the Bible. For Koreans the Bible is a privileged place to encounter God. The Korean United Methodist churches are deeply committed to teaching the Word because that task is assigned specifically to them. The Bible is the foundation of faith and morality for the Korean Christians. Korean United Methodist churches have the faith conviction that praying with the Word awakens our desire to study, and that studying the Word enriches our prayer. For the Korean Christian, spirituality is the process of inviting and permitting the spirit of Christ to dwell within the movement toward reflecting the presence of Christ in all of life. Prayer life demands that we set other concerns aside to spend focused time with God. In this time we listen to God and respond with mind and heart. Prayer quiets us and opens us to the reality of God in our lives. Korean United Methodist churches have received many gifts from the tradition of Wesleyan thought and practice:

- Belief in God through Christ leading lay and clergy to personal witness and evangelism
- Desire to plant new congregations
- Prayer life
(This means early morning prayer every day, regular fasting prayer, all-night prayer meetings, and pastors setting aside 2-5 hours for prayer per day.)
- Bible study
- Sunday evening and Wednesday services
- Strong home visitation program
- Emphasis on small groups
(class meeting)
- Faithful stewardship, including tithing
- Year-long nurturing process requiring study and active participation in church life
- Role of extended family to help newly arrived immigrants
- High value placed on family and community
- High value placed on learning and education

Difficulties of Wesleyan Thought and Practice in the lives of Korean United Methodists

Korean United Methodist churches experience various difficulties. More than 80% of the Korean United Methodists have backgrounds in other denominations. And even those members who grew up in The Korean Methodist Church in



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Korea have a radically different understanding of polity. The Korean Methodist Church in Korea abandoned its traditional connec-tionalism and adopted congrega-tional practices. Therefore, the spirit of connectionalism is extremely weak among Korean United Methodists. Almost all Korean United Methodist churches in the U.S. were organized to win converts to Jesus Christ and to meet the religious needs of the people, not to meet the institutional needs of the denomination. Many times this is a source of difficulties.

While United Methodism is centered around annual conferences, the majority of Korean pastors and key lay leaders are not able to participate in the activities of annual conferences. Major differences in language and culture hinder their partici-pation in the mainstream life of the denomination. Most annual conferences that have Korean United Methodist con-gregations have underestimated the need for providing opportunities for the Korean congregations to participate so that they can then offer a more integrat-ed and effective ministry of Jesus Christ.

There are some distinctively difficult areas in the lives of Korean American United Methodists:

- High qualification of clergy member-ship. Many Korean pastors would like to transfer their membership from The Korean Methodist Church to The United Methodist Church. However, because of the difficulty of transferring their ministerial membership, they often decide to start new Korean Methodist churches to avoid losing their ministerial membership. Within the past two decades, the number of Korean Methodist churches has grown from almost none in 1970 to 220 today.
- Many Korean United Methodist pastors are not covered by any health insurance.
- The structure of The United Methodist Church is perceived as engaged in administration rather than in doing ministry.
- A challenge faced within the Korean United Methodist Church is to under-stand the spiritual gifts of Korean American clergy women and to accept them as pastors in charge of Korean language churches. Only a handful of clergy women are serving Korean lan-guage churches.

- As the Korean United Methodist Church continues to increase in num-bers, it becomes increasingly diverse in perspective, needs and expectations (educational levels, longevity of immi-grant life, ability to speak English, etc.). We are witnessing a shift from a pre-dominantly Korean language ministry to bilingual and bicultural ministry. These factors create tensions within the community. What served the first gen-

eration very well does not reach the next generation effectively.

- 90% of English-speaking Korean youth leave the church after high school. They experience language and cultural gaps with their parents' generation. They cross over ethnic lines through marriage and raise their families in an inter-cultural setting.

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