



New Missions with a New Generation: The Experiences of Korean American Churches and Missions

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Abstract

Korean immigrants have continued to form Protestant churches in the US and to contribute to overseas missions. As the American-born second generation grows, however, ethnic congregations of Koreans are experiencing generational struggles. These new challenges represent the potential for Korean American churches to broaden their missionary perspective and empower their missionary practices. Through gathering and witnessing with the second generation, immigrant churches can transform their churches into missionary communities that evangelize and cooperate with other Asian Americans. Second-generation Christians can also lead the immigrant churches to reach other ethnic groups in the US beyond their Korean enclaves.

Keywords

Korean American missions, Asian American church, mission from the margin, church education and missions, missions to US society

Ten years ago during my graduate study in the US, I began my first ministry in a Korean American church. During the following years, I have observed Korean American churches, sometimes as an outsider from Korea and sometimes as an insider with Korean Americans, participating in ministry with the congregation. Ten years is

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enough time for me to recognize that the term “Korean American church” refers to two kinds of congregations. The first is a Korean American church that is a congregation of Koreans in the United States. It is a church for immigrants, although many of its members may have US citizenship. The second kind is a church of Americans of Korean origin who were born and raised in the US but who identify themselves as Americans with an Asian heritage. Although these two kinds of churches may look the same to outsiders, every insider knows that Korean American churches include the potential for struggles between immigrants, who are primarily Koreans, and their children, who in many ways are almost fully Americans.

Korean American churches and overseas missions

Protestant churches in the US have been religious, cultural, and social centers for Korean immigrants. Beginning with the first group of Korean immigrants, who came to Hawaii as indentured farmers in 1903, Koreans established Protestant churches that became their centers for spiritual growth, cultural preservation, and patriotic expression. As the number of Korean immigrants grew rapidly after the US Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, Korean Protestant churches multiplied throughout the nation. This has been a distinctively Korean American phenomenon, while other Asians brought their traditional religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, and recently Islam from Japan, China, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Korean Protestant churches do mission work to reach Korean immigrants through showing hospitality at their religious and social centers, evangelizing the immigrant families, and functioning as a cultural community that fosters ethnic values. According to *Christian Today*, in 2018 there were 4,454 Korean American churches (one for every 323 Korean Americans), and 70 percent of Korean Americans identify themselves religiously as Protestant.¹

The experiences of Korean American churches confirm some theological presuppositions about Christian immigrants. First, immigration can be the source of theological reflection. Jehu Henciles comments, “Migration is often a theologizing experience.”² In this era of global migration, immigrant Christians necessarily and creatively interpret their experiences through their biblical understanding, theological insights, and contextual missiology.³ For example, facing the structural racism in the US, Jung Young Lee develops a “theology of marginality” that focuses on Jesus Christ as an example of the marginalized; he broke the border between center and margin, making Christians the people of the kingdom of God. Andrew Sung Park draws on the Korean understanding of *han* to liberate victims from their wounds in a racist society and from the hard realities of immigration. As womanist theologians work for African American women, so Korean feminist theologians reflect the double burden of being immigrants and women with Korean religiosity in the US. Korean Christians have sought their theological meanings of immigration and hardship in a new land, the US, and interpret their divine calling and mission through their migrant lives.⁴

Second, through their tie to the passion and practice of overseas missions from Korea, Korean American churches have become an example of “mission from the margin.” In Christian missions in the twenty-first century, we are experiencing two

distinctive changes: the massive movement of people globally, and the shift of Christian centers from the Global North to the Global South.⁵ The increased number of transnational migrants and their churches has resulted in a new flow of Christian missions, namely, from former mission fields back to formerly missionary-sending lands. After the 1980s, Christian missions from Korea have led these changes by sending out thousands of missionaries, planting churches in overseas fields, and now leading mission societies. Korean immigrant churches in the US are also participating in these missionary movements. From my study and experience, the average Korean American church sends out short-term mission teams every year (independently or in partnership with other churches) and cooperates with missionaries and mission societies. For example, a church I know in the Chicago area with 300 in weekly attendance sends its own missionaries to Brazil, supports a Christian grade school and community projects in Haiti, and sponsors two or three short-term mission teams every year. As another example, a Korean American church in Southern California with just 70 or 80 attendance funds several missionaries, supports cooperative mission societies, and sends short-term mission trips annually to Mexico.

Why are small ethnic local churches such as these so passionate about foreign missions, giving freely of their effort and resources? Some contributing factors exist in the churches themselves. The majority of Korean Protestant immigrants brought with them their evangelistic enthusiasm and the foreign mission experience of the churches in their Korean homeland. The experiences as immigrants have strengthened their calling to be more faithful Christians, which extends to their missionary zeal for engagement in multicultural experiences and international missionary networks.

There are also contributing factors from the mission fields. Many missions from Korea and the US have expected to work with Korean Americans, and Korean Americans are actually in demand in the mission fields. This encouragement has led Korean American churches to make overseas missions their calling in their new land, although reaching out to neighbors in the US is still hard because of the language barrier and the racism they experience in US society. Overseas missions of Korean American churches is a distinctively Korean American movement bridging Korean missions, the immigration experience, and new callings as Christian diaspora.⁶

This section has summarized the missionary mind and practice of Korean American churches today. Experiencing immigration and living as the marginalized, these Christians examine the nature of faith and seek to practice their calling. Korean American churches present an example of pilgrims or a diaspora who respond to new callings in their new lands, inviting fellow Christians to live as migrants moving toward the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, there are weaknesses. Korean American churches find it difficult to move beyond their monoethnic culture, leaving it to others to share Christian love and the Gospel with their American neighbors. They have been reluctant to reach other racial groups and to participate as Christians in civil society.

Ministry for and by the second generation

This article examines another area of mission of Korean American churches. As previously mentioned, Korean Churches include immigrants and their American-born

children. For the last two decades, the number of immigrants from Korea has rapidly decreased, and the second generation has grown old enough to move into leadership in Korean American congregations. These challenges have led the immigrants to review their faith and the practices of the churches as communities of the second generation. Gathering, worshiping, and serving with the second generation, I argue, enable the immigrant churches to broaden their missionary thinking and practice so they can invite the second generation to engage in new mission efforts for their American neighbors, integrating the formerly monoethnic enclaves into the larger American society. This perspective involves both a challenge and an opportunity for Korean American churches and their missions.

Korean American churches have made a priority of educating their children in and through their churches. The immigrant churches have assumed two educational responsibilities for the next generation of Korean Americans. One is spiritual; they expect to raise their children as Christians with their evangelical faith and to provide a spiritual home for their children. The other responsibility is cultural. The parent generation has tried to teach the Korean language and culture, hoping the second generation retains their Korean identity and sense of community.⁷ As the education of children has been a primary reason for many Koreans to immigrate in the US, it is not uncommon to see the teaching of faith and of Koreanness intermingled in the ministries of local churches. Weekend Korean language schools, as well as Sunday schools, have been main ministries in Korean American churches.⁸

Being churches both for immigrants and for the second generation is quite challenging. Like many churches both in Korea and the US, Korean American churches also struggle with the generation gap. The morning service needs an organist and a choir, while the noontime service needs a praise band and beam projectors. In addition, the different language, predominant culture, and social identity amplify the gap between the two generations. While the immigrants gather in Korean churches because of Korean language and culture, the second generation has much less need for these features. They speak English and live in an American world—except when they join their parents and their parents' congregation.⁹ In short, Koreans in the US and Americans (or Asian Americans) with a Korean heritage have many differences.

Korean American scholars have focused on relationships between the two generations in churches—on the harmony, but more on the conflicts. Helen Lee has pointed out the “silent exodus” of the second generation from the ethnic churches. They are typically dissatisfied with the Asian-style leadership of the church, the ethnic emphasis on church culture, and the lack of opportunity for the younger generation to realize spiritual growth. They feel like second-class citizens in immigrant churches.¹⁰ “Silent exodus” becomes a general term for Korean Americans. The immigrant churches have sought ways to respond to this challenge through developing semi- or fully independent English ministries in their churches, while maintaining common ministries such as children's education and overseas missions.¹¹ Their efforts have been generally unsuccessful, however, because of their small congregational size and continuing generational conflicts.

Where has the younger generation gone? Some of them leave the faith when they move to college or get new jobs. Some have attended American mainstream churches. But more second-generation Christians have sought their spiritual home at independent churches in which the majority of the congregations are Korean Americans or Asian Americans. While they typically do not prefer Korean immigrant churches, second-generation Christians of various ethnic groups, especially of Asians, find their spiritual homes with other Asian American Christians because they have similar experiences of the immigrant family and of marginalization in a racist mainstream society.¹² The second generation of Korean immigrants identify themselves as Asian Americans, rather than as Korean Americans, in the way that American society defines ethnic groups. Second-generation leaders pursue their spiritual growth and a sense of mission differently from that in immigrant churches. Sharon Kim points out that the growth of independent second-generation Korean American churches is a distinctively Korean American phenomenon more clearly observed than with other ethnic groups.¹³

The independent second-generation ministry within and outside of Korean immigrant churches has developed with certain weaknesses. For the parent generation, the new churches seem like church schism and sheep-stealing. They worry that their children will abandon their faith tradition and their education in Korean culture. Emotionally, they feel a sense of disconnect from their children's generation. For the second generation, the new churches they attend face the risks of young leadership, unexperienced organization, and unstable theological foundations, even as they have more autonomy and ownership of their churches. Most significantly, they suffer from a weakness of leadership.

The immigrant churches' experience with the second generation, not only as their children but also as a growing independent ministry both inside and outside of the their immigrant churches, can become a chance for them to broaden their understanding and practice of missions and to empower the churches to reach more people whom they should serve, but could not, because of their limitation as an ethnic church. First, they can enrich their missionary understanding and practice by viewing second-generation ministry as a new kind of foreign missions. Second, the second-generation ministry can lead Korean American churches to reach their American neighbors, witness love and justice to American society, and participate in Christian civic responsibility beyond the ethnic islands of immigrant churches.

Ministry for the second generation as cross-cultural mission

I wish to propose a response to the "silent exodus," namely, that second-generation ministry be viewed as a cross-cultural mission, just like overseas missions, with the same need to witness to the Gospel and to love them, which are the fundamental goals of any other cross-cultural mission. We note that generational conflicts occur because, in each other's eyes, the parents are too "Korean," and the younger generation, too "American." In addition to studies of family and Christian education, missiological

approaches are also helpful insofar as they consider any two groups who speak different languages, live in different cultures, and maintain different ethnic identities. To the second-generation ministry, Dang Hyun Huh applies Ralph Winter's scale of different kinds of evangelism by cultural difference. In Winter's terms, E0 is sharing the Gospel with Christian families in churches of the same culture, and E1 is evangelism to people outside of churches in the same culture. E2 approaches people in a similar but different culture, and E3 is evangelism of people in a very different culture (like foreign missions).

Huh argues that second-generation ministry is E2 evangelism because the language and culture are different from those of the parent generation, and they need to be evangelized. In these terms, therefore, the immigrant churches should approach the education and English ministry for the second generation as their mission field, just as Korean churches evangelize Korean Chinese, or French Canadians evangelize their English fellow citizens.¹⁴

This perspective calls for a change in the immigrant churches' understanding of missions. For most Korean immigrant churches, mission has meant missions to other countries. If these Korean immigrant churches could broaden their view of the mission field to include their second generation, they would grasp the nature of the church as a missionary community. First, this would change their understanding of evangelism. As Walter Brueggemann proposes, the second generation is not only the congregation to follow the church and participate in ministry but also the people whom the church should reach out to and evangelize. Churches should seek a way to communicate with them, to bring the Gospel to them by word and deed, and to encourage them to live as disciples of Christ, not viewing them simply as other church members and their own children.¹⁵ Because the ministry to the second generation involves cross-cultural mission as much as any overseas mission does, the immigrant churches should not plan simply to replicate their churches for the next generation, an approach that causes many conflicts. Rather, the churches should invite second-generation Korean Americans to the kingdom of God in ways appropriate to them, just as overseas mission proceeds in planting indigenous churches.¹⁶

When immigrant churches regard the second generation as a mission field, it is possible for them to apply missiological principles to this ministry. Such ministry would be an indigenous church planting either within or outside of the immigrant churches. Such church planting would follow the principle of the three "selves" (self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating) and would mean viewing the new church plant as being much more than simply an educational department of the immigrant church.¹⁷ As Tom Steffen has emphasized, church planters should transfer the authority of leadership to indigenous leaders. Adopting this approach would enable the parents to overcome paternalism, allowing the second generation to develop a sense of ownership and autonomy.¹⁸ This model changes the perspective of immigrant churches. No longer would they think primarily in terms of teaching and transferring their faith and cultural practices to the second generation; rather, they would study how they could become an incarnational mission community that exercises patience, takes initiative, and identifies with the culture of the second generation.¹⁹ More

broadly, various missiological approaches can be mined for second-generation ministry, including inculturation, contextualization, holistic missions, and movements of liberation.

This shift of perspective moves beyond simply seeking generational harmony in Korean American churches. It calls on Korean American immigrant churches to view church as a *missionary* community. The experience of immigration calls for the ethnic church not only to live out the faith of pilgrims who move to a new land but to accept the kingdom of God as an agent of Christian missions.

Overcoming the limitations of ethnic churches

Some Korean American churches teach and develop these new missionary understandings and practices, leading to the establishment and growth of independent second-generation congregations. Such second-generation churches are clear that their congregations are not just alternatives to immigrant churches, for they have moved beyond an ethnic emphasis and Korean traditions. These churches occupy the hybrid space for mission-oriented communities beyond ethnic ghettos and the racist mainstream. While immigrants gather in Korean churches because they are Korean churches, the second generation forms their churches as Korean-American or Asian American Christian communities. The immigrant churches are too Korean to be their spiritual and cultural home. The US mainstream churches are too American, typically reflecting the individualism of American culture, making any second-generation group as “forever foreign” and simply guests in the churches.²⁰

The mission of immigrant churches is to gather as a faith community, serving the immigrants, and encouraging theologies that fit the immigrants. The concerns of the second generation are more about being a Christian witness to their neighbors and an influence in the future of the United States. The language barriers and ethnic limitation with which the immigrants have struggled cannot hinder the church ministry of the second generation. Their spirituality arises equally from Korean Christian traditions and from the American context as they pursue the calling of being missionary communities in their own right.

Second-generation churches can reach other ethnic groups. While the immigrant churches may have a passion for evangelism and missions, they cannot realistically invite people of other ethnic groups to their monoethnic congregations. Korean American churches, pan-Asian churches, and multicultural churches formed mainly by second-generation Korean Americans can reach fellow Americans and invite them to their worship and activities. The members of these churches emphasize this point as the reason to plant independent second-generation churches that go beyond ethnic boundaries. Their missions should not be limited in ethnic and immigrant churches.²¹

Second-generation churches also are able to volunteer and participate in various social missions. Immigrant churches concentrate on the immigrant society, leaving Christian service to their neighbors and the poor as an individual responsibility. Second-generation churches actively expand their compassion ministry and community service to areas such as homeless ministry, tutoring for children of impoverished neighborhoods,

community garden projects, visiting elderly people with nurses, and providing job-training education for underserved communities.²² In some cases these ministries are engaged in planting Hispanic or African American churches and cooperative projects with various Christian organizations. In wider realms of ministry such as disaster relief and ecological projects, the professionals and volunteers of the second-generation churches actively take part. Varied in theological emphasis and church size, these compassion ministries are common among second-generation churches, whether they are mainline or evangelical, blunting the criticism that evangelical churches of the second-generation are reluctant to engage in social service.²³

The mission of second-generation churches includes civil and political responsibility. The 1992 Los Angeles riots, ignited by the Rodney King incident, uncovered the weakness of immigrant churches, which failed to respond to social problems or to raise a Christian voice in the wider society. Second-generation Christians, however, have formed a unified organization (Christian Korean Union) and have urged Korean Americans to become public advocates in seeking peaceful alternatives.²⁴ Many second-generation Korean American churches envision multiethnic and multicultural ministries, believing that racial reconciliation is a significant mission of Asian American churches for the future of American church and society.²⁵

Notes

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