"The Missionary Spirit of the Korean Church"

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I. Introduction

In the beginning of the last century, the Korean Church was frequently said to be a miracle of mission. Indeed, it was mainly through missionary reports that Korea began to be known world-wide.1 Over the last century, the exponential growth of the Korean Church extended to it another credit, a miracle of the church. Furthermore, since the last quarter of the last century, the Korean Church emerged as one of the main forces of the missionary movement, obtaining still another credit, a miracle of mission; obviously, in this case, the Korean Church was the subject, not the object, of mission. In short, the Korean Church continued to transform itself from a fast-growing mission church to a massively expanding national church to a startlingly developing missionary (missional) church.2 To be frank, the Korean Church was, has been, and is, a missionary church. This paper aims to elucidate the missionary spirit of the Korean Church, on the one hand, and to share its historical legacies with other churches, on the other.

II. The history of the missionary movement of the Korean Church

1) Before the opening of Korea to the world

At the end of the nineteenth century when Christian (Protestant) mission to Korea began, it was the policy of isolation of the Korean Yi Dynasty government that predisposed the future of the Korean Church as well as its missionary movement. Due to this policy, mission to Korea could not be


2 It is necessary to note that nowadays the word of ‘missionary’ tends to be preferably used to that of ‘missionary’, which is a loaded word.
implemented in a normal way in which the commencement of the church came with the arrival of missionaries. Circumstances dictated that missionaries who were to reach out to Korea, mostly working in China and Japan at the time, should have adopted more imaginative methods: some attempted to land on the Korean Peninsula, even at their own risk, distributing copies of the Chinese Bible to the Koreans; and others tried to mobilize the Koreans for mission who occasionally came out of the Korean Peninsula for various reasons such as internal trade. In Manchuria, John Ross, Scottish Presbyterian missionary originally sent for China, together with the Koreans, succeeded in translating the Bible into the Korean language, and a number of Korean Christians devoted themselves to distributing the Bible and building up the Christian communities within and without the Korean border. Thus, the first Korean church started as an overseas Korean community church and also established the tradition of being a self-evangelizing church. In other words, the Korean Christians were accustomed to evangelizing their own compatriots, wherever they were.

Meanwhile, in Japan, a Korean aristocrat called Yi Su-Jeong (or Soo Jung Lee) who was baptized by an American Presbyterian missionary took the lead in the Christian movement. Besides taking leadership in translation of the Bible, evangelism and church planting, he appealed to American churches for the evangelization of Korea, which was known as the ‘Korean Macedonian Call’. Although his precarious small Christian community mainly comprised of the higher echelons of society and short-lived, it revived in the beginning of the twentieth century, which finally grew into the Korean Christian Church in Japan(KCCJ), the first and only interdenominational Korean church.

2) From the opening of Korea to the Liberation

With the opening of Korea to the world in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, missionaries flocked to Korea. They could utilize the legacy of the Christian mission done before the opening of Korea such as the Bible and self-evangelized Korean Christians. After a decade of eventful but unprofitable years, they could make a real breakthrough in their ministry. However, it was the Korean Christians who attained the substantial growth of the Korean Church, while missionaries attempted to

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3 His name is ‘Rijutei’ in Japanese, by which he was more widely known.
6 We may add one more thing, that is, pre-understanding of Christianity through the Korean Catholic Church. See Kyo Seong Ahn, “The Genesis of World Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Korea” (Unpublished M.Phil. Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2004), 15.
devise the ecclesiastical structure.\(^8\) Martha Huntley, a former missionary to Korea, even argues that the inexperience of the first generation of missionaries could partially save them from paternalism and promote the participation of national Christians in ministry.\(^9\) She maintains that:

I cannot speak for later generations of missionaries, but the pioneers worked in tandem with Koreans from the beginning. They were simply too young and too green to be paternalistic; it was the Koreans who taught their young missionary teachers. Even before the first Protestant missionary arrived, there was a church in Korea in the sense of a century of Catholic witness and martyrdom, in individual Korean believers who had accepted the faith in Manchuria and Japan, and in the Holy Spirit long at work. While the missionaries were catalysts and in some cases enablers, the Koreans were the primary agents of evangelism. Koreans participated in all aspects of the work, laboring beside the missionaries in writing the Bible, compiling hymnals, translating textbooks, teaching classes, caring for the ill, building the church building, preaching the Word and making the rules. As in the case of women missionaries, Korean church leaders were underpaid and underacknowledged, but they were valued and very real partners in the mission enterprise.\(^10\)

As has been clarified from the quotation, most scholars agree that for the growth of the Korean Church, there were several reasons such as preparatio evangelica, missionaries’ effort, and nationals’ initiative.\(^11\) In this sense, it can be said that the Korean Christians were seasoned evangelists who were ready to evangelize.

Considering its remarkable success in self-propagation and self-support, the result that the Korean Church could enjoy self-government at a relatively early date was a foregone conclusion. With the establishment of the national church, the Korean Church began its missionary work in various ways: firstly, for the Koreans in the uttermost part of Korea; secondly, for the Korean diasporas in China (esp., Manchuria), Japan, Russia (esp., Maritime Province), the U.S.A. (esp., the Hawaii Islands), and even Mexico; and lastly, even for foreigners in a neighboring country, that is, China. Using new missiological terminology, these diverse works can be classified as national saturation mission, diaspora mission, and cross-cultural mission.

The Korean Presbyterian Church (the Presbyterian Church of Korea, hereafter PCK), the largest church in Korea, was a key player of the missionary movement in the period under consideration. It was involved in all of the three types of mission, and led the movement. On the other hand, the


\(^{9}\) Ibid.


Church of Christ in Korea (a primordial Baptist church), and the Korean Methodist churches also participated mainly in the first and second types of mission.

Take the case of the PCK. With the establishment of the All-National Presbytery in 1907, it began its first official missionary ministry, Mission to the Jeju Island, then better known as Quelpart. In the ensuing years, it gradually expanded its diaspora mission to the overseas Koreans, which some expatriate missionaries viewed as the expansion of domestic mission. With the establishment of the General Assembly in 1912, it commenced its first cross-cultural missionary ministry, Shandong Mission, in China. Thus, the Korean Church transformed itself from a self-evangelizing church to a self-missionizing church. How could it be?

Scholars attempted to uncover the underlying reasons for this phenomenon. First, missionaries worked in Korea were enthusiastic for educating the Koreans into mission. Seong Hwan Kim maintains that American Presbyterian missionaries taught and became a role-model for world mission. He also argues that the American Presbyterian missionaries equipped the Korean Church for world mission, using various means. In particular, according to him, there is evidence that the curriculum of the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in the early twentieth century had already included courses relating to world mission. Second, as noted above, the Korean Church was from the very beginning

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16 Seong Hwan Kim, “Joseongyohoeui Haeoeseongyo Yeogsawa Seongyodongin [The History of the
a self-evangelizing church, and as meeting the need of ever-increasing Korean diasporas, it gradually widened the scope of evangelization, and finally started its cross-cultural ministry. Third, like other national churches, the Korean Church regarded as an affirmation of the nationalistic spirit its participation in world mission, which meant that it became one of sending churches.

What then do these initial missionary efforts of the PCK tell us? What historical legacies of the Korean missionary movement challenge other churches? The first is that the rise of a missionary spirit was a way to affirm ecclesiastical independence. At the same time, this was closely related to the above-mentioned affirmation of the nationalistic spirit. For instance, the Rev. Gil Seon-Ju Gil(or Kil Sun Chu) stated that:

It is very difficult, in many respects, for the Korean Church to send missionaries to China. However, although we lost our nation, it is the most significant thing for us to be one of the nations doing world mission, by becoming a church to send overseas missionaries...In doing so, we can practice our faith, obeying the order of the Lord that “You have freely received, so freely give.” We simply do our best to accomplish this.

18 For instance, the Korean Presbyterian Church (the PCK) was listed in two parts of the report of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System (ARCPS, the precedent of the World Alliance of the Reformed Churches, WARC). On the one hand, ecclesiastically, it was placed under the section of Japan since Korea was then a colony of the Japanese empire. On the other hand, in terms of mission, it was separately placed under the section of sending churches. See J.R. Fleming, ed., Proceedings of the Twelfth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System, Held at Cardiff, 1925 (Edinburgh: Office of the Alliance, 1926), 327, 337.
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The second is that the missionary work was a ministry of the whole church or a church-initiated mission. The leitmotif of the church-initiated mission runs through the history of the Korean missionary movement, and this is why we, Koreans, must be careful when we endeavor to learn lessons from the history of the western missionary movement in which interdenominational missionary societies, not denominational mission boards, have played a main role. As regards the Korean missionary movement, interdenominational missionary societies were not vigorous enough in their work until the last quarter of the twentieth century. The third is that it was carried out as a way of ecumenical mission (in a broader sense). For instance, Shandong Mission was planned and implemented by consensus among various parties concerned such as the Korean Church, the Chinese Church, and the Presbyterian Missions in China and Korea. The fourth is the legacy of teamwork, although this legacy has not been faithfully followed in the missionary work of the post-liberation period. The last but not least is that the missionary work was done by the powerless, in this case, the colonized, not the colonists. Facing adverse circumstances such as poverty and colonization, the Korean Church dared to repay the debt of God’s grace in sharing the Gospel with its neighboring country, China. Such indefatigable missionary spirit can be a model for other non-Western churches, which suffer from the false idea of mission that only the strong and the rich should do mission.

3) From the Liberation to the 1970s

In the aftermath of the Liberation, the Korean Church devoted itself to the reconstruction of the church and world mission. In spite of the post-liberation and post-bellum devastation, the Korean Church never forgot to obey the Great Commission, although it could do mission only in a limited capacity at the time. In particular, the PCK decided to resume world mission ministry at its first reconstructed General Assembly. In short, for the PCK, if there was no reconstruction of mission, there was no reconstruction of the church. However, in what context was the Korean Church to do mission?

In the post-colonization period, national churches had to face the demand of the independence of nation, that of the church, and even that of mission. New circumstances exacted a new way of doing mission, and it is against this historical backdrop that the concept of ecumenical mission emerged. The message of the Lake Mohonk Conference aptly summarizes the concept of ecumenical mission as follows.

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20 In the similar vein, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. included the case of Shandong Mission in the list of ecumenical mission in the report of the Lake Mohonk Conference on World Mission, which became a landmark event of the so-called ecumenical mission. See Report of the World Consultation of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Held at Mountain House, Lake Mohonk, New York – 22 April – 1 May, 1956 (mimeographed), 20-21.
In our consultation, as we have planned for the future, we have had borne in upon us this
great truth: the privilege of a sending mission belongs to every Church, irrespective of
nationality, culture or financial ability. Therefore, we call upon Churches everywhere to share
both in carrying the Gospel across frontiers and in welcoming fraternal workers from other
Churches to help win their own peoples to Christ. We are committed to ecumenical
mission...We have faced the limitations of our relationships with each other and with other
communions. In some areas the Church has as yet little missionary vision. Many Churches
are only beginning to explore the way to integrate all missionary endeavor into the Church,
both local and ecumenical. The danger that isolationism and separatism will impede united
action has concerned us. But we firmly believe that, with the Holy Spirit guiding the Churches,
nothing can deter us from fulfilling together our world Christian mission...Our sensitivity to the
need of peoples is not keeping pace with their rising demand for justice, equality, and
brotherhood. For this reason, we reject as inadequate any concept of ecumenicity which
expresses itself solely in terms of organization. Ecumenical mission is the whole Church in
the whole world releasing its whole life in dynamic mission, with the purpose of entering
directly and vitally into an encounter with the world in the name of Jesus Christ. Too long the
Church has ignored His command to be one in Him, that the world may believe. In the
urgency of our time it dare do so no longer.21

As the quotation clarifies, the concept of ecumenical mission asks a new perspective of mission. First,
it asks who does mission: churches, not missions. Second, it solicits ecumenical relations between

21 “A Message from the Consultation on Ecumenical Mission under the Auspices of the Presbyterian
Church in the U.S.A.”, Report of the World Mission, 16. For ecumenical mission, see John Smith,
From Colonialism to World Christianity (Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1982); Donald Black,
Merging Mission and Unity: A History of the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations
(This article was originally carried in The Journal of Presbyterian History 59:2 (Summer 1981): 161-
77); William R. Hogg, New Day Dawning (New York: World Horizons, 1957). See also William R.
Hogg, Ecumenical Foundations: A History of the International Missionary Council and Its Nineteenth-
Missionary Council, Missions under the Cross: Addresses Delivered at the Enlarged Meeting of the
Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen, in Germany, 1952; with Statements
Issued by the Meeting (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1953); Ronald K. Orchard, ed., The Ghana
Assembly of the International Missionary Council, 28th December, 1957 to 8th January, 1958, Selected
Papers, with an Essay on the Role of the I.M.C. (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1958), esp., 185-
240.
churc hes, as a prerequisite for doing mission. Third, it requests the widening of the scope of mission, which means that you should give the world, not merely souls, serious consideration. It was in this context that new missiological jargon such as fraternal worker emerged.

Asian churches were particularly enthusiastic about the concept of ecumenical mission. It is worth quoting how the Asian churches understood this new concept.

Under God, there has come to the churches of Asia a new understanding of the missionary nature of the Church and a new conviction about their privilege and responsibility within the Church’s mission. This is the result of many factors. First, many sons and daughters of the churches in Asia have heard and responded to the call to missionary work outside their own lands, secondly, by this very fact the churches have been constrained to face up to their own responsibility as churches, to their share in the missionary calling. Also contributing to this new awareness has been the experience of the churches in Asia as they moved from the status of ‘mission’ to that of ‘church’, and from the arrangement of mission side by side with church to that of ‘church in mission’.22

It is not surprising, however, that not all missions and churches swept along on the tide of ecumenical mission. Indeed, the case was quite opposite. The conventional concept of world mission showed its staying power, and even the evangelicals attempted to turn the tables on the conciliar ecumenicals, by establishing an evangelical ecumenical network. It is against this historical background that the Berlin and Lausanne Congress came into being in 1966 and 1974, respectively.23

How, then, did the Korean Church do mission during the period under consideration?

Although it did mission in the context of ecumenical mission, the Korean Church did not fully understand the implication of ecumenical mission. The reason is that the Korean Church, particularly the PCK, was divided over the issue of ecumenism, and most of the Korean churches detached themselves from the ecumenical movement, especially the World Council of Churches (WCC). On the other hand, the Korean Church began to side with the new evangelical missionary and ecumenical

movement such as the above-mentioned Berlin and Lausanne Congress.

Scholars in general deem that for the Korean missionary movement the period under consideration was a period of depression or stagnation. In terms of number and scale, it may be said so. It must be remembered, however, that missionary works done during this period were of very great significance. In this period, the PCK (the PCK Tonghap, after the church division in 1959) once again played a main role of the missionary movement. The reason is that except for the PCK Tonghap, most of the Korean Presbyterian churches struggled to recover from the birth pangs of new denominations. The Korean Methodist Church (hereafter the KMC) vicariously participated in mission in 1961, by authorizing missionaries to Pakistan sent by an affiliated mission school called Ewha Women’s University. Other Korean churches were busy surviving the post-bellum devastation.

Take the case of the PCK again. First, in the aftermath of the Korean War, the PCK sent its missionaries to Thailand in 1955. At first, the PCK planned to send missionaries to Indonesia according to the conventional concept of mission. How, then, was the plan changed? The years of the 1950s saw the birth of numerous ecumenical bodies such as the Asian Council of Ecumenical Mission (ACEM) and the East Asia Christian Conference (EACC, the precedent of the Christian Conference of Asia, CCA). It was at the ACEM meeting that the PCK decided to send missionaries to Thailand as a way of missionary partnership among Asian churches. Although the PCK and its missionaries participated in this new kind of mission, they were slow to, or hesitated to, appreciate ecumenical mission. Such attitude inhibited the development of ecumenical mission in the Korean Church, particularly the PCK. It is no exaggeration to say that some of the inveterate maladies of the Korean missionary movement such as individualistic tendency can trace their roots back to the underdevelopment of ecumenical mission in this period.

Second, according to the concept of ecumenical mission, the PCK sent a missionary to the U.S.A. in 1957. As Hogg suggests, “From what began as inter-church aid with emphasis primarily upon physical assistance, there has evolved a partnership in evangelism.” This kind of missionary symbolizes the fact that mission is no more a unilateral movement from West to non-West and that mission is a mutual learning process. Nowadays this kind of missionary reemerges again in the context of globalization, especially mission to Europe.

Third, the PCK also began to send missionaries in various capacities. Although the PCK missionaries fell into two categories, cross-cultural missionaries and overseas evangelist ministers for Korean diasporas, it has gradually become difficult to draw a boundary between them.

24 The PCK was divided into four major groups in the 1950s: PCK Koshin, PROK, PCK Hapdong (or GAPCK), and PCK Tonghap (or simply PCK). The sub-divisions of the Korean Presbyterian Church, mainly within the PCK Hapdong (GAPCK), still continue.


26 Hogg, New Day Dawning, 16-21; quotation, 18.
While the development of ecumenical mission was arrested, the evangelical missionary movement was beginning to take root. Some of the Korean mission leaders such as the Rev. Kyung-Chik Han and Dr. Helen Kim found this movement congenial to one of the cherished ideas of the Korean Church, evangelism. Furthermore, young mission leaders such as David J. Cho called attention to the importance of the non-Western missionary movement, especially non-Western missions, showing strong inclination towards conventional concept of mission.

4) Since the 1980s

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Korean Church found that conditions were very favorable for starting world mission in a massive scale: first, the national evangelization movement gradually developed into the world missionary movement, fostering the missionary spirit, on the one hand, and equipping the Korean Church with the evangelical missionary perspectives which mainly emphasized evangelism, on the other; second, the liberalization policy of overseas travel and remittance of the government, together with economic growth, enabled the Koreans to fan out into the uttermost part of the world. This meant the rise of the Korean Church as a young but remarkable missionary force.

In 1979, Korean missionaries finally totaled one hundred and this signaled the breakthrough of the Korean missionary movement. Soon after that year, the number of Korean missionaries began to soar. According to Timothy Lee, the Korean Church even felt that Korea was “not only a chosen but the final redeemer nation”, which may be said to be a Koreanized “manifest destiny”. At any rate, it is said that the number of Korean missionaries was flying over twenty thousands in 2009. At a conservative estimate, the Korean Church (58 denominational mission boards and 217 interdenominational missionary societies) sent 19,413 missionaries into 168 countries in 2008.

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27 It is important to note that both the Berlin and Lausanne Congress highlighted the issue of evangelism or evangelization.


31 Seung-Sam Kang, “Gwondueon: Hanguggyohoe Seongyosa Pasong Research Hyeonhwang
Not surprisingly, in the turn of the century, it is said that the Korean Church was promoted from the status of an important missionary force to that of the representative non-Western missionary force. In other words, the Korean Church has been asked to be a missionary leader, not merely a missionary force. Indeed, Andrew Walls regarded the Korean Church as a new leader of the world missionary movement, and G. J. Schwartz deemed that Korea became one of the countries which were rich in missionary resource. However, to meet such demand, it is necessary for the Korean Church to upgrade its missionary thought and practice.

Nowadays scholars began to doubt the way of doing mission of the Korean Church. Suffice to quote a couple of issues: individualistic tendency, cultural blindness, Koreanization, and the danger of mission by the affluent. In this sense, the Korean Church as a missionary church can be said to be standing at an important crossroads in the history of its missionary movement: whether it can continue to be an authentic missionary church or not.

Meanwhile, the Korean Church faced new challenges for world mission. First, the evangelicals belatedly came to emphasize the importance of partnership in mission. They were eager for developing various evangelical missionary networks. For instance, the National Consultation of World Evangelization (NCOWE) began in 1990, and the Korean World Missions Association (KWMA), an umbrella organization, also started in the same year. It is necessary to recognize the contribution
of the Korean diasporas, especially those in the U.S.A., to this process. Second, the ecumenicals attempted to materialize the idea of ecumenical mission at the grassroots level. Third, in the era of globalization, the scope of diaspora mission has continuously been widened. In short, the focus has been moved from Korean diaspora to world diasporas. On the one hand, the Korean Church focused on new diasporas who came into Korea rather than those who went from Korea. On the other hand, the Korean Church searched for the way to mobilize new diasporas for mission to their own compatriots and/or other peoples.  

III. Conclusion

I have argued that the Korean Church was, has been, and is, a missionary church. Although the Korean missionary movement seems to have a checkered history, especially during the third quarter of the twentieth century, the Korean Church has never forsaken its missionary mandate totally. From the very beginning, the Korean Church was enthusiastic about evangelization, and by officially launching its missionary work, it transformed itself from a self-evangelizing church to a self-missionizing church. It continues to widen the scope of mission, from national saturation mission, to diaspora mission, and to cross-cultural mission. In the midst of the agony of colonization, the Korean Church, a church of the powerless par excellence, was faithful to the missionary task. In the aftermath of the Liberation and the Korean War, the Korean Church reconfirmed its indefatigable missionary spirit, as sending missionaries to Thailand and other countries. It is true that due to various reasons the Korean Church was slow to, or failed to, appreciate the implication of ecumenical mission. However, it is important to remember that nowadays both ecumenicals and evangelicals painfully came to realize that the issue of partnership is a must in world mission. Entering the new century, the question is no more whether the Korean Church is an important missionary force. It is whether the Korean Church can take responsibility for world mission, as one of servant leaders.


38 The Diaspora Mongolian Network (DMN) is a good example. See http://www.dmn.or.kr