

Mission Journey of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea

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Introduction

According to statistics compiled by a missionary society in Korea, more than 17,600 Korean Protestant missionaries are currently working overseas.² Considering the relatively short history of overseas mission of the Korean church, which began in the late 1960's,³ this is a drastic development.

Compared with other denominations, the number of missionaries of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) is relatively small. Currently, sixty PROK overseas missionaries are serving around the world, and the number is rising. More than half of these missionaries work in Asian countries.

The tragic kidnapping incident in Afghanistan in July 2007 of 23 South Koreans on a mission trip sponsored by the Saemmul Presbyterian Church⁴ has projected to Korean society as well as to the global village mostly negative images about the Korean church's overseas mission. At the same time, however, it has brought some positive results, including the following:

- 1) Korean Christians are recognizing that the rapidly developed missionary movement of the Korean church should be re-examined, and that there should be a new understanding of mission. It is in this context that the theology of '*Missio Dei*' and the concept of 'mission partnership' are being carefully studied by the Korean churches, particularly the Korean evangelical groups.
- 2) The Korean church has begun to listen to the criticisms of its methods of overseas mission, which ignore the socio-political and cultural context of the missionary-receiving countries, and have resulted in church planting and conversion.
- 3) Consensus is being built among the Korean churches that they must create a

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² Among the missionary-sending countries, the Korean church ranks 10th, following Canada. The US churches rank top, with 115,700 American missionaries working abroad.

³ Most Korean churches began to send their missionaries at the end of the 1960's. The PROK sent its first missionary, a female pastor, Rev. Lee Young Sook, to Japan in 1968 to work with Korean residents of Japan.

⁴ The group of 23 South Koreans (16 women and 7 men) was captured and held hostage by members of the Taliban while passing through Ghazni Province of Afghanistan. Two of the hostages were executed before the deal was reached between the Taliban and the South Korean government. The group was traveling from Kandahar to Kabul, when two local men, who the driver had allowed to board, started shooting to bring the bus to a halt. Over the next month, the hostages were kept in cellars and farmhouses and regularly moved in groups of three to four. Of the 23 hostages captured, two men were executed. Later, with negotiations making progress, two women were released and then the remaining 19 hostages were also subsequently released.

common platform (or system) through which they can eventually transform the theology and methodology of their mission abroad.

In short, even though the chronic problems of the Korean churches' overseas mission culminated in the Afghanistan incident, this incident turned out to be an opportunity for the Korean churches to begin to seriously reflect on the whole question of 'mission'.

In this paper, I would like to highlight several important theological positions of my church on mission and to share with you some good examples of overseas mission work of my church.

PROK's theological position on overseas mission

(1) 'Missio Dei' theology

Since its beginning in 1953, the PROK has been faithful to the theology of 'Missio Dei'. The 'Missio Dei' theology affirms two important aspects of mission. First, it affirms that the ultimate authority of mission belongs to God, not to the church. The Latin words, 'Missio Dei,' can be translated as 'God's mission' or 'sending of God'. Jurgen Moltmann spells out that the missionary initiative comes from God alone, saying, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church."⁵ Second, it affirms that the salvation of the world is the ultimate goal of the mission of the church, as the participants of the 1952 Willingen Conference⁶ claimed.

According to a survey, at least half of the Korean missionaries asserted that "their mission is to plant churches or denominations that are exact copies of the churches (or denominations) back home." The survey also revealed that fewer than 10% of Korean missionaries are involved in 'diakonia' or educational work. It can not be denied that most Korean churches send their missionaries to plant their denominations or churches, because church planting is perceived as the sign of salvation by most church members in Korea. Church planting has often become a source of serious competition among Korean missionaries. The more churches they build the more financial support they receive from their mother churches in Korea. But the problem is that the theological orientation of most missionary-sending churches in Korea is not ecumenical and this theological orientation is transferred to the hosting churches or bodies without these receiving churches engaging in any constructive theological reflection. All of us should remember that the objective of God's mission is to save the whole world, not to extend the kingdom of churches.

(2) Ecumenical Vision

⁵ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 64.

⁶ The world mission conference held in Willingen, Germany in 1952 is believed to have paved the way for a renewed ecumenical understanding of mission. It was seen as a pivotal event in a century marked by profound change in people's perceptions of the role of Christianity as one among other religions.

The PROK has always worked hard to realize the ecumenical vision in its life and mission of the PROK. I would like to highlight two significant elements of the ecumenical vision.

(a) Church Unity—An ultimate purpose of the ecumenical movement is to achieve church ‘unity in diversity’. The churches, the body of Christ, must be one, united by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are well aware that the ecumenical community, such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), consolidates all its efforts to achieve church unity in spite of confessional and denominational barriers. We therefore have to ask ourselves, “Is our overseas mission uniting the churches in the hosting countries or dividing them?”

(b) Cosmic Unity—Visser’T Hooft, the first General Secretary of the WCC, urged WCC member churches that mission must go beyond our churches and denominations, reaching to the whole inhabited world God created. In order for our mission to reach the whole world, our vision and mission must be relevant to the cries of the world. Today people around the world, regardless of their religion, are suffering from poverty, war, terror, conflict, injustice, human rights violations, environmental disasters, HIV and AIDS, etc. If we do not respond to the cries of the world, our mission will not have a firm biblical and theological foundation and will thus be obsolete. Therefore, a number of the PROK missionaries are involved in mission work to realize the ecumenical vision and to achieve God’s Community of justice and peace.

(3) Mission based on the spirit of partnership

In May 2006 the PROK held a ‘Partnership Consultation’. In this consultation, the Asia area secretary of the United Church in Canada (UCC) shared, reflecting on the UCC understanding of overseas mission: “In the UCC, our understanding and practice of mission has undergone many changes over the years. In the early 1920’s there were over 600 UCC missionaries serving around world. Like other missionary-sending churches, we inherited a crusading understanding of Christian mission. Missionaries went out to proclaim the gospel, planting churches that were carbon copies of churches back home. Mission was a one-way relationship. Today, there are only 27 UCC personnel working with partners overseas, four of them with the PROK. We no longer call them missionaries. The UCC term ‘overseas personnel’ still does not sound exactly right to me. I much prefer the PROK term ‘ecumenical co-worker’.” A participant from the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) said, “Come visit, admire our cultural and natural landscapes, but please, do not help us. Many problems arise when you help us. We want you just to accompany us in our journey, so that we may gain the confidence that, with you walking with us and with God’s assurance, we can help ourselves.”

‘Mission based on a spirit of partnership’ means that both sending and receiving churches grow together through mutual learning, understanding and trust. It also means mission that is sustained by mutual responsibility. There is no one-way relationship. The participants of the El Escorial meeting organized by the WCC in 1987 reaffirmed that being in mission together is being one among many companies or friends needing to share gifts and receive gifts so that God’s mission can be faithfully pursued. They also committed themselves to a relationship in which there is no absolute donor or absolute recipient, but all have

needs to be met and gifts to give.

In sending out our missionaries, the PROK has been faithful in following the spirit of partnership in mission. Today, we do not refer to our overseas workers as 'missionary' because the term carries a colonial connotation. In order to explicitly express the concept of mutual partnership rather than that of one-way relationship, we call them 'ecumenical co-workers'. In principle, we do not send our co-workers to churches with which we do not have a partnership agreement. Once our co-workers are sent to our partner churches, these co-workers must work under the supervision of the receiving churches. One of the most important roles of our co-workers is to discern the needs of the receiving churches. Our church tries our best not to plant churches, as this often results in the transplanting of the chronic denominationalism of the Korean church to the receiving churches. We, rather, encourage our co-workers to work for the faith or social issues with which the receiving churches or countries are struggling. In India, for example, a PROK co-worker serving with the Church of South India (CSI) is working with the Dalits. We have one co-worker working with youth in Cambodia to help them develop their ecumenical leadership. We also have a co-worker with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, Rev. Kim Hyun-Sook, working with people living in poverty in Bukidnon Conference in Mindanao. However, there are still some PROK local churches that send their missionaries, without proper procedure and coordination with the General Assembly office, to countries where we do not have partner churches. The PROK General Assembly office is addressing this problem very seriously.

In conclusion, the PROK takes the stance that every church must carry out its own mission; we must respect that each church is independent and the subject of its own mission. Of course, we also receive co-workers from our partner churches to deepen and promote mutual relationships between our churches.

Prophetic mission—life, justice and peace-centered mission work

Since its beginning, the PROK has committed itself to prophetic mission and to the movement for human rights and democracy even though it was often condemned as heretical by other Korean churches and severely oppressed by the military regimes in the 70's and 80's. In the course of our journey, we experienced the pain of being a minority and severe oppression by military dictatorial governments. From this historical experience, the PROK has begun to be involved in various life, justice and peace issues in Asia as well as in the wider world. Addressing the issues of human rights violations in the Philippines, interfaith cooperation in Indonesia, elimination of poverty in Cambodia and India, is among the mission priorities of the PROK. A number of our ecumenical co-workers in Asia are already involved in these issues, and the number will increase.

Conclusion: Challenges

(1) Lay leadership: More than 90% of PROK ecumenical co-workers are ordained pastors. Therefore, we are exerting great effort to develop youth and lay leadership in our overseas mission work. We are studying various models, including that of the Christian Peacemaker

Teams organized by the Mennonites and Quakers, through which we can challenge our lay leaders to be aware of and actively involved in emerging global issues.

(2) Continuing education: To be a PROK ecumenical co-worker, the candidate must participate in a two-week orientation course provided by the PROK. This PROK 'World Mission Academy' course is a venue for them to deepen their theological understanding and acquire practical information concerning their future mission abroad. However, because of time and financial limitations, we can at this point provide them with only a very minimum level of training. We plan to establish, in the near future, a comprehensive educational system through which our current co-workers as well as future candidates may have various training opportunities to develop their leadership.

(3) Networking among PROK co-workers: It was only last year that the PROK organized four regional networks (Asia-Pacific, Africa, Europe and Latin America) to promote fellowship and information sharing among our ecumenical co-workers. Through these networks, the PROK co-workers can also develop ideas to cooperate together on regional issues. But these networks need to be strengthened.

(4) Centralized financial system: Basically, PROK ecumenical co-workers should be self-supportive. The PROK General Assembly office allows them to raise funds from the local churches and members according to financial guidelines set by the General Assembly office. Our co-workers thus usually spend a significant part of their time fund-raising, which is a heavy burden for them. Therefore, the General Assembly office is seeking various alternatives to relieve our co-workers of the financial burden and to help them focus on their mission work.