

STRATEGY FOR EVANGELIZING KOREANS

**IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA
12/1/04**

PROFILE OF KOREANS

General Background

The two Koreas, North and South, are located on the Korean peninsula in Eastern Asia, the northern nation bounded by China on the west and the Sea of Japan on the east. The division was made in 1953 at the 38th parallel after the bloody Korean War in which almost 55,000 Americans died, rendering Korea as a deeply emotional point of contact between the U.S. and the “liberated” nation of South Korean. On the other hand, North Korea remained resistantly communist to this day with little commerce with the outside world. North Korea, in land area slightly smaller than Mississippi, is somewhat larger than its southern counterpart which is slightly larger than Indiana. However, South Korea currently has double the population of the North, at around 50 million inhabitants, one of the more compressed countries of the world.

From ancient times Korea has struggled successfully to preserve its national independence, marked by a warrior aristocracy, shamanic religion, and a strong adherence to Buddhism, along with a system of government modeled on Confucian bureaucracy. The Japanese invasion of 1592 was later repelled by Chinese and Korean forces and, for over a century, all non-Chinese foreign influence was rigorously excluded from the country. In the latter half of the 19th century, violently replaced China as the major cultural, political and economic influence in Korea, vigorously attempted to eradicate Korean culture. It was the Korean communist movement in collaboration with the Chinese that jumped to the void when Japan was defeated in the Second World War.

Some say that the most important aspects of the Korean culture are education and language. Education is viewed as the means to respect and success, and English and Western curriculum is considered most desirable for getting ahead. On the other hand, the language reflects the social patterns and structure of the culture. Koreans are very interested in preserving and teaching their language, especially to their children, and is used to perpetuate the cultural structure of respect for authority in the home. Dedication to family and friends, ancestor worship, the pursuing of peace and justice, striving for “The Golden Mean”, that is seeking for balance in the middle way, a reverence for life, and doing good works, all of these ideals are not just a religious belief system but permeate the Korean way of life.

Many first generation Koreans in North America, find themselves engaged in business opportunities, i.e. the food industry, “mom and pop” markets, etc. which demand more financial outlay than cultural sensitivity, resulting oftentimes in both subtle and overt tension, especially in the poorer sections of urban areas. In the riots of Los Angeles, in 1991, a tragic irony was noted when it was discovered the Korean and Blacks, the two most “churched” groups in the city, were at polar opposites of the social clashes that resulted. The result was that both groups entered into self-examination and gestures of reconciliation and mutual support, recognizing that their individual cultural interests had evolved into profound misunderstanding on both sides.

Immigration Patterns

South Korean immigration (North Korean immigration in effect does not exist, except through South Korea) to the United States officially began in 1903 with immigrants first landing in Hawaii, then a territory. Immigration has picked up especially in the most recently decades with between 20,000-35,000

new green card residents added each year, the vast majority of whom settle on the West Coast of the United States. Around 4,000, or double the proportion settle into Canada with about 48,000 now living in Vancouver. Most estimates calculate that between 2-3 million people living in the United States are of Korean origins. Two interesting demographics statistics stand out. First, over 48,000 Koreans have been adopted by American families, making Koreans the largest and most preferred nationality for adoption. Second, almost two thirds of all Koreans do not come directly from South Korea to obtain green cards, but rather, come via their student and business visas. Thus, the transition arrangement makes them more adaptable and economically viable compared with other immigrant groups. Koreans are generally very mobile, and have a great sense of worldwide “diasporic” identity, their numbers out of country (South Korea), now at perhaps five million.

Unlike many of the immigrant groups, Koreans often come to North America with a heightened understanding of Christianity. If anything, they are dismayed at the lack of commitment, lax sexual mores and ethical propriety in the Church in their adopted countries. Often they come with either a strong Presbyterian, Baptist, Holiness or Pentecostal orientation and may not fully understand the distinctives of the Church of the Nazarene.

Religious Heritage

It was in the more mountainous and less accessible north that the missionary enterprise had made its greatest headway. With the division of the country, many of the Korean Christian leaders escaped to the South with few possessions other than their faith, sharpened by extreme persecution and “signs and wonders” that led to their preservation. Because of their experiences, they were rabidly anti-communist, and intensely evangelistic. At the same time, the history of American involvement there, led to many new missionary enterprises and collaborations that have, in part, generated the most extraordinary example of Christian church growth in all of Asia. Indeed, currently, around 50% of the population claims Christianity as its religion, followed closely by Buddhism and then a smattering of Confucianism and folk religions. Indeed, some of the world’s largest Christian congregations are clustered in South Korea and Seoul, its capital, including Dr. David Yonggi Cho’s Yoido Full Gospel Church which now has over 800,000 members. Yet one can see very clearly a “Korean” version of Christianity with very strong Presbyterian and Pentecostal strains merged with the indigenous aspects of intense prayer disciplines (not unlike the meditation “mountain prayer retreats” of the Buddhists), autocratic leadership styles, and social decorum.

These Christian institutions have had great social and political effect on the nation, including a great evangelistic recruitment effort and discipleship program among the military, and among those still carrying the wounds and impairments from past hostile military actions. Western ideas and models of organizational management have, in general, been well received and incorporated into the life of Korea, especially in governmental structures, economic activity and educational philosophy.

The Nazarene work in Korea was officially begun by Dr. Robert Chung in 1948. He was soon accompanied by Dr. Don and Adeline Owens in 1954. In the earliest days, American servicemen played a role both in Korea and later in their communication to the people back home, further giving incentive to the missionary interest in this emerging country. Recently, the Korean Church of the Nazarene consolidated its five districts into one with eleven regions, to now become the largest, by membership, district in the denomination with 221 churches. Korean Nazarene University in Chonan is the largest educational institution in the Church of the Nazarene with 8,000 students and is particularly noted for its special programs to the physically impaired.

Because their Korean models are so successfully, often Korean Christian leadership is less adaptable or negotiable, both because leaders are given singular respect and authority, and because the Church of the Nazarene is such a recent phenomenon in their own country.

Some Korean Christians seek out church buildings primarily for pragmatic reasons, with little interest in extending the ministry of the host congregation. If the congregation grows, they may be likely to move on to their own facility and disconnect with the denominational identity. Almost always, Korean Christians see the Church not just as an evangelistic opportunity but also as a means of cultural retention, to preserve

language, and Korean family structures and authority. Sadly, many of their children are less motivated to be defined as Korean, desiring to identify more with American or Canadian culture, sometimes resulting in intrafamilial classes.

One phenomenon to be noted is that of the emerging Korean college student generation which is often classified as the “one and a half” generation. These are Koreans born in South Korea but who immigrated as children to North America. They are often bi-lingual, and quite independent of their families, are highly evangelistic and entrepreneurial, seeking to develop their own congregations. It is out of these congregations that true indigenous leadership is emerging. Ironically, Korean-Americans and Canadians are more apt to identify with other North American citizens rather than other Asian Americans, in part because of their sad history with the Chinese and Japanese who often see them as culturally inferior.

Currently, there are about 60 Nazarene Korean congregations formed in the United States and two in Canada. A dozen of these are in Southern California, and another dozen in the northern and central regions of the state. Another 10 are in the metropolitan area of New York. Others are in scattered in the urban areas throughout the country. This is a growth that has almost doubled in the past 15 years. The Korean Church in North America is one of five groups that has its own designated coordinator, Dr Ing-Geoung Kim Lundell.

The Missional Task of Evangelizing Koreans

General Suggestions

Seek financial subsidy for qualified Korean leaders perhaps in the form of housing, health insurance, office space and educational subsidy. Korean leaders do not have the concept nor the desire to be bi-vocational as their national history suggests that church growth necessary comes through complete dedication to the ministry task.

Study the Korean population on universities, trade schools, specialty training programs to determine what access can be found to do Christian ministry, i.e. Bible Studies. Because of the great desire of Koreans to learn English, Bible Studies can be conducted in the English language.

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR THE DISTRICT IS TO:

- Identify Korean immigrant communities on each district and to understand the institutions (both Christian and secular) and networking associated with them.
- Coordinate with Nazarene Korean leaders in other parts of the country to further identify individuals who might be candidates for developing new ministries
- Provide training opportunities for emerging Korean leadership, i.e. students, immigrants who have Nazarene heritage back home. These leaders have a passion to prepare themselves adequately for their assignment, and are less interested in inferior educational options.
- Determine whether a new ministry ought to be developed, or whether an existing ministry might become “Nazarene”. Because of the strong “holiness” movement in Korea coming through the Oriental Mission Society, there are many affinities with the ethics and ideals of the Church of the Nazarene. These need to be examined to determine compatibilities and common mission. Any rental arrangements should be seen as “close-ended,” perhaps a year or two, until an “engagement” is consummated into a marriage with the Church of the Nazarene, or called off. Beware of Korean “sect-like” initiatives, such as those presented by the Unification Church which tries to involve evangelical churches in “ecumenical initiatives”.
- Insist that every potential Nazarene Korean leader be “mentored” by some leader who is culturally sensitive but clearly committed to training a “Nazarene” leader.
- Encourage the participation of new Korean Nazarenes in denominational activities, especially those that have a Korean component to them, i.e. General Assembly, Korean retreats, etc. in other parts of the country.

- Work with denominational headquarters to identify “moving Nazarenes” who, perhaps are arriving from South Korea.
- Organize special emphases for Korean missions, highlighting special projects, special speakers or organizing “work and witness” teams to go to South Korea.

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH IS TO:

- Give prominence to known Korean Christian leaders, on the platform, in the preaching ministry, etc. Remember, that their history involves some of the most exciting and successful initiatives occurring anywhere in the world. Also recognized that Korea now sees itself as a missionary-sending country that, next to the United States, send out worldwide more missionaries currently than any other country. Their story is well worth study and notoriety in Nazarene churches.
- Catalogue and keep good records of people with interest in Korean ministry, ex-military personnel, language teachers, North American businesspeople who have traveled to, or worked in South Korea. Use these as support personnel, hosts, and bridgebuilders to immigrants.
- Make friends with Korean neighbors. Go to Korean restaurants and ask questions about their Christian institutions. In general, Koreans are very well informed about their community.
- Offer ESL classes in the local church. Spin these off into Bible Study classes. Be willing to establish true mutual friendships. Learn some greetings in Korean.
- Utilize the “arts,” especially music and visual arts. Ask a Korean choir to sing in church, or young people to play the piano or display paintings. Many Koreans are very artistically adept and present themselves and their art with quality and finesse.
- Provide space in the local church for Koreans to meet. If a separate congregational program for Koreans either is annexed into the ministry or develops, monitor it closely to assure that it is going to be a positive contribution to Nazarene ministry.
- Integrate Korean young people into the children and youth programs of the local church, using their unique cultural assets as points of interest and celebration by the host culture.
- Offer translation and translation equipment for public services where Koreans may be attending.

- Enjoy Korean foods when they participate in the “pot luck” or invite you to their home.
- Commemorate important Korean holidays or hold cultural events open to the public. Mourn with Koreans when tragedies occur in their nation.