

Teacher: Stanley John

Ethnographic study of the Korean diaspora church

In February I decided to study the Korean Protestant church “FRIENDS” near my home to fulfill this course requirement. I do not know the Korean language at all. First, I started by calling the church to make an appointment, and a gentleman answered my call, saying he would find someone to call me back and help me. However, I waited a whole day, but no one called me back. The next day I went to the church, rang the bell, and a gentleman came out to meet me. After listening to my request, he said that he answered my phone yesterday and tried to contact their English pastor to help me but without success. This gentleman was the church’s senior pastor, Mr. Bin. Mr. Bin said he speaks limited English, and all his sermons will be done in Korean, and he invited me to come to the church’s morning prayer meeting and Sunday worship. I felt thankful and warmly affected by his humble attitude. I did not expect the senior pastor would answer my phone and open the door to meet me.

I am a first-generation Chinese immigrant. To participate and study this cross-cultural church, I can only use my observation and my imagination. In this paper, based on my observations and interviews, I will first describe what I saw and learned in the church’s physical environment. Secondly, I will compare the church’s core values and mission statement with takeouts on the related theories covered in this course and share my personal participating experiences. Lastly, I will describe the differences between the church’s Korean ministry congregation and its English ministry congregation and discuss the reasons for these differences.

The church’s physical environment

The FRIENDS Church is a Korean Protestant diaspora church located in Queens of New York City. The church was founded in 2018 at Corona, Queens, and then moved to Little Neck, Queens. The church's sanctuary is located on the second floor, with about 250 seats. Above the stage, there is a big screen, a chair for the pastor, a podium at the center, and a big wooden cross stand at the left of the podium. The hymn's lyrics and scripture texts are projected on the screen. There is a cloth draped on the cross, and during the Easter holiday season the cloth's color is changed to purple. On the left side of the wall, there is a post with a painting picture of a kneeling praying man, the Korean text under it says, 'Seeking, you will find.' On the right side of the wall there is a post with a painting picture of a church and its congregants, and the Korean text under it says, 'Church is a place for healing and growing.' Across from the sanctuary is the fellowship hall and cafeteria, on the wall also hang up three pictures and a big post containing the church's visions. The first painting is made by combining many color palms and fingers to compose two Korean words, 'FRIENDS.' The second picture is two people standing together with one person's hand embracing the other person's shoulder, and the Korean text under it says, 'Do not worry.' The third picture is a saving hand rescuing a sinking hand under the water, without any text attached to it.

The visions post listed seven visions in Korean as follows: 1. We continue to build a church of 1,000 friends of Jesus. 2. We want the next generation to inherit the Reformed tradition, freedom of belief, conscience, and Korean American identity. 3. We build a church where those who have sinned against, marginalized, ignored, discriminated against, frustrated, and wronged find forgiveness, love, hope, joy, and courage. 4. We become friends and refuges for immigrants and a church that protects them. 5. We share the gospel with our communities, meet their needs, and be salt and light to them. 6. We share in the historical wounds and pains of

Native Americans and continue to do incarnational ministry for healing and reconciliation. 7. We establish and evangelize at least one church and educational institution in every country in Central and South America.

Through the church members' explanations, I understood the meaning of those paintings and texts and deeply appreciate that this church emphasizes praying, evangelizing, fellowship, and making disciples for Jesus Christ. When I participated in their worshiping, praying, and fellowship activities and meditated on those pictures, I deeply felt the presence of God.

The FRIENDS Church's core values

The FRIENDS church's website is primarily written in Korean; however, you can choose different versions of the language through Google Translate. In the English version, the website introduced its core values that are consisted in the acronym of FRIENDS: F (Fellowship of Saints), R (Restoring the Image of God), I (Immigration Stories), E (Empowering the Next Generation), N (Networking Community), D (Developing Gifts), and S (Spreading the Word). I will compare each core value with takeaways on the related theories covered in this course and share my personal participating experiences.

● F (Fellowship of Saints)

The FRIENDS Church consists of first-generation Korean immigrants, the 1.5 generation (born in Korea but raised in the U.S.), and second-generation Korean Americans (born in the U.S.). The first-generation Korean immigrants tended to keep their homeland culture and traditions, however, the 1.5- and second-generation Korean Americans tended to embrace the American culture. In this course, we learned that culture is the learned and shared knowledge that people use to generate behavior and interpret experience. Two common

fallacies were encountered when people judge the behavior of others: ethnocentric fallacy and relativistic fallacy (Rynkiewicz 2011, 24). Ethnocentrism is the belief and feeling that one's own culture is best and reflects our tendency to judge other people's beliefs. Cultural relativism believes that no behavior or belief can be considered wrong or bad simply because it differs from our own culture. To have a fair judgment, we must understand a culture on their own terms and to understand behaviors or beliefs in terms of the purpose, function or meaning of the people.

In my personal participating experiences, I learned several aspects of Korean culture, one of which is Korean eating culture. After the Korean worship service, all the participants were invited to the cafeteria for a fellowship meal. People waited online and picked up dishes they wanted at the service counter. I saw there was only rice and kimchi (fermented vegetables) on the serving counter, and I wondered in my mind why the Korean meal was so simple. I picked up a bowl of rice and a plate of kimchi, then returned to the round table to eat with the other brothers. I had a conversation with my neighbor brother and said that this is my first experience eating rice with Kimchi. My brother suggested to me that I should also pick up a bowl of soup. He explained that the traditional Korean way of eating this meal was drinking the soup first and then eating the rice and kimchi. Sometimes people prefer to dip the rice into the soup and eat it together. This is a new lesson for me to learn about the Korean eating culture.

Another personal experience that occurred was Korean worship. In this course, we learned that communication is the process of sending and receiving messages, through verbal and nonverbal expressions. Communication is not limited to language; for instance, facial expressions and body gestures are used in conversation. Rynkiewicz introduced the

constructivist view of communication (Rynkiewich 2011, 62), which suggests that communication is a project shared by a speaker and listener. This is an ongoing project of constructing meaning during dialogue, then deconstructing the meaning, and then building it up again. Although I do not know Korean, I sensed the meaning the pastor preached. I was surprised to find that some of the Korean words sound similar to the Chinese words, i.e., the word 'church' sounded similar in Korean and Chinese.

In one of the dawn prayer meetings, the Bible scriptures were posted on the big screen in Korean, and all I knew was the chapter and verses number 8:6-24. During the preaching, I heard the pastor say the words 'Corinthians,' 'Titus,' and 'Jerusalem,' which sounded like the Chinese version. I tried to guess what the scripture texts were. After a few tries and errors, I then looked at Second Corinthians chapter 8 and I found 'Titus', and this chapter was talking about 'Corinthians,' 'Titus,' and 'Jerusalem.' I was happy to know what the pastor was preaching about. However, I also know it was hard for me to participate in the Korean congregation.

● R (Restoring the Image of God)

When we partook in the baptizing ceremony, we announced to the world that we are a child of God. We died to our old nature and lived in Christ as a re-born new person. Therefore, we can call other Christians our brothers and sisters because we are all children of God. From the social and cultural perspective, an ethnic group or ethnicity is a grouping of people who identify with each other based on shared attributes that distinguish them from other groups (Rynkiewich 2011, 164). In church, we shared a new identity personally and corporately as a restored image of God, while we kept our own ethnic identity.

Rynkiewich pointed out that ethnic churches face two problems: first, maintaining identity over several generations, and second, the prospect of never moving into fellowship with other ethnic groups. To reflect on the FRIENDS church, the English ministry congregation is composed of second-generation Korean Americans. It is hard to ask them to identify with Korean culture, but they are neither totally fitting in with American culture. The young adults do not want to join with their parent's Korean congregation, but they cannot easily find a similar ethnic Korean American Christian group in the community. In my opinion, especially in the urbanized area, Christians should prepare their minds to embrace the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural churches.

● I (Immigration Stories)

Immigration stories tell about the people who moved to a new country. Creolization is a term referring to the process by which elements of different cultures are blended to create a new culture. Rynkiewich pointed out that the process such as assimilation, acculturation, culture-loss, and culture mixing is not culture destruction or loss, but culture-building. A diaspora community is composed of people who have migrated from their homeland and settled in a new place, who have taken the time and trouble to form a separate community there, and who still maintain connections with the homeland. Their second generation learns a combination or a hybrid culture. The third generation becomes more fully identified with the new setting, but they often return, in story or in fact, to the old setting to recapture the cultural symbols for their identity (Rynkiewich 2011, 202).

I interviewed three English ministry congregation members: Justyn, Salley, and Steve. Each one has his/her own immigrant story. Justyn is a 1.5-generation Korean American;

Salley is a second-generation Korean American; and Steve is a 1.5-generation Indian American. Justyn grew up in a Christian family, however, he does not participate with his parents in Korean congregation worship. Salley is currently the only one Christian in her family, and she wishes that her parents and sister will receive Jesus Christ as the Lord. Steve was converted to Christian at his college years. During his first year in College, Steve was attracted to a Christian group on campus called 'KCF' (Korean Christian Fellowship). Steve joined KCF, became a Christian, and he learned some basic Korean language.

● E (Empowering the Next Generation)

When immigrants moved to America, they expected to have a better life, get a better job, make more money, and provide children with a better education. Most Korean parents send their children to good schools and expect them to adapt to American culture. However, good education did not help the second-generation children keep their faith. The Korean English pastor says that too many in the second generation are leaving the church.

From the observations of Korean ministry congregation Sunday worship, Korean daily dawn prayer meetings, English ministry congregation Sunday worship and English Bible study, it revealed the contrasts of spiritual life between the first-generation immigrants and the 1.5- and second-generation Korean Americans. The obvious difference is the much smaller number of English congregants attending church meetings.

From my observation, the empowering spirit that blessed the Korean ministry congregation occurred in their daily dawn prayer meetings. More than thirty congregants get together daily at 5:30 a.m. on weekdays and 6:00 a.m. on Saturday at church sanctuary. They sing worship hymns, listen to the pastor's Bible preaching, and pray for one hour. I felt

that the dawn prayer meeting is a good Korean church tradition, but it has failed to captivate the second-generation congregants.

- N (Networking Community)

Rynkiewich says that there is another way of organizing relationships in the city. A social network is not a group, but rather a series of links between people that a person may use to mobilize small groups, gather information, or obtain resources (Rynkiewich 2011, 225). The main idea of networking is that individuals in complex societies are faced with a large range of potential relationships, so that the individual selects those with whom he or she will establish social ties. The result is a network of relationships that is centered on the individual.

FRIENDS church has established a mission network with other community organizations. I observed a meeting in which a representative from another organization came to FRIENDS to introduce a mission event that they are planning to go to South America to visit an area near the Amazon River this summer. Other than the Amazon mission trip, FRIENDS church has mission works in South Dakota (USA) to Native Americans, Bolivia, and Haiti.

- D (Developing Gifts)

Rynkiewich pointed out that Christians in mission will spend time listening to the stories of migrants, refugees, and people in diaspora, discovering where God has been at work and where they themselves might contribute to that work (Rynkiewich 2011, 213). In a FRIENDS English Bible study meeting, I observed Salley's interactions with Steve. After Steve shared his current problems, Salley rightly suggested to all of us to pray for Steve.

Although Salley has her own issue that she cannot display openly, I feel that Salley will be a good comforter and is developing her caring gifts for ministry.

● S (Spreading the Word)

It is interesting to compare colonialism with mission movements. One is spreading the control power, and the other is spreading the Word. In Rynkiewich's book chapter 10 discussed the history of colonialism, and the critiques through anthropology's perspective.

Colonialism refers to the practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically. Neocolonialism is the use of economic, political, or cultural pressures to control or influence other countries, especially former dependencies (Rynkiewich 2011, 190). The impact of colonization moves beyond land and resource exploitation. They expanded to control and commodify the body (i.e., slavery), and control the mind. That is, colonizers succeed if they convince the colonized to accept the worldview, values, motives, goals, and outcomes that they desire.

Christian missionaries also want to convert the minds of the unbelievers. However, missionaries did not use fierce weapons to conquer the unbelievers; instead, they used the Word to convince the unbelievers to accept Jesus as the Lord and the Bible as the ultimate life guideline.

In FRIENDS' daily dawn prayer meetings, pastor Bin uses the exploring Bible study method to preach the Bible. Each day pastor Bin will explain about one chapter, or no more than twenty verses, of a book from the Bible. In comparison with the English ministry congregation, the Korean congregation were immersed in the Word more deeply. The English pastor only preached once a week on Sunday and held a Bible study twice a month.

The FRIENDS Church's mission statement

The FRIENDS church's mission statement says, "Our mission is to be a friend of Jesus, a friend to our neighbor, a friend to the whole world, and a friend to you." It is noticed that we should first be a friend of Jesus, and then we can truly be a friend to the others. Because Jesus came to the world to be a bridge to restore our relationship with God, Christians should be a bridge to connect with their neighbor, and to work with God to spread salvation to the world.

Rynkiewich described the premodern world which was concerned about daily life and what is real. The term in the philosophical tradition is 'ontology,' and the question is: What exists, what is out there? In the modern age, people are concerned about what is false and misleading, from what is true. The term in the philosophical tradition is 'epistemology,' and the question is: How do we know what we know? Postmodernism questions the objectivity of the thinking and knowing self. With reality in doubt and with truth in doubt, the postmodern philosopher has lost his way, and the nihilist branch sees no hope of recovery. Those people believe that life is meaningless and reject all religious and moral principles (Rynkiewich 2011, 244). Rynkiewich pointed out that Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me." Jesus answers and fulfills the desires of premodern (the life), modern (the truth), and postmodern (the way) ages. Jesus fulfills all our needs and answers all our questions, but who is able to introduce Jesus in an attractive and compelling manner?

The FRIENDS church's mission statement says: Our mission is to ...

- "Be a friend of Jesus,' responds to the postmodern people's need for 'integrity.' Postmodern people are suspicious. Meet suspicion with authentic Christlikeness; with the Holy Spirit' power, we point to Jesus.

- “Be a friend to our neighbor” responds to the postmodern people’s need for ‘relationship.’
Postmodern people are fleeing from individualism. Postmodern people tend to belong before they believe.
- “Be a friend to the whole world” responds to the postmodern people’s need for ‘diversity.’
Postmodern people have little time for the divisions of the past and already practice what we say that there is no difference between male and female, slave or free, in Christ.
- “Be a friend to you” responds to the postmodern people’s need for ‘dialogue.’ Postmodern people need a non-threatening atmosphere for honest sharing. Be prepared to listen, learn, and appreciate the story of the other. Remember: we are God’s witnesses, not God’s lawyers.

The contrasts between the FRIENDS church’s Korean ministry congregation and English ministry congregation

Based on the observations, research, and interviews, it shows that Korean immigrants have kept their religion and cultural traditions in the American diaspora church, but they have failed to transmit their cultural traditions to the second-generation Korean Americans. Korean English congregations for the 1.5- and second-generation Korean American have almost eliminated Korean cultural components from their worship services. The reasons are partly due to the second-generation Korean Americans having embraced the white American evangelical subculture (Min and Kim 2005, 263).

At FRIENDS’ Korean Sunday worship, congregants sing traditional hymns accompanied by piano. Senior Pastor Bin wore a conservative suit with a dark color tie and preached in

Korean. Pastor Bin usually chose a long paragraph of Scripture for his sermon content. By contrast, Korean English ministry congregations sing contemporary gospel songs accompanied by guitar. English Pastor David wore a casual suit with a light color tie and preached in English. Pastor David usually chose a few verses of Scripture for his sermon content. In addition, the atmospheres of Korean congregations are more formal and serious, while the English ministry congregations are more casual and exciting.

The Silent Exodus

One English ministry congregant commented that the second-generation cannot speak Korean very well and they see the U.S. culture as ‘higher’ than Korean culture. Since the 1990s, pastors and scholars have been studying about the “silent exodus” from Korean churches in North America (Huyser-Honig 2005, 3). Many second-generation Koreans left the Korean church. Some of them left the Korean-language church but joined a multiethnic church, and some were completely leaving the church and faith behind (Lee 2022, 4). This is not just happening for Korean American churches, it also applied to Asian American churches and American young adults. Since there is both a generational and a cultural gap between the first and second generations, the latter may desire to have their own separate space within the church to worship God in their own cultural way (Kim 2010, 120).

Conclusion

I agree with English ministry Pastor David’s comment that there is nothing wrong with first-generation worship habits, but we are attempting to help the emerging generation think, feel, and act in their own cultural ways. In this ethnographic study, I learned many things which are not from the traditional ways of study. Participating in FRIENDS Church’s worship, I felt an

actual experience of 'unity in one body' (Ephesians 4:4-5). Even without understanding the Korean language, by celebrating together in worship, I can see and experience that we are one body of Christ, across cultures, across generations, across languages.

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Field Note 1:

February 21 (Tuesday), 2023, 5:30 AM – Korean Dawn Prayer Service at FRIENDS

I left home at 5:15 am in the morning, while it was still dark outside, and walked to the nearby FRIENDS church. From an internet search, I found the church's website and learned they have dawn prayer meetings from Tuesday to Friday (starting at 5:30 am) and Saturday (starting at 6:00 am). On the way there, I thought, who would come to church so early to pray? I arrived at church on time and was surprised to see many people already sitting in the sanctuary to pray. This is my first time coming to a Korean church and observing a dawn prayer meeting.

At the start, a young man led a prayer and then led all of the people to sing a few hymns. One of the hymns was 'Jesus lead me,' my favorite one. I observed there were about 30 people attending this meeting, all were adults and senior Korean people. Above the stage, there was a

big screen, the hymn's lyrics and scripture text were projected on the screen. However, it showed Korean only, no English.

After singing, the senior pastor Bin went to the stage, standing at the podium, ready to preach. Today's scriptures were posted on the big screen in Korean, all I knew was the chapter number and verses 8:6-24. During the preaching, I heard the sayings of 'Corinthians,' 'Titus,' and 'Jerusalem,' which sounded similar to the Chinese word. Without knowing what the pastor was talking about, I tried to guess what the scripture texts were. I opened my Chinese Bible, and did a search. In the New Testament, the four Gospel books do not mention 'Titus,' so I looked at Acts chapter 8, no 'Titus' found, then looked at Romans and First Corinthians, and was still not successful. When I looked at Second Corinthians 8, I found 'Titus' there, and this chapter was talking about 'Corinthians,' 'Titus,' and 'Jerusalem.' I was happy to know what the pastor was preaching about. However, I also know it was hard for me to participate in the Korean congregation. After the sermon, pastor Bin turned off the light, all people started praying, I stayed about 15 more minutes and left quietly.

Field Note 2:

February 26, 2023, 11:00 AM – Korean Sunday Service at FRIENDS

This is the FRIENDS church's second worship service on Sunday morning, the first service started at 9:00 AM. I arrived at the church on time, however the sanctuary was almost full, so I sat in the back row. There were about two hundred people attending this service, all were Korean adults, and the Korean language was used at all worship time. Because I do not understand Korean, I can only observe their body language and signs decorated on the sanctuary. On the stage, there is a podium at the center, and a wooden cross stand at the left.

I noticed that there was a cloth draped on the cross, and the color was changed from green last week to purple today. On the left side of the wall, it has a post with a picture of a kneeling praying man, and on the right side of the wall there was a post with a picture of a church and its congregants. I do not understand the Korean words written under those pictures. After the service I asked a sister, and she explained to me that the Korean words under the picture of kneeling praying man were ‘seeking, you will find;’ and the words under the picture of church and congregants means ‘church was a place for healing and growing.’

The worship started with prayer, and reading the Apostle’s Creed, then we sang several worship songs; they were all traditional hymns, and I knew the melody very well. Next section we listened to the choir sing. I was impressed with the choir, they were composed of about twenty senior persons, male and female, and they presented a great harmony. After the singing, pastor Ben delivered a sermon. The scripture reading and the preaching are all in Korean. Although I did not understand what he said, I noticed that he chose a long paragraph of scripture for his sermon content. He wore a conservative suit with a dark color tie. He preached the sermon with a zealous tone and waving his hands naturally. He did not look at his drafts most of the time and finished preaching on time.

Field Note 3:

March 5, 2023, 2:00 PM – English Sunday Service at FRIENDS

Today’s English worship service was delayed due to the sanctuary being occupied by a Korean congregation’s summer mission trip preparation meeting. We waited in the lobby until the meeting finished, then we entered the sanctuary. The English Ministry (EM) Pastor David came to greet me and introduced Ms. Ein, the EM program assistant, to me. I was surprised that

there were only 12 people attending the worship, sharply fewer than the morning Korean Ministry worship, which has about 200 people fully seated in the whole sanctuary.

I saw five girls gathered at the front praying, then the worship started at 2:20 PM. The worship leader Ms. Jen started with a prayer and then we all read aloud the Apostle's Creed. Ms. Jen playing guitar led the congregation singing two worship songs. These songs were modern style, with the lyrics projected on a big screen at the stage. Ms. Jen sang 'the goodness of God running after me,' with a freely expressed emotion, but I could hardly hear the congregation's voice. Today's sermon title was 'Unbelief,' with the scripture reading of John 12:37-43. Pastor David stressed God's grace regarding human beings' salvation, and that without God's grace, no one can come to God. Human beings' pride and fear are obstacles to believing in God's salvation. After the sermon, Jen made some announcements and finished the service by leading all the people to the Lord's prayer.

After the worship service, we were invited to the cafeteria located across from the sanctuary for fellowship. They served simple meals and coffee, and we sat at a round table and ate together. I told pastor David my purpose for coming today. I said I want to know about this church and have an interview with a couple of people. David asked me 'will you leave us after the interviews?' Because currently I attend another Chinese church, I therefore responded 'I do not know, it will depend on my availability.'

Field Note 4:

March 15, 2023, 7:00 PM – English Ministry Bible Study at FRIENDS

The English Ministry Bible Study was held at church every other Wednesday night. I arrived at church and Pastor David invited me to the cafeteria to eat pizza. Tonight, there were only four people coming for Bible study. Other than Pastor David and myself, I met Salley and Steve and we introduced ourselves to each other. We sat at a round table and started eating and talking (I guessed that they had not eaten dinner yet). Salley said she was fasting, so she would not eat. Salley's parents came from South Korea, and she was born in America and was about 25 years old. She said she learned Korean at home and at youth school during the weekends. In addition, she has visited South Korea several times and that helped her improve her Korean. Steve was an Indian American and was 27 years old. Steve lived in this neighborhood and came to this church earlier than Pastor David. It was about three years ago the prior English ministry pastor left and David came to replace him.

We studied Romans chapter 6 tonight. We read the whole chapter first with each person reading 5 verses. After reading, David asked us a question: "what's your experiences of struggling with sins?" Salley responded that she used to hate the pastor in her prior church, however, at the end she forgave him and left that church. She did not say anything in detail, and no one asked her. I shared my story of yelling with my wife and children. But after I confessed it to my family and with church members, it happened less and less. Pastor David explained the texts of Romans 6, the meanings of 'we shall die to sin and live to the Lord;' and 'we were no longer the slave of sin, but the slave of God.' Steve said that he still committed sins in his life, could he continually be a Christian? David responded that 'we are child of God through believing in Jesus Christ, this is our identity. Do not be deceived by the Devil's lies and accusations. No one is perfect, but the Holy Spirit will help us to be like our Lord. After the discussion, we wished to see each other at the next meeting to study Romans chapter 7.