

Analysis of Second-Generation Leadership Concerns in the Korean Diaspora

Church

Introduction

NY Pillar Church (NYPC) is a Korean-speaking, independent Methodist diaspora church located in Glen Oak, Queens, New York. The church as it exists today was founded in 2019, the 32nd Branch Church of Pillar Church. Pillar Church began in Gangwon-do, South Korea in 1971 and has branches throughout Korea and internationally in locations ranging from Cuba, Mozambique, Malaysia, Haiti, and Canada. NYPC consists of first-generation Korean immigrants as well as second and third-generation Koreans. Through the implementation of their English-language Ministry services (EM), a small number of Filipino and African-Americans people worship at NYPC.

For this project five NYPC members were interviewed, including the EM pastor, two high level volunteer ministry leaders, one Filipino church member, and a third generation Korean church member. NYPC holds two Sunday morning worship services in Korean in addition to a 12:30pm English language service. This project will include observations gleaned from formal and informal interviews of church members and staff and observations of both Korean and EM services, as well as observations of English-language youth group discussion and study meetings, Holy Week dawn prayer services, and casual lunch meals served before and after services. The data and observation concludes that, similar to many Korean diaspora churches in the USA, NYPC experiences tension in growing the commitment to faith of their younger generation.

The Social Composition of NYPC and the Religious Composition of its Location

NYPC is located on Union Turnpike, a busy four-lane road running through the center of Queens County to just past the border into Nassau county. It stands across the street from St. Paul's Lutheran Church, and down the road from Our Lady of the Snows Roman Catholic Church and a Hanuman Mandir Hindu Temple. NYPC's neighborhood is predominately White and Asian, with a strong presence of Indian, Korean, Chinese, and Pakistani population communities. However the church draws its members from within a five mile radius, drawing attendance from the surrounding communities.

NYPC conducts two Korean language services each Sunday with virtually one hundred percent of attenders coming from Korean extraction. A typical Sunday will draw about three hundred worshippers across the two services. NYPC offers a third service in English which is much more lightly attended, with under fifty people regularly in attendance. The service is attending primarily by a much younger crowd. The high school and college aged members of the community gather for the EM service, as well as a few middle-aged and more senior members of the church. The lion's share of both stage ministers and congregants are the children of those attending the earlier Korean-languages services. A small handful of attenders of the EM service are of non-Korean extraction, most notably African Americans and Filipinos.

Prior to the establishment of NYPC in 2019, the building housed another Korean Methodist community of faith. Only a few members of the prior assembly remained to continue on under the leadership of NYPC.

History of Christianity in Korea

Protestant Christianity has enjoyed a strong presence in South Korea since American missionaries arrived in the late 19th century. The gospel was preached to a people whose culture, steeped in the Confucianism values of purity and a promise of an afterlife, had served as a keen *prepartio evangelica*, preparing the way for the message of Jesus.¹ Protestant missionaries established a strong connection of Biblical literacy and study as a fundamental component of the Christian identity, which played well with the general respect and dedication to educational ambitions which many Koreans share.² Korean Christianity exploded with growth throughout the twentieth century, providing a strong sense of religious identity and comfort in the face of Japanese colonization and the civil war of the 1950's and beyond.³

Today, approximately 30% of South Korea is Christian, the majority belonging to mainline Protestant denominations.⁴ Koreans have a great heart for missions, sending out more than twelve thousand overseas missionaries.⁵

1 Kim 132

2 Yu, 49.

3 Kim, 136.

4 [https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2014/08/12/6-facts-about-christianity-in-south-korea/#:~:text=1South%20Korea%20has%20no,%25\)%20and%20Buddhists%20\(23%25\).](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2014/08/12/6-facts-about-christianity-in-south-korea/#:~:text=1South%20Korea%20has%20no,%25)%20and%20Buddhists%20(23%25).)

5 Kim, 132.

This is reflected by the Pillar Church itself, with its various international church plants ranging from Asia, Africa, North America, and Central America.

Transnational Relationships at NYPC

Members of NYPC have largely settled in New York most do not go back and forth to Korea regularly. The pastor of the EM service, Dan, is second-generation himself and explained that although fluent in the language he did not grow up speaking Korean every day. He talked about his upbringing on the west coast, his childhood in Northern California and years at university in Seattle. He has been to Korea a few times and was introduced to the woman he would eventually marry there.

Although NYPC is an independently run church it is anchored and supported by its mother church, located in Bucheon, South Korea where Pastor Dan's father is the Senior Pastor. There seems to be a strong connection between the churches, as pastoral leadership flows freely from Korea to the United States and back again. In a recent service at NYPC, the congregation celebrated the news that Dan's brother Mike, also a Pillar pastor, would be returning to New York after two years owing to complications with his visa. It was also announced that Pastor Young-min Lee would make return to Korea at the same time. In this way, although the members of NYPC are settled New Yorkers, there are great ties to Korea and a strong connection to both the culture and the country.

Relationship and Differences Between Korean and English Language Services

The two Korean language services were fuller, louder, brighter, and more lively. Worshippers were enthusiastic and expressive in their singing and clapping during praise. The platform was filled with singers, some wearing white and purple choir robes. A worship leader dressed in a crisp suit led the congregation in worship, a mixture of songs both familiar to most US evangelical churches and some songs that seemed to be Korean in origin.

In what felt simultaneously hospitable and defensive, I was unable to attend a Korean language service during one of my visits to NYPC. I explained to the ushers standing outside to welcome visitors that I wished to attend the Korean service and then to stay on for the EM service. They initially agreed and I was ushered to an available seat to join the worship service, only to be escorted to an English language discussion group happening in another part of the building. Although very friendly and motivated by a desire to be good hosts (they assumed there would be nothing for me to gain from joining in a service conducted language I cannot speak or understand), it felt as though there were a strong dividing line between the Korean service and the EM service.

This observation was borne out as I took note of how those I met in the EM services were not present in the online broadcast of the NYPC Korean services, which several times during a service will show a crowd shot of the

main chapel. Conversations with second and third-generation English speaking members confirmed the fact that they preferred to worship in the EM service. Their cultural identity and connection to their heritage, as important as those things are, was secondary to joining in worship in the language which they feel more comfortable and at home.

When Pastor Mike returned from Korea a joint service was held in both Korean and English. The sermon and the address to the congregation was delivered by Pastor Mike in Korean and then translated into English by Pastor Dan. However the song service was conducted entirely in Korean with the lyrics to the songs displayed on screens above and behind the platforms in both Korean and English. This is a good reflection of the EM services secondary role in the mission of NYPC.

The EM services are clearly modeled after contemporary popular evangelical liturgies and atmosphere. Popular worship songs by Bethel Music and Hillsong play over the speakers prior to service, and the lights are dimmed when the worship service begins. The band and singers are comprised of high school and college age kids. During this lightly attended service the congregants who worshipped at the Korean services meet for small groups and fellowship in various classrooms. Likewise, the students and young adults attending the EM service meet separately for fellowship, small group, and classes and English. In this way, the two services move in shadow step with one another, both unified in the same building and same community but with a sharp line of distinction based on language.

The Tension in English Language Ministry and Hybrid Cultural Identity

This raises interesting questions relating to identity. Not all students attending the EM service have Korean as their primary language, experiencing the world and interpreting that experience through English. For first-generation church members, the Korean church provided a place for both cultural identification and social interactions. This reinforced the values and customs that are such a part of their unique Korean identity.⁶

For second and third-generation Koreans, there is a special tension that exists owing to the differences in worldview that are generated by their American upbringing and its cultural context. Due to their participation in the community of faith the younger generation naturally appreciate the values and culture of their heritage. Yet a certain tension inevitably develops since Eastern and Western cultural values are not one hundred percent compatible.⁷

Conversations with the English Ministry Pastor confirmed this tension. In my very first interaction with him I was told that that the EM service was experiencing “growing pains.” I would later learn that this was owing in part to the changes in leadership that the church had recently navigated through. There was difficulty in finding the right time to facilitate the EM service and a general sense that, although the church as a whole reluctantly saw the need

⁶ Hong, 259.

⁷ Hong, 260.

for the EM service to exist and the value it provides for the younger generation, it appeared to be very loosely connected to the rest of the church body. There was little to no participation from the older generation of the church. This gave the EM service a hollow feel, as though it were slightly adrift from the rest of the church body.

Analysis of English Language Ministry as a Window Into Concerns

Pastor Dan reflected on the tremendous amount of growth he has witnessed in the young people he has pastored since taking on the duties of English Ministry Pastor in 2021. The bulk of his responsibility lies in teaching and shepherding the youth. Dan stated that in the short years of his tenure he has seen growth in the spiritual life of his group, and emphasized how important it was to see them take hold of the faith and experience Jesus for themselves. It was significant for him that the youth develop a sense of ownership of their own experience of faith rather than merely inheriting the faith of their parents and going through motions.

It is not right to grade the sincerity of one's heart by their outward expression in worship. It is impossible to judge the posture of the heart, and I make no presumptions on any of the church members sincerity in the following. Although not a scientific metric, body language can still convey something of an individual's emotional investment in an activity.

In my observation of multiple EM services, the students and young people in attendance were split into halves: those who participated as

musicians for the song service and everyone else. Of the non-musicians, there was minimal participation in singing although all stood respectfully when appropriate to and followed the instruction to greet others and so on. During two different services I sat in a row directly behind a mother and her teenage daughter. I was unable to learn the name of the mother, but it was clear that her daughter was present in obedience to her mother only, sitting on the opposite end of the row with several seats between them. The daughter did all that was required of her, but nothing more. I picked up on this pattern through subsequent visits.

During most of my visits the sermons were part of a series call Controversial, in which Pastor Dan offered a biblical teaching and approach to contentious social topics and cultural issues. Topics included gender roles with one Sunday dedicated to the biblical teaching on womanhood and another Sunday to manhood. Church attendance and was stressed as an exemplary value for Christian young men and women. Pastor Dan specifically took aim at social media and how it can warp young women's sense of value and propriety, leading to them sharing risqué pictures of themselves for attention. He admonished the church to let go of the world's foolishness and instead embrace the biblical picture of femininity and God's desires for their lives.

Services end with the congregation joining together in a time of fervent prayer led by the pastor who after introducing the topic of prayer loudly and tenaciously prays into the microphone while the band builds up a crescendo

behind him, in most cases rendering his prayer inaudible. Following the message on Christian womanhood Pastor Dan first prayed for the young women of the church and then asked everyone to pray for the parents of the NYPC who diligently “dragged their kids to church every Sunday”, not giving up on them but bringing them back every week. It was clear that the EM service was viewed as necessary to offer an incentive for the the second and third-generation to not give up on the faith of the parents. There was real anxiety that the temptations and teachings of the surrounding secular culture would prey upon the disillusionment felt by some in the younger generation.

I was invited to sit in on Sunday school discussion group that was conducted in English. I sat in on the meeting facilitated by Pastor Dan prior to the EM service meeting at 12:30 pm. The discussion group served as a preview of the sermon that would be preached shortly with opportunities for the group to ask questions on the topic. The subject for that week’s controversial sermon was abortion and the sanctity of life. Nearly twenty five students sat in a semi circle with Pastor Dan sitting on a small elevated platform. He brought out statistics and opinion poll numbers on abortion. Apart from some murmuring and rustling that would accompany any classroom, the room remained was silent when Dan wasn’t speaking. The group was respectful but no one aside from Pastor Dan or an older gentleman elder and EM volunteer Daniel asked questions or gave input. The students had access to an app though which they could ask questions

anonymously, which Dan could then display on a projector screen and answer. No response was generated from that method either.

The meeting was less like a discussion group and felt more like a seminar. Pastor Dan spoke clearly and candidly on how wrong abortion is and how life in the womb has God-given value and should be protected. It stands to reason that the other discussion groups for the sermon series would cover issues such as homosexuality, gender identities, and other hot button issues treated in the same straight forward manner of transferring data and church approved positions on the topics.

Conclusion

It is clear that NYPC serves a vital role in maintaining a strong sense of Korean identity and connection to the people's rich heritage and cultural values. It is also clear that NYPC recognizes the need for ministry to the second and third-generation that is contextualized and presented in the language of the host country. Since the younger generations live and move in an English-speaking context and have been born and raised in American culture, it is important for them to have an opportunity to learn and worship in that language. This allows for the more "Americanized" members of the church to explore the religion of their parents in a context that feels more authentic than the Korean language services in which many feel out of place worshipping in. The EM service provides a safe space for learning about the Bible and Christianity while also providing the opportunity to take personal ownership of their faith so they can experience God on a personal level.

This ministry is crucial, because if there is no effort to bridge the cultural gaps experienced by the younger generation, the first-generation Korean could lose an entire generation that either leaves the faith completely or seeks to join a non immigrant church to assimilate their faith into the larger culture.

I wish I had felt comfortable asking more direct questions related to this issue. My conclusions are more drawn from observations and deduction rather than stories provided by church members. Although Pastor Dan was accommodating and very friendly and the church was welcoming and hospitable, I felt an awkward anxiety that prevented me from being more forward. I was painfully aware of my “otherness”, and because the EM services skewed much younger in age, I felt like a creepy old white guy hanging around a youth group service. If I had more time I would arrange to include more direct questions in my interviews with Pastor Dan, and can see the value of selecting a church to study that a friend or classmate attends or is familiar with.

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Field Notes March 12th, 2023 – 12:30pm

- I first visited New York Pillar Church on March 12, 2023. I entered through the side entrance which brought me past church offices and a small café area called Tarsus Café in which several older women were sitting. They smiled and greeted me and showed me how to find my way to the main chapel on the other side of the building. I walked through a corridor that took me into a large cafeteria with a kitchen and lots of seating. Groups of people were hanging out there

following the second Korean language service. I wore a covid mask out of respect, having seen people wearing them.

-Upon entering the sanctuary I was greeted by Pastor Dan, about 35 years old. He took interest in me as a visitor, asking where I was from and what brought me to visit today. I explained that I was a seminary student and was visiting as part of a class exercise. We became acquainted.

- I found a seat and took time to speak with a congregant named Vilma. She explained she had been attending for a few years. Although not Korean herself, she connected well with the church.

- The service was conducted by students, few people in the seats, everyone dressed on the casual side. Layout of the room was typical, seats arranged in rows facing a large platform, a glowing red cross on the wall. Worship songs played on keyboards, drums, guitars, multiple high school or college aged singers. A handful of popular worship songs were sung. I was greeted as a newcomer and given a welcome basket and invited to stand to be acknowledged.

- Pastor preached on Biblical womanhood, taking aim at typical sinful behavior surrounding social media, image. Passionate prayer after sermon led by the pastor and followed by benediction.

- I spoke with Pastor Dan following the service. He made himself available to me to help in any way with the assignment. He gave me information about the church and answered my questions. He invited me to come earlier than 12:30pm to join in the pre-service lunch. I met also Daniel and JP, two very friendly deacons.

Field Notes April 2nd, 2023 – 12:30pm

- I arrived at 11am and was welcomed by Daniel and JP. They brought me up to the fellowship area where they served lunch, a delicious Korean cabbage soup and kimchi. I spoke with Daniel, who explained he had been a part of the previous church that met in the building before NYPC took over in 2019.
- The lunch-room was filled with the students who mostly attend the EM service. I spoke with Jun the worship leader of for the EM service, a college student. His parents attend the earlier services in Korean. He is thankful for the EM service and the opportunity to attend church in English.

Field Notes April 16th, 2023

- I attempted to attend one of the Korean services. I was greeted by three men in suits outside the building, they explained the services are not in English but when I explained I knew that and wanted to stay for both services they showed me in. I had to explain this again to two women greeters at the door of the chapel. They let me in and seated me, but moments later escorted me out to an English language discussion group. I went along with it, because it felt forceful and that they didn't want me to sit in the Korean service. I wanted to acquiesce and be gracious. The woman leading me out was named Lisa, she was kind and brought me up to a room where JP and Jun were talking. Jun asked if I'd like to join in the discussion room where Pastor Dan was leading a talk on his sermon series "Controversial". He showed me into the room.
- A large multipurpose meeting room with piano and small platform. The students sat in a crowd before Pastor Dan who spoke on abortion. He invited questions for discussion but

not there was no response. The students were able to answer by text and their messages would appear on the screen. No participation or just “no” in response to questions.

- After the group I sat with Dan and over lunch like the prior week. He talked about his calling into ministry, how he ran from the call, but eventually came from the west coast to serve in his brother’s church. He talked about the challenges of building up the EM ministry and celebrated the growth he had seen in the lives of the kids in the church.
- I stayed for the service, spoke again with Vilma. Noted for the third time a mother and daughter sitting in front of me, but they weren’t very friendly to talk. I was invited following the service to another lunch in the main cafeteria by another service coordinator, in his twenties, Devon. Spoke with him for a while although I couldn’t stay for lunch.