SECOND-GENERATION KOREAN-AMERICAN CHURCH AS AGENTS OF BLACK-ASIAN RACIAL RECONCILIATION

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Outline

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the extent to which the Korean-American church—specifically, the second-generation English-speaking congregation—can act as an agent of racial reconciliation between Blacks and Asians. First, I begin by providing a brief overview of the origins of Korean Protestant Christianity and its heavy involvement in the 1919 Korean Independence Movement. Then, I turn to the origins of Korean American Christianity and the development of transnational identity in the face of weak U.S. national consciousness due to

labor exploitation and racial discrimination, compounded by the ongoing Japanese colonization of Korea. Next, I explore the role of the Korean-American church as a social and cultural center for the first-generation Korean immigrants. I then compare and contrast the role of the church between first and second generation Korean-Americans, particularly with the emergence of the English-speaking congregation. I discover that second-generation Korean-American Christians differentiates themselves from their immigrant parents with less of an emphasis on transnational identity and instead love for one's neighbors, characterized by evangelistic zeal and simultaneously re-defining their "American" identity. Whereas Korean immigrants identify primarily by their ethnicity, that is Korean, first and foremost, second-generation Korean-American Christians choose their religion as their primary identity. I then turn to a brief overview of Black-Korean tensions and the Model Minority myth. Finally, I conclude with some suggestions and practical recommendations for the second-generation Korean-American church as agents of racial reconciliation with the Black community, based on the Contact Theory in Brenda Salter McNeil's *Roadmap to Reconciliation* and A-R-C Model of Racial Justice in Jemar Tisby's *How to Fight Racism*.

Terminology

A quick word on terminology is due here regarding "first" and "second" generations. "First generation" refers to foreign-born immigrants who emigrated to the U.S. from their countries of origin. "Second generation" refers to those born within the U.S. and children of first-generation immigrants.

Introduction

According to Stop Asian Hate's 2021 national report, there have been a total of 10,370 bias incidents reported against Asian American and Pacific Islander (hereafter, AAPI) persons from March 19, 2020 to September 30, 2021.[1] While anti-AAPI hate is not new, there has been a visible uptick in hateful rhetoric and physical harm towards Asian-Americans since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 and the subsequent footage which was released caused public outrage and stirred global support of the Black Lives Matter movement, which was founded in 2013. Conversations on race took the world by storm, pervading every sphere of society, including the church. Yet, much work remains yet to be done in bridging the gap between various ethnic churches in the process of racial reconciliation. What role does the Korean-American church have to play, if any, in the work of racial justice? What are the relationships between the Korean American church and its origins in the homeland? What are some of the evolving distinctions between first-generation Korean immigrant Christians and second-generation Korean-American Christians? Specifically, how can the Korean American church help act as a bridge between the Black and Asian communities? These are the questions which this paper seeks to answer.

Japanese Colonization of Korea: Christianity and Anti-Colonial Efforts

In 1910, Japan annexed Korea and over the course of the next thirty-five years, Korea suffered heavy oppression under Japanese rule. Koreans were forced to give up their Korean names for Japanese ones, speak Japanese at school, worship at Japanese shrines and refrain from learning Korean history. In essence, Koreans underwent cultural genocide. Despite these efforts

1 Richard S. Kim, "Inaugurating the American Century: The 1919 Philadelphia Korean Congress, Korean Diasporic Nationalism, and American Protestant Missionaries," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 26, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 58, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27501780.

to erase Korean cultural identities both individually and collectively, on March 1, 1919, thirty-three activists gathered at a restaurant called *Taehwagwan* to sign a declaration of independence. Sixteen of these signatories were Protestants, including pastors. This immensely bold act inspired two million Koreans to join their movement, resulting in over 1,500 demonstrations and 7,500 casualties. Notably, of the 19,525 Koreans were arrested, Christians comprised nearly a fifth, and of these, more than half were Protestant, an astonishing number considering that Protestants only accounted for slightly over one percent of the population in 1919.[2] As the early Protestant church consisted primarily of liberal Koreans, both "commoners and outcasts who were estranged from the Confucian society and the progressive elite who desired to transform it," Korean Christians took the lead in mobilizing the independence movement against colonization.[3]

Korean American Christianity and Transnational Identity

On January 13, 1903, 102 Koreans arrived in Honolulu, Hawaii aboard the *Gaelic*, marking the first significant wave of Korean immigration to the U.S.[4] The U.S. missionary Horace Allen arranged a labor immigration with Hawaii plantation owners, who "sought Korean labor to force down wages and break the labor unrest of the predominantly Japanese work force."[5] Hence, over 50 percent of these immigrants were already converts to Christianity, in contrast to the less than 2 percent of Christians in the homeland.[6] As will soon be evident, this

2 Han-Kyo Kim, "The Korean Independence Movement in the United States: Syngman Rhee, An Ch'ang-Ho, and Pak Yong-Man," *International Journal of Korean Studies* VI, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2002): 2, http://icks.org/data/ijks/1482456493_add_file_1.pdf.
While there were a handful of isolated cases of Korean students and merchants who had traveled (temporarily) to the U.S. mainland as early as the 1880s, this marked the beginning of the first significant Korean community in the U.S.
3 Daniel Tudor, *Korea: The Impossible Country* (Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 2012), 58.
4 Kim, "Inaugurating the American Century," 52.
5 Kim, "The Korean Independence Movement," 2. Earlier, it was mentioned that the first significant wave of Korean immigration occurred in 1903. While this is true, it must also be noted that there were other Korean migrants to the U.S. including students, political exiles, diplomats and merchants starting from as early as 1882.
6 Ibid.

would inevitably shape the trajectory of future Korean-American generations. By 1905, an additional 7,226 Koreans immigrated to Hawaii to escape the turbulent political climate in Korea as well as in search of better job opportunities and economic prosperity, or the so-called “American Dream.” Little did they know, however, that the reality they would encounter in Hawaii consisted of long hours of arduous manual labor “six days a week for meager wages, averaging from sixty-five to seventy cents a day.” The harsh experiences of the Korean immigrants on the Hawaiian plantations resulted in “a weak national consciousness" and instead awakened in them "a strong love for Korea...which inspired them to organize self-governing bodies."[7]

In 1905, the Friendship Association, or *Chinmokhoe*, was established, which launched a boycott of Japanese products in addition to creating a program of mutual aid. Later that same year, a special convention of Korean-Americans in Hawaii addressed a petition to U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, requesting American intervention on behalf of Korea's sovereignty at the peace conference to end the Russo-Japanese War. This same convention selected Yun Pyonggu, a local Hawaiian church pastor, and Syngman Rhee, who would later become the first South Korean president, as their representatives. On April 15-16, 1919, a group of Korean immigrants gathered together in the U.S. to create the Philadelphia “Korean Congress,” which echoed and expressed solidarity with the Korean independence movement. Many of the Korean Congress leaders were “Western-educated elites and devout Christian converts,” including the aforementioned Rhee and Philip Jaisohn.[8] Philip Jaisohn was the President of the Korean Congress and became the first Korean to gain U.S. citizenship by means of naturalization in

7 Ibid.
8 Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, "Diaspora Formation: Modernity and Mobility," in *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 53.

1890 while pursuing his studies in Pennsylvania.[9] In 1892, Jaisohn became the first Korean as well as, for that matter, Asian American to receive a medical degree in the U.S.[10]

Korean American Church as Social and Cultural Center

The first group of Korean immigrants to Hawaii established the first Korean Methodist Church in Honolulu. In 1905, the Korean-American Christian population in Hawaii totaled around 400. By 1918, approximately 2,800 new converts attended 39 churches. Soon enough, several churches of different denominations were established in Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago.[11] Even those who had previously not identified as Christian prior to departing Korea attended church for ethnic solidarity, lingual and cultural education for their children, and employment and networking opportunities. Im has argued that churches have functioned as the "epicenter" of the Korean-American community.[12] Pyong Gap Min has identified four major social functions of Korean churches for first-generation immigrants: (1) fellowship, (2) social status and positions, (3) preservation of Korean culture, and (4) social services for church members and the Korean community as a whole.[13] In the mid-1980s, there were 350 Korean Protestant churches in NYC, constituting almost 1 out of 6 of all Protestant churches. In 1992, 75 percent of Korean immigrants were Christian (55 percent Protestant and 20 percent Catholic). In contrast, only 25 percent of South Koreans self-identified as Christian (18 percent Protestant and 7 percent Catholic). Kim and Kim found that 78 percent of Korean church members attended weekly—significantly higher than the percentage of Whites (28), Blacks (34), and Latinos (49).

9 Min and Kim, "Intergenerational Transmission," 270.
10 Kim, "The Korean Independence Movement in the United States," 2.
11 "Religion, Social Incorporation, and Civic Engagement," 83.
12 Ibid.
13 Im, "The Korean Diaspora Churches in the USA," 137.

Moreover, 35 percent of Korean churchgoers attended twice a week or more often.[14] As of 2010, there were over 4,000 reported Korean-American churches spread all across the U.S. with some experts estimating there may be closer to 5,000 in actuality.[15]

Second-Generation Korean Americans and English Language Congregations

Compared to other minority groups, second-generation Korean-Americans demonstrate an unusually high church participation rate, due in large to the unique history of Korean Americans in the U.S. Studies reveal that 82 percent of second-generation Korean Americans affiliated with a Korean church participated at least once a week, if not more–mirroring the high participation rates of their first-generation counterparts.[16] It is important to note, however, that while two thirds of second-generation Korean American affiliated with a Protestant church chose to attend a Korean church, the majority of these participants were far more likely to attend an English-language congregation within the Korean church, rather than the Korean-speaking congregation itself.[17] The English-language congregations are heavily evangelical, which can be attributed to a range of factors, such as the increasing involvement in college campus ministries which tend to be highly evangelical—InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and Campus Crusade for Christ, for instance.[18]

In examining the evangelical nature of second-generation Korean American Christians, I shall now turn to Kurien's work on second generation Indian American Christians and the

14 Pyong Gap Min and Dae Young Kim, "Intergenerational Transmission of Religion and Culture: Korean Protestants in the U.S.," *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 3 (2005), 269. https://doi.org/10.2307/4153099
15 Prema Kurien, "Religion, Social Incorporation, and Civic Engagement: Second-Generation Indian American Christians," *Review of Religious Research* 55, no. 1 (March 2013): 82, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41940817.
16 Pyong Gap Min, "Korea," in *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration Since 1965* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 497.
17 Min, "Korea," 498.
18 Kat Chow, "'Model Minority' Myth Again Used As A Racial Wedge Between Asians and Blacks," NPR, last modified April 19, 2017, https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/04/19/524571669/model-minority-myth-again-used-as-a-racial-wedge-between-asians-and-blacks/.

connection between their faith and civic engagement. While this research does not focus on Korean Americans, per se, I believe there may be several parallels to be drawn from the Indian Christian experience as regards that of Korean American Christians; furthermore, the research draws from studies based on second-generation Korean Americans. Kurien defines civic engagement as "the involvement of individuals and groups in the larger community of which they are a part, based on a feeling of obligation to 'give back' to the community, and to improve conditions within the community."[19] By extension, the researcher proposes that civic engagement is inextricably linked to the individuals and groups' self-identification, of which religion plays a role, and the subsequent understanding of their relationship to the surrounding community.

First generation Indian Christians primarily practiced civic engagement in the form of financial contributions to their denomination's "many social service projects," including several "mission fields" in Kerala and other Indian states.[20] On the other hand, second-generation congregants "imbibed the ideas of American evangelicalism and supported a 'seeker-church' model where informal, anti-liturgical worship [was] a form of outreach that target[ed] religious seekers."[21] Second-generation Indian Christians believe that evangelism is a "central function of worship," and includes "enabling other racial and ethnic groups to participate in worship services." As we have seen thus far, much of first-generation Korean immigrants' civic engagement stems from their strong ethnic identity and ensuing diasporic transnationalism. On the other hand, second-generation Korean-Americans do not feel as strong of a connection to their parents' homeland and emphasize their evangelical identity. Further studies indicate that second-generation Korean Americans purposefully engage in local outreach so as to differentiate

19 Ibid.
20 "Census: Industry, Employment, Income," KACLA, last updated August 2020, https://www.kacla.org/census-industry-employment-and-income.html/.
21 Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation 2.0*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 26.

themselves from their first-generation counterparts, who were primarily "focused on serving the needs of the Korean immigrant community." Thus, the transnational identity of the first generation serves as a "foil" for the second generation to re-define their "American" identity.[22]

Black-Korean Tensions

One of the unique characteristics of the Korean-American population in contrast to other immigration populations is that they largely choose to run self-employed businesses, rather than labor for pre-existing ones. In 1980, 18 percent of Korean immigrants were self-employed. In 1990, Korean immigrants had the second-highest self-employment rate with a record of 26.5 percent. One huge advantage Korean immigrants have in contrast to some other Asian immigrant groups, including Indians and Filipinos, is that they all share one language. By far the most popular Korean-owned small business is the retail grocery-and-liquor store. In 1994, there were 1,800 such stores owned by Korean immigrants in New York and New Jersey alone. Korean immigrants generally open businesses in minority neighborhoods, as other grocery stores are less likely to open chains in these neighborhoods due to higher vandalism and crime rates. This provides a favorable situation for Korean business owners in that not only do they meet the high demand, they also face less competition. However, due to the perceived exploitation of Blacks and unfair advantages of Koreans, racial tensions have risen. Between 1981-1995, there were fourteen boycotts, largely led by the Black community, of Korean stores in New York. In particular, the Brooklyn boycott of two Korean produce stores garnered national and even international media attention. Beginning with an alleged altercation between a Korean store owner and a Haitian immigrant woman, the boycott was arranged by Black, Caribbean, and Latinx activists and lasted from January 1990 until May 1991. Again in the spring of 1991, a 14-

22 McNeil, *Roadmap*, 46.

year-old black girl named Latasha Harlins was shot to death by Du Soon Ja, a Korean female, which further heightened racial tensions. When Du was given five years of probation instead of the expected sentence, the court decision stirred anger and deep hurt amongst the Black community.[23] Five months later, when the jury acquitted four White police officers from beating Rodney King, the Black community responded in outrage. The infamous Los Angeles rebellion took place from April 29 to May 4, 1992. Korean-owned stores were the object of much violence with approximately 2,300 Korean stores destroyed or plundered. In total, Korean business owners incurred over $350 million in property damages.[24]

The Model Minority Myth

Part of the historic conflict and perceived racial tensions between Blacks and Asians have arisen from the Model Minority Myth. Essentially, the Model Minority Myth stereotypes Asian Americans as possessing certain cultural values and traits, such as intelligence, diligence, and a strong work ethic and therefore more socioeconomically successful than other minorities. Developed in the aftermath of World War II, the myth served as a political tool to create a "racial wedge" of sorts between minority groups, particularly Asians and Blacks.[25] Following the release of Japanese-Americans from internment camps, the media "created the idea that the Japanese were rising up out of the ashes," and begged the question, "Now if Asians can make it, why aren't Blacks?"[26] However, this assumption severely overlooks the "selective recruitment of highly educated Asian immigrants," not to mention "making a flawed comparison between Asian Americans and…Black Americans, to argue that racism, including more than two centuries of

23 McNeil, 37.
24 Ibid.
25 "About," Letters for Black Lives, last updated 2021, https://lettersforblacklives.com/about-the-letter-ed27ea67eb2e.
26 Pyong Gap Min, "The Structure and Social Functions of Korean Immigrant Churches in the United States," *International Migration Review* 26.4 (Winter 1992), 1370.

black enslavement, can be overcome by hard work and strong family values."[27] Moreover, the Model Minority Myth treats Asian-Americans as a monolith, failing to recognize the diverse range of groups, experiences, and vantage points contained therein. In so keeping, the Model Minority Myth undermines the challenges that various Asian-Americans face.[28]

Roadmap to Racial Reconciliation

In *Roadmap to Racial Reconciliation*, bestselling author Brenda Salter McNeil defines racial reconciliation as "an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to reflect God's original intention for all creation to flourish."[29] She states that the long, albeit worthy process of racial reconciliation is often, if not always, preceded by "catalytic event[s]," or "painful but necessary experiences that...serve to jump-start the reconciliation process."[30] While most definitely painful indeed, the 1992 LA riots served as the perfect opportunity to act as a catalytic event between the Black and Korean communities, respectively, in resolving interracial conflict. More recent examples include the aforementioned March 2021 Atlanta massacre and killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. In offering a "roadmap" of sorts towards reconciliation, McNeil refers to the Contact Theory, namely that "relationships between conflicting groups will improve if they have meaningful contact with one another over an extended period of time."[31] The author goes further to state that this contact must occur in "a *mutually* beneficial learning environment and multiple learning opportunities."[32]

27 Chandler Im, "The Korean Diaspora Churches in the USA: Their Concerns and Strengths," in *Global Diasporas and Mission* (Minneapolis: 1517 Media. 2014), 134.
28 Kurien, 85.
29 Edward Taehan Chang, "Toward Understanding Korean and African American Relations," *OAH Magazine of History* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1996), 68.
30 Ibid.
31 Min and Kim, 272-273.
32 Ibid.

In the past, one potential barrier may have been language. However, second-generation Korean-Americans possess a unique advantage in that many of them speak both English and Korean. Thus, they can serve not only as agents of reconciliation and initiate dialogue with their Black brothers and sisters, but also with their Korean mothers and fathers, and aunts and uncles. A powerful moving illustration of how second-generation Korean-Americans can serve as a bridge between Korean-speaking immigrants and the Black Community is evidenced in the "Letters for Black Lives" campaign. Beginning with a group of Asian Americans and Canadians "writing an intergenerational letter to voice [their] concerns and support for the Black community," the letter has since been translated into dozens of Asian languages and used by Asian-American immigrant children to explain Black Lives Matter to their parents.[33]

The A-R-C Model of Racial Justice

In *How to Fight Racism*, author and activist Jemar Tisby offers the A-R-C model of racial justice, namely (1) Awareness, (2) Relationship, and (3) Commitment.[34] I believe this offers an immensely helpful framework in addressing Black-Korean racial tensions and pursuing racial reconciliation between the two groups. First, there must be increased awareness of systemic racism at large, but also the unique and distinct histories of both Koreans and Blacks in the U.S. Whereas the Black community holds negative stereotypes of Koreans in light of their "immigrant" status, Korean immigrants fail to properly understand the unique experience of Blacks in America. For instance, while Blacks envy Korean-Americans for apparent "success" in their entrepreneurship, part of the reason Koreans are so successful in such endeavors is due to their monolingual background, which simultaneously prevents them from entering the general

33 Min and Kim, 273-275.
34 Jemar Tisby, *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 4-5.

labor market in which English fluency is needed. On the other hand, since most Korean immigrants arrived after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, they are incognizant of the "long history of racial discrimination" that the Black Community has faced and continues to face, albeit in less overt ways. Hence, Korean-Americans often buy into the model minority myth, believing that if one simply tries hard enough, one may succeed.[35]

As they learn one another's stories and share fellowship together, Blacks and Korean immigrants may be surprised to learn they have parallel, albeit distinct, histories of oppression and exploitation. Due to the exclusion of Asian American history from school textbooks, our Black brothers and sisters in Christ may have never heard of the major first wave of Korean immigrants recruited for plantation labor in Hawaii or the Japanese colonization of Korea in the first half of the twentieth century. Likewise, Korean-Americans like myself may be surprised to hear that the Civil Rights movement and ensuing Civil Rights Act of 1964 paved the road for the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which in turn opened the door for the third major wave of migration from Korea. I believe much of the misunderstanding and strained relations between Koreans and Blacks stems from their lack of "meaningful contact" with one another. The author goes further to state that this contact must occur in "a *mutually* beneficial learning environment and multiple learning opportunities."[36]

In this sense I believe that second-generation Korean-American congregations are uniquely situated to foster spaces of connection and deep relationship. Earlier it was mentioned that for the most part, English-language congregations more closely resemble white evangelical congregations rather than their first-generation counterparts—this ranges from music, fashion,

35 Sandra Maria Van Opstal, *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 117.
36 Ibid.

sermons, to prayers. Yet, ironically, the one ingredient which seemed to tie first and second-generation congregations together, culturally speaking, is Korean food. Cultural Korean values of fellowship and hospitality were maintained within second-generation congregations by means of food after service, whether this encompassed an actual meal or otherwise snacks.[37] In so keeping, simply having fellowship and sharing a meal between Black and Korean American brothers and sisters in the church will go a long way towards dismantling stereotypes and creating greater mutual understanding. An additional step would be to show solidarity in times of tragedy, such as the ongoing anti-Asian hate crimes as well as the innocent killing of Black lives. This could range from holding prayer vigils, preaching in the pulpit against systemic racism and mentioning recent events, to peaceful protests and marches. In *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World*, Van Opstal offers the following three principles as guidelines for pursuing multiethnic worship: hospitality, solidarity, and mutuality. In other words, effective worship communicates, "We welcome you"; "We stand with you"; and "We need you."[38] While this does not mean Korean-American churches need to turn multiethnic, per se, I believe that creating spaces in worship to address racial injustice and formulate solidarity are good and necessary. Last but not least, true racial justice requires commitment. This last branch of the A-R-C model involves holistic reform and policy change. Due to the systemic and institutional nature of racism, simply raising awareness and fostering meaningful relationships is insufficient to produce racial reconciliation. There must be changes in the law, court, politics, and every sector of society.

Conclusion

37"Stop AAPI Hate National Report," Stop AAPI Hate, accessed March 18, 2023, https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/21-SAH-NationalReport2-v2.pdf.
38 Chung-shin Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 29.

This paper has sought to address the question of to what extent the Korean-American church can act as an agent of racial reconciliation between the Black and Asian communities. As seen earlier, Christianity was woven into the fabric of Korean-American history and continues to play a huge role today. If widespread change amongst the Korean-American community is going to start anywhere, it is going to begin with the church. While the journey is long and most certainly will not be easy, I believe it is our God-given responsibility and daresay privilege to act as ministers of reconciliation in healing the wounded histories and relationships between our Black brothers and sisters and the Asian community, starting with Korean-Americans (2 Cor. 5:18-19).

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