

Minae Kang

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Analysis of the Culture and Worship in a Korean Diaspora Church

The Peace Korean Reform Church (PKRC) is a Korean-speaking, American reformed diaspora church located in Fair Lawn, New Jersey. Interviews and a one-on-one time with leaders revealed the interesting history of not only the church, but the denomination. PKRC belongs, or is associated to the Reformed Church in America. The history of the Reformed Church goes up to the Reformation era. The two great reformers of the Reformation were Martin Luther, a German, and John Calvin, a Frenchman. From those two reformers came the Lutheran Church following Luther's theology and the Reformed/Presbyterian Church following Calvin's theology.

Among the churches following Calvin's theology, the church that came to America via Scotland is called the Presbyterian Church, and the church that came to America via the Netherlands is called the Reformed Church. In other words, the Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Church follow the same theology, and have an administrative system in which a representative of the church members is elected to administer the church like a pastor. So, Princeton Theological Seminary, which represents the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUSA), does not call Presbyterian theology Presbyterian Theology, but Reformed Theology/Reformed Theology.

The senior pastor also studied theology in both Korea and US at Presbyterian Theological Seminary (Jangsin Daesin University, Union Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary), and also studied at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, a denomination theological school to which PKRC belongs. The senior pastor was also a pastor of

the Presbyterian Church in Korea and belonged to the Presbyterian denomination to which many renowned churches belonged. In other words, The Reformed Church and the Presbyterian Church have the same theological practice and pastoral administration. And Rev. Underwood, the first Presbyterian missionary to come to Korea in 1885, graduated from NYU, studied theology at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and was sent to Korea as a missionary.

In this way, the RCA denomination is a church established by Dutch Christians who came to the United States. The first university the Dutch Christians established in America was Queens College in 1766. Then, when Queens College was going through financial difficulties, a man named Henry Rutgers made a donation in 1825 and the name of the college was changed to Rutgers. And in 1945, it became a state university. Soon after, Rutgers State University itself started out as an RCA school to what it is today.

PKRC had three distinct visions: Church, Holy Spirit, and Disciple Visions. The Church Vision is that homes and Korean churches are restored through healthy churches, and for God's kingdom expanding to all nations. Holy Spirit Vision is to become a powerful Christian in every life by experiencing the filling of the Holy Spirit to achieve world evangelization. Disciple Vision is that all believers become disciples of Jesus in order to make other disciples with the gospel in order to fulfill Jesus' command. The head pastor's philosophy on his pastoral ministry is: a church led by the Holy Spirit, a church that nurtures talented people, a church where the laity minister, a church that builds strong families, a church that changes the world.

The church consists of first-generation Korean immigrants, 1.5 and second generation Korean-Americans. The church has two worship services that are in Korean, or KM (Korean Ministry) as well as an afternoon service that is in English. (EM, English Ministry) PKRC had been led by the head pastor, Rev. Kim since 2006. There are approximately 120 members in the

Korean ministry. Many of the congregations have lived in New Jersey for more than 20 years, working as small business owners, working in restaurants, nail salon, laundromats, etc. It was rare that families moved out of the town since the education system is well-known. Many of their children had K-12 education in Fair Lawn. Occasionally, new members will join because the Sunday School service has a great program. There were many families with young children within the congregation. There are approximately twenty members who attend the English service, most of them being in college. Many of these college students have attended this church since they were very young, or since the Youth Group.

The history of Korean Americans in the diaspora context can be traced back to the late 1800s, when a small group of Koreans came to the United States as students, diplomats, and migrant laborers. However, it wasn't until the end of the Korean War in 1953 that significant numbers of Koreans began to immigrate to the United States. (Woo, 2012) Between 1950 and 1964, approximately 8,000 Koreans immigrated to the United States. Most of these early immigrants were war brides, soldiers, and their families who had been sponsored by the U.S. military. These early immigrants faced significant cultural and linguistic barriers, as well as discrimination and racism. In the decades that followed, the Korean American community grew rapidly, with immigrants coming to the United States in search of economic opportunities and political stability. By the 1980s, Korean Americans had become one of the fastest-growing immigrant groups in the United States, with a population of over 500,000. (Min, 1998)

Despite this growth, Korean Americans faced numerous challenges in adapting to life in the United States. Many struggled with language barriers, discrimination, and a lack of access to social services. In addition, the Korean American community was deeply affected by the 1992 Los Angeles riots, which resulted in significant damage to Korean American businesses and

community institution. (Min, 1998) Through these challenges, Korean Americans have made significant contributions to American society in fields such as business, politics, education, and the arts. They have also worked to preserve their cultural heritage through the establishment of community organizations, cultural festivals, and Korean language school. Today, Korean Americans continue to face challenges, including discrimination, political polarization, and economic inequality. However, they remain a vibrant and resilient community, with a rich cultural heritage and a strong sense of identity and community- church being one of them.

In the mid-20th century when Korean immigrants began to settle in America, many of them initially attended predominantly white Protestant churches but they soon began to form their own ethnic churches to meet their unique cultural and spiritual needs. The first Korean American church was established in 1903 in Hawaii, but the Korean War in the 1950s marked the beginning of significant Korean immigration to the United States and the formation of more Korean American churches.

The majority of these early churches were Presbyterian, reflecting the dominant Christian tradition in Korea. In the following decades, the number of Korean American churches grew rapidly, with new churches being established in major cities across the US. These churches served as important social and cultural centers for Korean immigrants, providing a sense of community and connection to their cultural roots. Korean American churches have also played a significant role in the development of Korean American identity and culture. They have served as platforms for the expression of Korean American identity and the preservation of Korean cultural traditions, including language, music, dance, and food. (Kim & Kim, 2005)

Most of PKRC members have settled in the United States. Even after COVID-19, not many congregations went back to Korea except to make short visits for vacation. All of the

congregation's Bibles are printed by the Korean Presbyterian Press, along with small group bible study books. The congregation also has lunch catered from local Korean restaurants. Rev. Kim is very flexible and understands the culture of both the first generation as well as the second generations. He puts emphasis on the importance of the transition, or linking the gap between these two generations so that faith can be passed on to the next generation. As he began his ministry at PKRC, his wife worked in ministry full time to support the church.

The only difference that the church has experienced greatly happened over the last three years- absence of the worship team and the fellowship time after service. After COVID, the weekly lunch hour has been discontinued, which did affect lack of fellowship and communication among the congregation. Thankfully, the lunch hour will start again starting this Month. PKRC used to have a worship/praise team with instruments and vocalists; however, ever since the leaders (husband & wife) had to move to California, only the pianist remains as the instrument. The style of music had change- from contemporary Christian music to more hymns to start Sunday service. There are 8 staff that work as leaders. Some are involved in outreach, some are small group coordinators, and others are overall leaders who oversee the congregation. Like mentioned before, there are other ministries besides KM and EM, such as Sunday School, Youth Group, small group bible study, etc. The staff include both men and women as leaders.

The diaspora church needs to target different age groups. One ministry PKRC does is Saturday Korean School for young children. This program is open to anyone who wants to learn Korean. Church members, non-church members, believers, or non-believers, it is a great way to evangelize. One family had a seven-year-old son who attended this Saturday Korean class with a friend. Because the program was so fun, he ended up attending Sunday service. Eventually, his parents wanted to see what the church was like and ended up becoming congregation members.

PKRC actively goes to summer missions to Bolivia and Peru every year. They have connections to missionaries in both Bolivia and Peru and help their ministry to build communities, including churches, schools, homes, etc. The mission team prepare for months in advance to learn the language, make skits/musical, prepare materials for VBS, and etc. One leader is a Chiropractor so he joins as a medical member. Another leader, Mr. Im, participates in missions to teach Taekwondo and to introduce the gospel using Taekwondo curriculum.

In an interview, Mr. Im said that every year he brings 50 gold medals to give out as prizes. In the past, many people, especially the younger generations, memorized John 3:16 by memory and received the prize. The youngest member in the mission team was Jessica, a freshman in high school. She said that this year will be her 5th year joining. Summer mission is what she looks forward to every year because it changes the way she views life. The more she participates, the more she realizes how privileged she is to be living as a Korean American in the United States. She was also grateful that although her church, PKRC is a small church, that they are able to have connections with missionaries who are in other countries.

Citations:

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Kim, J. K. (2005). Korean Americans. In J. Min (Ed.), *Asian Americans: Contemporary Trends and Issues* (pp. 67-94). Sage Publications.

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Field notes: Sunday. February 5, 2023

I participated in the KM service at 10 AM. From the entrance, I was greeted by a few members of the church. It turns out, there is a separate “greet” team who stands by the entrance to make sure all congregations are welcomed. I was handed the worship program along with the offering envelope. The whole service is in Korean and power point is used for many things- lyrics, bible verses, announcements, etc. Everyone is quite reserved when singing. After service, the hospitality was exceptional and very friendly. I was handed a ‘first time’ goodie bag with mint, mini tissue, and a keychain.

Field notes: Good Friday. April 7, 2023

I participated in the KM Good Friday Service at 7 pm. Before service started, Rev. Kim mentioned that we shouldn’t be gathering in the attitude of attending a funeral. Rather, we should be worshipping with a heart full of thanks and love to Jesus. The Sunday School children had prepared a song for the service, as well as a few volunteers to had practiced a special song in small groups. It was good to see all generation worshipping together.

