Korean-American UM Clergy: Spiritual Formation through Group Discernment

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In the summer of 2009 I had an opportunity, through the Lilly Foundation and George Fox University in Portland, Ore., to participate in a peer learning group using the discernment process. After the initial gathering, each participant was asked to lead a peer discernment group in their own setting. I decided to lead a group of Korean American United Methodist pastors and candidates for ordained ministry, from the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference. There were six participants in our group. We met 12 times between September and December 2009. The group was composed of four ordained clergy and two candidates for ordained ministry:

- three ordained clergy who are serving non-Korean UM churches;
- one ordained clergy who is serving Korean UM churches; and
- two candidates for ordained ministry who are in seminary and are working in non-Korean UM churches.

The material that we used for our discernment process was The Way of Discernment by Steven Doughty & Marjorie J. Thompson from The Upper Room publications.

These are the findings through our group discernment process.

**Individual versus group discernment.**

We learned that most Korean Christians are not familiar with the group or communal discernment process. They are better at individual discernment than at communal discernment processes. This is because of the different understandings of pastoral authority within the church structure as compared to European/Caucasian Christians. Most Korean Christians expect to be fed spiritually by their pastor, and they believe it is the pastor's job to discern for the congregation. They are willing to follow the pastor's guidance and his (mostly male pastors) decision regarding the vision and goals for the church. The dynamics in the church are the typical “shepherd and sheep” model. The pastor has a strong authority in all decision making. It often brings unrealistic expectations on the pastor and rather harsh judgments on any mistake made by the pastor. The congregations rarely vote in decision making. They agree in spirit. They rarely disagree with the pastor, the anointed one. There is a heavy emphasis on the spiritual authority of the pastor.
Prayer is the main tool.

Many Korean Christians use prayer as their main tool for discernment of God’s will. Prayer is the strongest of the spiritual disciplines for Korean Christians. Most Korean Churches have a Dawn Service every day at 5 a.m. and Late Night Service on Fridays. Both services are well attended and consist of brief singing, reading of scripture, a sermon, and individual prayer. The individual prayer time is as long as is needed. The prayer time at the Friday Late Night Service can last an hour or two, easily.

Education is key.

The group realized there is a need for educating lay people in participating in the group or communal discernment process. They also realized that it has to start with the pastor, with willingness to share the spiritual authority with lay people. Sometimes it takes letting go of authority to gain authority. Many of the lay people in the Korean church are not trained to do communal discernment; they are not familiar with the idea. Often times, it appears as though it is easier and more convenient for lay people not to do communal discernment, and for pastors to stay in this tradition, unwilling to change the way things are done.

The call to ministry.

In the discussions concerning their personal calls to ministry, there was much honest and heartfelt sharing amongst the group. The call to the ordained ministry is a call to be a shepherd, not the CEO of a company. However, in reality, pastors are under constant pressure to make the church grow in number and reach financial stability. Often they felt like their job was to run a company rather than be a pastor of the church, not to mention the quality of being a pastor - spiritual growth and care of being a faith community. They also shared their personal struggles - family, finance, and health issues. They felt sorry for their family and said they did not spend enough time with them, even though their spouses and children understood and supported their ministries. Financial hardship is another difficult obstacle for pastors and their families. It is a major stress factor in their lives.

Struggles.

The candidates for ordained ministry shared their struggle in discerning God’s will in their call to ministry. Is the church they want to serve going to be a Korean church or non-Korean church? Many questions arose as the sharing continued. “Is my English good enough to serve an English speaking congregation?” “Would the cultural difference between us be a stumbling block in serving non-Korean church?” “Would I enjoy working in non-Korean church?” “How about my family? Would the non-Korean congregation willingly accept me and my family?”
Cultural differences.

Cultural differences of Korean United Methodists within the denomination: What does it mean to be a Korean United Methodist in The United Methodist Church?

The group shared their thoughts about this issue and agreed on few things. Most of the Korean UM churches are not following the appointment system: their pastor being appointed to a local church by the bishop. Instead they practice the call system: finding a pastor on their own as they do in Korea.

There is a lack of denominational loyalty. For many Korean Christians, the concept of denomination means very little. Among the Protestants, denominational identity is not that clear either. These two go together and there are so many competitions. There are more Korean churches of various denominations than the whole Korean population in the area.

Most of Korean United Methodist pastors who serve Korean United Methodist churches do not follow itinerancy. Many of them were ordained in the Korean Methodist church in Korea and were called to the U.S., by Korean United Methodist congregations.

Need for strengthening the relationship within the Korean Caucus.

The Association of United Methodist Korean Pastors (Korean caucus) in the Baltimore Washington Conference has had deterioration in the interpersonal relationships amongst its members. For example, one group of pastors is serving in Korean churches and the other group is serving a non-Korean churches (cross-cultural/ cross-racial appointment). They do not have a lot in common because each of their circumstances is different. The pastors serving Korean churches, who happen to be the senior members of the caucus, have withdrawn themselves from the caucus, as the group of pastors serving non-Korean churches has grown. Another concern of the caucus is that there are a few members who are undermining the authority and integrity of the caucus. Often times it appears as if they are deliberately trying to go against the expressed wishes of the caucus.

Need to respond to the needy in the Korean community.

There are a growing number of Koreans who have lost jobs and/or are in a financial crisis. The category most people are concerned with are the so-called illegal aliens among Koreans. They are not eligible for any unemployment benefits. Many in this category are afraid of being exposed to the authorities and deported. Their living conditions are difficult, and the help is hard to find. The question becomes as a congregation, “What can the Korean church do for them?” Do we, as Korean churches, have enough resources to help them? The answer is “No.”
What does the future hold?

The group discussed the need for a Korean church for second and third generations of Korean Americans. “Would Korean Americans still need a Korean church after the assimilation takes place?” “What happens to other ethnic groups?” The answers were “Yes” and “No.” Some ethnic groups still maintain their ethnic congregations while others don’t. At this point, there are several second-generation Korean American churches in the U.S. Of course the number of the second-generation churches is a lot less than the first-generation churches, and they are not as stable as the first-generation Korean churches financially. Whether the Korean church is going to exist generation after generation and/or how it will look in the future is something only time will tell.

It was a rewarding experience for me and all the participants. I want to express my gratitude and thanks to Dr. Paul Anderson at George Fox University and to the Lilly Foundation for allowing us to have this wonderful opportunity.

This article was submitted by The Rev. JongWoo (JW) Park, an ordained elder serving Fairhaven United Methodist Church (Gaithersburg, Md.) in the Baltimore Washington Annual Conference.

This article does not represent the view of all Korean-Americans. The views and opinions are only limited to this specific group.