Chapter 11

Response to “The Importance of Migrant Missions in South Korea”

Darrell Jackson

David Chul Han Jun’s study of migrant missions is an updated and revised version of a chapter previously published in 2011 by Regnum Press.¹ After a brief biblical introduction to “diaspora,” he refers to the 7 million Koreans who live in diaspora and who have been active in God’s mission around the globe. Though important, these 7 million are not the focus of this helpful case study. Instead, Jun introduces the predicament of foreign migrant workers in Korea, currently estimated to number around 2 million.

Jun catalogs the range of difficulties foreign migrant workers have faced in Korea, including exploitation by employers (withholding of salary, unsafe workplace practices, abuse of rights), communication obstacles (language-learning), intercultural conflict, and prejudice (regarding language, religion, and culture). He expresses his concern and argues for the necessary involvement of Korean migrant missions among these workers. The grounds for his argument are not clearly stated, but we can say that they reflect a biblically informed ethic and missiology.

Developing his argument, Jun discusses the work of migrant ministries in Korea. From among five hundred examples, he highlights ministries that address the spiritual and material needs of migrant workers in a more holistic way. In particular, he discusses the ministries of Friends of All Nations and the contribution of the Migrant Missions Network in Korea (MMNK). He concludes with a call to equip migrant workers for mission back in their countries of origin. More specifically, he anticipates that the MMNK will expand and grow as more areas of migrant mission are explored and developed.

Initial Points of Response

First, I would like to express my appreciation to David Jun for the important and sympathetically critical research he has conducted. Second, may I be permitted to observe that the chapter reflects an unresolved tension? This tension exists, I would say, between the attention given to the missionary potential of the Korean diaspora abroad and the attention also given to the need for a more holistic approach to mission among migrant workers in Korea. I believe, however, that the tension can be resolved and that a more intentional missiology might do so. Or, a simpler way to resolve the tension would be to adopt a single focus on mission to migrant workers in Korea.

Third, may I suggest a point that I think deserves further theological and biblical

reflection? Jun notes the observation made by other evangelical agencies that “some ministries to foreign workers are ineffective because they devote more energy to dealing with human rights than they do to teaching the Gospel” (XXX). Such claims, I would argue, require the presentation of a more robust and adequate biblical ethic for holistic mission.

Fourth, in developing a diaspora missiology, two theological and biblical sources are worth considering. The first of these would be for Korean migrant missions to explore together, from the Old Testament, the biblical injunctions concerning the mutual responsibilities between God’s people and the aliens living in diaspora among them. Second, in the New Testament, the Great Commandment to “love your neighbor” sits at the heart of the Lausanne Movement’s Cape Town Commitment and underlies any evangelical commitment to holistic mission.2

A More Substantial and Focused Response

I reflect here on six points of correspondence between what Jun presents and the Korean migrant community I know best—that of Sydney, Australia, the city that I now call home. This approach makes best use of my experience of mission leadership in three mission agencies (two Australian and one European).3

Seven million Koreans in diaspora. Of the 7 million Koreans in diaspora, the year 2016 found 123,000 residing in Australia; of this number 24,000 were Korean-Australians.4 In 2006 the Korean diaspora in Australia was “the sixth largest Korean community outside of Republic of Korea.”5 Some 71 percent of Korean-born Australian residents self-identify as “Christian.” In the same report, 40 percent of Koreans in Sydney reported attending church as their most frequent community activity.6 Responses (out 312 Koreans residing in Sydney) to the question “What activities are you currently involved in [in] your local community?” can be seen in the accompanying table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>No. of people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attend church</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports and recreation</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural groups</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer services</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth services</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged care services</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. See www.lausanne.org/content/ct/ctcommitment.
3. My subheadings reflect observations presented in Jun’s chapter.
6. The table is adapted from SKWA, Needs Assessment Report, 30.
Gil-Soo Han and Joy J. Han note that the first Korean churches in Sydney were established in 1974. By 2010 the city had 151 Korean Protestant churches, with schism being a significant cause of the rapid multiplication. An initial review I conducted in 2017 suggests that some consolidation has occurred, perhaps because of larger churches incorporating Koreans who were formerly attending smaller and less well-resourced churches.

*Elementary communication by migrant workers.* Several thousand Korean males traveled to Australia during and immediately after the Vietnam War. Many of the men overstayed their student or tourist visas and entered the “gray economy,” working without proper documentation. Between 1974 and 1980 the Australian government extended a series of amnesties to individuals who had overstayed their visas, many of whom, lacking strong English-language skills, found employment in low-skilled, menial, and undesirable job sectors.

Koreans migrating to Australia during the 1980s and 1990s were generally highly skilled and educated, but they faced similar challenges in acquiring the necessary English-language skills to achieve the more desirable white-collar jobs. Migrants of this generation are notable for being the most likely to suffer from psychological and mental health disorders as a result of feeling unvalued and insignificant.

*Ministries that meet needs and offer friendship.* Korean churches in Sydney have been an important point of social contact with other Koreans and have become key sites for affirming and nurturing cultural identity. Many who attended Sydney’s Korean churches did so because the church formed a supportive and therapeutic community, particularly for the migrants of the 1980s and 1990s. For them, “the difficulties they face[d], whether psychological or physical, [were] relieved by the sermons they hear[d] in the Korean immigrant churches.” For some church members, the social stigma attached to their low-status jobs, such as cleaning, could be relieved through serving as deacons or elders of their local Korean church. They worked as cleaners, but prayed as elders!

*Many Koreans are not ready for intercultural coexistence.* Kwang Chung Kim and Shin Kim, in writing of Korean American churches, note an “almost complete indifference to needs outside” their own Korean congregations. These trends can also be observed in Sydney’s Korean churches, despite the confident claim by Rev. Sang-taek Lee as long ago as 1989 that “we are here to influence and improve every part of the Australian society. . . . We should realize that

8. Ibid., 27.
God has sent us to Australia to carry out such missions.”

Missiological analysis suggests that the insular location of Korean congregations within areas of high Korean population density is a further indication of Korean churches’ reluctance to engage with ethnic difference, a conclusion implied as well, I think, by Jun’s own case study.

**Discrimination, forced labor, inadequate salary, physical and verbal abuse, delayed wages, withheld identification credentials.** Korean migrants to Australia who arrived after the economic crash and International Monetary Fund intervention in Korea in 1997 came looking for a new start. They were unemployed or bankrupt, and they were traumatized. Koreans already living in Australia did not readily welcome them. New immigrants complained that they were being exploited by Korean employers and businesses. Gil-Soo Han discovered that “Korean migrants are not only the victims of racial discrimination, but are also exercising it, for example, Korean small business persons employing recent ‘non-English speaking background’ migrants at lower rates of pay than those earned by Korean workers.”

My students and colleagues share stories of newly qualified seminary students being encouraged to acquire a religious worker visa so as to enter Australia to begin working in a church. The church worker is then exploited, underpaid, and overworked. If such workers complain, they are warned that the church can withdraw their visa sponsorship. Those who become eligible for permanent residency after four years frequently leave that initial congregation and start their own. Some then sponsor other Koreans on religious worker visas and start the cycle of exploitation anew.

**Use of the Korean diaspora for the future of Korean overseas mission.** A Korean-Australian recently related to me the story of an elderly Korean missionary working in a deprived area of Sydney with a high aboriginal population. The missionary had limited proficiency in English but fed and loved the aboriginal community. My student had initially dismissed this man’s missionary efforts, but later he attended the funeral of an aboriginal Christian and learned that the deceased had become a believer just a few months previously and was the fruit of that missionary’s loving and faithful witness.

Han and Han suggest that Korean church growth in Sydney was due, in part, to “the presence of many theological graduates from Korea.” We can assume that some of them understood themselves to be cross-cultural “missionaries,” for as Robert Buswell and Timothy Lee observe, “The Korean Protestant churches commissioned more missionaries than did any other national church except the United States.” For the great majority of Koreans in Sydney, however, the challenge of cross-cultural mission remains unrealized, for reasons already spelled out above.

**Conclusion**

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Even brief exposure to the Korean diaspora in Sydney highlights the need to develop intercultural practices of ministry that take their cue from the Messiah who came as a migrant to serve all. Understood in this way, for a Korean to work as a cleaner and pray as an elder can be interpreted as the hallmark of a truly missionary people in diaspora, liberated from the disabling effects of disempowerment, shame, and dishonor.