

Religion and Race

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Evangelizing White Americans: Sacrifice, Race, and a Korean Mission Movement in America

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Abstract: This paper examines the phenomena of non-western missionaries evangelizing in the West through a case study of a Korean mission movement in the United States. It discusses how Korean missionaries of color were able to evangelize white Americans in the late 1970s and have had some success in cross-racial evangelism. It argues that Korean missionaries practiced a theology of sacrifice to evangelize white Americans. They practically embraced suffering, self-denial, and service and specialized in sacrifice to evangelize Americans. An important part of this theology, however, included uplifting and privileging white converts. Given their long history with white-American missionaries and American imperialism, Korean evangelicals were privy to a white-dominant racial hierarchy in American society. This affected those whom the missionaries in my study viewed to be the “real Americans” and the “ideal native” converts in America. It also shaped how they sought to evangelize and draw the white population into their congregations.

Keywords: Korean missionaries; South Korea; Global Christianity; World Christianity; reverse missions

Growing numbers of missionaries from the global South are moving to the West to evangelize and revitalize the “white natives” of the West. Missionaries from countries in parts of Africa, Latin America, and Asia that have been the destination countries for white-western missionaries in the last five centuries are sending missionaries back to the West.¹ Europe now receives more missionaries than Africa, and the United States is a top missionary destination.² Although there is growing awareness of this boomerang trend in missions, journalists, scholars, and leaders of Christian communities in the West suspect that this kind of evangelism is mostly talk and wishful thinking. To many Westerners, missionaries of color from the global South “planting churches like Starbucks”³ across the United States, and filling their churches with “white native” converts is more hype than reality, particularly because actual case studies that document such evangelism efforts are virtually nonexistent.

As is the case for research on non-western missionaries’ evangelism efforts in the United States, research on Christian immigrants’ cross-racial religious engagement in the United States is also sparse. Existing sociological research on Christian immigrants and their settlement in the United States have predominately

1 Adogame and Shankar, “Religion”; Catto, “From the Rest”; Hanciles, “Beyond”; Jenkins, “The Next”; Kim, “The Spirit”; Währisch-Oblau, “From Reverse”; Wuthnow, “Boundless.”

2 Center for the Study of Global Christianity, “Christianity”, 76.

3 This phrase stems from an article on Nigerian Pentecostals from the Redeemed Christian Church of God in North America planting churches in the United States (Meeks, “Nigerian Pentecostals”).

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treated immigrant congregations as ethnic enclaves that are largely disengaged from the broader society.⁴ This has certainly been the case for studies on the religious engagement of Korean immigrants, one of the most Christian immigrant groups among contemporary immigrants in America.⁵ Approximately 70 to 80 percent of Koreans in the United States identify as Christians and the majority of the Korean Christians gather in the 4,000 or so ethnically homogenous Korean congregations across the country.⁶ Much of the literature on Korean Christians' religious engagement has focused on their ethnically-insular religious engagement in Korean churches that essentially function as an ethnic third space, a "home away from home" where co-ethnics can gather to reconstruct their ethnic identity, rebuild community, and settle in a foreign land.⁷ Although Korean Christians, most of whom are Protestant, are famous for their evangelical fervor and passion for missions, studies of their religious engagement remain largely confined to ethnically-enclosed churches.⁸

Given the scarcity of studies that actually document non-western mission efforts in the United States and considering the dearth of research on cross-racial evangelism efforts among contemporary immigrants, this paper uniquely examines a Korean mission movement that has been active in evangelizing Americans, particularly white Americans, in the United States for over four decades. Based on research conducted from 2008 to 2011 into the University Bible Fellowship (UBF), one of the largest South Korean mission agencies that has sent many of its missionaries to the United States, I discuss how Korean missionaries of color were able to evangelize white Americans and have had some success in their cross-racial evangelism efforts in America. I do this by drawing primarily from data collected through interviews with some of the pioneer Korean missionaries in UBF who arrived in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s.⁹

Taking the perspective of these early Korean missionaries, I argue that the Korean missionaries practiced a theology of sacrifice to evangelize white Americans. They practically embraced suffering, self-denial, and service and specialized in sacrifice in order to evangelize Americans. I found, however, that an important part of this theology included uplifting and privileging white converts. Given their history with white-American missionaries and American imperialism, Korean evangelicals were privy to a white-dominant racial hierarchy in American society. This affected those whom the missionaries in my study viewed to be the "real Americans" and the "ideal native" converts in America—white people. It also shaped how they sought to evangelize and draw these whites into their congregations.

A Korean Mission Movement in America

Before Korean missionaries began serving as missionaries in America, American missionaries were in Korea. American Protestant missionaries first entered Korea in 1885, a time when Christianity was banned and persecuted. More than a century later, South Korea became one of the largest senders of missionaries around the world. In 2014, the Korean World Mission Association counted 26,677 Korean missionaries working in 170 countries.¹⁰ Although Korean missionaries are scattered throughout various parts of the world, the United States is consistently ranked as one of the top destinations of Korean missionaries.¹¹

⁴ Cadge and Ecklund, "Immigration"; Dolan, "The Immigrant"; Ebaugh and Chafetz, "Religion"; Guest, "God"; Kim, "Religion"; Min, "The Structure"; Min and Jang, "The Diversity"; Min and Kim, "Religions"; Smith, "Religion"; Warner and Wittner, "Gatherings"; Yang, "Chinese."

⁵ Min and Jang, "The Diversity", 261.

⁶ Kim, "God's"; Kim, "The Spirit"; Kwon et al., "Korean"; Min, "The Structure"; Min, "Preserving"; Min and Jang, "The Diversity"; Min and Kim, "Religions."

⁷ Kim and Kim, "Revival"; Kwon et al., "Korean"; Min, "The Structure"; Min and Kim, "Religions"; Yoo and Chung, "Religion."

⁸ Kwon et al., "Korean"; Min, "The Structure"; Min, "Preserving"; Min and Jang, "The Diversity."

⁹ My data primarily consist of interviews and surveys of Koreans along with some of the white American leaders and members of UBF. Given the scope of my data, this paper's discussion on evangelism and the American racial dynamic focuses on the perspective of Koreans, specifically of Korean missionaries who were born in South Korea around the time of the Korean War and who were sent as missionaries to the United States in the 1970s and 1980s.

¹⁰ Park, "The Missionary", 24; Ma and Ahn, "Korean."

¹¹ Kim, "Korean"; Kim, "The Spirit"; KRIM, "Korean"; Moon et al, "Missions."

This is partly because one of the largest missionary-sending agencies in South Korea, the University Bible Fellowship, sends many of its missionaries to the United States.¹²

Founded in 1961 in South Korea, the UBF is an international campus evangelical organization with a reputation of being aggressive and fanatical about world campus mission. With chapters on every major college and university campus in South Korea, the ministry focuses on dispatching self-supporting missionaries to college campuses across the world. UBF has been sending missionaries to various parts of the world since the late 1960s, focusing on non-diaspora discipleship (evangelizing non-Koreans) and church planting.¹³ Given that the two founders of UBF moved to the United States from Korea in the 1970s and that one of its founders is an American, a significant percentage of UBF missionaries are in the United States.¹⁴ As of 2008, 42.15 percent of UBF's 1,414 Korean missionaries were in the United States.¹⁵ With approximately one hundred "native," mostly white, Americans who are active leaders in the ministry, the U.S. UBF has had some success at evangelizing in the United States.¹⁶

As self-supporting missionaries, Korean UBF missionaries must go to countries where they can financially support themselves as they engage in their mission work. This made the United States an attractive destination. At a time in the 1970s when a Korean citizenship allowed limited entrance into various countries of the world, the Korean evangelicals in UBF, who were willing to go to any country that would have them and where they could also support themselves, took advantage of the doors open for immigration to the United States. Hundreds of UBF missionaries entered the United States following the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, which lifted racially-biased quotas on immigration and sought to draw skilled laborers. The missionaries moved to the United States as students or professionals, particularly in the field of medicine, and financially supported themselves as they engaged in their primary task of campus evangelism. Most settled in large cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York where they could find employment and be close to colleges and universities.

Korean UBF missionaries were also in the United States because they believed that the nation was seriously in need of spiritual revival. They imagined the United States to be a powerful "Christian" nation that was losing its spiritual fire: although a country that is perhaps the most influential country in the world and home to the greatest number of Christians in the world, it was believed to be faltering in its faith, overwhelmed by secularism, hedonism, humanism, and materialism.¹⁷ In such a powerful nation in apparent spiritual decline, the missionaries focused on evangelizing a population that they believed was particularly in need of revival and conversion—young students on secular college and university campuses.

This paper is based on the stories of this early wave of Korean UBF missionaries born about the time of the Korean War (1950-1953) and were sent to the United States as missionaries in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁸

¹² Kim, "The Edinburgh", 17; Park, "A Survey"; Park, "The Missionary", 25. According to the Korean World Mission Association's (KWMA) 2010 figures, UBF sent the most number of missionaries out to foreign countries among Korean mission agencies. UBF sent 1,718 missionaries to 82 nations.

¹³ Kim, "The Spirit."

¹⁴ The American co-founder is a former missionary to Korea from the United States.

¹⁵ *UBF Missionary Statistics and Address 2008*.

¹⁶ Most of the UBF chapters in the United States that I observed for my research fit the definition of a multiracial congregation commonly used by sociologists studying diverse congregations, which is that no more than 80 percent of the congregation consists of one ethnic or racial group. Most of the UBF chapters had a majority of Koreans along with sizable numbers of whites and other ethnic/racial groups. For example, during my participant observations, the largest UBF chapter was approximately 60 percent Korean, 30 percent white, and 10 percent "other."

¹⁷ By a "Christian" nation, I mean that the United States is home to the most number of Christians in the world and also sends out the most number of missionaries in the world (Center for the Study of Global Christianity, "Christianity"); also note Kim, "The Spirit."

¹⁸ For a more extensive discussion on why Korean missionaries are drawn to the United States, please refer to Kim, "The Spirit."

Method

The data for the paper consist of 108 personal interviews and 186 online surveys of the missionaries, leaders, and the past and present members of the UBF (2008-2011). Participant observations were also conducted over the span of four years at several of the largest UBF chapters in the United States, as well as in South Korea, where I gathered UBF mission reports, missionaries' testimonies, and other UBF publications. I also took part in other international Korean missionary gatherings through the Global Inter-Missions Network and conducted participant observations at various missions-oriented Korean churches in and around the Los Angeles area.

Theology of Sacrifice

One of the major challenges for cross-racial evangelism in the United States is that Sunday mornings, the time when most Christian congregations gather to worship, are some of the most segregated hours of America.¹⁹ The majority of Americans worship in racially-segregated spaces, and multiracial congregations, particularly those that are led by immigrants, are scarce. In this context, it seems nearly impossible that foreign-born missionaries of colour from outside of the West could bridge the racial divide and evangelize white Americans. As missiologist Jehu J. Hanciles writes, "...the challenges involved in a non-Western missionary encounter with American society are as formidable as the idea itself is unconventional."²⁰

The Korean missionaries in my study took on the challenge of cross-racial missions and proselytized Americans by practicing an intense theology of sacrifice. They embraced sacrifice and dogged-hard work to make their mission possible. The essential elements of the missionaries' theology of sacrifice were suffering, self-denial, and service.

Suffering, Self-Denial, and Service

Korean UBF missionaries in the U.S. imagined themselves as spiritual soldiers and "wore sacrifice as a badge of honor."²¹ As such, they accepted suffering as a critical part of their mission life. In the early years of UBF, members who aspired to be missionaries took an oath. The first part of this oath was, "We are soldiers of the Lord Jesus Christ." The second part of the oath was, "For the sake of Bible Korea and World Mission, we participate in the *sufferings* of Christ voluntarily."²²

Embracing suffering, the Korean UBF missionaries denied their inclination to pursue a comfortable, "easygoing life" in America and strived to obey Jesus' command to preach the gospel. As self-supporting missionaries, many of the UBF missionaries held full-time jobs or were busy as full-time graduate students. They entered the United States in their late 20s or 30s as professionals or graduate students and supported themselves financially as they engaged in campus evangelism. They also had minimal cultural training, and their English was far from perfect. It therefore required tremendous sacrifice and effort to prioritize cross-racial evangelism on college and university campuses with young Americans.

While adjusting to their new lives and occupations, UBF missionaries maintained a rigorous work schedule to carry out their mission.²³ Although most of the missionaries had young children and growing families of their own, they participated, without fail, in multiple ministry-related activities. They met for daily early-morning prayer and attended numerous fellowship meetings, worship gatherings, and Bible studies throughout the week. They also planned and took part in various seasonal Bible conferences throughout the year. Most importantly, the missionaries actively went out to their mission field to evangelize and study the Bible with American students.

¹⁹ Christerson et al., "Against"; Emerson and Smith, "Divided."

²⁰ Hanciles, "Beyond", 381-382; also note Währisch-Oblau, "The Missionary."

²¹ Schafer et al., "University", 129.

²² *World Mission Report 2008*, 160, emphasis added.

²³ Schafer et al., "University."

In the early days of UBF in America, Korean missionaries were expected to go out to campuses daily and to invite students to Bible studies in what may be referred to as “cold-turkey” evangelism. Unlike many American churches that wait for new members to come to their church (e.g., through familial or friendship ties), the Korean missionaries actively evangelized. They embraced aggressive “cold-turkey” evangelism, simply went up to strangers and students that they saw on the college campus, and inquired about their interest in having one-on-one Bible studies with them. If the missionaries had full-time jobs, they were expected to engage in this kind of evangelism and have at least five personal Bible studies with different students in a week. If the missionaries did not have full-time jobs, they were expected to have twelve Bible studies with students, and some missionaries even had twenty Bible studies in a week. Since most of the students that the Korean missionaries approached on the college campus and invited to Bible studies rejected their offer, it required great persistence and effort to have so many Bible studies with different students.²⁴

Korean missionaries’ willingness to suffer and deny themselves for the sake of mission resonated with American students. One of the students, who is now a UBF staff member, explained, “My Bible teacher was eight months pregnant with a full-time job and was happy and willing to meet me for Bible studies in the bitter Chicago winter.” The humble lifestyle of the missionaries was noted by their American converts, particularly given that they knew that the missionaries did not have to live that way as college-educated professionals, as described by one white-American convert: “What impressed me the most was the lifestyle.... They lived humbly in small apartments with bare essentials for furniture....ate simple meals... often wore the same clothes every day.” Americans in UBF saw that the missionaries were not getting paid to be missionaries, but spent their extra time and money on their mission work and lived modestly for the sake of mission.

The white Americans also understood that the missionaries teaching the Bible to them in an North American, hence alien, culture and language was itself a form of self-denial and sacrifice. Given cultural and language barriers, it would have been far easier to evangelize Korean Americans rather than reach out to whites. As one of the white Americans in UBF shares, “The missionaries were dedicated to mission, they had sacrificial spirit. They denied themselves the comfort of teaching the Bible to Korean students in the Korean language and tried very hard to learn the language, tried to reach Americans.” American students were intrigued that the missionaries denied themselves and pursued the more challenging path of cross-cultural/racial missions.

Ultimately, what convinced students to stay and commit to the ministry was the level of care that the missionaries provided for them. The missionaries were thoroughly invested in serving and taking care of the students. The missionaries were the American students’ Bible teachers, but they were also their shepherds who served and took care of them in a myriad of ways. One white American woman recalls how the Korean missionaries were able to teach the Bible to American college students: “The missionaries were full of energy, zeal, and courage...They were always ready to serve, ready to loan their car to students for days on end, to open their home at any time, day or night, to listen to students talk endlessly.” The Korean missionaries confirmed that explanation as to how they were able to disciple American students: “Serve them well and love them.”

Living out their theology of sacrifice, the Korean missionaries practically served American students in a variety of ways. They invited them to their homes to eat and fellowship with them. If it was the students’ birthday, the missionaries threw a party. If it was Christmas, the missionaries bought the students gifts. If the students needed a ride, they provided transportation. If their Bible study students needed a car, they let them borrow their car. If the students did not have a place to stay, the missionaries opened their homes to them. If the students were sick, the missionaries took them to the hospital or bought them medicine. If the students needed help with their math homework, the missionaries tutored them. Korean missionaries in America practiced a theology of sacrifice and provided high levels of service and care for the American students they sought to evangelize.

²⁴ Kim, “The Spirit.”

White-Dominant Racial Hierarchy

A significant part of this theology of sacrifice that UBF Korean missionaries practised to evangelize white Americans was informed by their awareness of a white-dominant racial hierarchy in the United States, heightened by South Koreans' long history with American imperialism as well as white American Christianity and missions. This shaped the UBF Korean missionaries' view of white Americans as the most desirable converts and affected how they sought to proselytize white Americans and draw them to their congregations.

Constructed by white Europeans in their centuries of colonial and capitalist expansion, the United States is racially stratified following a white-dominant hierarchy. White people are positioned at the top of the hierarchy as the dominant group with the most power and privilege. They are the unstated norm and majority. Meanwhile, other groups such as blacks, Hispanics, and Asians are racialized and placed somewhere below whites.²⁵

Particularly since the late-twentieth century, Asian Americans have been positioned below whites and above blacks in the American racial hierarchy as "model minorities" and "honorary whites." Whites have valorized Asian Americans vis-à-vis blacks as a group that is hard working, socioeconomically mobile, and relatively non-contentious to whites. Despite this valorization as a "near-white" minority, Asian Americans continue to be socially ostracized by whites and constructed as "immutably foreign and unassimilable" in relation to whites.²⁶ "Model minority" and "honorary white" constructions of Asians coexist with constructions of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners, "gooks," and "yellow peril."²⁷ The American racial hierarchy places Asians below whites as an alien and suspect group, as monolithic "strangers from a different shore."²⁸

This white-dominant racial hierarchy is also the globalized racial hierarchy that evolved alongside western imperialism, including American imperialism.²⁹ It is the hierarchy that American imperialism as well as American Christianity has constructed, disseminated, and continues to spread across the world however subtly or willfully. Although the relationship between missionaries and imperialism is complicated and often an ambivalent and limited partnership, American missionaries, on the whole, have supported Western democracy and the free-enterprise economic system and have accepted U.S. imperialism.³⁰ To evangelize was to civilize - the two were entangled.³¹ Consequently, American missionaries - regardless of the level of intentionality - also exported all of the impositions of American imperialism, including the presumption of American cultural and moral superiority, racism, and white supremacy.

The majority of the early American missionaries were of white-European descent. Although there were other missionaries of colour, the proverbial American missionary is white.³² And the empire to which those missionaries were connected has not only asserted economic, political, and military influence over other nations, but also has perpetuated a white-dominant racial order that privileges and advantages whites and their culture over all others.

Korean missionaries were cognizant - based on their own cultural history - of the privileging of whiteness in a racial hierarchy long before they set foot on North American soil.³³ Even before the first Christian-dated century, Koreans favored white and light over black and dark colours. Under a strict agrarian hierarchy, the

²⁵ Bonilla-Silva, "Rethinking"; Bonilla-Silva, "This is"; Bonilla-Silva, "From Bi-racial"; Feagin, "Racist"; Feagin, "The White"; Kibria, "Becoming"; Kim, "The Racial"; Kim, "Imperial"; Kim, "God's"; Kim, "The Spirit"; Okihiro, "Margins"; Song, "Introduction"; Tuan, "Forever"; Wu, "Yellow"; Zhou, "Are Asian."

²⁶ Kim, "The Racial", 107.

²⁷ Bonilla-Silva, "From Bi-racial"; Feagin, "Racist"; Kibria, "Becoming"; Kim, "The Racial"; Kim, "Imperial"; Kim, "God's"; Okihiro, "Margins"; Song, "Introduction"; Tuan, "Forever"; Wu, "Yellow"; Zhou, "Are Asian."

²⁸ Takaki, "Strangers."

²⁹ Batur-VanderLippe and Feagin, "Racial"; Bonilla-Silva, "This is"; Feagin, "Racist"; Kim, "Seoul-America"; Kim, "Imperial"; Winant, "The World."

³⁰ Preston, "Sword"; Rieger, "Theology."

³¹ Noll, "A History."

³² Ibid. For example, there were African American missionaries who worked in parts of Africa since the nineteenth century.

³³ Kim, "Imperial."

nobility and elites were light skinned and the peasants who toiled in the fields were dark skinned. While “light skin denoted high social status, authority, and respect,” “dark skin betrayed the opposite.”³⁴

These existent colour hierarchies, along with the Confucian emphasis on proper positions and Koreans’ preoccupation with bloodlines, primed Koreans to adopt the Euro-American racial ideologies loosely introduced by a colonializing Japan and more clearly affirmed by Imperial America. Koreans of the early and mid-twentieth century were “uncivilized” and helpless compared to the powerful and modern white-American missionaries, soldiers, and government officials who helped “liberate” Korea from the Japanese and rebuild South Korea following the Korean War. For example, the Korean government could set its annual budget only after the American Congress approved the amount of aid to Korea. Meanwhile, American missionaries gave out Bibles and aid, and American soldiers gave out chocolates and gum to poor Koreans, conjuring up images of America as a “white” land of wealth and riches.³⁵ The senior missionaries in my study grew up watching Grace Kelly, Elizabeth Taylor, and James Dean on screen, believing that all Americans were beautiful, rich, and white.

Although South Korea has now become one of the developed economies, Koreans continue to be shaped by this white-dominant racial hierarchy.³⁶ Contemporary South Koreans have a “white complex.”³⁷ They want to have a white skin tone, double eyelids, a higher nose bridge, and a taller stature like attractive white people.³⁸ Whitening skin creams are ubiquitous, Euro-American physical features are the ideal, and Seoul is the “plastic surgery capital” of Asia.

This white-dominant racial hierarchy and “white complex” shaped the definition of “ideal converts” for the Korean missionaries in my study.

“Real” Americans and Ideal Converts

Looking over the membership and attendance reports of the U.S. UBF, there are only two categories for members: “missionaries” and “Americans.” In this dichotomous categorization of members, “missionaries” are presumed to be Koreans and “Americans” are defined as those who are not Korean, particularly whites. Thus, a second-generation Korean-American, born in the United States, will be categorized as a “missionary” or “Korean” instead of as an “American.” Meanwhile, a recently-arrived immigrant or an international student studying in the United States who looks white will be categorized as an “American.” One UBF member explains, “A Russian who speaks with a thick accent, studying in the U.S. who is studying the Bible with a Korean missionary would be labeled in the report as an ‘American,’ while [a Korean American who was born and raised in the U.S.] would be placed in the ‘missionary’ or the ‘non-American’ section.” This method of group categorization reveals Korean missionaries’ presumption that white people are the “real Americans” and therefore the most desirable converts. Korean missionaries in UBF who descended on the American college and university campuses in the late 1970s and 1980s were interested in evangelizing the future leaders of the United States. Since white people are positioned at the top of the American racial hierarchy with the most power in America, the Korean missionaries in UBF who sought to convert and disciple the “future leaders of America” focused on converting white Americans. A Korean missionary explains this rationale:

As a man who received grace, as a Christian, a forgiven sinner who received apostleship sent by none other than God himself, you approach whites or blacks, you are representing God’s name... so I did not even think about whether anyone is black or white except since I am in America, so-called modern day Rome [the most powerful country in the world] and since America is run by white Caucasians, I thought I better focus on white people because they fill leadership positions... in order to pioneer America we need to first make disciples out of those who are going to fill the leadership positions.

³⁴ Ibid., 27.

³⁵ Yuh, “Beyond.”

³⁶ Jo, “Korean.”

³⁷ Jo, “Korean”; Kang, “Multicultural”; Kim, “Imperial.”

³⁸ Double eyelid surgery (blepharoplasty) is a common surgical procedure in South Korea that is used to create a crease (a supratarsal epicanthic fold) in the upper eyelid for those patients who lack such a crease.

This emphasis on white people particularly made sense to the missionaries in the 1970s and 1980s when a greater majority of the students on the U.S. campuses were white.

Privilege White Converts

Since whites are the most powerful group in the United States, the Korean missionaries assumed that they are also more prideful than others. The missionaries believed that white Americans thought that they were better than other racial groups, including Koreans. Korean missionaries therefore reasoned that they must privilege white converts and work harder to evangelize them and make them feel welcomed within their ministry.

This kind of reasoning was evident when the Korean missionaries were asked in the interviews how “raising disciples” in America differed from raising disciples in Korea. One of the missionaries put it plainly, “How is it different? Here you are lower class, whites feel like they are higher class, it is harder.” Another missionary shares, “In Korea, I can get many freshmen in one semester [to study the Bible and attend worship gatherings], but in the U.S., that can take years, like ten years.” Of course, the difficulty in the United States is compounded by language and cultural differences. But whites’ presumed “racial superiority” is also noted. A Korean missionary who moved to the United States as a missionary after working as a missionary in Africa shared how scared she was to approach white students: “I was afraid of approaching American students, but African students [in Africa], they are very humble and approachable, but American white people are proud.” Since white people appeared to be proud as the dominant racial group, Korean missionaries had to work harder than normal to proselytize them.

U.S. UBF thus mirrors the white-dominant racial hierarchy in America. Among new recruits, white Americans are the most sought-after, and the top “American” leaders within UBF are nearly all white. There are no black American senior leaders in UBF and there are no black American speakers and guests at the major national or international conferences.³⁹ The missionaries themselves recognize this and suspect that it is because the ministry favors white recruits. One of the missionaries reflects, “The leaders who have remained in UBF, most of them are white people. African Americans and Hispanics, they usually leave, I don’t know. They may not be as respected or honored in our ministry.”

Racial Power Dynamics

This act of privileging white converts is similar to what sociologist Korie L. Edwards found in her research on interracial congregations.⁴⁰ In a society where whites are culturally and structurally advantaged, whites need to be placated and their preferences need to be accommodated in order for them to keep attending integrated congregations. Because race is a central organizing feature of American society, and because white privilege is so normalized in America, racial minorities need to accommodate whites’ preferences and needs in order to keep them in the church.⁴¹ As a result, white privilege persists even in interracial churches.

The racial hierarchy of new members in UBF, however, is critically different than the racial hierarchy in the broader American society in that fellow Koreans are located at the very bottom. Whites are at the top as the most desirable recruits, while Koreans are at the bottom as the least-desirable recruits. Although whites were their main target group, the early wave of Korean missionaries in UBF also evangelized blacks and Hispanics and even some other Asian Americans who were not Korean. The missionaries, however, intentionally avoided Koreans.

A missionary in UBF could not call herself a legitimate missionary if she evangelized Koreans. They did not come all the way to the United States as a “missionary” to evangelize fellow Koreans. If they were going to proselytize Koreans, they should have just stayed in Korea where there are plenty of Koreans. Moreover, if

³⁹ If there are black speakers, they will invariably be representatives from a country in Africa.

⁴⁰ Edwards, “The Elusive”; Edwards, “Bring Race.”

⁴¹ Christerson et al., “Against.”

they targeted Koreans, they would become no different than the myriad of Korean immigrant churches that reach out to Koreans. The Korean missionaries in UBF thus purposefully turned away fellow Koreans who naturally found their own way into the church and assiduously went after other Americans, particularly white Americans, who would not otherwise step foot in their church.

Gaining Status through White Converts

While white people are at the top of the hierarchy of new recruits and are uplifted as visible leaders, the behind-the-scenes leadership remains largely in the hands of the Korean missionaries, namely senior Korean men. There is a separate power stratum for missionaries. But even in this separate ranking system for missionaries, status is based on how many white people the missionaries converted and “discipled” (mentored) within the ministry.

Senior Korean missionaries spoke fondly of bringing “beautiful white” students to UBF. They would describe some of their Bible students as a “gorgeous American [white] girl with blue eyes” or a “handsome American [white] boy.” Korean missionaries had status and prestige within the ministry when they had beautiful white-American students under their care. The epitome of a Korean missionary’s success was when an attractive young white American went up on the stage at one of the regional, national, or international conferences and shared a personal testimony about how they were “saved” thanks to the labour of the Korean missionary. The primary measure of success and status for the UBF Korean missionaries in America was based on how many Americans, particularly white Americans that the missionaries had “raised” as disciples within the organization.

White People at the Front

One of the factors that make multiracial congregations possible is the diversification of leadership. Having a racially diverse group of leaders helps to attract and sustain a multiracial church body.⁴² Essentially, the leaders of the ministry should reflect the members that it seeks to recruit. The UBF founders recognized this early on and placed white Americans at the forefront in the visible leadership positions even when there were other Koreans who were more experienced or qualified to fill such positions. A Korean missionary explains, “To raise American shepherds, they put them in the front, to deliver the message, to do many things and the Korean missionaries, they had to be very humble. They did not use their talent, they had to just be humble and support [the white students]...” Giving white Americans the noticeable leadership positions helps draw more white members to the ministry. It makes the white leaders feel more connected to the group and sends the signal to others that the ministry is open to white people. Thus, even if the Korean missionaries are the ones who are ultimately in charge of running the ministry, the white Americans are the ones who are visible on the front stage of the ministry.

When the Korean founder of UBF was alive, the Korean missionaries could attend the large group gatherings only if they brought at least one American student, preferably white, to the meeting. A Korean missionary without a white disciple was not fully qualified to attend the leaders’ meetings. At one point in UBF history, the Korean missionaries could not even attend the Sunday worship services if they did not bring an American student to the service. Along these lines, the children of missionaries were prohibited from attending the Sunday service with their parents. They were kept away from the main service so that the church would not look like it was full of Korean families. Once the second generation came of age, they were allowed to attend the worship services, but they were not welcome to attend the leaders’ meetings. The leaders’ meetings were for “Americans,” particularly white Americans, and the Korean missionaries who brought them. The only Koreans who obviously had a leadership presence was the charismatic founder himself, along with a handful of Korean missionaries who were loyal to him and had white disciples under their care.

⁴² Dougherty and Huyser, “Racially.”

Sacrificing to Connect with White Americans

Privileging white Americans also meant that Korean missionaries had to sacrifice some of their everyday comforts to create an environment where whites, not others like themselves, would feel at ease. The missionaries therefore tried hard to act and appear more American. Some of the Korean men got “perms” (semi-permanent wavy or curly hairstyles) to look less Asian and more Western. The missionaries adopted Western Christian names like John, Mary, or Paul. The early wave of Korean missionaries in UBF were also prohibited from speaking Korean at church and had to pay a fine if they spoke Korean around Americans. They also tried to eat more American foods such as hamburgers and sandwiches, avoiding Korean foods (e.g. *kimchi*, which has a pungent garlic smell, unfamiliar and therefore rejected by many Americans).

Korean missionaries also cut themselves off from the broader Korean-American community in order to evangelize Americans and build a multiracial church. Korean immigrants are well-known for taking part in Korean churches in America.⁴³ Korean immigrant churches help their members to gain spiritual, emotional, and social support as they adjust to their new lives and provide an important space where Koreans can come together and eat Korean food, speak Korean, and socialize with fellow Koreans.⁴⁴ By being a part of an intentionally cross-racial organization, however, Korean missionaries in UBF had to forgo the cultural social comforts that they could have enjoyed in an ethnically homogenous Korean church. A senior missionary reflects: “The greatest sacrifice for the early missionaries who stayed was denying their Korean culture, Korean-looking people, Korean faces, the Korean community....”

Over the four decades that UBF has been active in the United States, the emphasis that the missionaries once placed on evangelizing white Americans has ebbed. Reflecting the changing U.S. racial demographic, there are now more students of colour who are members and leaders within the ministry. Second-generation Korean-Americans are also taking a more active role within UBF. But during the early years of the ministry, particularly while the Korean founder was alive, UBF clearly tried to create an environment where white college students would feel the most welcomed and privileged.⁴⁵ This meant that Korean missionaries had to sacrifice much of their social comforts and could not rely on their church to be an ethnic haven for Korean immigrants.

White Americans Sacrificed Too

Korean missionaries were not the only ones who sacrificed to make a diverse ministry possible. White Americans in UBF sacrificed too. Their responses to interview and survey questions on some of the challenges that they faced within the ministry often pointed to being rejected or cut-off from their family members and close friends, who were predominately white, as a result of joining a ministry with Koreans. Much of this had to do with them converting to Christianity and becoming heavily involved in a church. But the conflict was also due to the fact that the church to which they had committed themselves was full of Korean missionaries.

From the perspective of white Americans in UBF, it could be argued that white Americans sacrificed perhaps even more than the Korean missionaries. In a society where they are the majority, white members of UBF had to submit to the Korean missionaries’ way of doing ministry. They had to deny their personal freedoms and suffer through clashes between Korean and American culture in a church led by mid-twentieth century Koreans. Although the missionaries privileged white Americans and attempted to elevate them as the visible leaders of the ministry, it was actually the old Korean men who were ultimately in charge. Just because Korean missionaries sacrificed themselves for white Americans did not mean that the white members were always comfortable or that the white members did not also make sacrifices to be part of the ministry.

⁴³ Hurh and Kim, “Religious”; Kim, “God’s”; Kim, “A Faith”; Kwon et al., “Korean”; Min, “The Structure”; Min and Kim, “Religions”; Yoo and Chung, “Religion.”

⁴⁴ Abelmann and Lie, “Blue”; Hurh and Kim, “Religious”; Kim, “A Faith”; Min, “The Structure.”

⁴⁵ The Korean founder of UBF died in 2002.

While white Americans also sacrificed and accommodated the missionaries, it remains that Korean missionaries initiated the interracial contact by practising their theology of sacrifice. They deliberately differentiated themselves from the vast majority of the Korean immigrant churches that targeted fellow co-ethnics and went against the norm of racial segregation in the greater American religious landscape. They intentionally reached out to individuals outside of their comfort zones and went beyond segregated social networks, while privileging white-American recruits over others, including Koreans. Without the missionaries' initiative and sacrifice, their diverse church would have been impossible.

Conclusion

Global South missionaries, such as those from UBF, seeking to revitalize the West, face multiple challenges. One of these challenges is countering the white-dominant racial hierarchy and the predominant narrative in missions of white Christians "saving" the others, the lost people of colour. Although the missionaries in my study went against this prevalent racial pattern of missions, they ultimately worked within the white-dominant racial frame.

Korean missionaries in UBF practised a theology of sacrifice and embraced suffering, self-denial, and service for the sake of their interracial missions in the United States. A critical part of the missionaries' sacrifice theology included privileging white Americans, their ideal converts. Korean missionaries drew non-Koreans, namely white Americans, into their churches by purposely uplifting and privileging whites over other races, including their own racial group. Although the missionaries' evangelism efforts went against the grain and countered the segregated religious landscape in America, they conformed to the centuries-old colour lines of Western imperialism. The Korean missionaries in UBF worked within the white-dominant racial hierarchy of American imperialism and American Christianity in their unconventional mission efforts in the United States.

This paper provides a case study of how a particular group of non-Western missionaries of colour encountered the American racial landscape and evangelized white people. Future studies should be conducted on other missionaries of colour's cross-racial evangelism efforts in the West. Further research should also examine how the white population of Western countries are responding to the evangelism efforts of non-Western missionaries of colour, as well as the impacts upon other people of colour in Western nations as they encounter missionaries from different shores.

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