Lost in Translation: Silent Exodus and the Korean American Church

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Globalization is striking America back. Roughly defined as socio-cultural-economic interrelatedness of the world and its occupants, globalization has existed since the beginning of humanity. However, the rate, breadth and intensity of the current process of globalization has never been seen before in history.[1] The United States has been the primary culprit of delivering punches across the globe, with its impact being deeply felt culturally, politically, and economically last hundred years or so. Yet the central dynamic of globalization is the global "dialectic mechanism of convergence (homogenization) and divergence (heterogenization)."[2] In other words, in the increasingly global world, many entities experience a paradoxical need of becoming the same yet different. Global influences, much of which America molded in the first place, are shaping American institutions more significantly than ever; the church is no exception.

This three-essay series attempts to demonstrate how this global dialectic of convergence and divergence is playing out in the Korean-American church, particularly in regard to its communal vision.[3] Specifically, this essay describes the global dialectic relating to the silent exodus and the ensuing relationship between the two ministry groups within the Korean-American church. Essay 2 explores the relationship between local congregations with each other. Essay 3 argues how the Korean-American church can be a spiritual laboratory for practicing *E Plubris Unum* ("out of many, one"), the global slogan on the official seal of the United States. By "Korean-American church," this paper means the collective group of churches within the United States whose membership is composed primarily of Korean immigrants and/or their descendants.

A typical Korean-American church is composed of twofold ministry groups: a Korean-speaking group (KM) and an English-speaking group (EM). As Korean immigration largely began after 1965, the Korean-American church did not have the need to cater to the latter group until well into the 80s.[4] However, as the children of the immigrants started to come of age, this new group – one who spoke a different language and abided by a different culture – within the church was created. Consequently, a need for interaction between the two groups arose, similarly to how the world now has been in need of constructive interactions between various groups socially, economically and culturally. This need became an urgent effort to unite together for the

[1] Frank J. Lechner and John Boli, "General Introduction" in *The Globalization Reader,* 1-2 and Jagdish Bhagwati, "Anti-Globalization: Why?" in *In Defense of Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11.
[2] Hak Joon Lee, *The Great World House: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Global Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2011), 15.
[3] According to Hak Joon. Lee, "communal emphasizes the strength of the bond and mutual obligation based on the kinship of humanity in God (48)." Community does not have to be culturally homogenous, even though the Korean-American Church is indeed largely so. Communal is in contrast with the political, which deals with engagement in social justice. The communal and the political both play out dialectically within local and global contexts in the four pillars of ethics: vision, norms, virtues, and practices. As claimed, this paper is concerned with one specific area of this complex ethical structure – communal vision.
[4] Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own: Second-Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 23.

growth of the entire church, when the church suffered what is commonly known as the "silent exodus" in the 90s and 2000s.[5] The church has been responding by pursuing more ministerial unity. Again, this trend of uniting resembles the global effort for mutual governance – the United Nations Security Council and the International Mutual Fund for instance – created for the purpose of solving global crises and promote global growth and stability.

In fact, it is precisely in the area of mutual governance that the Korean-American church is converging; many Korean-American churches are casting a vision of unity between the KM and the EM within themselves. For example, there is a trend of hiring 1.5-generation senior pastors.[6] Two prominent flagship churches in Young Nak Presbyterian Church of Los Angeles and Sa Rang Community Church in Orange County have recently hired 1.5-generation senior pastors.[7] Other influential churches all over the nation likewise are led by senior pastors who are proficiently bilingual: Choong-Hyun Mission Church, Oriental Mission Church, Davis Korean Church, New Jersey Chodae Church, Open Door Presbyterian Church (Virginia), and etc. Almost all hiring advertisements for senior pastor position across the country list bilingual ability as a foremost candidate requirement. Furthermore, well-resourced churches tend to hire bilingual education pastors and even youth pastors. Churches that are not as fortunate still manage to list preference for language ability of potential ministers, as observed from popular Korean Christian websites.[8]

Such emphasis on bilingual-ness points to the converging vision of homogenizing church leadership at the least. Every church wants to have a thriving English Ministry, and senior leadership who can mentor it and its pastors. However, since language for Korean-Americans is the single most predominant factor that composes culture, it can be argued that such desire for bilingual leadership is aligned with cultural unity of the church.[9] Moreover, as Korean-Americans largely consider and participate in the church as the hub of their social fabric in all aspects, the cultural unity indicated can be inferred as a desire for holistic social unity.[10] Senior pastor, as the top leader, acts as a focal point that motivates communal vision of unifying the two ministry groups of his or her church, a vision homogenized within the Korean-American Church. The associate pastors are assumed to work together with the senior to support this vision.

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[5] Ibid., 54. "Silent exodus" is a phenomenon in which many English-speaking Korean-Americans left the Korean-American Church en masse, with some joining other churches or forming their own but most losing church membership altogether. On the other hand, the church attendance rate of the first generation immigrants have largely remained the same. Scholars differ on their thoughts regarding the cause, scale, impact, and duration of the silent exodus. To be clear, the North American church overall has been experiencing the silent exodus.

[6] 1.5-generation is a group of Korean-Americans who immigrated to the states in their childhood. They are typically bilingual, and have assimilated into American culture in various degrees, but are considered less American than the second generation born in the states. They are also considered less Korean than the first generation who immigrated in adulthood, hence the name 1.5. Though there are cases of churches hiring two senior pastors separately for their KM and EM congregations – in Young Nak Presbyterian Church (KM) and Young Nak Celebration Church (EM) for instance – senior pastors of Korean-American churches are often regarded as the top authority figure of both ministries of the churches which they lead, and supervise all pastors within the church.

[7] Prominence of churches mentioned here is determined by total congregation size, length of history and recognition and involvement within their community. While not every Korean-American Christian would agree to such definition of church prominence, the churches named here have been widely-known by and active in Korean-American communities across the United States. The specific make-up of the KM and EM of these churches vary. Young Nak and Sa Rang are two churches that have a particularly long history and large congregation not only in the United States but in Korea; many non-Christian Koreans would be aware of their names.

[8] These websites include: christianitydaily.com, newsm.com, christianherald.com, kamr.org, etc.

[9] Kim, 137.

[10] Ibid., 5.

For all of its desires to grow unitedly, the Korean-American church is still full of intergenerational tension between the KM and the EM. The silent exodus sheds a light on this tension. Although silent exodus is not solely a Korean-American problem, the Korean-American church is unique in that it is the only ethnic community whose second generation is "leaving the immigrant church to develop entirely autonomous religious institutions apart from the immigrant context."[11] The second generation is primarily leaving the immigrant context – if not the church altogether – primarily for three reasons: a) negative views of the EM pastors toward the KM shaped by KM's authoritarian leadership style and legalistic spirituality, b) cultural clashes between the two generations over issues such as worship style and church management, and c) the second generation's feeling of being treated as second-class citizens within the church.[12] On the other hand, the KM side of the church frequently point to small church attendance, low tithing rate, and lack of participation in early morning prayer service of the EM as signs of weak spirituality. So far, the hope for and practice of mutual governance via bilingual pastors does not seem effective in uniting the Korean-American church beyond the surface level.

Why is the convergence of bilingual governance not enough to unite the two generations? I believe it is because this practice lacks the other component of the global dialectic – divergence. There are significant differences between the two ministries in terms of their theological stance and ministerial focus rooted in globalization. For example, while the KM is generally disapproving of prevalent social issues such as alcohol consumption and homosexuality, the EM is more likely to be accepting.[13] A possible theological explanation is the two ministries' varying theological emphasis in holiness and freedom, respectively, due to selective upholding of certain scriptural passages, which is a corollary principle. Ministerially speaking, the second generation is more focused on spending resources to reach out to other ethnic communities, while the first is rather interested in preserving the Korean culture.[14] Their varying ministry scopes expose them to different social issues, setting the stages for conflicting theological interpretations as above mentioned.

Yet these theological and ministerial differences are products of globalization, particularly of the divergent experiences of the two groups as immigrants and their children living in a globalizing context. The first generation has been raised in a Confucian society that preaches "the Golden Rule of Mean," which criticizes extremes of any spectrum, be it alcohol consumption or sexual preference.[15] This rule remains dominant in the paradigms of many immigrants even in their new home. On the other hand, the second generation has grown up in a Western society that values individuality, thus is likely to respect others' drinking and having sex as individual choice. Additionally, many first generation Korean-Americans also experience downward mobility after immigrating due to linguistic and cultural barriers, and turn to churches for social recognition.[16] This is compacted by the pain of violent Japanese imperialism that tried to wipe away their language and identity.[17] Most second generation members not only do not encounter such downward mobility – though they do experience racialization in the mainstream

[11] Kim, 22.
[12] Ibid., 26-7.
[13] Johnny Lee, "Emerging Diversities, No Such Thing" in *Balancing Two Worlds: Asian American College Students Tell Their Life Stories*, eds. Andrew Garrod and Robert Kilkenny (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 231.
[14] Kim., 48 and 116.
[15] Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 57.
[16] Ibid., 24.
[17] Ibid., 25.

society – they are also a step removed from Japanese oppression.[18] Growing up in America, the second generation better adapts to the mainstream culture of individualism and independence, thus are more open to culture and identity changes. Therefore, the theological and ministerial differences of the two generations described above are deeply rooted in global interaction, and are not simple matters that can be reconciled by mere converging of church leadership.

How then can the Korean-American church go deeper? How can the two generations come together more meaningfully? To be clear, the convergence of leadership via bilingual pastors is helpful, as churches need pastoral leadership that can guide and serve all of their members. Yet the effort for convergence must also meet its dialectical counterpart of divergence. I believe such meeting ought to be initiated and sustained by placing intergenerational relationship urgently at the forefront of ministry. While most Korean-American churches would recognize that intergenerational ministry is important, a very few, if any, are upholding it as the primary agenda. Almost no church focuses on the coming together of two generations to worship, pray, read, serve, and evangelize on a weekly basis. In fact, bilingual worship can only be found on Mothers' Day, Easter, and Christmas. Churches must engage in intergenerational activities that force the two generations to understand and interact with one another intentionally and regularly.

Moreover, the changes mentioned are being made at the pastoral level, but have not necessarily been trickled down to the congregations. There are real differences between people of different generations, and not just in the leadership. For example, the second generation earns about $20,000 more annually than the first generation on average; these two groups lead a significantly different lifestyles due to this wide socioeconomic difference.[19] Consequently,, some churches would rather part ways than messily staying together.[20] Indeed, second generation-only church has its strengths: local community engagement, potential for multicultural transformation, preparation for the third generation, etc. Still, what does this separation say about intergenerational reconciliation and unity? How can there be such reconciliation and unity if the local churches are not composed of different generations? Congregation to congregation interaction is not likely.

As Koreans have moved and are born in the United States, they have been partaking in the historical rate of globalization. The Korean-American church, with its fervent prayer style and sacrificial tithing, has been a force to be reckoned in the American church landscape. Yet this increasing interconnectedness of the world is affecting the Korean-American church back; the two generations of Korean-Americans who have experienced diverging life experiences have been in tension with one another. Whatever spiritual legacy that the first generation has established is not being translated into the second generation. The Korean-American church is responding to the situation by converging its leadership. However, while such response is helpful, it is not enough. The Korean-American church must also answer to the divergence dialectic of globalization by placing intergenerational ministry that allows meaningful interaction between the two generations as the burning primary issue.

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[18] Wesley Yang, "Paper Tigers," *New York,* May 8, 2011.

[19] ChangHwan Kim, "Generational Differences in Socioeconomic Attainments of Korean Americans," http://people.ku.edu/~chkim/KorAm_2ndG.pdf (lecture given at the 4th annual conference of the Research Center for Korean Community at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, April 2013)

[20] Blessing the EM congregation to separate from the KM mother church is a popular trend, as seen from Crossway Community Church (Sarang), Church of Southland (Grace International Ministries), Good News Chapel (Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church), etc.