

Sinai Chung  
Trinity Christian College  
[sinai.chung@trnty.edu](mailto:sinai.chung@trnty.edu),  
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### **Educational Vocation of Korean American Church in the Public Sphere**

*Church has a responsibility to play a both prophetic and priestly role in educating the public for a righteous and humane society. Church needs to address the ways to play this role. Trying to find out one of such ways, this research explored two contributions from the experiences and practices of Korean American Church. (1) Korean American Church can bring the potential clue to transform the racial discrimination and to actualize the racial reconciliation from its own experiences and practices as an ethnic minority group in this society, which can bring a more multicultural public educational ecology. (2) Korean American Church can also carry the possible promise to overcome dehumanization and to recover the meaning of life through sharing Korean traditional spirit and practices of “we-ness,” which can also enrich the layers of moral character formation of the public. This research, with these contributions, would be beneficial for church, including KAC, to grapple with recapturing its role in the education of the public.*

#### **Church is...**

Church is not to be separated from but rather to be proactively involved in lives of the public, including education of the public. Church’s role for the formation of the public is one of its pressing concerns especially in this unrighteous and dehumanized society where we are facing more young people and grown-ups who are alienated, lonely, mentally weak, depressed, and hopeless. Church has a responsibility to play a both prophetic and priestly role in educating the public for bringing the righteous and humane society. Church, then, needs to address ways in which it can play this role, overcoming the chronic tendency of domestication in its education.

As a constituting part of the entire U.S. society and its educational configuration, Korean American Church (KAC hereafter) also shares with all other churches in the U.S. the same commitment to and responsibility for the U.S. public and the formation of it. In this sense, I tried to find out one of the possible ways to play a prophetic and priestly role in educating the public from the experiences and practices of KAC. For this, I explored promising contributions of KAC to the education of the public. In doing so, I employed a literature-based methodology combined with an ethnographic methodology (one in-depth interview) while depending upon on insights from practices in KAC.

In this paper, I suggested two contributions as follows, through which KAC can bring positive impact upon the education for the public: (1) By sharing its experiences and practices with other ethnic minority groups, KAC can provide educational resources for transforming racial discrimination and actualizing racial reconciliation, which also can bring more multicultural public educational ecology. (2) By introducing Korean traditional spirit and practices of “we-ness,” KAC can bring public educational resources for prevailing and healing the negative effect of individualism in this society, which can also enrich the layers of moral character formation of the public.

## **To Transform Racial Discrimination, To Actualize Racial Reconciliation**

The United States is regarded as a representative multicultural society. But in reality, racial discrimination is still the topic of this society. White European Americans have been the cultural, social, political, economic, and educational majority of this society and still they are. For a long period of time, assuming the sole ownership of this nation—sometimes consciously and other times unconsciously, white European Americans have overtly and covertly discriminated other ethnic people, such as African Americans, Native Indians, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans, including Korean Americans, suffered under various racial prejudices. But what is worse, these racial minority people have discriminated one another. Even sometimes, they seem to have considered white Americans as superior beings to non-whites, often putting such an idea into practice. In the process of discriminating and being discriminated by one another, various ethnic minority people, including Korean Americans, have developed antagonism towards one another.

Racial discrimination, seriously inhumane and unrighteous, still exists within this society. In order to bring racial reconciliation into reality, instead, the public needs to be fully educated about the seriousness of racial discrimination and the urgency of racial reconciliation. Both as a subject and an object of racial discrimination, and as a constituting part of this society, Korean Americans, including Korean American Christians, realize keenly the necessity of benefitting the public education for transforming racial discrimination and actualizing racial reconciliation. Since their experiences engendered appreciation for, sensitivity to, and openness towards racial/ethnic/cultural diversity, Korean Americans can better serve the U.S. public in educating racial issues than anyone else.

Especially, current KAC takes seriously its responsibility for educating the public about the racial issue. KAC tended once to connect Christianity not complaining about discrimination.<sup>1</sup> But now it comes to be well aware that the unrighteous and inhumane racial discrimination is not included in God's plan on human society, whether it might have been generated from experiential reasoning, from a critical historical event, from theological reflections, or from all of those. This awareness caused its active involvement in the practices of racial reconciliation. Hopefully, through sharing its stories of such practices with the public, KAC will bring public attention to the issue of racial discrimination and racial reconciliation.

There are examples of KAC's racial reconciliation practice. In harmony with other racial/ethnic groups, KAC supports and participates in the ministries of multi-ethnic churches.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not they possess self-consciousness of it, multi-ethnic churches with many Korean American members and ministers are already representing and performing a practice of racial reconciliation. There are also many cases that Korean American local churches are peacefully sharing a worship place with churches from various racial/ethnic backgrounds. In these cases,

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Howard Ecklund, "Models of Civic Responsibility: Korean Americans in Congregations with Different Ethnic Compositions," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* v. 44 n.1(2005): 21.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Ibid., 18-27: There are many cases of this throughout the States. In this journal, the author also gives an example of this case within the church called "Manna").

members from both local congregations come to have better understandings and show higher respects for cultures of each other. Here are two more impressive stories of KAC's racial reconciliation practice: with African Americans and for Native American Indians.

#### *Reconciliation with African Americans*

KAC has created various practices for being reconciled to African Americans who are under a chronic hostile relationship with Korean Americans, which finally led "The Los Angeles Riot of 1992, the worst civil disturbance in America."<sup>3</sup> Realizing that mutual understanding is the starting point of reconciliation, beneath the practices lied KAC' efforts to better understand who African Americans are culturally, socially, politically, economically, and educationally, and what are reasons of antagonism between Korean and African Americans.<sup>4</sup> First, KAC has made efforts to organize African-Korean associations under its initiative while supporting other privately led organizations. Due to the devastating riot, many local Korean Americans were hurt psychologically and financially. People worried this riot would make the animus between Korean and African Americans severer. But rather, this brought recognition that racial reconciliation is the urgent task to both parties. Korean American local churches were prompt in dealing with this task. They built up "multiethnic coalition" for reconciliation under their initiatives such as "Black-Korean Christian Alliance" which is still active, and also supported other organizations, such as "Scholarships to African American Students, Trips to South Korea, and Korean and African American Human Relations Council."<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, some Korean American congregations have enjoyed joint worship services and fellowships with African American congregations. For example, "Camphor memorial United Methodist Church (which is African American congregation) and First Korean Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia [celebrated] their 25<sup>th</sup> annual worship service and fellowship on Sunday, April 28, 2013, from 3 to 6 p.m. at Camphor Memorial United Methodist Church, Philadelphia."

<sup>6</sup> This joint worship and fellowship was originally designed from the thought that this might alleviate the mounted conflicts between Korean American merchants and African American

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3 Edward Chang, *Los Angeles Riots and Korean-African American Conflict* (Seoul: Seoul National University Institute for American Studies Press, 2002), 1.

4 Refer to Ibid.,1-5. Scholars suggested antagonism between African and Korean Americans, might come from economic friction between Korean merchants and African American customers, lack of mutual understanding about histories and ideologies, and cultural differences. Here the author introduce "middleman minority theory of Blalock, Bonacich, Loewen, and Zenner, immigrant theory of Glazer, Moynihan, and Sowell, and Stewart's research on different view of inappropriate acts between Korean and African Americans.

5Ibid., 32.

6BCNN 1. "Black Church and Korean Church in Philadelphia to Celebrate 25<sup>th</sup> Joint Fellowship on April 28<sup>th</sup>". *Black Christian News Networks One*, April 22, 2013. Accessed August 29, 2013 <http://www.blackchristiannews.com>.

customers at Philadelphia at that time. Such an effort, giving the members an opportunity to share their life stories, cultures, and histories with each other, has been helpful to establish relationship between the two and to promote mutual understanding. And it is, for sure, an exemplary manifestation of Korean and African racial reconciliation.

Finally, in KAC, there are some Korean American ministers who serve predominantly African American congregations. A representative of such ministers is Rev. Peter Chin, who is serving as an interim pastor of Peace Fellowship Church in Northeast Washington. According to *The Washington Post*, August 25, 2012, Rev. Chin, “a Korean American pastor, being open-minded, builds relationships [with African Americans] in the predominantly African American community.”<sup>7</sup> The article points out that it gave a good impression to African American neighborhoods for Rev. Chin to live within the community where the church he is serving is located. It is because African Americans have been “resentful of shop owners who benefit economically from their neighborhood while not living in them”<sup>8</sup> Peter Chin is functioning as a model figure who contributes to Korean African reconciliation. What is better, he has actively communicated with the public about the racial issue in many ways. Here are some examples, such as posting his experiences in this community in his influential blog (peterchin.com), interacting with people through Tweeter (twitter.com/peterchin), uploading on *YouTube* his stories, and being featured in mass media programs. I do not know exactly whether he has an intention for racial reconciliation or not but I believe he might have it judging from his earnest comments on harmfulness of racial prejudices in his communication with the public.

#### *Making White European Americans Reconciled to Native Indians*<sup>9</sup>

KAC has involved in various ministerial efforts for Native American Indians who has been most discriminated from the mainline American society for a long time and to whom white European Americans need to be reconciled. Native American Indians and white European Americans are two main actors of the most painful story of racial discrimination in the U.S history. From the very beginning of the United States, Native American Indians should have confronted to harsh racism against them by white European Americans. They were deprived of their homeland and forced to move a certain designated region called the Reservation. They were compelled to turn down their own culture and religion, and forced to adopt European culture and Christianity. They were unjustly treated as inferior beings and considered as savage people since they were different from the European Americans. They have been subject to extermination and

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7Obaro, Tomi. “For Korean American Pastor, Being Open Minded, Builds Relationships.” *The Washington Post*, August 25, 2012. Accessed August 30, 2013. <http://www.articles.washingtonpost.com/local>.

8Ibid.

9For this section, I conducted a semi-formal in depth interview with Rev Taeil Lim, a Korean American minister for Hopi tribe at the Reservation, Arizona. It was done in Korean on Wednesday, August 28, 2013 at Yongin, Korea.

obliteration for a long time in this society. Unfortunately, churches and their missionaries took the lead of all of those.<sup>10</sup>

Even though increasing are reflections about racial issues for other racial groups and voices of repentance for other races, those for Native American Indians are still not enough in this society. White European Americans, including their churches, should not postpone repenting and offering their hand of apology and reconciliation to Native American Indians anymore. It is, however, very difficult for this to successfully happen. On the one hand, even for current white European Americans who are descendents of those who oppressed Native American Indians, the story of discriminating and oppressing them might be too painful to confront. On the other hand, Native American Indians do not trust on white European Americans due to the past memory of being severely oppressed and discriminated and the current miserable life reality as a result of the history of extermination. Here comes KAC's story of bridging the both parties.

Many Korean American ministers have served Native American Indians.<sup>11</sup> And many Korean American local churches have helped them by giving financial aids and sending short term mission trip teams to labor. Rev. Lim, a Korean American minister for Hopi tribe, said, "without the help from mission teams from KAC, literally, there would have been nothing to be possible in my ministry here...that much...their helps have been critical for my ministry in this place (interview script 9)." As a result of such ministries, Korean American community came not only to better understand the history, culture, life, and spirituality of Native American Indians but also to recognize the urgency of their being reconciled to white Americans for their own sake. Rev Lim points out that "they (Native American Indians) are so much dejected and have low self esteems due to their past and current experiences...and so it is really important to let them know that they are valuable and wonderful people...they have a lot of good things to teach this society, such as creation spirit and peaceful spirits...attitude for nature...no greed...(interview script, 4,6)." This can be expanded to the wider society when such ministries are publicly shared more and more, expecting racial reconciliation and mutual growth. Practically, with such ministries KAC is functioning as a mediator for racial reconciliation between Native American Indians and white European Americans. Here is the last exhortation from Pastor Lim, For authentic reconciliation, "white people have to understand them as they are and appreciate their value and dignity...most of all white people should repent their past and apologize to them (interview script, 10)."

*Being a wounded healer*<sup>12</sup>

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10 On top of learning from the interview with Pastor Lim, for understanding the history of Native

American Indians, I referred to the book, Debo, Angie. *History of American Indians in the United States*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013.

11 One of them is my respondent, Rev Taeil Lim. According to him, even in his place, there are five pastors including himself from various denominations.

12 I did not use the term in the same way as Carl Jung used. Nor did I use it in the limitation of

All the stories of KAC above could be beneficial public educational resources for transforming racial discrimination and actualizing racial reconciliation. Those can lead the public into discussion on the issue. Those might be an igniting flame to bring larger involvement in political protest about racial discrimination. Those might be a catalyst for engaging a movement for system reform about racial discrimination. These might be an encouraging message for volunteer activities for racial reconciliation. All those together could function as a stepping stone for making the entire public educational ecology of this society more multicultural, in which all ethnic people and their cultures are considered equally valuable, accept and respect one another as they are, and mutually learn from one another. But for this, KAC has a prerequisite. It should throw away the victim mentality from its wounds of discrimination. Rather, it should work as a healing agent for this society of discrimination. It should be a wounded healer, who can heal the wounds from discrimination with sincerity in that it has experiences of being wounded from discrimination and thus knows the pain from such wounds better than those without such experiences.

### **To Overcome Dehumanization, To Recover Meaning of Life**

The issue of dehumanization is one of the most painful distortions of our modern societies, including American society. Dehumanization made people more perplexed in searching for the meaning of life and suffered with meaninglessness. It can be fairly said that along with various kinds of social injustice from Capitalism and technological challenges, American society's chronic emphasis on individualism—once considered as a positive philosophy for overcoming collectivism, though—has taken part in dehumanizing its people and in making them suffered with loss of meaning of life. When all churches in American society wrestle with helping people restore their life meaning, as a part of the society, KAC also feels keenly the necessity of taking care of this issue. KAC can bring a potential clue to recover the meaning of life from its traditional heritage, “we-ness.”<sup>13</sup>

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referring to an image of counselor in the pastoral care setting (suggested by Henri Nouwen or Donald Capps).

13KAC can also enrich the layers of moral character formation of the public by introducing some

Korean traditional ethical virtues. As well known, many important Korean traditional ethical values were influenced by Confucian ethics. Especially, we can pay attention to themes pertaining to familial relationship such as filial piety and sibling love. In Confucianism, “sibling love and filial piety are praised as two great values at the root of all benevolent actions [Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Simon Leys (Filiquarian, 2006), 5; re-quoted from Sinai Chung, “Mozing: When the Young Mentor the Younger,” in *Greenhouses of Hope: Congregations Growing Young Leaders Who Will Change the World*, ed. Dori Grinenko Baker (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010), 77]” Although those might not be unique in Korean culture but universal in all other cultures, such ethical themes are uniquely intensified and practically actualized in Korean culture (and other Asian countries under Confucian influence). It would be significantly

### *We-Ness Culture: We-Spirit and We-Practice*

Korean traditional culture's essential practice and spirit lie on "we-ness," on the contrary to American culture's individualism.<sup>14</sup> In Korean language, the term "we" already includes "I-identity." Koreans have traditionally valued on such "we-ness" culture. "We" does not deny "I" in this culture. Rather, Korean people *harmoniously* center on "we" *as well as* "I." Koreans call such a traditional mindset "we-spirit." Beneath this spirit lies the Humanitarian ideal, the founding principle of Korea, which is "to benefit others."<sup>15</sup> Because it fairly includes consideration and care for others in one's community, it often called "community spirit." But it is different from collectivism which focuses on community alone. Rather it aims at coexistence.<sup>16</sup> Two key values of "we-spirit" are sharing and cooperation, because of which, Koreans often call "we-ness" as "together-ness."

Such "we-spirit" has been manifested through various kinds of "we-practices" in Korean society. We-practices are traditions through which Korean people have interdependently helped and cared for one another through sharing and cooperation. We-practices have been always experienced in Korean communities in farming seasons, for wedding and funeral, in the feasts of celebrating traditional holidays, and other situation that needs hands of neighbors. Some examples of "we-practice" are "Doore (a labor cooperation for farming and the ensuing banquet), "Pumasi (an individual labor exchange in turn for farming, wedding/funeral, and house works), "Gye (a kind of association, union, or guild, or a kind of private fund whose members chip in a modest amount of money and take turns to receive a lump sum share), and "Hyangyak (a kind of volunteer village code for helping the needy and keeping proprieties to one another) as well as various kinds of seasonal customs in which Korean people helped one another in cooperation,

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meaningful in educating the public for us to focus on these themes when considering the seriousness of family destruction and deconstruction in our current society. Considering that such familial issue comes to our society partly due to the influence of individualism and expecting that two Korean traditional familial virtues can be expanded to and applied to the wider community, the two virtues might be valuable for the public of our society. When KAC, where such familial values are predominantly practiced, introduces these to the public appropriately, it can provide to the public influential teachings to enrich educational contents for moral character formation of the public (I did not include "matrimonial distinction" which is also one of the familial virtues from Confucianism because it should reinterpreted and altered in the feminist perspective).

14 Koreans call one's own mother as "our" mother while Americans call her as "my" mother.

15 Kyoungsook Lee, Jeason Park and Oksoong Cha, *The Roots of Korean Life Ethics* (Seoul, Korea: Ehwa Womans University Press, 2001), 48.

16Ibid.

while praying richness and well-being of the community together, sharing one another's possessions with the needy, and enjoying folk games after joint labor.<sup>17</sup>

In nature, such "we-ness" appreciates the value of mutual relationship and interdependence. It is about care for others. It is about an expression of love for neighbors that Christ taught us through his actual exemplification on the cross. And so, when properly introduced and shared, such "we-ness" can be a powerful public educational source for prevailing and healing the negative effect of individualism in this society—dehumanization and meaninglessness and for generating one's meaning of life again. And KAC, in which Korean traditional culture of we-ness, both spirit and practices (though altered in a modern way) has been thoroughly embedded, will play a key role for this.

### **Expectations**

I expect that this research could be beneficial resources for the entire church in the U.S. society in recapturing its role for the education of the public especially in dealing with the issues of racism/reconciliation and individualism/life meaning restoration. I also hope that this research could give Korean American Church, as a member of this society, a chance to become more aware of and actively actualize its commitment to and responsibility for the U.S. public and the formation of it as well as to realize their own potentials for those.

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<sup>17</sup>Refer to Kwangsoo Yu and Yunho Kim, *Understanding of Korean Traditional Cultures* (Seoul, Korea: MJ Media, 2003), 32-38.



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