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- Transformative Leadership
- Generative Organization
- Sustainable Design

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- Custom Services

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- Q&A »
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- Sermons »

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Reflection: [Missions & Evangelism](#)

Rebecca Y. Kim: Acts of sacrifice

Korean missionaries in the United States evangelizing white Americans are an exception to the rule that "birds of a feather flock together" in congregations, writes the sociologist and author of "God's New Whiz Kids?"

by [Rebecca Y. Kim](#)

June 21, 2011

"Birds of a feather flock together." That idea, in the field of sociology, is called homophily.

Think about how it plays out in Protestant congregations in the United States. They are more segregated than public schools, residential neighborhoods and workplaces.

What does it take to go against this tide of homophily?



One way to explore this question is to look inside Protestantism itself -- and specifically at Korean missionaries in the United States.

Since 2008, I have conducted an in-depth case study of the University Bible Fellowship (UBF), supported by the [Louisville Institute](#). It has more than 1,400 missionaries, making it the second-largest missionary-sending organization in South Korea -- and about 42 percent of them are working in the United States.

These missionaries are here not just to seek converts in the Korean community. Their primary target: white American college students.

My overriding research question was this: How do Korean missionaries convince Americans, especially young white Americans, to hear the gospel through them and to build diverse congregations with them?

Here's how one Korean missionary answered that:

In my effort to not cause cultural alienation to Americans, ... I curled my hair, I changed my glasses, practiced my tongue (to make it more amendable to speaking English), wore American-style clothing, ... didn't eat kimchi (a traditional Korean vegetable dish that has a pungent garlic

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smell), ... didn't teach my children Korean, didn't speak Korean, ... stopped all relationships with Koreans.

That answer -- reflective of the Korean missionaries in the United States evangelizing white Americans -- is fascinating because it's such a sociological aberration.

Let's consider the norms.

First, think back to homophily. In previous research, I examined why second-generation Korean-American and other Asian-American evangelicals gravitate toward separate ethnic ministries instead of multiracial or white campus ministries.

Like the majority of Americans, the opportunity to choose among a variety of competitive Protestant congregations lead Asian-American evangelicals to pursue what is "most comfortable" in their religious participation. And what is most comfortable is congregating with co-ethnics.

By the numbers

2

- rank of Korea in missionary-sending countries in the world

8

- rank of the U.S. in host countries for Korean missionaries in 2000

77

- percentage of Korean missionaries focused on non-Korean "local people" in 2006

169

- number of countries where Korean missionaries served in 2010

22,014

- number of Korean missionaries in 2010

Sources: [Korean World Mission Association](#) and [Korea Research Institute for Mission](#)

Also, the majority of Asian, Latin and African immigrant congregations do not extend beyond fellow ethnic or immigrant communities; most adults who immigrate to the United States do not proselytize or worship with the "natives."

And, there is the sense that missions work should flow from "the West to the rest," not the reverse. Responding to the news of Korean missionaries in the U.S., for example, one white American said: "Who do Koreans think they are, coming to the U.S. as missionaries?"

So why do they come, and how do they minister to whites?

Like other missionaries from the global South, the Korean missionaries in my study came to the U.S. full of "spirit" and zeal for evangelism. They believed in the absolute truth of the gospel and the urgency of rescuing the perishing, and they trusted that their overriding faith in Christ could transcend any ethnic or racial boundaries.

But in addition to trusting that "Jesus can transcend all boundaries," the missionaries practiced a theology of sacrifice. They embraced self-denial and service to evangelize white Americans whom they believed were the "real" Americans, those who had the most power and influence in the American hierarchy.

Think back to what the Korean missionary said -- and what other missionaries have said, too. To evangelize white Americans, they denied their culture, spoke English, stopped eating kimchi, lived humbly, and spent

their free time and energy going to campus to preach the gospel and invite white Americans to their church.

When other Koreans found their way to the missionaries' churches, they were turned away, while white Americans with whom the missionaries had little in common with were purposefully targeted and welcomed. A missionary said:

It is far easier to get Koreans; they come without us trying, but they come here and they want Korean comfort, they want to speak Korean [and] eat Korean food. ...They will turn our church into a Korean immigrant church. So we turn them away, encourage them to go to a Korean church instead. ...We did not come (to the U.S.) for Koreans, but for Americans.

What I learned: If what drives many in the Protestant marketplace to segregate is personal comfort,

what draws a few together are deliberate acts of sacrifice.

Faith &
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