

CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS IN KOREA: UNSUNG HEROES OF THE KOREAN CHURCH GROWTH

BY JOSEPH CARL KIM

Church historians marvel at the growth of the Korean church. How could a small country—ransacked by the pilfering of its resources during 36 years of Japanese occupation (1910–1945), followed by years of devastating civil war (1950–1953), and living constantly under the threat of a nuclear attack from North Korea—become one of the largest missionary-sending countries in the world? According to Korea World Missions Association's 2007 statistics, some 17,697 Korean missionaries are serving in 168 countries around the world (www.kwma.org). It is estimated that 25 percent of the population in South Korea are Christians (Kim 2007). What is rarely recognized is the vital role that the starting of Christian schools had on the establishment of the vibrant churches in Korea.

BIRTH OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLING IN KOREA

On Easter Sunday, April 5, 1885, two American missionaries—Horace Underwood and Henry Appenzeller—landed in Korea. At that time, Korea was a hermit nation that had closed its doors for years. One hundred years earlier, Catholic missionaries had come to convert the Korean people, but the missionaries faced ferocious opposition. Most of the Catholic missionaries and their converts were either beheaded or exiled. When the Protestant missionaries finally arrived in Korea, they had to approach their mission with a different strategy. Thus the Christian school movement was born.

The *New World Encyclopedia's* entry about Horace Underwood reveals his dedication to establishing Christian schools in Korea: "About a year after arriving, he formed an orphanage, which eventually became Gyeongsin High School, one of the earliest schools offering educational opportunities for Korea's commoners; in nineteenth-century Korea education was only available for the sons of upper class families. Continuously concerned about the need for good education for the Korean people, as the mission work expanded he created elementary schools in each new district" (2008).

The Christian school that Henry Appenzeller started in 1885 immediately gained national attention when the ruler of Korea, King Kojong, endorsed the school by personally giving the name *Pai Chai Hak Dang*, or Hall for the Rearing of Useful Men, to this school. About a year later, another pioneer missionary, Mrs. Mary Scranton, established a Christian school for girls, and the Queen of Korea gave the name for that school, Ewha Hak Dang. All segments of the Korean society recognized Christian schools in Korea, from their inception, as something of great value to the nation.

"By the time Japan annexed Korea in 1910, American missionaries had established about 800 schools for 41,000 students. The missionary schools, from kindergarten to college, were well staffed and financed. In contrast, the Chosen [Korean] public schools had less than 20,000 students" (Young-sik 2003).

In an environment antagonistic to Christianity, it was the Christian schools that took the gospel to scores of young people and trained them with a biblical worldview. These schools provided the Korean church and the nation with well-trained Christian leaders. Within 25 years of their inception, the Christian schools became the engine of social change and transformation. It is interesting to note that the Christian schools in Korea were flourishing nearly 50 years before such a movement even began in the United States.

Considering such a successful beginning, one could reasonably assume that Christian schools in Korea are still robust. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. Since 1910, the Christian school movement in Korea has steadily declined in its influence and sustainability.

From its height of nearly 800 schools in 1910, the number of Christian schools dwindled to about 450 schools by 1915. Five years later, the numbers decreased to 279 schools (Chung 2006, 114). Today, only a handful of schools in Korea can fairly be classified as being Christian in the truest sense. Not only have the number of schools continually dwindled,

but their distinctively Christian characteristics have also been severely compromised. How could this have happened?

OPPOSITION TO CHRISTIAN SCHOOLING IN KOREA

As influential as Christian schools were in the late nineteenth-century Korea, they also became the target of opposition by forces competing for political hegemony.

The first wave of opposition to Christian schooling in Korea came from the Japanese Imperial Regime. Upon the signing of the 1905 Ulsa Treaty, Japan began annexing Korea by taking over most of the Korean government functions. The aim of the Japanese regime was to socially engineer the Korean people to become Japanese citizens. During that period, the Christian schools and only the Christian schools insisted on teaching Korean language, history, and geography. According to the Japanese Imperial Regime, the Christian schools were also “corrupting” the Korean young people’s minds by planting seeds of independence and of opposition to the Japanese rule. The Japanese regime passed its first private-school act in 1908, forcing the Christian schools to receive license to operate from the Japanese authorities. Furthermore, it required all private schools to have their curricula and textbooks examined and approved by the Japanese regime. The legislation effectively shut down more than half of the Christian schools in the nation within 10 years.

The next wave of opposition came from the right-wing Korean military regime in the 1960s. The regime viewed Christian and private schooling as a threat to its dictatorial rule. Through a private-school act in 1963, the Japanese government tried to bring Christian schools under its direct control. The legislation took away the freedom of school choice from parents and forced schools to become “equalized” and “homogenized.” Christian schools no longer had liberty to select students on the basis of faith criteria, nor could these schools vary too much from the public-school programs. Government agencies became intrusive in all aspects of schooling through heavy-handed inspections of the schools by government authorities.

In 2006, the now left-wing liberal government, backed by the powerful teachers union, enacted a new private-school act. This legislation aimed at attacking the governance of private schools by requiring private Christian schools to open up seats on the board to be filled from the public sector. The socialistic agenda of the leftist government would be best served if such government allies as the teachers union could control the Christian schools’ governance.

Each time the ruling government body passed legislation, it increased the choke hold it had on the Christian schools. Fledgling schools were forced to close, and any attempts at starting new schools were nipped in the bud.

In spite of the hard left and right punches the Christian schools received, there is a remnant of resilient Christian schools that are making a comeback in recent days.

THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLING IN KOREA

It began at first as a trickle. One school and then another—Suwon Central Christian Academy in 1994 and Ansan Dongsan High School in 1995—opened up with a commitment to restore the vision of authentic Christian schooling. Soon a steady stream of equally committed schools began to flow as churches and dedicated individuals opened up smaller Christian “alternative” schools. These schools in the new generation of Christian schools were much more vibrant than many of the historic, mainline mission schools. Dream School, Eagle Christian, Han Dong International, Gloville, and some 50 other schools have been established during the last 10 years. Some of the historic, mainline mission schools, such as Soong Duk Girls School and Yum Kwang High School, also began to restore their identity as authentic Christian schools. Today, these schools have come together to hold Christian school conferences and publish materials to foster integration of faith and learning. Strategic partnerships that channel the various tributaries could open the floodgate for a new and vigorous movement to start Christian schools throughout Korea and other countries in Asia.

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned;
struck down, but not destroyed.

—2 Corinthians 4:8–9, NIV

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