

Mennonite Church South Korea is born

According to a long-standing tradition in South Korea, all babies are considered 1-year old at the time of their birth. Although this system for calculating age may seem odd to Westerners, it actually makes some sense. After all, babies don't enter the world as blank slates; they bring with them a whole history of genetic information along with other qualities conditioned by their mother's health during pregnancy. We never start life at zero.

On Feb. 20, four congregations from various regions in South Korea gathered on JeJu Island to officially adopt an identity as Mennonite Church South Korea. Four other congregations are considering membership in the new group. Sometime in the future, as this new conference begins to tell its story to another generation of members, Feb. 20, 2016, will likely be the date historians associate with the beginnings of the Mennonite church in South Korea. Yet the Korean tradition of calculating birthdays is a healthy reminder that our celebrations of beginnings can easily obscure the fact that every group has a history before its birth—that naming a “beginning” can conceal a host of genetic and environmental influences that profoundly shape the group's trajectory.

I thought about all this when I had the good fortune of hosting Hyun Jin Kim—a pastor, professor of missions and founder of a small intentional community in South Korea—in my home for several days. Hyun Jin was the son of a successful Presbyterian evangelist at the time the South Korean Protestant church was growing rapidly. As a young man, he was a dedicated and earnest Christian, and his father expected him to become a missionary. But Hyun Jin was troubled by the numerous conflicts he witnessed in the church. Those divisions inspired a desire to think more deeply about the communal nature of Christian witness—how the church through its life together might be an expression of mission. While in seminary, Hyun Jin focused intently on biblical and theological themes of community, organizing a network of study groups with students in other seminaries. After his studies, he joined Jesus Abbey, a well-known intentional community in South Korea, and began a global exploration that led to visits in some 15 Christian communities around the world.

Hyun Jin's reports on these visits, which he published in a popular Korean church newspaper, met with great interest, particularly at a moment

when the large Korean churches were beset by a series of leadership scandals and divisions. In the mid-1990s, he published a major work on the theology of community, *Community and Mission: A Systematic and Historical Study on Protestant Communities as Missional Communities*. “Community is the essence of church and the essence of mission,” Hyun Jin argued in the text. “True Christian mission should demonstrate radical discipleship...a whole, all-inclusive gospel that is expressed through Christian witness and proclamation.”

Not surprisingly, in his quest for a community-centered form of mission, Hyun Jin discovered the Anabaptist tradition. In 1998, he developed a friendship with Tim Froese, a newly-appointed mission worker, sent by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and the Mennonite churches in North America to walk alongside various Korean groups who were interested in integrating the themes of community, spirituality and peacemaking. The Korea Anabaptist Center emerged out of that work and played a significant role in connecting Hyun Jin's publications with a rapidly growing network of congregations and communities in South Korea who were seeking an alternative to the traditional Protestant options.

And there were other currents as well.

MCC's work, starting in 1952, had left a positive legacy; a Mennonite-supported vocational school was formative for several key leaders. And, in the late 1980s, a group of young Korean Christians joined together for systematic reading and theological reflection on Anabaptist-related themes. Some of these young people went on to become lay pastors and to play active roles in the formation of publishing enterprises, a language school, a peace-building institute, an Anabaptist journal, and the Korean Anabaptist Fellowship.

Some of the individuals and groups who have participated in this movement, including Hyun Jin Kim himself, are not ready to identify themselves as Mennonites—the question of Christian pacifism poses a significant hurdle for them in this highly militarized society.

But 50 or 100 years from now, when Mennonite Church South Korea pauses to celebrate its birthday, the historians among them will need to pay close attention to all of the many individuals and groups who contributed to its genetic identity and who helped shape its trajectory long before it was actually born. **TM**



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