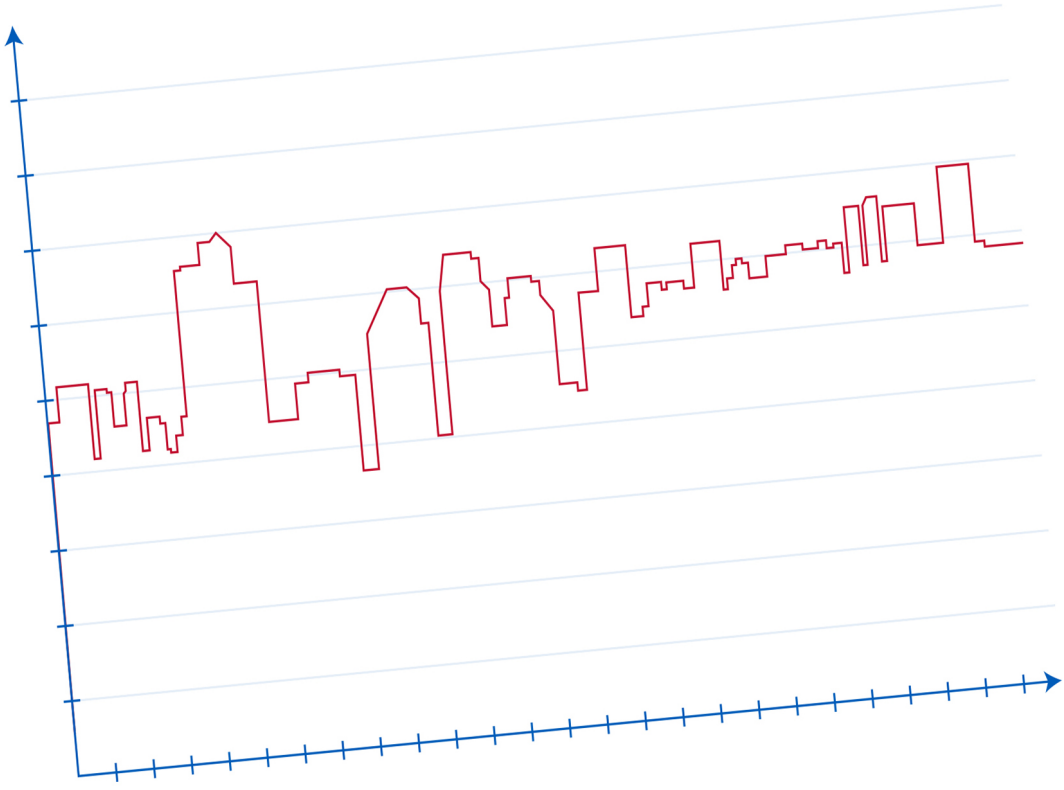
THE KOREAN MISSIONARY MOVEMENT

Dynamics and Trends, 1988–2013



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STEVE SANG-CHEOL MOON

The Korean Missionary Movement: Dynamics and Trends, 1988–2013

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THE KOREAN MISSIONARY MOVEMENT: Dynamics and Trends, 1988–2013

The missionary movement in Korea recorded phenomenal growth for the period of 1988 through 2013. According to the *Korean Mission Handbook*, over these twenty-five years the total number of Korean missionaries burgeoned from 1,178 to 20,085 persons, a 1,705 percent increase.[1]

Written for the present volume, this chapter is published here for the first time.

1. The title and coverage of the *Korean Mission Handbook* has evolved over the years. It first appeared as Marlin L. Nelson, ed., *Directory of Korean Missionaries and Mission Societies* (Seoul: Asian Center for Theological Studies and Mission, 1979). Nelson prepared revised editions, published by ACTS, in 1982 and 1986. His fourth and final edition, *Directory of Korean Mission Societies, Mission Training Institutes, and Missionaries*, was published by Basilae in 1989. As requested by Nelson, Steve Sang-Cheol Moon and the staff of KRIM have—since KRIM's founding in 1990—continued the work of research on the status of the Korean missionary movement that he inaugurated.

The first edition of the directory prepared by KRIM was David Taiwoong Lee and Steve Sang-Cheol Moon, eds., *Directory of Korean Missionaries and Mission Societies* (Seoul: Basilae, 1990). From 1992 through 1998 KRIM issued an updated directory—titled *Korean Mission Handbook*—every two years, showing the development of the Korean missionary movement. These handbooks were published by GMF Press, the publishing arm of KRIM. For the years 2000–2008, only electronic editions of the handbook were issued; these also appeared biennially. Since 2010, for security and other reasons, KRIM has published only the final reports. Beginning in 2012, KRIM changed to a yearly research cycle; an English language report appears in the April issue of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* each year.

KRIM's operational definition of "missionary" does not encompass independent missionaries who are sent directly by local churches and do not belong to a mission agency; pastors of diaspora churches who do not belong to a mission agency;

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In 2013, these missionaries served with 166 mission agencies and worked in 171 countries.[2]

More than half of Korean missionaries were serving in Asia (52.9 percent) and more than a quarter in countries with a Muslim majority (26.9 percent). A large majority of Korean missionaries (81.3 percent) were involved in traditional soul-winning ministries, including Bible translation, church planting, discipleship training, educational ministry, itinerant evangelism, and theological education.[3]

More Korean missionaries were:[4]

- married (86.2 percent) rather than single (13.8 percent)
- ordained pastors or spouses of pastors (70.4 percent) rather than lay people (29.6 percent)
- full-time (92.5 percent) rather than bivocational or tent-makers (7.5 percent)
- members of a Korean agency (88.1 percent) rather than of an international agency (11.9 percent)
- serving in regular missions (65.0 percent) rather than in frontier missions (35.0 percent)
- women (53.7 percent) than men (46.3 percent)
- members of interdenominational agencies (51.5 percent) rather than of denominational agencies (48.5 percent)

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people who work with migrant workers in Korea (although we know that there are some); or Korean missionaries sent by diaspora churches (having emigrated, they are no longer Korean citizens). The number 20,085 is thus conservative.

Consistent application of our operational definition increases the validity of KRIM's analyses of trends in Korean missions. The statistical data and reports on Korean missionaries for the period 1979 through 1989 are drawn from Marlin L. Nelson's research. The other time periods are analyzed using data gathered by KRIM staff.

2. Steve Sang-Cheol Moon, "Missions from Korea 2014: Missionary Children," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 38, no. 2 (2014): 84.

3. Steve Sang-Cheol Moon, "Missions from Korea 2013: Microtrends and Finance," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 37, no. 2 (2013): 96.

4. Ibid., 97.

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Most Korean missionaries were:

- in their forties (42.2 percent) or fifties (28.4 percent); combined 70.6 percent
- university graduates (96.2 percent); more than a third (37.5 percent) have a postgraduate degree (master's, 33.3 percent, and doctorate, 4.2 percent).

The number of Korean missionary kids (MKs) was estimated at 17,675, which nearly equaled the total number of missionaries (88.0 percent as many MKs as missionaries). Though the Korean mission movement was so young, already over one-third of Korean MKs were either university students (29.1 percent) or graduates (4.9 percent). The rest were divided among preschoolers (16.8 percent), elementary students (22.9 percent), middle-school students (13.4 percent), and high-school students (12.9 percent). Korean MKs of elementary through high school age were educated in local schools (35.9 percent), international schools (28.6 percent), schools in Korea (14.6 percent), home schooling (9.0 percent), MK schools (8.9 percent), and others (3.0 percent).[5] Many mission leaders wish to know the percentage of Korean MKs who have themselves become involved in an intercultural ministry after finishing their formal education. According to a survey carried out by the Korea Research Institute for Mission (KRIM) in 2012, only 2.3 percent of the total number of Korean MKs are serving as missionaries.[6] This percentage is very small, but the great majority of Korean MKs are still enrolled in school or university.[7]

For the year 2012 an estimated US$363 million was channeled through mission agencies for Korean missionaries. The sources for this

5. The figure of 8.9 percent includes students enrolled in either international MK schools or Korean MK schools.

6. This percentage does not consider the breakdown of age groups and the number of job seekers (or the employable MK population). It is simply the proportion of MKs who are already doing missionary service as a career, out of the entire MK population of all age groups.

7. Steve Sang-Cheol Moon, "Korean Missionary Children and Their Educational Needs," in *Family Accountability in Missions: Korean and Western Case Studies*, ed. Jonathan J. Bonk (New Haven, Conn.: OMSC Publications, 2013), 245–46.

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income were local churches (41.6 percent), individual supporters (34.9 percent), organizations (9.8 percent), and others (13.7 percent). Mission finances were expended for missionaries' living costs (41.9 percent), field ministries (23.9 percent), home office costs (13.2 percent), organizational projects (2.8 percent), and other general purposes (18.2 percent).[8] The average monthly allocation for living costs for a four-person missionary family with two children was US$1,518. The average educational allowance for the two children of the four-person family was US$556. The average ministry fund (that is, funds provided to missionaries to cover ministry expenses) was US$812.[9]

DYNAMICS AND TRENDS

A diachronic yet descriptive analysis will enable us to look into the deeper realities of the Korean missionary movement. Dynamic factors and trends (macro, mini, and micro) related to the unprecedentedly rapid growth of the Korean mission movement are highlighted below.

Dynamic factors. What lies behind the phenomenal growth of the Korean missionary movement over the past twenty-five years? Long-term observation brings to light five factors that have contributed to the rapid advance of this movement.

First, the Korean churches' conservative theological orientation laid a good foundation for the growth of missions over the years. Without a solid theological foundation, missions can easily become too vague to practice and bear fruit. Since 1988 the conferences and related activities of Korea's equivalent to the U.S. Urbana Mission Convention, the Mission Korea movement, have orchestrated the efforts of all campus ministries and missionary-sending agencies that are evangelical in theological orientation.

Second, the explosive growth of the church in Korea in the 1960s and 1970s affected the growth of missions beginning in the 1980s. In

8. Moon, "Missions from Korea 2013: Microtrends and Finance," 96–97. The amount shown for "other general purposes" appears rather high because some agencies place project funds in that category.

9. Ibid.

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the case of Korea as elsewhere, the missionary movement followed as the child of church revival.[10]

Third, the globalization of Korean society had an enabling impact on the missionary movement. Government policies, including unrestricted travel and overseas residence, have facilitated the missionary movement.[11]

Fourth, sacrificial giving by Korean Christians propelled the Korean missionary movement. Many Christians and churches prioritized missions budgets and mission giving over other financial needs and purposes. With the active participation and financial contributions of supporters, missionaries can survive and their ministries be sustained in their countries of service.

Fifth, the surplus of seminary graduates helps to explain the increase in expatriate Christian workers from Korea. Many young Christians who commit themselves wholeheartedly to the cause of God's kingdom enroll in seminary and then, as there are insufficient ministry positions within Korea for all seminary graduates, turn overseas for their future ministry. This phenomenon has both positive and negative consequences.[12] Positively, more workers go overseas as missionaries, but negatively, a problem arises of wrong motivation in considering missionary service. Possibly more missionary candidates should go to business school instead of seminary and so prepare for future ministry in creative access countries.

Trends: macro, mini, and micro. The Korean missionary movement has recorded explosive growth since 1988. As we have seen, the number of Korean missionaries grew from 1,178 in 1989, the year for which we have a count, to 20,085 in 2013. In the same period the number of mission agencies increased from 92 to 166, and the number of hosting countries for Korean missionaries grew from 72 to 171. The following data, based on the different editions of the *Korean Mission Handbook*

10. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000), 160; Steve Sang-Cheol Moon, "The Protestant Missionary Movement in Korea: Current Growth and Development," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32, no. 2 (2008): 60.

11. Walls, *Missionary Movement*, 221–40; Moon, "Protestant Missionary Movement in Korea," 60.

12. See Moon, "Protestant Missionary Movement in Korea," 60.

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