Koreans in the CRC

One ethnicity, much diversity

KOREAN IMMIGRANTS have established more than 3,500 churches in North America; as of 2009, 105 of those congregations were part of the Christian Reformed Church. That’s about 10 percent of the CRC’s 1,100 member churches—a significant number. And with the ongoing immigration of Koreans to North America, that number continues to grow.

Korean Christianity in North America is known for its unique brand of passion and spirituality. However, especially because Korean churches now consist of several generations of immigrants, it’s not always easy even for Koreans to understand the particular culture of this community.

After ministering for more than 10 years in the Korean community in Los Angeles; Grand Rapids, Mich.; and Seattle; I’ve found one useful principle to help understand the changing dynamics of North American Korean churches: we need to stop thinking that Koreans in North America are all the same.

Yes, Koreans have maintained a strong, ethnically homogeneous society for 5,000 years. But the situation of the Korean community in North America is somewhat different. We are one people but include many groups. I prefer to describe these groups as “tribes.”

There are roughly four major tribes in the Korean North American community, in addition to the many Korean children who have been adopted by North Americans. We can identify these groups by two categories: their immigration status and their degree of adaptation to American culture and/or fluency in the English language (see chart).
First-generation Immigrants

First-generation immigrants generally arrive in North America after college graduation or marriage. Their first language is Korean and, though they seek to spend the rest of their lives here, their cultural lifestyle remains Korean. Their primary felt needs are survival, English-language skills, a home mortgage, the education of their children, a thriving business, and a strong faith.

They have many reasons for moving to North America. But whatever their reasons, like first-generation immigrants of many other ethnicities they feel a huge responsibility to provide for their families and educate their children. This makes them hard workers, willing to lead wearying lives for the benefit of their children. Without their sacrifice, the Korean Christian Reformed churches of today would not exist.

All these immigrants desire as the outcome of their dedication is to see good results in the lives of their children—an expectation that can become burdensome to their offspring.

First-generation immigrants know they should hang out in the English-language community to be considered “real Americans.” However, they tend to keep to themselves because that provides a safe and comfortable place for them. By the grace of God, the church especially has become that place. There they can pray and praise God in their mother language and trust that God will answer them in his way and in his time.

Yusin Cho: First Generation

I came to America three years ago, scared and uncertain, but now I realize that life is just about the same wherever you go. My family usually eats Korean food, but we have adjusted to eating simpler for breakfast and lunch and pick Thai or Vietnamese restaurants when we go out.

Sometimes English can still be confusing, such as grasping cultural nuances, but most of the time it isn’t so difficult. Also, some personal interests that Americans seem to enjoy seem to be enviable. But most are still difficult for me to understand because I seem to worry more about preparing for the future rather than enjoying hobbies and interests of the moment.

I do, however, enjoy the American custom of living a more carefree personal lifestyle; however, I still prefer and long for the close relationship bonds that are a core aspect to Korean culture. Fortunately, the Internet keeps me connected to Korea.

If possible, I would like to help other future immigrants adjust to their new life in America.

Sarah Lee: Second Generation

As a second-generation Korean American, I grew up ignorant about many aspects of Korea's culture. Although my mother insisted that I learn how to speak, read, and write the language, my exposure to the culture was very limited. It wasn’t until the end of high school that I really started to mature and realize for myself the importance of my heritage. Korean history has always fascinated me, but now I actively enjoy reading more on the subject as well as enjoy watching Korean historical dramas (as well as modern ones). Sure, there are some aspects of the culture that I still do not understand nor appreciate, but overall I believe that I have grown to respect and value my heritage. I tend to root for both Korea and the U.S. during worldwide athletic events, such as this year’s World Cup. I am also a thorough advocate of Korean cuisine, especially kalbi and kimchi!

1.5 and Second Generation

This generation, too, is made up of immigrants. Most of them arrived in North America with their parents when they were preschool-age children. As they quickly adapted to their new home, English became their primary language, though they still speak some Korean at home.

Just as they adapted to a new language, they also quickly picked up Western lifestyle and culture. Unlike their parents, who paved the way for them, they are free to focus on more than just survival. Understandably, their feelings are identity, family relationships, college, and careers—not unlike their Korean peers who were adopted as young children by North Americans.

What makes these youths either 1.5 generation or second generation? It is said that if they attended kindergarten in North America they are considered second generation. The 1.5-generation immigrants are those who came to America during or after elementary school.

Although this rough categorization generally holds true, factors such as personality or where these young people grow up in North America (for example, California or Nebraska) can make a difference in their outlook. Some people try to divide them further into subcategories such as 1.7 or 1.9 generations, though that is not yet common terminology.

Both 1.5- and second-generation Koreans who have grown up in the education systems of North America are well educated, responsible citizens. They speak and act like other Westerners, but they run into identity problems when others do not know how to distinguish them from young visitors from Korea. It seems that nobody escapes stereotypes based on appearances.

These immigrants' weaker Korean-language skills can also prove troublesome. Many North Americans expect Korean Americans to speak and write both English and Korean fluently. While that may be desirable, the reality is that Korean Americans who grew up in North America may understand only the casual conversation of other Koreans. They cannot read
Korean newspapers, and special Korean terminology might as well be Latin to them.

In addition, they’ve not been exposed to the deeper philosophies of their heritage, which can be difficult to learn in the North American context. They’ve had to navigate between two very different cultures—not an easy task.

These immigrants are their own unique type of North Americans. When they see their special status as not simply burdensome but God-given, they can celebrate their unique position.

**Foreign Students**
These Koreans are visitors, most often traveling to North America to attend college or graduate school. Unlike the immigrants I’ve already described, these students expect to spend their adult lives in Korea. They retain their Korean language and culture, while learning some English-language skills. Once they earn their degrees, many will return home to serve a mandatory two-year stint in the Korean army.

The needs of this group include English communication skills, education, cross-cultural experiences, and friendship.

U.S. government records indicate that the majority of foreign Asian students in the U.S. come not from China or India, but from South Korea. That means that many colleges and universities in the U.S. have a fairly sizeable Korean student population. However, even these Korean students are not all the same and can be divided into three different subgroups:

1. **0.8 Generation (Graduate Students).** Most foreign Korean graduate students want to get a doctoral degree as soon as possible and return to a career in Korea, often to teach at the college level. Some would like to stay in America, but the door for them is not open wide enough. Only a few who have degrees in science might be able to get a job in the U.S. and apply for a green card. If that happens, the graduate then joins the tribe of first-generation immigrants.

   Even though most students in this group return to Korea, their worldview is no longer the same as before their experience in North America. This distinguishes them from their fellow Korean citizens—therefore, we could call them the 0.8 generation.

2. **1.2 Generation (College Students).** These Korean college students might confuse you. Because they look like 1.5- or second-generation Korean immigrant students, some people overestimate their English-language ability. Indeed, many do pick up North American slang, speaking with their original Korean accent. However, at some point they will or must return to Korea, often because of the army-service requirement. That tough army stint can easily undo their years of gain in English fluency, so they seek to equip themselves for business success as much as possible during their years abroad.

3. **1.4 Generation (Younger Students).** Like you, I cannot imagine a month-long separation from my seventh-grade son or third-grade daughter. But in the recent blizzard of globalization, many Koreans view the pressure to master the English language as stronger than the need to be together as a family.

**Short-term Residents**
Koreans in this group, too, are visitors to North America, though they often arrive already settled into a career or marriage. They come not to study but to work. Their primary language remains Korean, as does their cultural lifestyle and identity.

This group is eager to sightsee and curious for new cultural experiences; at the same time they care about earning a decent income and putting their kids through college. This group is eager to sightsee and curious for new cultural experiences; at the same time they care about putting their kids through college. This group is eager to sightsee and curious for new cultural experiences; at the same time they care about earning a decent income and putting their kids through college.

**Getting to Know Us**
How can we enjoy the diversity within the Korean North American community? How do we minister with and to each different “tribe”? What kind of church structure can best meet the pastoral needs of each group? The answers have yet to be revealed. However, understanding the diversity and diverse needs within this community offers us a place to start.

Sungil Hong: Foreign Student

I think that it is easier to study in America than Korea. There seems to be a more carefree and open sense of freedom here as well. Also, I really like the fact that we don’t have to attend tutoring centers after school like we do in Korea. However, I feel that it’s impossible to form deep friendships with my American peers. In Korea, I feel that a good friendship lasts forever, with many shared moments and memories. Maybe people here live too self-centered lives, making it impossible to form such lasting relationships. When I dwell on this thought, I really miss and long for Korea, where people live and die for friendship.

Soon Park: Visitor

Whenever I go on vacation I go overseas. I have visited the U.S. six times. I visit often because my daughter attends high school there. I have traveled all over the country, and so far I have not had any problems when it comes to the food. Although I appreciate this culture, where individuals respect each other’s private lives, I am ever aware of our cultural differences: waving a hand to say hello instead of bowing one’s head as a form of greeting, indoor carpeting, and different traffic/driving rules are a few examples of America that still remain awkward for me. I do not have a single American friend yet.

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