

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Lee Jae-seok, Bridging Korea's Religious Divide

Knut Holdhus
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Lee Jae-seok (1933-2021). Photo: From front cover page of his autobiography from 2021



Segye Ilbo

Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

The Unificationist who built religious bridges in a South Korea where denominational and ideological divisions have often been intense

An [article](#) by religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su published by the South Korean daily [Segye Ilbo](#) on 21st August 2026, looks back at the life of Lee Jae-seok (이재석 - 1933-2021), a prominent figure in [Unificationism](#) (통일교) who spent decades trying to promote dialogue between the faith he had chosen and other religious communities in South Korea. Written by religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수), the [article](#) presents Lee's story as an example of the difficulties - and possibilities - of religious reconciliation in a country where denominational and ideological divisions have often been intense.

For readers unfamiliar with Korea's modern religious landscape, Lee's story is particularly significant because it illustrates an unusual transition. He began his religious life as a committed member of [Unificationism](#) at a time when relations between the new religious movement founded by [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명 - 1920-2012) and established Protestant denominations were deeply antagonistic. Yet rather than responding to opposition by withdrawing into his own religious community, Lee eventually made dialogue with other faiths and religions one of the central aims of his life.

From law student to Unificationism evangelist

Lee was born in 1933 in rural Cheongyang County on the South Korean west coast. As a young man, he studied law at Chung-Ang University in Seoul and hoped to become a judge. While preparing for Korea's highly competitive national civil-service examination, however, his plans changed.

In 1956, during his third year at university, Lee encountered [Unificationism](#), then still a relatively small and persecuted religious organization. The encounter profoundly affected him. The following year, he became involved in evangelizing work in the city of Cheonan, about 80 km. south of Seoul.

His early commitment was intense. After completing a seven-day fast in the summer of 1957, he went to Cheonan, where he spent approximately ten months conducting outreach work, going from neighborhood to neighborhood and speaking with people about his faith.



Lee Jae-seok (1933-2021), here speaking in Tarrytown, New York, USA in 1988

At the time, the relationship between [Unificationism](#) and established Protestant churches was highly confrontational. Lee experienced this hostility personally. On one occasion, he visited a Presbyterian church and attempted to discuss religious doctrine with its pastor. Instead of engaging in a theological debate, the pastor reportedly denounced him as a heretic and expelled him from the church.

Yet these experiences of rejection would eventually lead Lee in a surprising direction.

Trying to build bridges

The decisive change came in the mid-1960s. By 1966, Lee was serving as pastor of [Unificationism](#)'s Third Church in Seoul.

Rather than concentrating exclusively on the growth of his own denomination, he began seeking opportunities for contact with Protestant ministers outside [Unificationism](#).

He helped organize joint revival meetings involving Protestant pastors and, in November 1966, participated in establishing an organization called the Headquarters for the Interdenominational Christian Movement. Its purpose was to encourage Christians from different denominations to meet and cooperate despite their doctrinal differences.



From 1956, the year Lee Jae-seok joined [Unificationism](#): Seated in front, from left: [Sun Myung Moon](#), Pastor Joshua McCabe who was sent by the Apostolic Church in Australia to study the Korean [new religious movement](#) for close to 80 days in 1956. Beside him, Professor Young Oon Kim (Kim Yeong-oon), the author of several books on [Unificationism](#) theology

The organization's first major initiative was a gathering for Christian ministers in Seoul. The organizers had not expected a particularly large response, but 180 pastors representing 27 denominations attended.

For Lee, this was evidence that many Christian leaders were willing to cross denominational boundaries if given an opportunity to meet directly.

The initiative also reflected a broader principle associated with [Unificationism](#) teachings: the idea that humanity should ultimately overcome divisions between denominations and religions in pursuit of peace and harmony. In this sense, Lee's interdenominational activities represented not a departure from his religious convictions but an attempt to put them into practice.

The response, however, was far from uniformly positive.

"Who is doing it?" rather than "What is being done?"

Once the wider Protestant community became aware that the interdenominational movement was connected with [Unificationism](#), opposition increased sharply. Planned joint revival meetings were cancelled, while some of the ministers who had initially participated withdrew.

Lee came to believe that the controversy revealed a deeper problem within Korean Christianity. As he later put it, he had discovered that people were often more concerned about "who is doing it" than "what is being done".

In other words, the religious identity or institutional affiliation of the person proposing an initiative could matter more than the initiative itself.

This observation became an important theme in Lee's subsequent efforts. He recognized that simply arguing that Unificationism was sincere in seeking dialogue would not be enough. Someone had to create opportunities for people on opposing sides actually to meet.

To be continued. Part 2 coming soon

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Today The Family Federation, Tomorrow A Temple?

August 18, 2026

In first trial 21st August in Seoul, defense challenges evidence in Family Federation mass political party enrollment case



Former First Lady of South Korea Kim Keon-hee (김건희).
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The first trial in the politically sensitive case concerning the alleged organized enrollment of members of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) – FFWPU, in Korea often called [Unificationism](#) (통일교) – in the conservative [People Power Party](#) (PPP) began in Seoul on 21st August 2026.

See also [New Case: Claims of Political Mobilization](#)

The case involves former First Lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희), FFWPU leader [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자), former [FFWPU](#) World Headquarters Director [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) (윤영호), former chief of staff Jeong Won-ju (정원주), and Jeon Seong-bae (전성배), known in South Korean media as the “Geonjin shaman”. All five defendants denied the charges at the opening hearing.



The logo of [JoongAng Ilbo](#), one of South Korea's largest and most influential dailies.

teams under the Lee Jae-myung (이재명) administration. [JoongAng Ilbo](#) (중앙일보), reporting on the first hearing, emphasized the defense's argument that the alleged offense had simply not been proven.

The lawyers of Kim Keon-hee (김건희) told the *Seoul Central District Court* that there was no evidence showing that she had directly asked either Jeon Seong-bae (전성배) or [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) (윤영호) to support a candidate in the PPP leadership election, nor any telephone call, text message, or document in which she promised proportional-representation nominations.



Yoon Yeong-ho, 6th Dec. 2020. Screenshot from [Peacelink TV](#)

According to the defense, the principal evidence consists of [Yoon's](#) testimony and text messages exchanged between [Yoon](#) and Jeon.

The basic allegation, as summarized by [JoongAng Ilbo](#) (중앙일보), concerns events beginning in November 2022. Prosecutors allege that Kim and Jeon conspired to ask [Yoon](#) to organize [FFWPU](#) members to join the PPP. The special prosecutor's theory is that Kim wanted



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a candidate supported by then-President Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열) to win the PPP leadership election in March 2023 and that, in exchange for mobilizing **Family Federation** members, the **organization** was promised government support and other political benefits, including assistance concerning proportional-representation nominations.

KBS News
provides
more detail
about the
alleged
scale of the

The logo for KBS News, featuring the letters 'KBS' in a bold, sans-serif font followed by the Korean word '뉴스' (News) in a stylized, bold font.

The logo of KBS News, the primary news reporting division of the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), South Korea's national public broadcaster.

membership campaign. According to the special prosecutor's case, **Yoon Yeong-ho**, with the approval of **Hak Ja Han** and other **FFWPU** leaders, instructed local branches to enroll members in the PPP. More than 2,400 **FFWPU** members allegedly joined between November 2022 and January 2023.

KBS News also reports that the special prosecutor's team initially sought support for former PPP lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong (권성동). After Kweon announced that he would not run, Jeon allegedly sent **Yoon** a message asking that members support Kim Gi-hyeon (김기현), who subsequently became the candidate supported by the Yoon Suk-yeol camp.

The logo for Hankook Ilbo, featuring the Korean characters '한국' (Korea) and '일보' (Newspaper) stacked vertically in a bold, sans-serif font.

The logo of Hankook Ilbo, a major national daily in South Korea, ranking among the top ten dailies in terms of circulation.

The prosecution maintains that this was part of a broader relationship between the **religious organization** and political power.

Hankook Ilbo (한국일보) quotes the special prosecutor's team as arguing that the **FFWPU** had strongly supported Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열) in the 2022 presidential election and subsequently intervened in the PPP leadership contest after allegedly receiving promises of proportional-representation seats and other benefits. Prosecutors characterize the alleged conduct as an attempt to distort democratic decision-making

within a political party and to turn parliamentary positions into objects of political bargaining.

The special prosecutor's team went further, arguing that **FFWPU** leaders used their religious authority to mobilize believers as political instruments. **Hankook Ilbo** (한국일보) reports the prosecution's claim that members were placed in circumstances in which they had little choice but to join the party and support particular candidates, regardless of their own preferences. The prosecution therefore characterized the alleged conduct not merely as an individual violation of election-related legislation, but as something that potentially undermined the constitutional principles of separation of religion and politics and representative democracy.

The defense strongly disputes that

The logo for Gyeonghansimu, featuring the Korean characters '경향신문' (Gyeonghansimun) in a bold, sans-serif font.

interpretation.

Kyunghyang

Shinmun (경향신문)

reports that Kim's lawyers argued there was no evidence that she had promised either financial

benefits or public positions to the **FFWPU**. They also stressed that there was no evidence demonstrating that the **religious organization** actually influenced the outcome of the 2023 leadership election. One particularly important defense argument, also reported by **KBS News**, was numerical: more than 2,400 new **FFWPU** members may have joined the PPP, but the difference between the first- and second-place candidates in the leadership election was approximately 140,000 votes. The defense therefore argued that it was difficult to regard the membership campaign as having had a meaningful impact on the election result.

The defendants also challenged the prosecution's evidence on an individual basis. According to **JoongAng Ilbo** and **Hankook Ilbo**, Kim's lawyers argued that even if she had mentioned proportional representation, she was not in a position to guarantee nominations and therefore could not have made a concrete or realistic promise of a benefit.

The lawyers of **Hak Ja Han** similarly rejected the allegation that she had approved or received a request to mobilize members. They attacked the testimony of **Yoon Yeong-ho** as lacking credibility, arguing that he was the principal source of the allegations against the **FFWPU** leadership.

See also [How Reliable Is the Prosecution's Key Witness?](#)

OhmyNews (오마이

뉴스) reports that

the defense teams also raised a more fundamental legal argument. They contend that the relevant provision

of the *Political Parties Act*, which prohibits providing or promising financial benefits or public positions in connection with party leadership elections, does not apply to the defendants in the manner alleged by the prosecution. The defense argues that **Hak Ja Han** and other **FFWPU** figures do not fall within the categories of candidates, campaign officials, voters, or observers specified by the provision.

O O L L

The logo of Kyunghyang Shinmun, a large and influential South Korean national daily, ranked among the top ten in terms of circulation.

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*The logo of OhmyNews. In smaller writing, reflecting the citizen journalism policy, it says, "All citizens are reporters". **Public domain** image*



The building housing Seoul Central District Court, where the first hearing was held on 21st August 2026. Image: Grok xAI, Nov. 2025.

The prosecution, however, says it has documentary and testimonial evidence beyond [Yoon's](#) account. According to [JoongAng Ilbo](#) (중앙일보), prosecutors obtained PPP membership rolls showing that large numbers of [FFWPU](#) members joined before the leadership election. They also say that information concerning the membership drive was repeatedly reported to [Yoon Yeong-ho](#) and that they obtained testimony indicating that he instructed members to join and vote.

The first hearing therefore established a sharp divide between the prosecution's broader characterization of the case as an instance of religious-political collusion and the defendants' insistence that the central allegations lack direct evidence. [Kyunghyang Shinmun](#) (경향신문) notes that the court has decided to separate the proceedings involving Kim and Jeon from those involving [Hak Ja Han](#), [Yoon Yeong-ho](#), and Jeong Won-ju. Further proceedings concerning the latter three are scheduled for 28th August.

The court plans to continue witness examinations through 18th September and begin questioning the defendants themselves in October. The 21st August hearing thus marks the beginning, rather than the resolution, of a courtroom battle over whether the alleged mass enrollment actually constituted an unlawful attempt to manipulate a political party – and, crucially, whether the prosecution can establish a direct evidentiary link between Kim Keon-hee and the alleged mobilization.

See also [New Case: Claims of Political Mobilization](#)

Text: [Knut Holdhus](#), editor

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