withU: An Interview with Rev. Oh Choong-wan, Northern Gyeonggi District Leader

Oh Choong wan
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Rev. Oh Choong-wan, who was inaugurated as Northern Gyeonggi District Leader this past March, is building a church of "generations walking together," in which the 30-40-50 generation stands as the strong backbone of the church and the young generation and the elder generation walk side by side. From a church culture that whole families can share to a variety of content that brings the Word naturally into everyday life, new initiatives continue to emerge in the Northern Gyeonggi District. WithU met with Rev. Oh to hear about the changes of the past six months and the future he envisions for the district. - Editor's Note

Question: To begin, could you briefly introduce yourself?

Hello. My name is Oh Choong-wan, and I was appointed Northern Gyeonggi District Leader as of March 1 this year.

Before my title, what I'd like to introduce first is my family. I received the Blessing in 2015 with my wife, Jang Ji-hye, and we are raising one daughter. This coming November we will welcome our second daughter, so I will soon be a father of two girls. I mention my family first because ministry, as I understand it, ultimately begins in the family.

As a pastor, I dream of "generations walking together." I want to place the 30-40-50 generation, the backbone of the church, at the center, while building a church where the wisdom of the elder and established generations and the dreams of the young generation blend naturally. That's the picture I hope to create, step by step, in the Northern Gyeonggi District.

Question: Half a year has already passed since your inauguration as Northern Gyeonggi District Leader. Looking back, what comes to mind?

Looking back, it really was a half year of running without a moment to catch my breath. The best way to put it is that I opened my eyes and half a year had already gone by.

As a young district leader, I wanted to pursue a ministry that doesn't lose the flow of the providence and yet breathes with the present age. Above all, I've done my best each day with the hope that ours could be a district that brings joy to True Parents.

There's still a long way to go, but I minister with a grateful heart as I watch us change little by little together with our members.

Question: What activities are currently under way in the Northern Gyeonggi District? Please introduce any you are placing particular emphasis on.

The goal our district considers most important is the "settlement of three generations." Rather than letting it remain a slogan, we keep asking how it can actually be realized in our churches and families.

The first question we considered in that process was, "Whom should we place at the center?" The Northern Gyeonggi District is paying particular attention to members from their 30s to early 50s - the so-called 30-40-50 generation. Our goal is for this generation to become the strong backbone of the church and, on that strength, to create "generations walking together," in which the young generation, the established generation, and the elder generation walk side by side.

At the district level, our activities center on four broad areas: programs for restoring and building up families, programs for internalizing the Word, programs that put the spotlight on our members, and

Blessing programs.

We're trying a variety of programs, including "Hyojeong Family's Day" for 30-40-50 generation families, "District Members' Day" for all our members, the "1day Academy," where people can encounter the Word in a more approachable way, as well as "Blessing Signal" and "Newlyweds Become Stars."

Question: You mentioned the "settlement of three generations." What concerns did it begin with, and what changes have you actually seen?

I'd like to tell you about Guri Grand Church. When I was first assigned there and looked around the church, one of the things I thought about most was the 30-40-50 generation. This is the generation that should be the backbone of the church, yet quite a few of them had drifted somewhat away from the church for various practical reasons.

So I started over from the question, "If we look at the church from their point of view, what do they need most?" That naturally turned my eyes to the Hyodong children.

We created a space where children could feel at ease, planned events that families could take part in together, and gradually changed our worship services and the church environment. Then the parents naturally began coming back to church as well. As word of these changes spread, some families newly came to Guri Grand Church.

I especially remember what one mother of a Hyodong child told me. She said her heart had always been with the church, but she had always felt sorry that she couldn't come because of childcare. There wasn't enough space where her child could be comfortable, and it was hard for parents to have any peace of mind. But after the church changed, she told me that she now wanted to come to church and be part of things all the more.

Hearing that, I realized there must be a great many people who could join us again if we just shifted our perspective a little. I believe that the more comfortably this generation settles in the church, the more healthily the young generation can grow.

Question: The Northern Gyeonggi District's activities include fresh approaches that differ from conventional church activities. What led you to plan them, and what thinking lies behind them?

I tend to watch social phenomena and issues, and the way people live, with keen interest. In today's terms, I guess you could call me a guy who's sensitive to trends. (laughs)

I believe the church, too, needs things that can change with the times. We must clearly keep hold of the main trunk, which is True Parents' teachings, but the way we convey them to people and share them can change as much as needed with the times.

In particular, ever since True Mother gave us the words "Heavenly Parent's Holy Community," I've come to see the church more broadly. I'd like the church to be not simply a space for religious activities, but a place where families spend time together, where there is culture and enjoyment, and where people meet one another. And within that, I hope people can naturally experience a life of fulfilling the Three Great Blessings centered on the Word.

Thankfully, I wasn't the only one who had been thinking about this. Once we began talking with one another, ideas people had been holding in their hearts started to come out one by one, and they have led to the various initiatives we have today.

Question: In preparing the district's activities and carrying them out with members, what do you regard as especially important?

As district leader, what I consider most important is "vision and persuasion." I think it's hard for a district to move on one pastor's ideas alone. So when we set a direction, I try as much as possible to listen to voices from the field and look at objective cases. And together we think through how to embody in it the providence and True Parents' words and heart.

To that end, we regularly hold church council meetings, church officers' steering committee meetings, and staff meetings. The ideas and directions that emerge are sometimes shared with members through worship

services, and sometimes conveyed through video content and online channels such as "Hyojeong Busking."

Above all, I place importance on communicating fully so that it isn't just a few people who move, but those serving in ministry on the ground and our members can understand and embrace the direction together.

Question: When do you feel most rewarded in your ministry?

To me, the position of district leader is one in which I must take more responsibility on the front line, and devote myself and love more. I also see it as a role of conveying True Parents' words and heart close to our members' lives.

In ministry, there are times when I wonder whether we have been looking at True Parents' words in only one way. That's because True Parents' words and heart contain truly diverse aspects and visions.

When I connect those words to the lives our members are living today, and I see them take it in afresh - "Oh, so it also had this meaning" - I feel truly grateful and rewarded. That's true whether they belong to the young generation, the established generation, or the elder generation.

A small word I shared or an activity we held becomes the occasion for a good change in one member's thinking and life - I think moments like that are the greatest force that keeps me going in ministry.

Question: There must also have been difficulties in leading the district's activities.

At a young age I was entrusted with the large district of Northern Gyeonggi and with Guri Grand Church, which has a long history and tradition, but I didn't feel as much pressure as I had expected.

The reason is that I trusted our members. They have followed True Parents for a long time, walking silently and steadily in their own places, and their love for the church is just as deep. So I believed that if the pastor showed sincerity first, communicated fully, and explained the direction we would take together, they would unite their hearts.

Of course, there were times along the way when our "pace" differed a little. Everyone needs time to think when something new begins. Still, when we talked, I found that many members had already been thinking along similar lines. When the pastor raised the subject first and offered a small opening, members comfortably shared their own thoughts, and I felt our hearts gradually coming together in the process.

That's why, even now, rather than changing things quickly, I value the process of talking things through

fully and changing together.

Question: As a young district leader, you must have great interest in the young generation. What education and activities are you currently carrying out for them?

We do many things, but I'd like to mention two.

The first is helping the young generation "internalize the Word." In the end, I believe the essence is what matters most. It's important to help the young generation understand, in their own language, the direction and providence True Parents are speaking of now. So in addition to conventional lectures, we make sure they can steadily encounter short-form content, and we're also trying cultural approaches to education. The "Place of the Word" YouTube videos uploaded every day, "Hyojeong Busking," which communicates through songs and interviews, and "Word and Heart," where we think together about various social issues from the viewpoint of the Word, are examples. I hope the Word will become not something encountered only on special days but something met naturally in daily life.

The second is building a family-friendly church through "Hyojeong Family's Day." For the young generation to grow up healthy, the parents' generation must first be able to settle comfortably in the church. So, centering on the 30-40-50 generation, we're creating spaces, a culture, and worship that families can share, and we're making a particular effort so that Hyodong children can enjoy their experience of church. In fact, there have been cases where families from the wider society saw this and came to the church together. Along with conveying the Word, I think it's important that the value of the Word can be felt in the actual life of our community.

Question: Are there activities you'd like to newly pursue or further develop in the Northern Gyeonggi District?

There's so much I want to do. (laughs) Among them, there are two things I'd like to keep developing.

The first is content. While clearly keeping the essence of True Parents' teachings, I want to create content that anyone can approach a little more comfortably and encounter again and again in daily life.

Young adults today encounter new ideas and values through all kinds of content - animation, short videos, music. They're also used to a culture of asking questions and talking with one another rather than listening one-sidedly. I'd like to see more of that culture among us. I want to create a culture where, within the essence, we can comfortably share diverse thoughts and ask questions.

The second is building a church where the 30-40-50 generation can comfortably take part. If this generation takes its place as the strong backbone of the church, I believe the young generation will

naturally gain strength as well.

Going beyond a family-friendly church, one that Hyodong children and the young generation enjoy coming to, I'd like to create a structure in which the 30-40-50 generation can naturally participate in the church's decision-making and activities.

Question: How do you hope the Northern Gyeonggi District will grow?

I prefer the phrase "generations walking together" to "generational change."

Our elder members have the wisdom and experience they have built up over many years; the central generation has dynamism and creativity; and the young generation has dreams, hope, and passion. Not one of them can be left out.

As time passes, the generation playing the central role may naturally change. But I don't think that means any generation's role has come to an end.

Different generations bringing out their respective strengths and creating a good story together - that is the Northern Gyeonggi District I envision.

Question: Is there a message for the members of the Northern Gyeonggi District and for members across Korea who will read this through WithU?

I hope our members will live feeling True Parents' love close at hand. We are passing through a difficult time, but it is precisely at such times that I hope we'll engrave in our hearts once more why we have walked this path and what kind of love True Parents have given us.

If we trust in the Will that True Parents, united as one, are guiding us in, and practice one by one what we can do in our own places, I believe good changes will continue in our families and churches as well.

I, too, have hope. Toward the goal of the settlement of three generations, I hope we can become a strong protective fence for the Inheritors of Heaven's Love and Blessing, cheer on one another's families, and walk forward together.

The Northern Gyeonggi District will be with our members on that path. Thank you.