

Religious Reversal: East Converting West – interview of Jack Korthuis

John Dart, Los Angeles Times Religion Writer
May 7, 1972



Christianity with a Far East flavor is being preached to American "unbelievers" in a small but energetic reversal of the religion's historical direction.

American Christians tend to think of their faith having spread from Israel to Europe to the Americas, culminating with outreach to Asia and other regions.

That push has been returned in kind by missionaries of two Christian sects born in the Far East—the Local Church (China) and the Unification Church (South Korea). Other sects may follow their path to the United States.

The Local Church and the Unification Church differently, but both have some approaches strange to Americans familiar with U.S. brands of Christianity.

The Local Church is known primarily for its founder, Watchman Nee, imprisoned in Shanghai since 1952, and for its practice of organizing churches by city. Thus, it is The Church in Los Angeles (now meeting in four locations), The Church Seattle, The Church in San Francisco, etc.

It's somewhat mysterious air results from a rule against "advertising." Its immaculate worship halls have no identifying signs, not even a cross. Publicity is not sought and interviews are granted reluctantly.

At the same, however The Church in Los Angeles has conducted drum-beating, slogan-shouting marches into parks, shopping centers and the Civic Center. Members wear white shirts with red-letter proclamations such as "Jesus Is Lord" for the marches.

Its worship services and meetings are open. The Los Angeles Convention Center was used for a four-day meeting last month and drew nearly 2,000 members.

The Unification Church was founded in 1954 by South Korean Sun Myung Moon, who caught world attention in October 1970, when he married 790 couples in a mass ceremony in Seoul. He made his first U.S. speaking tour earlier this year.

Many of the reputed million-plus followers are said to believe Mr. Moon is the "Lord of the Second Advent." Sect leaders do not declare this openly, however, for fear of turning off prospective believers.

Instead, the dawning of a New Age is proclaimed and arguments are derived from the Bible, including a long-disputed verse in Revelations which Mr. Moon's followers say indicates he is the prophetic figure "from the East."

The Unification Church has been known in Los Angeles also as the Unified Family and in Korea as the Tong-II Church. The official name is The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity.

An unusual tactic for Christianity's "unification" is employed. Some members are assigned to attend other churches of their choice and "revitalize" spiritual growth in the congregation. When the time is right, the divine answers revealed to Mr. Moon are gradually shared.

Of the many religious movements fostered in the Far East containing varying amounts of Christianity, only a few others have made a serious attempt at missionary work in this country.

Iglesiani Cristo (Church of Christ) has grown to impressive dimensions in the Philippines with 2,000 chapels and 35 cathedrals since its founding by the late Felix Manalo. Born a Roman Catholic, Manalo went from church to church until he founded his own in 1914.

Like the Unification Church, Iglesiasni Cristo asserts its founder is the person referred to in Revelations 7:2, the "... angel ascending from the East, holding the seal of the living God..." ("East" in the King James Version becomes "rising of the sun" in modern Bible versions, but both sects believe it is a New Testament indicator of their Far East founders' God-given role. The Local Church, however, ascribes no such place in its beliefs to Watchman Nee.) Iglesiasni Cristo has churches in Guam, Hawaii, San Francisco, San Diego and Los Angeles, the latter at 220 E. Ave. 28 in Lincoln Heights.

From Japan comes a metaphysical religion called Seicho-No-Ie, founded 42 years ago by Dr. Masaharu Taniguchi. The 79-year-old leader conducted a four-day lecture last month at the Los Angeles Founder's United Church of Religious Science, whose tenets are akin to Seicho-No-Ie.

Although Dr. Taniguchi draws on Shintoism, Buddhism and Other religions as well as Christianity for his "One-Truth" Movement, he often supports his arguments with Bible quotes. A haloed statue of Christ stands over the entrance to the Tokyo mother church for the reputed 3 million worldwide followers.

The mother church for Seicho-No-Ie on the U. S. mainland is in Gardena, at 14527 Vermont Ave. It has an estimated 1,000 active members in the Los Angeles area. Other U.S. centers include Honolulu, San Francisco, San Jose, El Cerrito, Denver and Larchmont, N.Y. From Indonesia, a book "Like a Mighty Wind," by a 24-year-old charismatic Christian leader, Mel Tari, is said to be attracting some readers among American evangelical Christians.

Last week, Tari began his second U.S speaking tour with some appearances in Los Angeles.

"What you often get in these movements is the building of faith around a prophetic character, a charismatic individual," said Dr. Alan R. Tippett, an anthropologist at Fuller Theological seminary in Pasadena.

"As time goes on the movements become very messianic and the man himself becomes the messiah," Dr. Tippett said in an interview.

"There must be thousands of these groups in the world," he said. "Some have little or no Christian elements while others are very much an improvement on the missionary churches."

The movement begun by Watchman Nee is "probably more Christian than most other Christian sects in Asia," the seminary faculty member said.

What chance then does Christianity imported from the Orient have in the United States, a country already abounding with endless varieties of the faith?

"There is always a certain number of people who like something foreign," Dr. Tippett said.

Most of the Church in Los Angeles youth-elder estimate three-fourths of their ranks are under 30 years old appear as enthusiasts.

"We have no rules or regulations (on dress or grooming)," said John Ingalls, one of six elders of the Los Angeles congregation.

The most active members meet practically every night of the week. More than 500 gather at homes to pray at 6 a.m. each day before going to work, according to the elders.

Gaunt, soft-spoken John Ingalls, a Los Angeles resident who became one of the first American followers of the movement in 1960, speaks of the Local Church origins in hushed tones, as if he can barely contain his excitement.

"In 1920, God raised up a man in China named Watchman Nee. He received Jesus Christ while he was in college. But he didn't want to receive point blank what Western missionaries said.

He wanted to go to the Bible and see what the Lord said," Ingalls said.

Watchman Nee, observing that the New Testament spoke about "the church in Antioch" or "the churches" in regions like Galatia, determined churches should be organized by city. And each church, should be the only Christian church in the city.

Christian unity is sought, but on the basis determined by the Local Church.

When the Communist party swept into power on the China mainland in the late 1940s Witness Lee's "most intimate associate," went to Taiwan but Nee remained behind. Nee was imprisoned in 1952 "on false charges of being a U.S. spy." Ingalls said, Local church elders say that Nee is alive and well, that rumors of torture are unfounded.

The Local Churches in Taiwan are considered today second in membership only to the Presbyterian Church among Christian churches. The Church in Taipei has more than 14,000 members.

Missionary work in America began in the early 1960s when a brother-in-law of Watchman Nee, Samuel Chang, migrated to Los Angeles and Witness Lee followed with some visits. Lee decided in 1963 to stay in this country.

The movement seemed to catch fire in late 1966, when one came up with the idea of 'pray-reading.' A verse or two from Scripture is read in an intensely prayerful manner, often followed by a short, quick prayer by someone in the group.

"With this 'pray-reading' they eat the word of God," said Samuel Chang. "They take it as nourishment."

Praising God aloud is considered a weapon against Satan. "The Bible tells us in Chronicles II 20:22 that when the people began to praise the Lord, the Lord sent ambushments against the enemy," according to a church publication.

When we Praise Lord by saying, 'O Lord, Amen, Hallelujah!' the ambushments will be sent."

(Some members occasionally are accused of getting over-enthusiastic with their slogans. An outside observer said a meeting of Campus Crusade for Christ at San Fernando Valley State not long ago was disrupted by a group of Local Church members who began shouting repeatedly such slogans as, "Jesus is Lord," "Praise the Lord.")

The devotion of followers is such that the Church in Yorba Linda, which had 67 adults, emigrated in 1970 to form what is now the 200-member Church in Seattle.

"We felt Yorba Linda was not such a strategic city" explained an elder. Another 70 in Southern California moved to Chicago and Atlanta.

The Church in San Diego, which now has nearly 90 members was begun last September when 27 adults moved there.

The Church in Los Angeles, which was overflowing its meeting hall at 1101 Elden Ave., subdivided last year into four areas-adding meeting places in Sepulveda, Westwood and East Los Angeles.

The clergyless, pewless churches (the duties are shared by all and worshipers sit around round tables in the meeting halls) have little visible to identify themselves to outsiders. The hall on Elden Ave., for instance, has neatly trimmed grass and shrubbery and a recent paint job. But there is no sign on the building and the shades are drawn on the windows.

Elders say they do not seek publicity, citing some Bible verses such as Proverbs 25:2: "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing, but the honor of kings is to search out a matter."

The Korean-born Unification Church is similarly open on some matters and quiet on others.

"We feel the end of the world is upon us-that is, the old world as we know it will pass away," said Jack Korthuis, director of the Unification Church in Southern California.

The catalyst for that change-52-year-old Sun Myung Moon-is considered more than just a prophet by the movement.

"He is beginning a religion that will soon emerge stronger than Christianity has emerged as we know it," Koirthuis said. "We feel that Judaism and Christianity laid the foundations for a new age when the Second Coming will occur."

Has the Second Coming already occurred with Mr. Moon as the Messiah?

"Everybody has to answer that for himself," said Korthuis, who added that the church has never stated publicly that Dr. Moon is such a figure.

An official biographical sketch of Mr. Moon says he was born to parents of Christian background in the village of Jungjoo, Punganbukdo Province. He began his ministry after World War II, but had to endure harsh prison treatment after he ventured into Communist North Korea. He escaped from the Hungnam prison camp during the Korean War and resumed his preaching in Pusan, South Korea.

The rest of the biography demonstrates the significance placed by the Unification Church on numbers common in the Bible. In 1957, according to the church, after seven days of fasting 120 groups of 2 persons each went to 120 cities in South Korea. The project lasted 40 days and 30 new churches were established.

In 1960, Mr. Moon married (at age 40) a young disciple, Hak Ja Han, to set the groundwork for "restoring the world to its original Kingdom of God on earth" as one follower put it.

Since 1960, Mr. Moon has conducted weddings of 3, 36, 72, 124, 430 and 790 couples—all matches approved personally by Mr. Moon himself. Couples married in the progressively larger mass weddings have been required to go immediately on 40 celibate days of evangelizing work, corresponding to Christ's 40 days in the wilderness.

The last mass wedding two years ago included couples from 10 nations, including the United States. It was originally planned to be 777 couples, nine more Korean and four Japanese couples decided to take part to make the actual total 790. However, the church still speaks officially of 777 couples wed in the last ceremony, seven being a commonly used number in the Bible.

The first missionary of the Unification Church to America was Miss Young Oon Kim, a graduate of a Methodist seminary in Japan, who was one of Mr. Moon's early converts in South Korea in 1954. She began her U.S. mission work five years later in Oregon.

Today, the church has centers in 10 U.S. cities, including headquarters in Washington, D.C. Farley Jones, a 29-year-old schoolteacher, is president of the U.S. church.

Korthuis, 35, who heads the Southern California church, was the lead singer in the Lido de Paris show in Las Vegas before moving to Hollywood last year. He now directs and sings in a group drawn from church ranks called "The New Tomorrow."

The Los Angeles church has had many of its active members living in a 30-room mansion at the foot of the Hollywood Hills, but zoning regulations have forced them to find a new home. Small "teaching centers" are located in Alhambra and Pasadena.

Although some members live in communal settings, the church emphasizes that the family is its basic unit and that sex is to be contained within marriage.

About 70 "vitaly interested" persons usually gather for Sunday meetings at a small hall at 1994 N. La Brea Ave. The meetings are not held in the mornings, however. "Sunday mornings we are usually involved with other churches," Korthuis said.

This infiltration into other churches is designed to "make the reality of God very powerful" in the other churchgoers' lives, said Korthuis.

"In some cases we're well known (such as in the Western Avenue Church of God pastored by the Rev. Willum Luke), but in others we're not willing to expose ourselves yet," he said. "The purpose is not to get them to leave their church," he said. Rather, it is hoped that these churches or church members will see the Unification Church is the next step in the new age.