



MISSION CONNECTIONS

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Two Thanksgivings

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*Mission co-worker
serving in East Asia*

Dear friends,

Eight months have already passed since I returned to Korea. The leaves of the Ginko trees that line the streets of Seoul have all turned bright yellow. Such sights summons up memories from my childhood when we as children used to play with the yellow Ginko leaves that covered the ground like a carpet.

The holidays in the U.S. no longer mark the rhythm of my life. Living through this season of Autumn has definitely made this real. Koreans celebrated *Chuseok* on September 20-23, *Gaecheon-jeol* on October 3, and *Hangul-nal* on October 9. *Chuseok* means “autumn night”; *Gaecheon-jeol* means “the day on which the Heaven opens” (Korea's birthday), and *Hangul-nal* means “the day of the Korean script.” Autumn is a season when Koreans celebrate who they are with pride.

By the time you see this letter, you probably will have celebrated Thanksgiving. For Koreans, *Chuseok*, commonly known as the Korean Thanksgiving Day, falls on August 15 according to the lunar calendar. Traditionally, extended families gather under the full August moon to give thanks for their harvest, pay tribute to ancestors, and enjoy one another with holiday foods and play through which they renew their kinship. On *Chuseok*, my sister, her son, his wife and I went to the charnel house where my mother's ashes are kept only to find that we could not enter due to COVID. When we returned home, we ate the mungbean cakes that I had made, along with other traditional holiday foods and celebrated our kinship.

Korean Christians, however, have another Thanksgiving Day, and it falls on the third Sunday

in November in the church's liturgical calendar. Korean churches have observed this Thanksgiving Sunday for as long as I can remember. As children, we offered crops of the field on the altar during worship, and a special Thanksgiving offering was collected. It was not until I was in seminary that I started to question the peculiarity of this observance. I reasoned that American missionaries must have introduced it to the Korean church and that Korean Christians incorporated it into their liturgical rhythm. Hence, I have long been a long-time critic of this Korean Christian tradition, asking, “What do Christopher Columbus and Pilgrims have to do with Korean Christianity?” Korean Christian churches are about to observe next Sunday as their Thanksgiving Day. I ask myself: What do I do with this legacy of such missionary encounter? What legacy will I be leaving behind?

Now that I am back in Korea as a mission co-worker from the PC(USA), the sending church, I have ample opportunities to appreciate and critique what resulted from missionary encounters in the past. My prayer is that what I learn from this engagement would help me shape my own mission engagement, which I hope would benefit both churches in partnership. Through these letters, I wish to share what I learn along the way. I have learned that historically the Korean church's



An image representing the Korean *Chuseok* with the full moon

decision to designate a Thanksgiving Day when to observe it, and for what purpose, was not a one-time event. The initiative to observe a Thanksgiving Day first came from Elder Suh, Kyung-jo. At the Presbytery Council meeting held on September 13, 1904, (where? in Pyoungyang) he made a motion that the Korean Presbyterian church designate a day to give thanksgiving to God for the prosperity of the Christian church in Korea. Among those in attendance were American missionaries. At Rev. Hunt's recommendation, Elder Suh's motion was referred to a committee to consult with other denominational bodies. At the same time, as a temporary measure, they chose November 11 as a day of thanksgiving. In 1906, the Presbyterian Church's Council changed the date to the last Thursday in November for the same purpose, and the Presbytery affirmed the date in 1908.

The Korean Church brought this discussion back to its General Assembly (GA) in 1914, and the GA made the decision to observe the Wednesday after the third Sunday in November as Thanksgiving Day in memory of the day when the first Christian



Korean Thanksgiving Sunday. Korean script written on each head of the Korean cabbage says Harvest Thanksgiving.

missionary set foot on the Korean soil. What is interesting is that none of the early Presbyterian missionaries arrived in Korea in November. Does it not seem obvious that American Thanksgiving Day served as a backdrop in this decision? How does their new purpose corroborate with or deviate from the original intent of Elder Suh, who wanted to have a day to give thanksgiving for the prosperity of the Korean church? I wonder.

Today, Korean churches observe the third Sunday as Thanksgiving Day but neither in memory of the arrival of the first Christian missionary in Korea nor in thanksgiving for the prosperity of the Christian church. In fact, I came across an article printed in a Korean Christian newspaper in September which shared the traditional narrative of the first Thanksgiving in the United States. This issue is not settled in the Korean Christian context. Drawing on the scripture, some want the church to have their Thanksgiving Day on the Jewish festival of sukkot; some want to have it on *Chuseok*; still, others want to choose a day that is neither the American Thanksgiving Day nor in remembrance of the first missionary to Korea. For most Korean Christians, it is what it is.

Personally, I anticipate having some conflicting feelings on the Korean church's Thanksgiving Day on November 21. After all, I represent a U.S. denomination. I pray that, with God's help, what I leave behind from my mission work will be something that truly benefits the Korean church and the movement that Jesus is still leading here and everywhere for God's kingdom. And, regardless of the date, I am full of thanksgiving to God for the opportunity that has been given to me to serve as a mission co-worker. Every day is my Thanksgiving Day!

Unzu

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