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Korean Presbyterianism and Social Work

PhD, Moo Youl Choi

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A Critical Analysis of the Social Work of Four Presbyterian Denominations

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the social work of the four denominations of the Korean Presbyterian church, the Kijang, Kosin, Haptong, and the Tonghap, which form the main stream of the Korean Presbyterian Church. It critically analyzes the background, the present social work, and the strategies of each denomination as well as the theological background, so that their differences in terms of social concern, problems and solutions are investigated. Various factors which influenced social work of the Korean Presbyterian Church are also examined.

As far as social participation is concerned, the Kijang is known as the denomination that is ahead of other denominations in terms of ideology and theology, based on Minjung Theology, and it became a symbol for an anti-government stand, concentrating on labourers and the poor. However, in spite of such a strong emphasis on social participation, its present social work in the community was found to be at the lowest level of the four denominations. Although the social awareness of Kijang pastors was the highest, they not only suffered financially in pursuing social work, because of a small number of churches, but also a number of pastors have a negative tendency toward their social policy which excessively emphasized social participation. In contrast with the Kijang, the Kosin, known as the most conservative and fundamental denomination, who were the successors of the anti-Shrine martyrs, showed an unexpected pro- social participational tendency, although they still have strong conservative factors on the other hand. The Haptong denomination maintained a conservative tendency from the division of the Tonghap, due to the conflict about social participation in the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the National Council of Churches (NCC). They have not changed that tendency up to now, but rather strongly emphasized church growth so that they produced enormous church divisions to expand their own denomination. This became a factor in the church neglecting social responsibility. The Tonghap party had a policy of keeping a balance between church growth and social participation from the first.

Many factors influenced the growth and the social work of the Korean Presbyterian Church as a whole, not just of individual Korean churches. There are international factors, such as conflict between the WCC and World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) which led to deep controversy in the Korean Church between conservatives and progressives, and social factors such as immigration to bigger cities, due to urbanisation in the period of rapid economic development in the 1960s and 1970s. Historical, philosophical, cultural, and political factors also enormously influenced the social work of the Korean Presbyterian Church.

Dominated by ideologies, neither progressives nor conservatives demonstrated adequately that mission to the community which expresses the Gospel basis of community service and social work which had been present in the foundation of the Korean Church.