

# Vocational/Theological Statement

## *“My Theology and Ministry”*

### **1. From the Marginalized to the Ebullient American Citizens**

*“My ministerial target is Korean immigrants<sup>1</sup> in America”*

My theology and ministry are truly inseparable from my context of Korean ethnicity and culture. Since I grew up in Korea, I believe that I am a typical Korean male. I have deep experience with the traditional characteristics of Korean society: patriarchy, homophobia, conservative Christianity, multi-religious society, etc. In this regard, my theological journey has not only begun to break through these negative aspects of Korean society, but also to construct my own theology which can contribute to rebuilding an alternative faith culture for Korean Christians.

My first step in my theological journey began as I attempted to overcome “biblical literalism,” which is widespread in Korean churches. Since I attended a liberal seminary at Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea, in the 1990s, I struggled with the issue of literalism in reading the Bible because the church I attended taught me that the primary author of the Book is God and that the texts are “permanent” truth. The reasonable teachings in the seminary persuaded me and soon I changed my previous worldview based on the fundamental doctrines, such as the Young

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<sup>1</sup> I am not using the term, “Korean American” because even the Koreans who gained their American citizenship do not identify themselves as “Americans.” Rather, they believe that they will return to Korea someday.

Universe theory, anti-evolutionism, and the traditional doctrine of Heaven and Hell. As a result, I reconstructed my worldview based not on those doctrines, but on new theological understandings and mainline scientific discoveries, such as the Big Bang theory and quantum physics. In the midst of Korean Christianity, it was a huge challenge for me to build my own theology, while excluding the fundamentalist doctrines. In addition, in ministerial fields, I had difficulty teaching or preaching to congregation who accepted those doctrines as truth.

Fortunately, when I attended seminary, the Korean Church was experiencing the biggest change in its history. Christians were not proud of their religious identity. With the rapid growth of Christianity in Korea, non-Christians began pointing out the flaws that Christians and churches committed, but the Christian camp responded to the opponents with a more aggressive missionary strategy. This response brought about greater opposition to the Church, and there was less tolerance of Christianity outside the Church. For example, before the 1990s, many evangelists proclaimed their faiths in the streets, at the shopping centers, or even on buses, and other people tolerated their missionary works, although Korea was a multi-religious society. However, in the middle of the 1990s, these activities were not allowed in public places. Simultaneously, many young Christians left churches due to the narrow-sighted view of incompetent Christian leaders who did not follow the changing world.

At that time, I had an opportunity to collaborate with the young church members. That experience was helpful to shape my theological view in accordance with the context of Korean post-modernity and to develop my ability to lead Bible study with people from diverse backgrounds, whether liberal or conservative.

However, when I came to America, I realized that Korean immigrant society and churches were much different from Korea. Their dogmatic perspective remained before the 1990s of the

Korean Church. Likewise, most Korean church leaders in America seemed to have pushed their congregations to believe in the conservative doctrines that I had learned in my childhood, and most church members took those teachings for granted. What is worse, Korean Americans were under tremendous stress in their businesses, and they blindly followed those fundamental doctrines to alleviate their stress. Hence, I realized that an immigrant minister must not only disabuse their distorted beliefs, but also console them in the midst of their hard work and lives as marginalized people living in America. I believe that developing a theology for Korean immigrants will help reshape their perspectives, give hope for healing, and change their lives from the marginalized to ebullient American citizens.

After realizing my interest in Korean immigrants, I studied a ministerial solution for their Christian lives and decided to propose them as my ministerial target. In particular, while attending PSR, I have had good opportunities to access to abundant resources, because the seminary possesses in-depth academic experiences about diversities, welcoming attitude for foreigners, and close student-faculty ties regardless of their different backgrounds. Most of all, my M.Div. curriculum helped me build my theology in both aspects of theory and praxis. For example, classes of practice, such as liturgy and homiletics, provided me with theoretical systems and ideas as well as with practical skills and training, while theoretical classes led me to reshape my theological structure. Furthermore, the class of Field Education gave me opportunities to choose my denomination and to serve my church. Consequently, PSR's theoretical and practical education has been helpful to understand my ministerial target, Korean immigrants in that I could enlarge my theological perspective and compare other ethnicities with Koreans.

However, in my ministry, I am not attempting to make perfect Korean Americans; rather, I am preparing to lead them to develop their own perspectives and direct their lives out of their stressful and marginalized conditions. Therefore, it is not evident whether through my ministry they will be able to change their biased understandings, such as concerning homosexuality, androcentrism, racism, etc. Nonetheless, I believe that they need a radical change and that my ministry and theology will provide them with significant solutions to develop those changes.

## **2. Faith and Creed**

*“And I believe...”*

My Christian identity has been shaped in my Christian family. I am not only proud of my Christian family heritage which began about 120 years ago in the earliest part of Korean Christian history, but I have also felt a responsibility to do “something” for God’s work. Although I have encountered progressive theologies and have changed my fundamentalist worldview, I have still felt this responsibility.

What I first learned in the seminary at Yonsei University was “to doubt what I had believed.” I had a chance not only to deconstruct my beliefs based on dogmatic teachings but also to reconstruct my own theology. In doing so, my main struggle was whether God exists or not, because I was taught to doubt any witnesses about God, including the Bible. In believing that God’s existence runs parallel with human hope for happiness, I was unsure of God’s presence. Nevertheless, I turned to develop a more positive stance about God’s presence, in observing that Korean society had developed politically. For example, in 1990s, the first Korean regime change happened without a military coup. On that occasion, I had confidence that history can unfold to make gradual progress and that people can become happier.

In this regard, the ultimate foundation of my faith is not the Bible or church dogma, but is my conviction about reality. As a result, the more I view that the world is getting better, the more I am convinced that God exists. To put it differently, when I am greatly disappointed by this world and feel frustrated at the lack of hope, I often doubt God's existence. However, I still believe in God's existence on the whole since I myself have experienced hope of the God who helps people in need. With confidence in God's existence, my theology has been formulated; in this sense, my theology is a "theistic worldview on reality," which is different from traditional perspectives.

In formulating this worldview, I rely on scientific discoveries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, I believe that this world has a starting point according to the Big Bang theory, while I also confess God as Creator. However, I do not follow the Thomistic tradition in which God is the unchangeable first mover; rather, I agree with Stephen W. Hawking who asserts that there would be no boundaries which distinguish between the moment of the beginning and before that moment. In other words, for him, there is no singular time during which the laws of science broke down when a person would have to appeal to God's existence. Rather, the reason why I confess God as the Creator is that I have discovered great mathematical beauty in this world. This does not mean that God is an "intelligent designer," but a provider who confers aesthetical benefits upon creatures between life and death, happiness and unhappiness, and truth and falsehood.

Even though God is an abstract being who endows creation, humans have a great deal of difficulty in guessing the purpose of God's creation and the meaning of human lives. With that in mind, I believe that Christ is an example for humankind. In my realistic idea, I do not think we have to accept mythological ideas concerning Jesus, such as the virgin birth or his miracles, as

being against the scientific laws. It is clear that the historical Jesus proclaimed God's reign in this world, acted in accordance with his proclamation and worked on behalf of the most marginalized, and died a righteous death for the fulfillment of his life; hence, Jesus became "the Christ" as a goal or as an example for the ultimate human life rather than "God's son" who has a hierarchal authority. When humans follow his path leading to the reign of God, we can say that we participate in the experience of salvation.

The Holy Spirit is a medium who enables the creation to communicate with each other. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 21:17). This means, according to Martin Buber, the kingdom does not exist inside an individual person, but in between people with an engaged relationship. Thus, we can regard not only that God resides passively in the relationship of like-minded persons, but also that God's activities enable humans to be engaged and harmonized in this world. I call these engaging activities "the Holy Spirit." I believe that if humans relinquish the ontological concept of the Holy Spirit, we can gain more fruitful inspirations from that Spirit. For instance, regarding the argument of *filioque*, if we renounce the ontological origin of the Holy Spirit, we can agree that activities of the Spirit originate from the Father through the Son in that Jesus' language and behavior embody the reign of God.

I identify with the Church as "a witness community for Christ." Hence, the most important role of church members is to testify about what they have seen and heard. In the Early Church, there were still eyewitnesses who met Jesus. However, church members today cannot testify about direct experiences of Jesus. In this sense, they have to follow two grounds: the Bible and Tradition. On the one hand, the Bible is a collection of testimonies. Apart from its historical value, the Bible reveals not only the belief of previous Christians, but also what contemporary Christians are to be and to do. On the other hand, Tradition emerged after the Early Church to

make up for what was lacking in the next generation in terms of its knowledge of the Bible. Thus, Tradition functions as a vehicle to connect the testimonies from biblical times with our own experiences.

When it comes to the external function of the Church, the community proclaims what the members have witnessed to this world. This proclamation must be suitable to every person. In this sense, each local church must pursue appropriate strategies according to the context of each region and culture. As long as churches do not lose their primary function as a witness community for Christ, they can be identified as part of the “One Church,” regardless of their contextual differences. Rather, the fact that there are so many denominations denotes the diversity and catholicity of the contemporary Church.

The reason why the Church proclaims is to introduce to humans a new way of life in fullness. The nature of a human is not to be labeled as “good or evil” since the concepts of “good or evil” can differ according to context or to generation. Nevertheless, human life seems to be easily corruptible without certain aims and continuous self-reflection. Christianity and its message convince humans of their limitations and anxieties and urge them to find a better path to seek fullness of life.

According to the traditional idea of the Church, Sin was understood as an ontological concept. This notion is still valid for some people, especially in light of Christian fundamentalism. However, many people tend to regard this notion as superstitious due to its ontological premise. Reinhold Niebuhr suggests two concepts as useful for skeptical people. His first suggestion is to interpret Sin as a psychological notion, such as “anxiety.” Thus, if we feel a sense of guilt, we do not need an exorcist but a counselor. The second suggestion is to allow the possibility that a moral person can be an immoral leader in defense of his or her community.

Then, Sin is not an individual problem but can become structural issues in society. In this regard, as liberation theologians assert, changing distorted social structures is more valuable for Christians today than improving individuals' morality.

Having studied theology, I feel responsible for changing many perverted social structures in this world and wrong perspectives of people. However, the fact that I know what is wrong does not mean that I am the best person to change the fault. The distance between knowing and acting is far greater than I ever expected. I cannot change everything that is wrong in this world. Nevertheless, in order to avoid the fact that my theology remains speculative, it is important for me to postulate what I can do by drawing on the strengths of my theological perspective.

In December 2012, I will apply for a doctoral program at the Graduate Theological Union in order to study systematic theology. Thereafter, with my theological perspective, I expect to devote myself to two areas: Korean theology and Korean churches in America. I do not think that Korean theologies exist at a low level. Nonetheless, most Korean believers have a tendency towards fundamentalism and therefore, cannot accept any "differences" from theirs. For many western theologians, the word "Korean theology" evokes *han* or *minjung* theology. However, most churches do not teach these progressive theologies and most lay people do not have the opportunity to learn such theologies. I spent much time as a lay person in these churches even though I studied theology. In a certain sense, I can play an important role to engage with these theologies and lay people from my theology and experience because I have less difficulty to share with the laity. Therefore, my theological perspective focuses on reducing the gap between theology and laity. With that in mind, my current field activities as a part-time minister and as a guest editorial are helpful for my future ministry.



### 3. Expansion of Theology into Context

*“Who is my neighbor?” –A Lawyer (Luke 10:29)*

From my theological view, the ultimate concern is to find “God’s hand.” If God exists and acts in this world, where is the path of God’s activity? Where is God’s hand intervening in this universe? When I was at fundamentalist church camp, I did not doubt in God’s miraculous interventions into this world. If I were to presuppose God’s omnipotence, I had no reason to deny the amazing stories of the Bible and the testimonies of earnest believers who asserted that they had experienced God’s supernatural miracles. However, I debated due to the differences between the story of evolution as explained by mainline science and the story of “Creationism” as supported by Korean mainline churches. Finally, I was persuaded more by the scientific explanation and I decided to abandon all fundamentalist worldviews such as biblical literalism, the Young Universe theory, and other notions about dubious miracles. Especially, I am curious whether miracles which go against natural laws are possible.

Later, I realized that what I gave up was not merely Christian fundamentalist worldviews, but also their ideologies which were created to keep their vested rights. For example, when I was younger, my church taught me that women were not allowed to be ordained because God created men and women according to different purposes: a male minister must lead his ministry while his female spouse must help the minister as an aid. I adhered to the doctrine because I believed that God had commanded it; however, when I relinquished the fundamentalist paradigm, I also began to doubt that doctrine, which did not allow women to be ordained. Then, I agreed with feminist theologians who insisted on gender equality even in the ministerial field. Yet, it is quite strange for most believers in the Korean context today to see a female senior pastor. The issue of homosexuality is another example of how fundamentalist Christianity obstructed my field of

vision previously. Fundamentalism taught me that homosexuality was sinful. Preachers of my church said that this is justified in the Bible. When I began to give up the fundamentalist worldviews, I realized that biblical texts were not immaculate and that I could not exclude the possibility that any previous biblical interpretation of homosexuality could be completely misunderstood.

Reinterpreting these issues of woman ordination and homosexuality, I received help from books by a celebrated anthropologist, Marvin Harris. In his books, he suggests that religious precepts and social customs of a particular location stem from its cultural-ecological relationship. For instance, he examines why people in the Middle East do not eat pork but beef, while Hindus do not eat beef but pork. According to him, this difference resulted not from religious regulations but from geographical environments. In other words, divine commands did not become religious laws and cultural phenomena, but in fact the reverse was true: a geographical environment limited people's behavior and thus made their activities constrained in order to survive; consequently, these regulations became religious laws. Likewise, I assume that many church doctrines based on the Bible were derived not from God's direct instructions, but from geographical and environmental factors. Considering Harris' perspective, then, I had no reason to think that woman had no right to be ordained and that homosexual people had no place, in spite of the prevalent prejudice which identifies these issues as wicked plans which should be damned. Thus, my own theological perspective began to refuse the norms of the centralist theology of those who maintained vested rights in Christian history.

The first step to build my own theology against existing dominant interpretations was to listen to marginalized voices. In the Korean context in those days, women, laborers, and the poor had no one to whom they could talk about the unjust situation in which they were living, because

the Korean government and its leaders considered the people who complained or who listened to their complaint as “commies” – the “red complex” was still at its zenith in Korea in the 1990s. Hence, listening to their voices, I had to make a decision about whether I would have to turn my back on the theology on which I had depended. For instance, I could not discuss problems of social injustice and dominant theology with my parents and with church members who adhered to fundamentalist Christian beliefs and I felt alienated from my family and from my church. Nonetheless, I met some theologians who were attempting to reconcile the existing church and its dominant theology with the opinions of the most vulnerable, even if these attempts occurred only in small ways. I became interested in the theologies of the marginalized. However, at that time, the terms, “the weak” and “the marginalized” were a bit abstract to me since I had little chance to meet real people who were living on the edge. Thus, it was unavoidable that I felt that my theology had become pointless, and I thus had no intention of doing ministry for the people.

However, when I came to America, I gradually realized that the Korean immigrants are the marginal people I had previously delineated in my theology for several reasons: first, they have a difficulty in speaking the dominant language, English. Many immigrants from Europe or South America wonder why the East Asians, including Koreans, speak English poorly, because they do not understand that the East Asian languages have different alphabetic systems and accents as well as different linguistic units and elements from those of European languages. Secondly, the fact, that Koreans have a different linguistic system from the west, means not only that they find it difficult to learn English, but also that their ways of thinking are so different from those of Europeans and South Americans, as is mentioned by Martin Heidegger, “Language is the house of the truth of Being.” Thirdly, this linguistic gap brings about difficulties in understanding other cultures. Fourthly, the issues of racial injustice in America exacerbate the communication gap

with other ethnicities. Lastly, the Korean community tends easily to be isolated from their neighbors in public activities. For example, they have limited options to find jobs due to their language and cultural differences. Consequently, Korean churches are the only refuge for them to relieve their stressful foreign lives and I must be a minister in a way to help them sincerely and to heal their wounded hearts by reducing their stress and by reshaping their lives.

Meanwhile, I do not intend to exclude other theological considerations, such as social justice, liberation, gender equality, ecology, etc. My theological work must include these considerations in order to share with my future congregation, because most Korean immigrants cannot escape severe bigotry concerning the activities of other minorities regardless of their own reality of marginalization. For example, most Korean Christians in the US, especially who are involved in their fundamentalist churches, still believe that attempting dialogue with other religions is wrong and sinful since they believe that there is no salvation outside of the Church. To top it all, many Protestant Christians tend to regard the Catholicism as a heresy and to dislike progressive theological arguments, such as social justice, ecology, or homosexuality. In addition, there are still some androcentric cultures in the Korean society which have been influenced by Confucianism, and hence, Korean women continue to suffer due to their unequal roles in family and society.

In conclusion, my ministry has been initiated to heal Korean immigrants and to reshape their American lives; gradually, I have realized that my ministry must help them expand their perspectives, improve their relationship with other ethnic groups, pay attention to common issues in which other Americans are interested, and go further to break through their religious or cultural prejudices. I will explain the details of what I aim at in my future ministry in the next section.

#### **4. Ministry in the Future**

*“To infinity and beyond!” –Buzz (Toy Story)*

I chose the denomination, the Korean Methodist Church (KMC), for several reasons. First, I grew up in a Methodist family. About 120 years ago, when the Protestantism first arrived in Korea, my great-great-grandmother was baptized by a Methodist missionary and her descendants maintained her faith during the history of Korean Protestant Christianity. I have family pride and feel a responsibility to uphold the missionary and his Methodist Church. Second, I prefer the Methodist theology to any other Christian doctrines. In the Korean context, in fact, when I was young, there were only two major denominations: either the Methodist Church or the Presbyterian Church. Since I did not prefer Calvin’s doctrine “Double Predestination,” I felt more drawn to Wesley’s argument that opposes the doctrine of Calvin and I do not still feel any different. I believe that people today have a difficulty in accepting the God who predetermined everything regardless of human will. Third, the more I study diverse theologies, the more I have an affinity for Wesley’s teachings. Especially, I agree that he focuses on the balance of Christianity between reason and piety through experience. Lastly, the Korean Methodist Church symbolizes the “unity of church” in the Korean context. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, American Methodist missionaries came separately from the Southern and the Northern Churches. However, both missionary camps and Headquarters agreed to build one Methodist Church in Korea, and this decision influenced the merger of the American Methodist Churches into one United Methodist Church. By comparison, Korean Presbyterian Churches divided into more than 200 sects. I, thus, decided to be a minister of the KMC because I identify it as the Church which seeks harmony and dialogue.

One of my weaknesses is that I have little experience with the KMC since I attended a non-ecumenical church in Korea. Thus, I am not familiar with Methodist worship service or traditions, and I must plan the process of the KMC's ordination with consideration. According to *the Doctrine and Discipline* of the KMC, for me, in order to be ordained after graduation, I had three options: 1) a three-year internship, 2) a two-year full-time ministry, and 3) a two-year full-time opportunity to work as a missionary. As I plan to proceed to a doctoral program after my M.Div. program, I cannot afford to get a full-time job. Thus, I want to choose to do a three-year internship in a current church or in a church that my mentor or district superintendence will suggest. The three-year internship consists of a one-year probationary period and a two-year associate period; afterwards, I can be ordained and become a full member.

I am struggling to find an obvious ministerial image for my future as I have still not been called to the specific kind of ministry I must do. After I finish my doctoral studies, I might become a senior minister at a church; otherwise, I might be able to have the opportunity to teach in a seminary or in a college, in Korea or in the United States. In either case, I intend to take part in church ministry whether as a part-time pastor or as a full-time pastor apart from my academic studies.

In my church ministry, I plan to nurture Korean immigrants as “a witness community” which proclaims what Christ taught and did. I believe that those who are inspired by this proclamation of Church may have experienced personal development or feeling of liberation, which took them to a place away from the experiences of their previous lives. Thus, the purpose of my ministry is to help create opportunities so that their lives can be transformed into new ones by experiencing what Jesus said and did. This transformation includes not only their “evangelized lives” but also a fundamental change of their lives. First-generation Korean

immigrants often work in small businesses in shopping centers such as liquor stores, laundry stores, beauty shops, small restaurants, grocery stores, etc. Since they are always busy with their businesses without resting, they are quite stressed and they have difficulty taking good care of their children. I am not able to and do not want to change their life patterns; instead, I would like to help them change their perspectives about life. In their American lives, making money should be regarded as a means; however, they identify that their earning activities are a goal themselves. I expect that if they changed such views about their economic activities through my ministry, they can, then, concentrate on having better relationships with their family and neighbors.

In particular, Korean immigrants need a broader definition of their neighborhood. Koreans deal differently with the other groups in accordance with their interests. For instance, when I lived in Baltimore, most Koreans earned money dealing mainly with African Americans, but they do not like the African Americans rather than other groups, such as whites and Latinos/as because they were stressed out by their main customers. Especially, when they referred to African Americans, they habitually used insulting appellations. I believe that the first outcome of my ministry is that those Koreans will no longer express such insulting words and will respect every ethnic group equally in their neighbors. Therefore, the transformation of Korean immigrants through my ministry must include improving their relationships with their neighbors.

The next step of transformation is to enhance communication within their family members, especially with their children. Owing to their own businesses, they spend less time with their family than with their coworkers. As a result, Korean immigrants have difficulty communicating smoothly with their family members. Particularly, many Koreans have uncomfortable relationships with their children as who have poor Korean language. However, I think that these communication gaps among their family members have been caused not only by language

problems, but also by distant relationship or estrangement. Indeed, the more time parents spend with their children, the better their children can speak Korean. Accordingly, their transmutation through my ministry will hopefully convince them of the fact that their goal is not working hard to earn money, but caring for their family members by spending more time with their families.

Developing healthy relationships enables them to enlarge their perspectives about reality. I believe that, once Korean immigrants experience this transformation, they can become a bridge which connects them with other marginalized people. Marginal places are located inherently outside of the dominant culture in a society. However, if a marginal area exists between two centers, it can include both centers and become a new core. In the same vein, I envision that Koreans can play such a role to connect the dominant culture with other marginalized groups in America. Since they have already experienced suffering and alienation as a marginalized group, Koreans have an advantage to understand situations of the marginalized and to help people find a solution to escape from their difficulties. The proclamation of witnesses is identical to this help for the marginalized and the weak.

Consequently, my ministry will attempt to lead Korean immigrants to face their negative realities, such as social injustice, androcentrism, racism, and diverse kinds of discrimination. In sum, I believe that my ministry will help Korean immigrants experience Jesus' eternal time and space, confess what they observe, and follow Christ by decreasing the gaps between what must be and what is in this world.