

# Korean congregation finds home, friendship with historical church

Ryan Schuessler | Sep 25, 2012 | [Columbiafavs.com](http://Columbiafavs.com)



Like many churches, Pastor Hanjoo Park's congregation begins its worship with song.

[\(LISTEN: Korean First Presbyterian Church of Columbia's call to worship\)](#)

The congregation stands and sings lyrics projected on the sanctuary wall, led by a small group of young members up front. Another member plays the baby grand piano, keeping the congregation on beat.

It's no different than many Christian church services in Columbia, except for one thing: it's all in Korean.

Park is the pastor at the [Korean First Presbyterian Church of Columbia](#), a relatively new congregation that shares space with the historical [First Presbyterian Church of Columbia](#) on Hitt Street.

Even though the two congregations regularly worship separately and can face a language barrier, the friendship between them is strong.

## AN ENDURING FRIENDSHIP



"This church has been so great to the Korean congregation," Park said. "Most of the Korean congregation realizes this and express their gratitude whenever they have the chance."

Pastor Dick Ramsey of First Presbyterian said that gratitude does not go unnoticed.

“We’re just very pleased to have them here, to offer this facility and their love for our congregation,” he said.

Ramsey fondly mentioned that he is greeted with “God bless you” every time he runs into a member of the Korean congregation, and Park has assured him of the congregation’s prayers for his flock.



Ramsey, who was hospitalized this past summer, also recalled how Park visited him during that time and offered support from the Korean congregation.

“They’re very gracious,” he said.



The two congregations have also come together for mission work. The Korean First Presbyterian has joined First Presbyterian in its mission efforts, including a Saturday morning café for the homeless and the [Loaves and Fishes program](#)—which will be led by the Korean congregation alone next month.

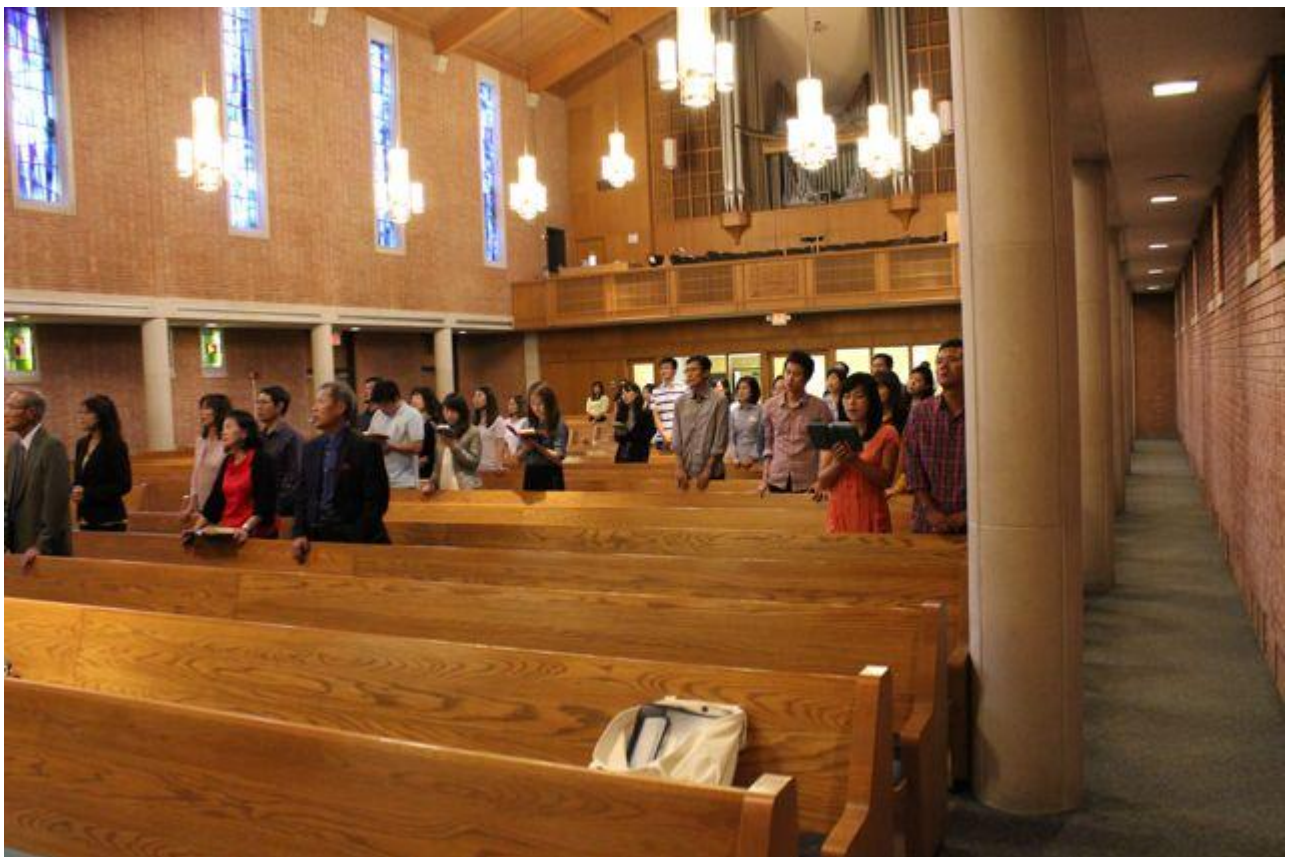
“This is going to be a learning opportunity for our younger generation,” Park said.

The Korean congregation is always eager to serve in Columbia, he said, since many members are immigrants or foreign nationals and want to find a place in the community.

“We think of it as a privilege,” Park said.

The Korean congregation was founded in 1999 by a group of about 20 people. The majority of First Korean Presbyterian’s congregation consists of international students attending MU or Columbia College. A few are visiting scholars and their families, and a small number are other Columbia residents.

Park said there are about 70 adult members, 30 in children’s Sunday School and 10 in teenage youth group.



While the two congregations regularly worship separately, there are occasions in which they come together. Park said he remembers a woman from First Presbyterian who was moved to tears by a song performed this past Christmas Eve by the Korean congregation at a joint service.

This past year, the Korean congregation hosted "Korea Night" and served traditional Korean food to thank First Presbyterian for its accommodations.

"I hope we have more opportunity for joint worship," Park said.

Both pastors said there has been no serious talk of permanently combining the congregations, though there are no hard feelings between the two.

"It really began as a church providing a space where they can worship," Ramsey said. "We remain two separate congregations, but have grown much closer than providing space. There's no strain between the congregations, but one of their strengths is the common nationality and customs."

Park said his church is more than a place of worship – it also acts as a cultural center for local Koreans, even providing language lessons for second-generation congregation members.

"The church has a function of helping [those new to the U.S.] adjust in a new environment," Park said. A sizeable proportion of the congregation has lived in the United States for less than a year.



After each service, the congregation comes together for a lunch of Korean food. They bought an air filter to get rid of the smell of kimchee – a traditional Korean side dish with a distinct aroma – to leave the space as they found it.

“If I were them, I’d complain all the time,” he joked.

The relationship between the two congregations goes beyond smiles, greetings and prayers. American and Korean Presbyterian churches have a long history of friendship, and Columbia’s congregations are a small part of that story.

## A BIT OF HISTORY

First Presbyterian’s parent organization is the [Presbyterian Church \(U.S.A.\)](#). The Korean congregation is part of the [Korean Presbyterian Church Abroad](#), which stemmed from the [Presbyterian Church of Korea](#).

But the two are closely related. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Presbyterian Church of Korea are sister churches.

[Horace Newton Allen, the first Presbyterian missionary in Korea \(and also the first American diplomat in Korea\), arrived in 1884.](#) By the end of that year, the first Presbyterian church was

built in Korea by the newly-baptized Suh Sang-Ryun in what is today North Korea. His church grew to become the Presbyterian Church of Korea.



Pyongyang, today the capital of North Korea, was once the center of Korean Christianity, Park said, earning it the name the “Jerusalem of the East.” In the 1950s, the Presbyterian Church of Korea was cut off from any believers in the North, though most Korean Christians had migrated south during the Korean War.

[Christianity today reported](#) that an estimated 40 thousand Christians are imprisoned in labor camps for their Christian beliefs in North Korea, and hundreds of thousands remain at risk for secretly practicing their beliefs.

[In 2010](#), three leaders of an underground church in North Korea were executed. The 20 members were sent to labor camps.

Even though worship is largely illegal in North Korea, Christianity has had tremendous success in Korean culture since its arrival.

Park said Presbyterianism’s success in Korea can be attributed to two things: history and structure.

When Christian missionaries started arriving in Korea in the late 1800s, many of them just happened to be Presbyterians from the United States, England and Australia.

The structure of the Presbyterian church, while democratic, reveres elders and is somewhat hierarchical. Park said this fits well with Korean culture, based in Confucianism, where one's age determines his or her place in the social hierarchy.

"The church politics of American Presbyterianism is very democratic, but still has hierarchy," Park said.

The Presbyterian denomination was founded in Scotland by John Knox during the reformation in the 16th century and is the national Church of Scotland, but it has made its way to every continent. It is the largest Christian denomination in South Korea.

## **ACROSS CULTURES AND LANGUAGES**



## What you hear during worship in Korean

God	하나님	“hananim”
Jesus	예수	“yesu”
Amen	아멘	“amen”
Christian	기독교	“gidoggyo”
Presbyterian	장로	“janglogyo”
Church	교회	“gyohae”
Holy Spirit	성령	“seong-lyeong”
Hymn	찬송가	“chansong-ga”
Bible	성경	“seong-gyeong”
Pastor	목사	“mogsa”
Communion	성찬	“seongchan”

The Presbyterian Church of Korea celebrated its 100th anniversary last week, and [representatives from the Presbyterian Church \(U.S.A.\) traveled to Seoul](#) to commemorate the occasion.

Ramsey said that First Presbyterian’s congregation is happy to share a common history with its Korean counterparts.

“The whole congregation is pleased to have that connection,” he said. “Most are aware that some of the denomination’s largest churches are in Korea.”

Despite the policies in the north, the south side of the Korean peninsula remains one of the Presbyterian denomination's strongest communities. The largest Presbyterian church in the world is found in Seoul, the capital of South Korea.

[Myungsung Presbyterian Church](#) was founded in 1980, and today it claims a membership of more than one million.

[The largest church of any denomination in the United States](#), Lakewood Church in Houston averages about 30 thousand attendees a week.

Ramsey and Park agree that the relationship and interaction between their two congregations is a reminder of the global reach of their common faith.

"The gospel is not just for one ethnic group," Park said.

Ramsey said something similar: "Every time we address a request [to use our space], it's a reminder of the breadth of the gospel across languages and cultures."