

# Watts, Ralph S. (1906–1994) and Mildred (Hoopes) (1903–2002)

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## KUK HEON LEE

Kuk Heon Lee graduated from Sahmyook University (B.A.), Newbold College (M.A.), and Sahmyook University (Ph.D.). From 1990 to 2009, he served as a pastor at Korean Union Conference. In 2010, he joined Sahmyook University as a lecturer and professor at the Theology Department. His research and teaching interests are in Church History. He wrote several books and published several papers on the subject. Currently, he is also the Dean of Planning at Sahmyook University.

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Ralph S. Watts (aka. Ryunsnag Won) and Mildred (aka. Myeongryun Won) served as missionaries in Korea for a total of 17 years, including Ralph's tenure as superintendent of the Chosen Union Mission (CUM) just before and after the nation's liberation from Japanese colonial rule.

## Background

Ralph S. Watts, born in the United States on October 6, 1905,<sup>1</sup> entered Korea as a missionary in February 1926. Little is known about his activities before he came to Korea except that he had been educated as a nurse in the United States.<sup>2</sup> He became an acting director of Soonan Hospital after learning Korean with his wife, Mildred Watts (born Hoopes, June 14, 1903), who was also a nurse. Clyde A. Haysmer, then director of Soonan Hospital, had become involved in what became known as the "Hushimo Incident"<sup>3</sup> and had to return to the United States in December of that year. As a result, the Watts, with their nurse's training, assumed leadership of the hospital on September 12.<sup>4</sup>



Ralph S. Watts, Sr.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

## Ministry in Korea

In May 1929, George H. Rue, who was in charge of the medical missionary program of the Korean Adventist Church, arrived as the new director of Soonan Hospital. As a result, R. S. Watts took on a new role as a secretary of the mission department at the sixth general meeting of the CUM held in June of that year.<sup>5</sup> For about eight years until CUM's tenth general meeting in April 1937, he served as the department's secretary.

Pastor Watts' main duty involved the mission's training meetings. During the winter of 1929, he toured the country for three months to conduct such sessions and continued in that role every year thereafter.<sup>6</sup> The meetings would convene for three days each year in each local conference and mission. In addition, he frequently held training sessions for self-supporting missionaries.<sup>7</sup> In the autumn of 1936, he promoted the "one by one" missionary movement and encouraged the participation in evangelism of all church members.<sup>8</sup>

Among the various projects he was involved in, perhaps the most notable was the Kyeongseong evangelistic series held in Seoul in September 1931. Watts rented the Gyeongseong Public Hall, located in the center of the city, and invited Pastor Griggs to lecture for about six weeks. Several choirs and a team of students from the mission school's theological department participated in the meetings. Audiences of 400 to 600 attended every evening, and 44 individuals accepted baptism.<sup>9</sup>

Man Kyu Oh records Pastor Watts extensive involvement in the local churches.<sup>10</sup> Among others, he worked with the: Gunsan Church in 1929, the Jangmae-ri Church in 1929, the Unbong-ri Church in 1930, the Imwonjin Church in 1930, the Yulsang-ri Church in 1931, the Anak Church in 1932, the Chungjoo Church in 1932, the Galhyeon-ri Church in 1932, the Daegu evangelical meeting, 1932, the Yongganggun Ipseok-ri Church in 1934, the Daejeon Church in 1935, the Gwangjang-ri Church in 1936, and the Gwangjang-ri Church in 1936.

Leadership appointed R. S. Watts a secretary of the CUM mission department in 1929, and at the mission's seventh general session in January 1931, he also became a secretary of the youth department.<sup>11</sup> Officially organized in 1910, Howard M. Lee and Mrs. Theodora Wangerin. Watts had directed the department from 1931 to 1937, guiding youth prayer weeks and youth training sessions.<sup>12</sup>

Watts received ordination on February 11, 1933,<sup>13</sup> The CUM's tenth general meeting elected him as director of the Central Chosen Mission (CCM) in April 1937.<sup>14</sup> At that time, the CCM had charge of the Gyeonggi-do, Yeongseo in Gangwon-do, and Chungcheong-do regions with the mission's headquarter located in Seoul. Therefore, Pastor Watts led the region's church growth. After heading CCM for two years, leadership appointed him superintendent of CUM in January 1939, because of H. A. Oberg's transfer as secretary and treasurer for the Japan Union Mission.<sup>15</sup> At the eleventh general session of the CUM in April 1939, Watts reduced its organizational structure from five missions to four to deal with the stagnant situation of the Korean Adventist Church. In addition, he put much effort into establishing the financial independence of the Korean Adventist Church.

However, in 1940 Japan urged the withdrawal of all foreign missionaries from Korea as it prepared for the Pacific War with the United States. In response, the General Conference recalled all its missionaries from the country. As superintendent of CUM, Watts oversaw their departure beginning in November. Then, after attending the Far Eastern Division council session in Singapore during December 1940, he held a council meeting of the CUM on February 4, 1941, delegated the position of the superintendent of the CUM to Pastor Tae-Hyun Choi, and left Korea on February 16, 1941.<sup>16</sup>

For about six years national leaders headed the Korean Adventist Church, a time when Japan's religious suppression policy intensified. Government pressure led to the dissolving of the church on December 28, 1943.<sup>17</sup> But on August 15, 1945, Japan surrendered to Allied forces, resulting in the liberation of Korea. Korean Adventists quickly restored the disbanded church. Its members asked the General Conference to resend those missionaries who had returned to the United States. In response, the Far Eastern Division appointed Pastor Watts as the superintendent of the CUM at its meeting in November 1945. He returned to Korea on March 13, 1946, after attending the general meeting of the FED, and convened a council meeting of the CUM in early April of that year to elect the leaders of the Korean Adventist Church.<sup>18</sup>

After a quick trip to the United States, Watts returned to Korea on January 12, 1947. His most urgent task was to reorganize the CUM and its local missions. After he completed that task, FED appointed Watts secretary of its ministerial department in July 1948. Ernest W. Bahr then became president of the Korean Union Mission.<sup>19</sup> Watts left Korea on September 11 of that year and moved to Singapore.<sup>20</sup>

During this period, his wife, Mildred, had worked as a nurse at Soponan Hospital and Gyeongseong Hospital and had charge of the nurse's training school that opened in April 1936.<sup>21</sup> The school was the predecessor of the current Sahmyook Health University.

## Later Life

In Singapore, Ralph Watts served as the secretary of the FED Ministerial Department from 1948 to 1950. In 1951 the Missouri Conference in the Central Union Conference in the United States elected him president, and he served for a year.<sup>22</sup> He then became president of the South African Division and worked in Africa from 1952 to 1958.<sup>23</sup> Later, the General Conference appointed him as a field secretary where he worked from 1959 to 1963,<sup>24</sup> and then served as vice-president of the General Conference from 1964 to 1970.<sup>25</sup> Retiring in 1970, Ralph Watts stayed with his family in Nordland, Washington, until his death on May 12, 1994.<sup>26</sup> Mildred Watts died on September 25, 2002.<sup>27</sup>

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## SOURCES

*Church Compass*, October, 1926; August 1929; January 1930; February 1931; March 1933; June 1936; May 1937; March 1939; September 1948; October 1954.

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## NOTES

1. *Outlook* (Mid-America Union), July 1994, 24.
2. Young Soon Yu, *Memories* (Seoul: Korean Publishing House, 1984), 106.
3. The "Hushimo Incident" took place at Soonan Hospital in 1925. At the time, the hospital's director, Haysmer, punished a boy who on numerous occasions stole the fruit from an orchard owned by the hospital. However, when the incident became widely known, Haysmer left Korea in late 1926. W. A. Spicer, "Bad News from Korea," *ARH*, July 29, 1926, 24.
4. *Church Compass*, October 1926, 32.
5. *Church Compass*, August 1929, 24.
6. *Church Compass*, January 1930, 27.
7. Man Kyu Oh, *History of One Hundred Years of Korean SDA, 1904~1945* (Seoul: Korean Publishing House, 2010), 389, 390.
8. *Church Compass*, May 1937, 21-23.
9. H. A. Oberg, "Evangelistic Effect in Seoul," *ARH*, April 7, 1932, 11.

10. Man Kyu Oh, *History*, 418-599.
11. *Church Compass*, February 1931, 6, 7.
12. Man Kyu Oh, *History*, 392-398.
13. *Church Compass*, March 1933, 3.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Church Compass*, March 1939, 41-46.
16. Man Kyu Oh, *History*, 675.
17. *Church Compass*, October 1954, 21.
18. Yung Lin Lee, *A Comprehensive Study in the History of the Adventist Church in Korea* (Seoul: Sunmyung Cultural Press, 1968), 87.
19. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1949), 111, 115.
20. *Church Compass*, September 1948, 15, 16.
21. *Church Compass*, June 1936, 32.
22. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1951), 41.
23. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1952), 172.
24. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1959), 12.
25. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1964), 12.
26. *Outlook* (Mid-America Union), July 1994, 24.
27. "Watts, Mildred," obituary, *ARH*, February 27, 2003. <https://www.adventistreview.org/archives/2003-1509/>.

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