

Korean Signs of the Times (Sijo)

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.

*Korean Signs of the Times (Sijo)*¹ is an evangelistic magazine published by the Korean Adventist Church to spread the faith of Adventism. Since September 1910, 1,219 issues have come off the press as of December 2021. The 111-year-old monthly missionary magazine has a circulation of about 50,000 copies every year. *Sijo*, which is released in B5 size (44 pages), is one of the three major periodicals published by the Korean Adventist Church, along with *Church Compass (Kyoheojinam)* and *Home and Health (GajeongkwaGeongang)*.

Background

The Korean Adventist Church, which began in 1904, decided to promote a publishing program at the first general meeting of the Korean Mission held in 1908 and appointed William R. Smith, the first Adventist missionary to the country, as secretary of the publishing department.² In particular, the meeting decided to produce an eight-page monthly magazine. After moving the mission headquarters to Seoul in September 1909, the Korean Mission appointed Mimi Scharffenberg, the first Adventist female missionary to Korea, as its editor. In September 1910 the Korean Adventist Church released its first evangelistic magazine, *The Gospel of the End Time (Malsebogumseo)*.³



The first issue, September 1923, after changing its name to *Sijo*.

Photo courtesy of *Korean Signs of the Times*.

However, the political situation in Korea at the time forced its suspension. In August 1910, Japan colonized Korea and passed laws to censor publications. The Japanese Government-General of Korea strongly demanded that Adventists drop the title of *the Gospel of the End Time*. Accordingly, the Korean Mission suspended the publication of the magazine and released the first issue of *Three Angels' Message (Secheonsauikibyul)* on October 20, 1910.⁴ It became the predecessor of *Sijo*.

The growth of Adventism in Korea created a need for official avenues that denominational leaders could use to communicate with the local churches. Accordingly, the Korean Mission inaugurated a new monthly organ called *Church Compass* in July 1916.⁵ It reported missionary and local church news and mission departmental activities, and included Sabbath School lessons. With its publication, *Three Angels' Message* was able to focus solely on its evangelistic function. In November 1916, the Korean Mission renamed *Three Angels' Message* as *Sijowolbo* and expanded the pages to 28.⁶ Then in September 1923 it became *Sijo (Korean Signs of the Times)*⁷ and continues under that title until today.

History

Sijo's purpose is to "spread the eternal gospel and the faith of Adventism to Koreans." In order to achieve its evangelistic purpose, the magazine's content dealt with current affairs, prophecy, the gospel, education, and practical religious life.⁸ In the early days of KSDA history, publishing directors focused on expanding its distribution. As a result, *Sijo*, which had printed 5,000 copies per month until 1919, increased to 10,000 copies during the 1920s and 15,000 copies in 1932.⁹ Literature evangelists sold the magazine throughout the country.

In 1939 the October issue commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of its founding and included congratulatory notes by such Korean national leaders as Chi-ho Yoon, Rin Choi, Heung-sik Park, and Kwang-soo Lee, indicating that *Sijo* occupied a major position in Korean magazine history. In particular, Kwang-soo Lee in an article titled "The Adventist Church and I," said, "I respect and love the humble and clean life of the Adventists."¹⁰

During the 1940s, Japanese imperialism suppressed Christianity in Korea as it prepared for the Pacific War with the United States. When Japanese political leaders closed Christian magazines, *Sijo* was no exception. The Chosen Union Mission had no choice but to stop publication of *Sijo* and *Church Compass* in April 1941.¹¹ Two months later, the Chosen Union Mission created a monthly cultural magazine titled *Healthy Life* instead of *Sijo*, but even it ceased when the authorities ordered the disbanding of the Adventist Church in December 1943.¹²

Four years later, in October 1947, *Sijo* resumed publication. After Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule, the Korean Union Mission began restoring denominational programs and institutions. Part of those efforts included the release of a reinstated *Sijo* on October 20, 1947.¹³ Subscribers increased to 10,000 copies after three months and 20,000 copies after five months.¹⁴ The Korean Union Mission designated November 20, 1948, as a day for promoting the magazine.¹⁵

In the 1950s *Sijo's* publication again faced a major crisis. On June 25 of that year, the Korean War broke out, and Theodora Wangerin, who was in charge of editing the magazine, evacuated to Japan with other missionaries.¹⁶ It was impossible to publish *Sijo* for a time because all Korean editorial assistants had to flee. However, Mrs. Wangerin set up a temporary editorial office in Yokohama, Japan, and summoned the Korean editors to join her. She and the Korean staff published *Sijo* (October 1951-February 1952) from there.¹⁷ In 1952, when the war entered a lull, the Korean Union Mission published *Sijo* irregularly in Seoul. Then, as the war completely ended and the situation of the Korean Union Mission improved, the Korean Publishing House again issued the magazine, beginning in April 1955. *Sijo* now resumed monthly publication in July 1957, although economic circumstances forced its suspension for one year starting April 1958.¹⁸

The Korean Adventist Church celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1954. *Sijo* published the October 1954 issue as a special commemorative one. It featured congratulatory articles by South Korean President Syng-man Rhee, National Assembly Speaker Ki-bung Lee, Education Minister Sun-geun Lee, and Seoul Mayor Tae-sun Kim. In particular, President Syng-man Rhee praised the social contributions of the Korean Adventist Church and Seoul Adventist Hospital. The special issue also included historical comments from prominent Korean scholars.¹⁹ The fact that the writings of such prominent Korean individuals appeared in the magazine suggests its widespread recognition during this period.

As a missionary magazine, *Sijo* played an important role in the growth of the Korean Adventist Church during the 1960s and 1970s. Many people joined the Adventist Church because of it. Denominational media such as the *Church Compass* published testimonies from those who had accepted the Adventist faith through the *Sijo* during the magazine's promotion every year. In the 1970s, *Sijo* earned recognition as a key Korean religious magazine, receiving a commendation from the Minister of Culture and Information at the eighth Magazine Day ceremony on November 1, 1973.²⁰

Since the late 1960s, many Koreans have immigrated to the United States and established Korean Adventist congregations. Because their members wanted to subscribe to *Sijo*, the Korean Publishing House sent copies by air and ship. However, beginning with the June 1980 issue, *Sijo* began publication in the United States, printing about 9,000 copies a year.²¹

In 1983, the Korean Adventist Church advanced from mission to conference status and organized the Korean Union Conference. Since then, the Korean Publishing House has expanded, purchasing high-end printing machinery and completing a new building. As a result, by 1990, the number of copies printed by *Sijo* reached 100,000. Meanwhile, in January 1990, the Korean Union Conference inaugurated a new monthly magazine called *Home and Health*.²² It, along with *Sijo*, has played a major role in the evangelistic program of the Korean Adventist Church.

During the 2000s, *Sijo* gained a reputation as a leading member of Korean publishing culture. On October 20, 2000, the Korean Union Conference held a ceremony to commemorate the ninetieth anniversary of *Sijo's*

founding. The following year, on May 15, 2001, a total of 400 copies (15,446 pages) of *Sijo* published during the first 35 years were reprinted (total 30 volumes). And in September 2003, *Sijo* published its one-thousandth issue, and the Korean Publishing House released it as a special commemorative one. In addition, in October 2009, to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the Korean Publishing House, a special *Sijo* issue (number 1,073) reflected on the Korean Adventist Church's publishing program. During this period, *Sijo* gained a reputation as the longest-running periodical in Korean magazine history. Meanwhile, on June 25, 2009, the Korean Publishing House reprinted all of *Sijo*'s issues from October 1947 to December 1957 as part of its one-hundredth anniversary commemoration.²³

In 2016 The Seoul Future Heritage organization selected *Sijo* as a Korean cultural magazine, once again an acknowledgement of its historical value. The Seoul Metropolitan Government, which headed the project and had selected 54 cultural items as representing modern and contemporary Seoul, had chosen *Sijo* because it was the longest-running periodical in Korea. The Korean Union Conference received a bronze plaque from the Seoul Metropolitan Government, attached it to the Korean Publishing House building, and widely reported the historical value of *Sijo*.²⁴

Many people receive *Sijo* free of charge through voluntary contributions of Adventist Church members. Unfortunately, reflecting social changes, the number of donations is gradually decreasing. Nevertheless, in 2019, 49,558 copies of *Sijo* were distributed.²⁵ *Sijo* has been the best publication for the past 110 years to spread Adventism to Koreans. Even now, the magazine continues to perform its evangelistic function.

Outlook

During the past 110 years, *Sijo* has faithfully played a role as the most important publishing material to convey the gospel message of the Adventist Church to Koreans. In addition, it has proved its historical value in Korean publishing culture.

Despite its evangelistic and historical significance, however, *Sijo*'s influence has been gradually decreasing since 2010. One of the main reasons is the rapid development of online media. The Korean Union Conference is making various efforts to expand the influence of *Sijo* online. Another urgent area needing to be solved for the development of *Sijo* is to increase the amount of donations made by church members. *Sijo*, which had a print run of more than 100,000 copies in 1990, has now dropped to 50,000 copies, in a large part because of the decrease in financial support by church members. The devotion of the church members has a direct link to the development of *Sijo*. Therefore, the Korean Union Conference is making great efforts to encourage church members to finance more subscriptions. Above all, *Sijo* is modernizing its editorial style to create into a more attractive magazine.

Sijo is the most efficient missionary medium to convey the gospel in a non-face-to-face society. The Korean Adventist Church is doing its best to convey the three angel's messages through this periodical.

Lists of the Editors

Editor-in-Chief: Mimi Scharffenberg (1916-1918); E. J. Urqhart (1919-1923); Theodora Wangerin (1923-1924); E. J. Urqhart (1924-1931); Theodora Wangerin (1931-1940); Chang Jip Kim (1941); Young Soon Yoo (1941); Dong Shim Chung (1945-1947); Theodora Wangerin (1947-1952); Young Soon Yoo (1952-1955); Young Seop Oh (1955-1963); Seok Youg Oh (1963-1967); Sang Do Kim (1967-1969); Jeong Wan Cho (1969); Yoon Hee Lee (1969-1972); Dong Ki Kim (1973-1980); Se Won Chun (1980-1996); Young Cheol Chang (1997-2001); Yoon Ho Sohn (2001-2005); Jeong Kwon Chun (2005-2013); Jae Man Park (2013-)

Managing editors of *Sijo*: Joong Seop Im (1991-1993); Ji Yang Jang (1994-2000); Hee Man Park (2001-2003); Seung Woo Im (2004-2007); Cheol Kim (2008-2012); Hae Sung Kim (2013-)

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Korean Adventist News Center, January 17, 2017.

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Minutes of the 36th General Meeting of Korean Union Conference. Seoul: Korean Union Conference, 2020.

Oh, Man Kyu. *History of One Hundred Years of Korean Seventh-day Adventist* 2 vols. Seoul: Korean Publishing House, 2010.

Wangerin, Theodora S. *God sent me to Korea*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1968.

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1909.

NOTES

1. The magazine's Korean name is *Sijo*, which means *Signs of the Times* in English. In this article, I will use the magazine's Korean name, *Sijo* as well as its English name *Korean Signs of the Times*.
2. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1909), 139.
3. Man Kyu Oh, *History of One Hundred Years of Korean Seventh-day Adventist* (Seoul: Korean Publishing House, 2010), vol. 1, 139.
4. C. L. Butterfield, "First Magazine Campaign in Korea," *ARH*, May 30, 1911, 16.
5. *Church Compass*, July 1916, 2.
6. Man Kyu Oh, 350.
7. *Korean Signs of the Times*, June 1923, 1.
8. *Korean Signs of the Times*, January 1929, 1.
9. Man Kyu Oh, 351, 352.
10. *Korean Signs of the Times*, October 1939, 6, 7.
11. Kuk Heon Lee, *A History of Korean Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Seoul: Sahmyook University Press, 2020), 148.
12. *Ibid.*, 155, 156.
13. *Church Compass*, October 1947, 16.
14. *Church Compass*, February 1948, 16; *Church Compass*, July 1948, 4.
15. *Church Compass*, November 1948, 5.
16. Frederich Lee, "Fifteen Minutes to Pack," *ARH*, September 7, 1950, 4.
17. Theodora S. Wangerin, *God sent me to Korea* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1968), 113.
18. Yung Lin Lee, *A Comprehensive Study in the History of the Adventist Church in Korea* (Seoul: Sunmyung Cultural Press, 1968), 167.
19. *Korean Signs of the Times*, October 1954, 6, 22, 23.

20. *Church Compass*, December 1973, 23.
 21. "Report of the Korean Publishing House," Minutes of the 27th General Meeting of Korean Union Conference (Seoul: Korean Union Conference, 1983).
 22. "Report of the Korean Publishing House," Minutes of the 29th General Meeting of Korean Union Conference (Seoul: Korean Union Conference, 1991).
 23. *Centennial Commemoration of Korean Publishing House* (Seoul: Korean Publishing House, 2011), 107.
 24. *Korean Adventist News Center*, January 17, 2017, see [here](#).
 25. "Report of the Korean Publishing House," *Minutes of the 36th General Meeting of Korean Union Conference* (Seoul: Korean Union Conference, 2020).
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