



Headquarters of the Korean Union Conference, 2021.

Photo courtesy of the Korean Union Conference.

Korean Union Conference

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 Union Conference (aka. Hankookyeonhaphoe) is a part of the Northern Asia-Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists. It was organized as a union mission in 1919 and reorganized as a union conference in 1984.

Current Territory and Statistics

The territory of the Korean Union Conference (KUC) is on the Korean Peninsula; that is, all over the Republic of Korea and Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The KUC comprises five conferences (the East Central Korean Conference, Middlewest Korean Conference, Southeast Korean Conference, Southwest Korean Conference, and West Central Korean Conference), one mission (the North Korean Mission), and one attached mission field (Jeju Region). According to statistics (June 30, 2019), the KUC has 259,029 church members in 697 churches!

Origin of Adventist Work in the Territory of the Union Conference

It was in 1904 that the messages of Adventism spread to Korea. The Korean Adventist Church, which was founded by Heung-Jo Son and Ki-Ban Lim. Son and Lim were baptized after hearing the messages of the Adventist Church in Japan. They helped organize the Chosen Mission Field on September 27, 1904, after establishing four churches with the help of Kuniah Hide, a Japan missionary, and F. W. Field, a director of Japan Mission.² The organization was a missionary organization belonging to the Japanese Mission. At that time there were about one hundred Korean Adventists, and Ki-Ban Lim was appointed as the temporary director of the Korean Mission Field.

After organizing the Chosen Mission Field, F. W. Field reported the missionary development in Korea in detail to the General Conference (GC) and requested the dispatch of missionaries.³ Upon this request, the General Conference sent William Smith as the first missionary of Korea in 1905. William Smith moved the headquarters of the Korean Mission Field from Jinnampo to Soonan. In 1907 he established a ministry training school in Soonan with Mimi Scharffenberg, the first female missionary to Korea, and promoted missionary work in Korea.⁴

When Korean missionary work began in earnest, the GC set up a plan to organize Korea as a missionary area independent of the Japan Mission. To this end the GC sent Charles L. Butterfield to Korea in October 1908. Then, a month later, in November, I. H. Evans, the treasurer of the GC, came to Korea with W. F. Field, the director of Japan Mission, to organize the Korean Mission.⁵ C. L. Butterfield, who was appointed as the director of the Chosen Mission, moved the mission headquarters from Soonan to Seoul in September 1909 and established a missionary plan for the entire country. According to the plan, Korean Mission was divided into four mission fields (Central Korean, West Korean, South Korean, East Coast) and established the main cities of each field (Seoul, Soonan, Gyeongsan, Wonsan) as the base for missionary work.⁶

Under Butterfield's supervision, the Korean Mission continued to grow. In February 1917 Arthur G. Daniels, who was a president of the GC, came to Korea to attend the Annual Meeting of the Korean Mission, which promoted the Korean Mission to the Korean Conference and led to a decision to appoint Butterfield as the superintendent.⁷ As a result, the Korean Adventist Church will grow from a Mission to a Conference.

In May 1915 the Asiatic Division of the General Conference was organized in Shanghai, China.⁸ At this time, the Asiatic Division consisted of large regions including the East Asian Union Conference, the India Union Conference, and the Australia Union Conference. In 1918 the current type of a division was organized,⁹ when the East Asian Union Conference, formerly part of the Asiatic Division, was independently reorganized as the Far Eastern Division. Thus, the Korean Conference, Japan Conference, and Manchurian Conference, which belonged to the East Asian Union Conference, were separated into their respective union missions. Thus, the Chosen Union Mission was organized in 1919.¹⁰

Organizational History

The Korean Adventist Church, which was promoted to the Chosen Union Mission after two years of being promoted from the Korean Mission to the Chosen Conference, held a General Meeting for the organization resolution in May 1919 and reorganized the entire country into three missionary areas, West Chosen Conference, Central Chosen Mission, and South Chosen Mission.¹¹ The West Chosen Conference¹² was assigned to the northwestern region of Korea, and its headquarters was located in Soonan. The Central Chosen Mission was assigned to Gyeonggi-do, Gangwon-do, and Chungcheong-do, and its headquarters was located in Seoul. The South Chosen Mission was assigned to Yeongnam and Honam regions, and its headquarters was located in Gyeongsan. In addition, the Kando Mission Field was established in the Manchurian area beyond the Tumen River.¹³

The Chosen Union Mission, which was organized in 1919 with three missions, lasted until 1933. The superintendents who led the Union Mission during this period were C. L. Butterfield (1908–1922) and H. A. Oberg (1922–1939).¹⁴ In 1933 the Chosen Union Mission reduced its organization in the wake of the global economic recession. However, in order to make the mission more systematic, the Chosen Union Mission decided to expand the three missions to five missions (Central, North, Southeast, Southwest, and West) in 1934.¹⁵ However, in April 1939, when the Southeast and Southwest Chosen Missions were merged into South Chosen Missions, the Chosen Union Mission was reduced again to four missions.¹⁶

The biggest difficulty faced by the Chosen Union Mission during this period entailed financial problems. Due to lack of financial resources, the Korean Adventist Church could not function as a union conference and was operated with support from the General Conference. In this difficult situation, all missionaries were withdrawn from Korea from November 1940 for political reasons. Ralph S. Watts, who was the superintendent of CUM, held an executive committee in February 1941 and handed over his post to a Korean (Tae-Hyun Choi) and left Korea.¹⁷ After that the Chosen Union Mission was forced to run by Korean leaders without any missionaries.

Since the missionaries left, the Chosen Union Mission has had more difficulties. The Japanese government suppressed Christianity in Korea by pushing for a coercive colonial policy. Due to this oppressive policy, the Korean Adventist Church faced the fate of being dissolved. The Japanese government led to close *Church Compass*, which was the official magazine of the Chosen Union Mission in May 1941 and closed the Chosen Union Workers' Training Institute and arrested some church leaders in February 1943. They finally disbanded the Korean Adventist Church on December 28.¹⁸ Due to the dissolution of the church, the Korean Adventists maintained their faith in the form of underground churches or wilderness churches. Fortunately, the period of Japanese rule did not last long.¹⁹ On August 15, 1945, Japan lost the Pacific War, and Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial rule.

After the liberation, the Korean Adventist Church rushed to reconstruct the churches. The church leaders held a meeting in October 1945 to resolve the reconstruction of the churches. The Far Eastern Division also

reappointed R. S. Watts as its superintendent at the General Meeting held in November 1945. Following this resolution, R. S. Watts returned to Korea in March 1946 and reconstructed the Chosen Union Mission. After that, he returned to the United States and returned to Korea in January 1947 to serve as chairman of the association.²⁰

In this way, the Korean Union Mission (KUM)²¹ has recovered, but the situation has changed a lot since before the liberation. Above all, Korea was divided into South Korea and North Korea. In North Korea a socialist regime was established under the influence of the Soviet Union, and it was not easy to maintain the church. After the liberation, churches in the North Korean region were managed by Sung-Won Im, who was a superintendent of the North Korean Mission.²² After the 1950 Korean War, however, Korea was completely divided into two countries, and the North Korean Mission was unable to follow the leadership of the KUM. Under these circumstances, the KUM divided the South Korean region into the Central Korean Mission and South Korean Mission and established its headquarters in Seoul and Daejeon and began its missionary work in earnest.²³

The Korean Adventist Church faced another crisis due to the Korean War that broke out on June 25, 1950. North Korea, which established a socialist regime, invaded South Korea, which led to a three-year Korean War. Three days after the war, Seoul was occupied by North Korean troops, and the missionaries withdrew again. However, three months later, with the help of the U.N. military, Seoul recovered, and missionaries returned to Korea. Due to the prolonged Korean War, the headquarters of KUM moved to Busan and Jeju with the help of Dr. George H. Rue and returned to Seoul in November 1951.²⁴

After returning to Seoul, the KUM held the 16th General meeting in Cheongju in May 1952, which divided the South Korean region into three missions (Central Korean Mission, Southeast Korean Mission, and Southwest Korean Mission).²⁵ However, the area of the Central Korean Mission, which covered Gyeonggi-do and Gangwon-do and Chungcheong-do, was so large that it needed to be divided again. In response, the Korean Union Mission made a resolution to divide the Central Korean Mission into the Central Korean Mission (Gyeonggi-do, Chungcheongnambuk-do) and the Middle East Korean Mission (Gangwon-do, part of Chungcheongbuk-do) in December 1957.²⁶ Following this decision, the Middle East Korean Mission was newly organized on January 1, 1958, and the KUM was again expanded to four missions.

In the 1960s, the KUM experienced remarkable growth. According to 1961 statistics, the KUM's Sabbath School members had nearly fifty thousand members. The remarkable growth of the KUM has drawn attention from Adventist churches around the world. As the church grew, the KUM needed to expand its organization further. In response, the Executive Committee of the KUM decided to divide the Central Korean Mission into the Central Korean Mission (Seoul and Gyeonggi-do) and the Middle West Korean Mission (Chungcheong-do).²⁷ Under the resolution, the KUC was reorganized into five missions from 1963: Central Korean Mission, Middle East Korean Mission, Middle West Korean Mission, Southeast Korean Mission, and Southwest Korean Mission.²⁸ This led to the re-establishment of five tournaments in 30 years since 1933.

Following the expansion of the missionary work, the missionary situation of the KUM, which was reorganized into a five missions system, continued to improve. As a result, in 1965 the number of Sabbath School members exceeded 100,000. In response, the KUM decided to separate the Southeast Korean Mission into North Kyong Mission and South Kyong Mission.²⁹ Thus, the KUC was organized into six missions. But this situation did not last long. After 1966 the missionary situation of Korea suddenly began to deteriorate. In 1967 the number of Sabbath School members dropped sharply to 34,330.³⁰ As a result, the KUM had to reduce its organization back to six missions. In 1967 the North and South Kyong Missions were merged into the Southeast Korean Mission again. And the KUM's annual council held in January 1968 merged the Central Korean Mission and Middle East Korean Mission into the Central Korean Mission and integrated the Middle West Korean Mission and the Southwest Korean Mission into the Southwest Korean Mission.³¹ In this way, six missions were reduced to three missions again.

The KUM has appointed young leaders to the president of the three missions, while downsizing its organization to overcome the crisis. And restructuring was carried out through a resolution to reduce the number of ministers.³² The 24th General Meeting of KUM, which was held in November 1970, strongly requested the appointment of a Korean as the president of the KUM. In response to this request, Pastor Yi-Yeol Kim was elected as the president of the KUM at the General Meeting of the Far Eastern Division (FED) in November 1971.³³ This led to the history of the appointment of a Korean leader again as the leader of the Korean Adventist Church 40 years after Pastor Tae-Hyun Choi was appointed as the superintendent of the Chosen Union Mission at a time when missionaries were withdrawn due to the Pacific War. Since then, the Korean Adventist Church has been run by Korean leaders, not interdivisional ministers.

At the 24th General Meeting of KUM, a resolution was also made to restructure the organization of the KUM. Overcoming the financial crisis in a short period of time, the KUM discussed the reparation of the missions, which it had merged into three missions three years ago. As a result of this discussion, the Southwest Korean Mission was divided into Southwest Korean Mission and Middlewest Korean Mission in April 1971.³⁴ Since then, the church's crisis has been overcome and has grown slowly (about thirty thousand members). Thus, KUM celebrated the 70th anniversary of the mission at the Church of Seoul Adventist Hospital on November 30, 1974.³⁵ In 1978 the Central Korean Mission was separated from the East and West, and the KUM reestablished the five missions (East Central Korean Mission, West Central Korean Mission, Middlewest Korean Mission, Southeast Korean Mission, and Southwest Korean Mission).³⁶

The KUM has been striving to become a union conference for more than seventy years. The results came in 1983, a year before the 80th anniversary of the mission. The KUM asked the GC in 1982 to review approval from mission to conference. The GC voted for the Korean Union Conference at the meeting in Manila in October that year. According to the statistics of the Korean Adventist Church at that time, there were 368 churches, 56,245 church members, and 261 pastors. After the resolution of the GC, the KUM held a General Meeting, which organized mission into conference, creating five conferences.³⁷ Thus, the Korean Union Conference (KUC) was

reorganized at the 27th General Meeting in December 1983.³⁸

From the 1980s to the 2000s, the KUC achieved sustained church growth. On November 3, 1984, the KUC, which held a ceremony marking the 80th anniversary of the mission at Jamsil Student Gymnasium in Seoul, later accelerated its missionary work and produced surprising results in 1991 with more than one hundred thousand church members.³⁹ Thanks to this result, on September 3, 1994, the 90th anniversary of the mission was held at the Olympic Gymnastics Stadium in Seoul with 25,000 church members in attendance.⁴⁰

Then, 10 years later, in November 2004, an event was held to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Korean Mission. The Korean Adventist Church became the fourth church in Korea to mark the 100th anniversary of its mission after the Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church, and the Korean Anglican Church.⁴¹ In 2004, marking the 100th anniversary of the mission, the KUC grew into a solid church with five conferences, 688 organized churches, 171,006 Baptists, 828 pastors, and 27 schools. In particular, in preparation for the second century of missionary work, the KUC established a plan for the development of the denomination that suggested the goal of "Hope 21: Completion of the Kingdom of God."⁴² Currently the Korean Adventist Church continues to grow under the leadership of the KUC.

List of Presidents

Charles L. Butterfield (1908-1922); Harold A. Oberg (1922-1925, 1927-1939); Edward J. Urquhart (1925-1927); Ralph S. Watts (1939-1940, 1947-1948); Tae Hyun Choi (1941-1942); Ernest W. Bahr (1948-1951); Clinton W. Lee (1951-1957); C. H. Davis (1958-1963); C. A. Williams (1964-1967); W. L. Wilcox (1968-1971); Yi Yeol Kim (1971-1978); Hyeong Hwan Yu (1978-1983, 1988-1991); Byeong Deok Jeon (1984-1987); Tae Seop Shim (1992-1995); Sang Woo Han (1996-2000); Gye Hun Shin (2000-2003); Jeong Kwon Jeon (2003-2004); Myeong Kwan Hong (2005-2008); Dae Seong Kim (2009-2014); Chun Kwang Hwang (2015-2020); Soon Gi Kang (2021-).

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2020), 223.
2. F. W. Field, "The Situation in Korea," *ARH*, December 29, 1904, 13.
3. F. W. Field, "The Light Spreading in Korea," *ARH*, November 24, 1904, 21.
4. William R. Smith, *The Passion of a Gospel Pioneer in Korea* (Seoul: Sahmyook University Press, 2006), 42-70.
5. Irwin H. Evans, "Our Work in Korea," *ARH*, January 14, 1909, 16.
6. Yung Lin Lee, *A Comprehensive Study in the History of the Adventist Church in Korea* (Seoul: Sunmyung Cultural Press, 1968), 43, 44.
7. A. G. Daniells, "The Korean Conference," *ARH*, May 3, 1917, 12, 13.
8. A. G. Daniells, "The Asiatic Division Conference," *ARH*, August 26, 1915, 5.
9. Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nampa, Idaho, 1995), 314, 315.
10. Irwin H. Evans, "Meeting of the Chosen Union Mission," *ARH*, August 7, 1919, 14.

11. Yung Lin Lee, 52.
12. The West Chosen Conference became a Mission from 1931 (*Seventh-day Yearbook* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1931], 183).
13. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1920), 158, 159.
14. Yung Lin Lee, 53.
15. *Church Compass*, June 1935, 16.
16. *Church Compass*, June 1939, 26.
17. Man Kyu Oh, *History of One Hundred Years of Korean SDA, 1904-1945* (Seoul: Korean Publishing House, 2010), 675.
18. Lee, Yeo Sik, "A Historical Records of the Past," *Church Compass*, February 1973, 22.
19. Man Kyu Oh, 742.
20. *Church Compass*, March-April 1947, 16.
21. The Chosen Union Mission was renamed the Korean Union Mission in 1947 (*Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* [1947], 104).
22. Yung Lin Lee, 87.
23. *Church Compass*, July 1947, 16.
24. Yung Lin Lee, 97-103; *Church Compass*, July 1952, 11.
25. *Church Compass*, July 1952, 51-53.
26. *Church Compass*, March 1958, 64.
27. *Church Compass*, February 1963, 17.
28. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1964), 119-122.
29. *Church Compass*, February 1966, 3; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1967), 124-127
30. *Church Compass*, October 1967, 18.

31. *Church Compass*, February 1968, 36.
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33. *Church Compass*, December 1971, 5.
34. *Church Compass*, May 1971, 11.
35. *Church Compass*, January 1975, 10.
36. *Church Compass*, May 1978, 6; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1979), 186-189.
37. *Church Compass*, January 1983, 1.
38. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1984), 136-139.
39. "Report of the department of Secretary," Minutes of the 29th General Meeting of KUC (Seoul: Korean Union Conference, 1991), 28.
40. *Church Compass*, October 1994, 3-17.
41. Kuk Heon Lee, *A History of Korean Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Seoul: Sahmyook University Press, 2020), 346.
42. *Ibid.*, 348.

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