

Lee, Keun Eok

(1881–1932)

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.

Keun Eok Lee was one of the first ordained pastors in Korea, administrator of a local mission, and outstanding preacher who contributed to the development of the Adventist Church in Korea.

Early Life

Keun Eok Lee was born on July 24, 1881, in Ipsoong-ri, Seongam-myeon, Gangseo-gun, Pyeongannam-do as the second-generation only son of Ui-Jun Lee. He

was born into a wealthy family and studied Chinese classics from an early age. Married at the age of 14, he was influential as a community leader while running an herbal medicine store.¹

In 1904 Gi Ban Im preached Adventism in the village to gather believers, and in August of that year, he invited a Japanese pastor, Kuniya Hide, to hold an evangelical meeting. Keun Eok Lee, who was an herbal medicine dealer, was baptized by Kuniya Hide in September of that year after attending the meeting² On September 13, 1904, F. W. Field, who was the director of the Japanese Mission, came to Korea and led the establishment of the Korean church with Kuniya Hide. As a result, Seondol Church, the first Adventist church, was established in Ipseok-ri, Jiun-myeon, Yonggang-gun, Pyeongannam-do on September 17.³ Keun Eok Lee participated as an early member of the church when it was established.

Seondol Church members made a pair of straw shoes every evening before going to bed to build the church. And after selling the shoes and raising some money, they built a small church hall in 1905⁴ When the church was built, Geun Eok Lee started an elementary education work under the name of Gwangyeom School in one of



Keun Eok Lee, the first ordained pastor of the Korean Adventist Church, 1915.

Photo courtesy of Kuk Heon Lee.

his herbal medicine rooms. This was the first educational work started by an Adventist in Korea.⁵ The name of the school means “Light and Salt,” revealing that the school was built on a biblical basis.

In 1907 William Smith and Mimi Scharffenberg, the first missionaries of the Korean Adventist Church, founded a youth training school in Soonan, South Pyongan Province. The school was established to train leaders of the church. When the first year of education began on December 9, 1907, there were 11 enrolled students, including six girls and five boys, and Keun Eok Lee was one of them.⁶ Keun Eok Lee disposed of the herbal medicine store and went to the school riding a horse from Ipsong-ri to Soonan. He was one of the oldest students and had experience in running primary courses; so, he studied in secondary courses and taught Chinese characters to primary students.⁷ The eleven students, including Keun Eok Lee, began working as church workers from late 1909.⁸

Ministry

Keun Eok Lee started his first ministry as a teacher at the Uimyeong School. With the enactment of the Private School Act in August 1908, the training school established in Soonan had to be registered as a regular middle school. Thus, the school leaders reorganized the school into a three-year regular middle school in 1909 and submitted a certificate of establishment under the name Uimyeong School in September of that year, obtaining permission to operate the school. Then Uimyeong School recruited 25 students to run a regular middle school, when Keun Eok Lee, Dong Hyeop Ha, and Chang Se Kim were appointed as Korean teachers.⁹ In this way Keun Eok Lee became a teacher at the Uimyeong School.

It was in 1910 that Keun Eok Lee began his ministry as a preacher. The Korean Mission was organized in late 1908, and the headquarters of the mission was moved from Soonan to Seoul in September 1909. In February 1910, the worker's institute was held at the Seoul Headquarters Church. At this meeting the Korea Mission divided the entire region into four missionary areas (Central-Seoul, West-Soonan, South-Gyeongsan, and East Sea Coast-Wonsan) and appointed mission managers for each region.¹⁰ In particular, the Korean Mission appointed six native workers. Keun Eok Lee was appointed as one of them, serving with Riley Russell in the West Region (Soonan).

From August 3 to 13, 1911, the Second Annual Meeting of the Korean Mission was held in Jinnampo, South Pyongan Province. At the meeting Keun Eok Lee was appointed as a missionary in Old-Uiju area. The Old-Uiju city was once called Omokdang, referring to Uiju, a provincial government complex in North Pyongan Province. It is not clear exactly when the church was built there, but based on this resolution of 1911, when Keun Eok Lee was deployed as a minister, is considered the time of establishment of the Uiju Church.¹¹ Keun Eok Lee, who was appointed as the minister of the Uiju Church, made a serious decision to give up inheritance of property and enter the path of God's ministry. Keun Eok Lee, who led the pioneering Uiju Church, worked as a minister in the Southeast region since late 1912, and devoted his efforts to pioneering missionary work in the Southwest region

including Gimje from 1914.¹²

Keun Eok Lee, who devoted himself to pioneering missions, was given the honor of becoming the first ordained pastor of the Korean Adventist Church in 1915. From April 6, 1915, the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Korean Mission was held at Soonan. Arthur G. Daniells, the president of the GC, visited Korea for the first time and guided the annual meeting. The highlight of the meeting was the first ordination ceremony for two Korean ministers. It was Moon Gook Jeong and Keun Eok Lee who were ordained by Daniells at the meeting.¹³ Shortly after receiving the ordination of the pastors, the First General Meeting of the Asiatic Division Conference was held in Shanghai, China, where Geun Eok Lee was recommended as a representative of the General Meeting along with Mun Gook Jeong to visit Shanghai. After returning from the General Meeting, Pastor Keun Eok Lee was in charge of the missionary work of Ulleung-do with Sung Won Lim from 1917.¹⁴

Keun Eok Lee and Mun Gook Jeong, the first ordained pastors of the Korean Adventist Church, were appointed as the leaders of the local mission field. The Advisory Committee of the Korean Conference, which was held in December 1917, grouped North Hamheung and North Gando into one mission area and appointed Pastor Keun Eok Lee as the leader of the area.¹⁵ He transferred from Ulleungdo Church to Hamheung Church. And then Keun Eok Lee, who was pastor around Hamheung from this time to 1919, served as the secretary of the Sabbath School Department that belonged to the West Chosen Conference (WCC) at the General Meeting of the Chosen Union Mission in 1919.¹⁶

Four years later, at the First General Meeting of the WCC in June 1923, William R. Smith was appointed as the president of the conference, and Keun Eok Lee assisted him in supporting the missionary work of the WCC. And at the Second General Meeting of the WCC in 1925, he was appointed as the president of the conference.¹⁷

As the president of the WCC, Keun Eok Lee supervised missionary work in Soonan, where the headquarters of the WCC was located, for the next six years. During his term in office, the 42nd Session of the GC was held in San Francisco, USA, from May 29 to June 12, 1930, when he attended the session as one of the Korean members. This made him the first Korean leader to attend as the official representative of the GC Session.¹⁸ The following year, from January 10 to 17, 1931, the Seventh General Meeting of the Chosen Union Mission was held at the Headquarters Church in Hoigi, Seoul. At the General Meeting, Keun Eok Lee was appointed as the director of the Central Chosen Mission¹⁹ and moved to Seoul, where the headquarters was located.²⁰

Later Life

While he was serving as the director of the Central Chosen Mission, he was diagnosed with stomach cancer and underwent surgery at Severance Hospital on December 31, 1931. Due to his poor health, however, he returned to his hometown of Ipsong-ri, Gangseo-gun, Pyeongannam-do in March 1932 and died on May 26, 1932.²¹ He was only 52 years old at the time. Although he died at a relatively young age, Keun Eok Lee made a lasting impact in the history of the Adventist Church in Korea, which is felt up to the present time.²²

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NOTES

1. Yeo Shik Lee, *The Pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventists in Korea* (Seoul: Korean Publishing House, 1987), 158.

2. Man Kyu Oh, *History of One Hundred Years of Korean SDA, 1904~1945* (Seoul: Korean Publishing House, 2010), 68.

3. *Ibid.*, 70, 71.

4. *Ibid.*, 71.

5. *Ibid.*, 428.

6. William R. Smith, "Mission Notes," *ARH*, February 20, 1908, 17; Yung Lin Lee, "A Comprehensive Study in the History of the Adventist Church in Korea" (Seoul: Sunmyung Cultural Press, 1968), 145, 146.

7. Yeo Shik Lee, 159.

8. Man Kyu Oh, 297
9. Riley Russell, "Medical Missionary Work in Korea," *ARH*, December 16, 1909, 20; Yung Lin Lee, 146.
10. C. L. Butterfield, "Training in New Recruits," *ARH*, April 21, 1910, 13. Central Region (Seoul): Harold A. Oberg, Rye- Jun Kim; West Region (Soonan): Riley Russell, Keun Eok Lee; South Region (Gyeongsan): R. C. Wangerin, Kyu Hyuk Kim; East Sea Coast (Wonsan): W. R. Smith, Hyo Seop Kim; The Korean Mission: C. L. Butterfield, Hwa Seok Kang; Manager of Korean Mission Press: Seung Won Kim. Cf. Yung Lin Lee, 43.
11. Jea Shin Kim, *A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North Korea* (Seoul: Korean Publishing House, 1993), 110.
12. Man Kyu Oh, 150.
13. J. E. Fulton, "A Missionary Tour in Korea," *ARH*, July 29, 1915, 11.
14. Man Kyu Oh, 185.
15. *Church Compass*, December 1917, 14.
16. Man Kyu Oh, 196. See, *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1920), 158.
17. *Ibid.*, 204-213. Mun Gook Jeong was the first Korean pastor to be appointed as the director of the local Mission/Conference (1923), and Keun Eok Lee was the second person to be appointed as the director (*Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1926], 149).
18. *Church Compass*, June 1930, 32.
19. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1932), 159.
20. *Church Compass*, March 1931, 38.
21. Yeo Shik Lee, 162.
22. *Church Compass*, August 1932, 18-22.

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