

Im, Gi-Ban

(1870–1932)

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.

Gi-Ban Im was one of the early leaders of the Korean Adventist Church who played a key role in establishing Korea's first Adventist Church in Jinnampo, Hwanghae-do.

Early Life

Gi-Ban Im was born in Jeonghwa-ri, Yanggok-myeon, Yonggang-gun, Pyeongannam-do in 1870. He joined the Methodist Church at the age of 11 and became one of the leaders of the Seondol Methodist Church in Yonggang County, South Pyongan Province, in 1899. At that time, he worked with Chang-Ho Ahn, one of the most prominent independence activists, at the Pyongyang branch of the Independence Association to enlighten the nation.¹ He worked as an employee of the East-West Development Company, which organized the Hawaiian Labor and Immigration Project from 1903 to 1905 and moved to Hawaii in January 1904 to organize the Believers Society of the Korean-Hawaiian with Seung-Ha Hong, a Methodist leader.² However, he returned to Chosen (old name of Korea) due to a dispute over the payment of immigration expenses by working immigrants in Hawaii.³

In May 1904 Hyung-Joo Im (named before changing his name to Gi-Ban Im), who visited Kobe on his way home, met Heung-Jo Sohn, who became an Adventist in the city, and heard the messages of the Adventist Church from Kuniya Hide, a minister at Kobe Adventist Church in Japan. However, after hearing from Kuniya Hide about the separation of church and state, he no longer met Kuniya because he was engaged in political activities as an enlightenment leader. Throughout his journey from Kobe to Chosen by ship, he became interested in Adventism as he heard and discussed the doctrines of the Adventist Church, including sabbaths and baptisms, from Heung-



Gi-Ban Im who serviced as the leader of the first Seventh-day Adventist Church in Korea, 1904.

Photo courtesy of Kuk Heon Lee.

Jo Sohn.⁴

Ministry

Sailing for 20 days after leaving Kobe, he arrived at Incheon Port via Busan and Mokpo. After that, he went to his hometown of Jinnampo, Pyeongannam-do, and began to study about the doctrines of the Adventist Church. In particular, after reading the biography of Martin Luther translated into Chinese and being impressed, Hyung-Joo Im changed his name to Gi-Ban Im with the intention of establishing an Adventist Church in Chosen. Gi-Ban Im, who experienced a change of mind, led the establishment of the Adventist community by delivering the messages of the Adventist Church to Won-Geol Jeong, Seung-Ho Kim, and Jae-Hwan Yang among Methodists in Jinnampo.⁵ Gi-Ban Im, along with about thirty people who accepted the messages of the Adventist Church, invited Kuniya Hide, who met in Kobe, Japan. The invitation he wrote recorded that "16 men, 14 women, and six children are looking forward to being baptized."⁶ Upon receiving this letter, Kuniya Hide came to Chosen in August 1904 and taught the doctrines of the Adventist Church and baptized people who gathered near Jinnampo. Later Kuniya Hide conducted evangelical activities in 13 villages for five weeks and baptized 49 people.⁷

When many believers were baptized within a short period of time, Gi-Ban Im asked Kuniya Hide to organize the church. Thus, Kuniya Hide invited F. W. Field, who was the director of the Japan Mission at the time,⁸ to Chosen. Pastor Field arrived in Chosen on September 13, 1904, and led the organization of the church for 17 days. Thus, four churches (Seondol, Gangdaemoru, Yongdong, and Bamegi) were established in Chosen. After organizing the churches, he held a general meeting with church representatives in Jinnampo on September 27 and organized the Korean Mission Field, which belonged to the Japan Mission.⁹ He then appointed leaders to lead the Korean Mission Field. Following this decision, Gi-Ban Im was appointed as the temporary director of the Korean Mission Field.¹⁰

Gi-Ban Im led the Korean Adventist Churches until William R. Smith, the first Korean Adventist missionary, was sent to Korea. Upon hearing that the mission field had been established in Korea, the leaders of the General Conference appointed Pastor William Smith as a missionary for the Korean Mission Field. After arriving in Seoul on October 22, 1905, William Smith moved to Jinnampo in May 1906 and carried out the missionary work with Korean leaders, including Gi-Ban Im. In November 1906, F. W. Field, who was the director of the Japan Mission, reentered Korea and held an executive meeting with Korean leaders. Gi-Ban Im was appointed as the missionary worker in the Pyongyang area at this meeting.¹¹ In January 1907 Gi-Ban Im attended the First General Meeting of the Japan Mission as a representative of Korea. At the meeting he listened to a lecture by W. W. Prescott, a leader of the General Conference, and had a meaningful encounter with him.¹²

However, Gi-Ban Im, who served as a strong leader in the early Korean Adventist Church, slowly experienced a crisis of Adventism as he opposed the policies pursued by missionaries. In 1907 William Smith and Mimi

Scharffenberg established a worker's training school in Soonan. At that time Gi-Ban Im argued that the school should have been established in Pyongyang and confronted William Smith. According to Smith's plan, the school was established in Soonan. Then Gi-Ban Im became a Chinese literature teacher at the school, and the debate over the establishment of the school was concluded.¹³

However, Gi-Ban Im was at odds with the missionaries in the dispute over the transfer of the mission headquarters from Soonan to Seoul. As Korean missionary work developed, the General Conference sent Riley Russell as a medical missionary, Helen May Scott as an educational missionary, and C. L. Butterfield as the director of the Korean Mission Field in 1908. The missionaries held an Advisory Committee in Soonan in November of that year, where the leaders of the Korean Adventist Church organized the Korean Mission by making Korea independent of the Japanese Mission. Then Butterfield was appointed as the superintendent of the Korean Mission,¹⁴ and the mission headquarters decided to move from Soonan to Seoul.¹⁵

Gi-Ban Im was included as one of five members of the committee that was appointed to promote the missionary headquarters' relocation to Seoul.¹⁶ However, Gi-Ban Im, who was serving in Pyongyang, was actively opposed to the relocation of the headquarters of the Korean Mission to Seoul. Despite his opposition, however, the headquarters was relocated to Seoul in September 1909.¹⁷ Gi-Ban Im, dissatisfied with the decision, withdrew from the Korean Mission by establishing a Free Church in Pyongyang with Geun-Myeong Kang and launching an independent church movement.¹⁸

Later Life

When he left the church, Japan colonized Chosen and began to dominate the country. Gi-Ban Im, who was active in the Independence Association, worked for the independence of Chosen. In June 1919 he and Ki-Ho Lee and Sa-Ik Kim worked together to secure funds for the independence movement in Manchuria but failed to achieve the will after Ki-Ho Lee was arrested by Japanese police in July 1919 while raising funds for the independence movement.¹⁹ He then worked independently of the church and died on June 5, 1932.

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3. Deuk Hee Lee, *100 years of immigration to Hawaii, how did they live?* (Seoul: Joongang M&B, 2003), 15-20.
4. F. W. Field, "Japan," *ARH*, August 4, 1904, 14.
5. *Church Compass*, June 1924, 8.
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7. F. W. Field, "The Light Spreading in Korea," *ARH*, September 14, 1904, 21.
8. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1904), 74.
9. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1905), 86.
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11. Yung Lin Lee, *A Comprehensive Study in the History of the Adventist Church in Korea* (Seoul: Sunmyung Cultural Press, 1968), 39.
12. W. W. Prescott, "General Meeting in Japan," *ARH*, April 18, 1907, 3.
13. Yung Lin Lee, 144, 145.

14. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1909), 139.
15. Man Kyu Oh, *History of One Hundred Years of Korean SDA, 1904~1945* (Seoul: Korean Publishing House, 2010), 113.
16. The five-member committee consisted of Butterfield, Russell, Smith, Gi-Ban Im, and Seung-Won Kim (Yung Lin Lee, 42).
17. *Ibid.*, 43
18. Yeo Sik Lee, *The Pioneers of the SDA in Korea* (Seoul: Korean Publishing House, 1987), 343.
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