Anabaptist ferment in Korea

On a cold Saturday in late January, nearly 100 people gathered in a rented hall in downtown Seoul, South Korea, to participate in the first Korean Anabaptist Conference. The goal of the gathering, according to Bock Ki Kim, director of the Korea Anabaptist Center and co-sponsor of the event, was "to introduce Anabaptist theology and values in a public, academic setting" and to "challenge ourselves as Korean Anabaptists to see who we are and what we have to do in South Korea."

Considered as a percentage of the total Christian church in Korea—nearly 30 percent of the population—the number of Korean Anabaptists is modest. Nonetheless, the event symbolized a significant moment in a remarkable renewal movement that has been gaining momentum for the past two decades. Today, South Korea is home to one of the most creative and dynamic expressions of contemporary Anabaptism anywhere in the global church, with potential for explosive growth in the future.

The origins of Anabaptism in Korea are as diverse as the original movement in 16th-century Europe. In the decades immediately following the Korean War (1950-1953), Mennonite Central Committee had a modest presence in the country, focused especially on a vocational school for war orphans. In the 1980s, several key Korean leaders, based in part on their contact with MCC personnel, began an independent journey of theological study, including experiments with intentional communities, that led them to a deeper understanding of the Anabaptist tradition. Several pursued training at Mennonite seminaries in North America and developed relationships with North American Mennonites. In 2001, a more formal relationship with Mennonite Church Canada Witness, combined with the energetic leadership of members of the Jesus Village Church, led to the formation of the Korea Anabaptist Center, which has since served as an important resource to the growing movement. Along the way, the Dae Jang Gan Press has overseen the translation and publication of scores of Anabaptist-Mennonite books, forging a strong niche market in the Korean Christian book trade.

Another source of this growing interest in Anabaptism has been a series of highly publicized scandals among several prominent pastors that has undermined the public credibility of Korean Christianity. For the first time in a century, the Protestant church in Korea—long associated with the country's political, business and military elites—is declining in numbers. In the face of these disappointments, many Koreans are looking for a more authentic faith, projecting onto Anabaptism a host of different hopes and expectations.

Not surprisingly, the emerging Anabaptist movement in Korea—like its counterpart in the 16th century—is far from unified. Some newcomers to the movement, for example, equate Anabaptism with community of goods. Others are looking for an egalitarian approach to church leadership, or a simple lifestyle, or a "small church" ecclesiology, or simply a canvas on which to imagine the possibility of "something different." And those congregations who have explicitly identified themselves as "Mennonite" are sorting through basic questions of ordination, child nurture, organizational structure and polity.

One particular challenge for the emerging Anabaptist movement in Korea is the question of nonresistance. For the past 60 years, South Koreans have lived in the ominous shadow of a highly militarized neighbor to the north. The armistice that formally divided the country at the end of the Korean War in 1953 was never signed—so in some sense, the war there has never ended. Living in a state of perpetual military preparedness, South Koreans generally support their country's policy of compulsory military service. Indeed, military service is an important part of Korean cultural identity, especially for young men. Currently, the only recourse for conscientious objectors is imprisonment, a choice recently exercised by Sang Min Lee of the Grace and Peace Mennonite Church in Seoul. His decision, however, remains a highly controversial topic among Korean Anabaptists.

Amid all these creative and diverse currents, the future of the Anabaptist movement in Korea ultimately depends on the emergence of leaders—theologians, ethicists, historians, pastors and teachers—who will consciously continue the work of "indigenizing" Anabaptism. Clearly, the movement possesses individuals with the energy, training, commitment and spiritual gifts needed to translate Anabaptism more fully into the Korean context. Someday, I hope, those of us in North America will be challenged to translate texts from the leaders in the Korean Anabaptist movement into English for the edification of the church here. May that day come very soon. TM

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