SOCIOL 1104, Sociology of Higher Education

**Escaping the Exodus:**

**Exploring Korean-American Seminarians and the Korean Church**

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*Abstract*

One common experience shared among Korean Americans is a relationship with the Korean immigrant church. The strengths and weaknesses of the church have affected many second-generation Koreans. Having personally grown up in the Korean Church, I have come across countless Korean Americans with varying opinions on the church. This paper attempts to hone in on one particular group of second-generation Koreans: Korean-Americans attending seminary. In particular, I attempt to observe how, if at all, the Korean church has affected these students’ decisions and aspirations in regard to seminary and further career prospects. To explore this, I conducted six interviews through Zoom. All of my participants are male students who attend Westminster Theological Seminary. My questions remained broad, allowing my interviewees to comment on what they believed was most relevant. Questions ranged from asking about the value of a seminary education, to the events that led to their decision to attend seminary, to their background and thoughts on the Korean church. With such a small sample size, it was difficult to discern any solid patterns, but it was clear that the Korean Church had played a major role in shaping some part of my interviewees’ thoughts on seminary and on their plans after seminary. Overall, this project aims to provide a starting ground for this sparsely populated research topic. Though there is research and writings on Korean Americans and the Korean immigrant church, this paper explores a more specific area in this field, and the findings point to further areas of research.

*I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code:*

Joshua Hong

**I. Introduction**

Though most of the scholarship on the sociology of higher education is populated with the study of universities, colleges, and their internal stakeholders (particularly students and faculty), this paper goes outside of the traditional university and towards a different higher education institution: seminaries. Having grown up near a seminary called Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS), I’ve met many students—both pastors and academics-- who attended WTS. ­Most of the students and alumni of WTS I have met are Korean American or international Koreans (largely due to The SaRang Korean Missions Center, a center dedicated to the “advance and academic discussion on the past, present, and future of the Korean church.”[[1]](#footnote-1) ). These students and alumni, like most Korean Americans, grew up in the Korean immigrant church.

My research paper applies the symbolic interactionist lens on the micro level of the seminary and the interaction between its students and the Korean Church. In this paper, I have explored what relationship, if any, the Korean immigrant church experience has with the experience of the Korean American seminarian. Particularly, I have conducted empirical research to investigate the lived experience of Korean American seminarians at Westminster Theological Seminary. In this case study, the key questions that guide my research are: What role has the experience of the immigrant church played in the seminarian’s decision to attend seminary? How does the Korean American student view the purpose and value of their seminary education and ultimately their degree? (i.e., is it viewed like a pre-professional student or like the “liberal man” that Cardinal Newman proposes)? How, if at all, has the Korean immigrant church influenced or shaped the students’ aspirations post-graduation. In the next section, I will present a review of literature that help guide my understanding and offer insight into my topic.

**II. Literature Review**

One overarching sociological theory of this research paper is symbolic interactionism, which can be defined as “a theoretical perspective in sociology that addresses the manner in which society is created and maintained through face-to-face, repeated, meaningful interactions among individuals.”[[2]](#footnote-2) (Carter and Fuller 2018). Two theoretical orientations of the Chicago School of thought are that people will act according to the meaning things have to them and that meaning comes from social interactions with others.[[3]](#footnote-3) My investigation of the relationship between the Korean Church and Korean seminary students was investigated through two perspectives. First, I investigated how Korean seminary students perceive the role the Korean Church played in their decision to attend seminary. The second orientation that guided my research was how, if at all, has the Korean church shaped the post-grad aspirations for the Korean-American seminarian.

Currently, there is no scholarship on Korean Americans in seminaries. However, there is some scholarship on Korean Americans and Christianity. In the book “Korean-Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries From Different Shore”, Peter Cha focuses on the religious experience of second generation Korean Americans. Cha is particularly interested in the “silent exodus”[[4]](#footnote-4) (Cha 2001, p.143) of second generations from the Korean immigrant church. Though the findings are warned to not be generalizable (since only 12 undergraduates were interviewed), Cha finds that as his interviewees matured to adolescence, they found themselves relating more to other Korean Americans which led to a positive experience in their youth groups. This seems to indicate a strong relationship between the Korean church and the second-generation students’ identity. However, many of Cha’s interviewees indicated they have moved on from the Korean Church, opting to attend second-generation Asian American churches or white churches. Although these findings might not be generalizable, it can serve as a backdrop of understanding the responses from my own interviewees. The picture of ethnic and religious identity formation that Cha provides can be expanded on with my research into Korean Americans not just in college, but in seminaries. Furthermore, there is room for Cha’s findings to be challenged. With such a small sample size, we don’t see those that were hurt by the church. Hopefully my findings will shed light on both cases and see how the church overall has impacted Korean American seminary students.

To understand the Korean immigrant church better, the chapter of Cha et. al’s book entitled “The Korean Immigrant Church Model”, examines the history of the Korean immigrant church, compares it to other immigrant church models, and focuses on the future of the Korean immigrant church.[[5]](#footnote-5) Warner writes about the salience of religion in Korean immigrants. He also talks about how the church as a sociocultural center for first generation Koreans leads to status conflict. All these things influence the second-generation Korean’s relationship to the church. The findings that Warner provides gives a brief overview of the history of Korean immigrant churches and contextualize some of my interviewees’ backgrounds.

# Another relevant book to the present research addresses seminaries and seminary students. In the book “What to Expect in Seminary: Theological Education as Spiritual Formation”, Virginia Samuel Cetuk writes about how seminary students are “called” to ministry in his 3rd chapter, “The Call to Ministry”. Interestingly, he writes that “many students come having known some satisfaction and dissatisfaction in their lives personally or professionally.” (Cetuk 1998, 50)[[6]](#footnote-6). It seems that many of the students he’s observed are looking to be changed by seminary rather than coming in with a set purpose for ministry or other professional aspirations. This chapter gives context to the experiences and expectations of seminary students as a whole. The findings in this chapter helped guide my understanding of the lived experience of my interviewees. The next section will provide an overview of my methodology.

**III. Methods**

Since my research question required qualitative data, I conducted six interviews from Korean students attending Westminster Theological Seminary. With such little scholarship surrounding this topic, I decided to use interviews to understand the lived experience of the participants rather than to test certain hypotheses or create wide, generalizable conclusions. Due the circumstances surrounding the pandemic, all of the interviews were conducted through Zoom and recorded with consent from the interviewees. To find participants, I partnered with the President of the Korean Student Fellowship, as well as the Associate Dean of Student Development at Westminster; however, it was more difficult than I initially expected to find enough participants. In order to limit any confounding variables, all of the interviewees were male students who are currently attending WTS and are a part of the Korean Student Fellowship. Five of the interviewees are second generation Korean-Americans, while one of the interviewees grew up elsewhere in Europe. The interviewees ranged from being in their first year at WTS to their final year.

The interview focused on these six main questions:

1. Can you tell me how you made your decision to attend seminary? Was it something you knew you would do, or was it a decision that was made over a long period of time?
2. What did your decision to attend seminary look like? Was it met with hesitancy from your family, yourself, friends, the church, or was it met with acceptance?
3. What are your plans after graduation?
4. What is the importance of a seminary education? Do you believe it is necessary for ministry and why?
5. Have your views of a seminary education changed as you’ve come to WTS?
6. What role does Korean Church play in your life at present? What role did it play before you joined seminary?

Questions 1 and 2 attempts to answer my first sub-question while questions 3, 4, and 5 attempts to answer my second sub-question. The last question spans across both sub-questions. In general, these questions are formulated to be broad and overarching, so that the students can express what was most important to their formation rather than the questions leading them towards a certain answer. As I conducted the interviews, I asked several follow-up questions to clarify and understand certain points. The names of the interviewees were kept confidential, and all of the interviewees opted to use pseudonyms.

Once the interviews were conducted, I elected to code my data using NVivo and utilized both the transcripts provided by Zoom and Otter.Ai to code my data into different nodes. The responses from my interviewees were first broken into different subsections for each question that I had, resulting in six total subsections. Within each subsection, if there were similarities across different interviewees, I grouped those responses together and observed any patterns that seemed to emerge. Rather than assuming intentions to create patterns, I only decided to group responses together if I saw an explicit connection.

**IV. Statement of Positionality**

Since I have personally grown up in the Korean immigrant church, there are some potential biases that must be dealt with. The most prevalent bias is confirmation bias. Though I had a theory of what the students would say, my research paper is less about directly answering a question and more geared towards observing a phenomenon. By orienting my paper this way, I am attempting to cut out confirmation bias, since there will be nothing to “confirm”. Moreover, my questions will allow the interviewee to explain their own background, experience, and meaning-making rather than my own assumptions dictating their responses. Furthermore, I attempted to create non-leading questions by offering two differing perspectives (i.e. question 2 where I ask if it was met with hesitancy *or* acceptance).

**V. Findings**

From my interviews, three distinct topics were discerned. First, the value of a seminary education was discussed. This section had the most agreement among all of the interviewees., with most viewing it as a legitimizing force for pastoral ministry. Second, each interviewee reflected on their decision to attend seminary. This ranged from dissatisfaction with traditional studies or jobs, to the search for a robust theological education. Finally, every interviewee gave their thoughts and observations of the Korean Immigrant Church in detail. This final section offered no patterns but showed the wide-ranging impact of the Korean Church on each of the interviewees, particularly the impact of the church on their aspirations after graduation. In the next three subsections, I will elaborate my findings on these topics.

**Va. Limitations**

Before exploring my findings, it is important to note some limitations to my study. Since I had only interviewed six students, my findings are not generalizable. Moreover, I found that I personally knew some of the interviewees, which could have skewed some of the responses. However, since my paper does not attempt to prove causality, my personal relationship with some of my interviewees shouldn’t have had a large impact on my findings.

**Vb. The Value of a Seminary Education**

Any vocation requires strict training. Most of my interviewees viewed their seminary education like the education one would receive in medical school, or any other vocational institution. When asked about whether seminary was truly important or necessary for pastoral ministry, Eddie said, “I think…if you went to the dentist's office and [it] turned out that your dentist never went to dental school…there'll be plenty of reason to be skeptical of getting treatment from that person.”. This sentiment was shared among all of my interviewees. Some commented on the possibility of preaching without a seminary education but were still largely skeptical of the content a pastor would bring without proper training. Though seminary wasn’t said to be absolutely necessary for pastoral ministry, it was heavily recommended by all of the students.

Yet, even as seminary was viewed as a type of vocational institution, each interviewee mentioned the value of the educational content that came from attending Westminster. A fifth-year seminary student, Paul, commented on the importance of the educational content, saying,

I think seminaries [are] definitely necessary. I think our faith is intellectual and so I think it requires actual intellectual and mental training. I think going to a place or school that teaches you how to build certain principles of interpretation or certain systems of thought…[whether] it’s learning about history or theology or just learning about the Bible itself…are all actually very relevant.

John echoes this sentiment, by naming Westminster as the place where he could “[seek] the kind of academic rigor that…was appropriate for the weight of what is being dealt with.”. Westminster offered the chance to not only become professional ministers, but the ability to inherit a system of thought that would allow the students to continue studying the Bible and other works once they leave seminary. The emphasis of the value of education was placed on the academic rigor and robust curriculum offered by Westminster.

**Vc. The Decision to Attend Seminary**

When discussing the decision to seminary, there was surprisingly little to no mention of the Korean Church, until I had asked my second question specifically addressing the church’s reaction to their decision to attend seminary. Only Eddie P. a first-year Korean American student, briefly alludes to the Korean church, saying. “I have realized, I guess, that [attending a non-Korean church] has given me a clearer view of the particular strengths and weaknesses of the Korean church. And it's actually reflecting on some of those that…I have come to develop some of my…aspirations and hopes for ministry.” It seems it was the students’ experiences that were specifically *outside* the church that influenced their decision. However, it was members of the Korean Church that aided and supported the students’ decision.

Two of the interviewees closely fit Cetuk’s model of the dissatisfied student entering seminary. Bobby, a first-year seminary student, studied nursing for undergrad and in a hospice unit after graduating college. When I asked him to elaborate on his dissatisfaction with his job at the hospital, he told me, “It was unfulfilling…I was in the hospice unit…every single patient I had died or were on their way to death. To me, to give them medication, to give them physical medication [wasn’t enough].” Isaac, a third-year Korean American seminary student, mentions a similar dissatisfaction in pursuing traditional career paths. Rather than pursuing a typical premedical track, Isaac was drawn to physical therapy where he had the potential to talk about religion. It seems that for Isaac, he had found his passion in discussing Christianity, but was seeking avenues to carry it out. Yet, he would soon change his focus to seminary, telling me,

And it was there that towards the end of my freshman year [my friend] actually passed away. And I remember thinking, ‘Oh, man. We couldn't complete that conversation. And there is a sense of guilt, of course. But then there's a sense of, hey, I don't want to [mess up] again…and it got me more interested in not in physical therapy or the body but the spiritual body.

Both Bobby and Isaac wrestled with dissatisfaction not only in career paths, but also the inability to cater to their patients and friends spiritually.

Another trend that arose was the desire for a robust theological education. Eddie and John, another first-year seminary student, mention this in their responses. They both mention how their exposure to strong teachings sparked an interest in seminary. For Eddie, this came from a new pastor from Westminster at his home church’s English Ministry. He told me, “…his method of preaching was expository preaching, where he explained a text of the Bible to extract the meaning and significance out of the text, rather than using the text as a launchpad for his own ideas or reading his own ideas into the text.” John’s exposure to strong teachings came when he watched a video entitled “What is the Gospel” by Professor Tipton who at the time worked for Westminster. John followed up by saying, “And I was like, I don't know who [Dr. Tipton] is. I don't know where this guy is, but I need to be where he is.” Moreover, when I asked each interviewee why they chose Westminster specifically, all of them noted Westminster’s strong theological teaching as a strong factor in their decision to apply.

These findings were surprising. I had expected the Korean Church to play a more pivotal role in shaping their decision, but the catalyst for considering seminary came from outside of the church. However, when it came to discerning the call to seminary, the church played a role for all of my interviewees. The five students who were set on pastoral ministry commented on how the pastors or members of the church guided their decision-making process. Eddie told me, “My church…was very supportive and were just helping me to discern the call…letting me be tested…. both in terms of ability and [if] I'm able to teach my able to clearly communicate the content of the faith, to counsel people…”. For John, who is attending seminary without aspirations for pastoral ministry, the church still played a positive role, saying “…people around the church [and] pastors, it was thankfully, I think providentially even, [met] without any hiccups.”.

**Vd. The Korean Church**

I had originally sought out these interviews to see what role, if any, the Korean church had played in shaping these students’ steps throughout seminary—from the decision to their post-grad aspiration. As mentioned in the previous section, I surprisingly found little mention of the Korean Church in their experience of seminary. However, that isn’t to say that the Korean Church played no role in my interviewees’ lives. In fact, most of the interview was dedicated to discussing the Korean Church in great detail, both in its impact on my interviewees’ lives as well as their general thoughts on the future of the church. Although this was not said explicitly, it seems like the Korean Church was embedded in the background of my interviewees’ experience at seminary. Though it was never the explicit reason for attending or understanding the value of seminary, the experiences they had formed from church was informing what they felt was important. The following quote from Bobby provides a picture of the role of the church in my interviewees’ lives:

“To put it in an illustration, it would be like…someone who took care of you, but then didn’t know what they were doing. You can appreciate that, but when you grow up, you think ‘oh I have to take care of them now.’”

Much like a parent-child relationship, most of my interviewees grew up under the care of the Korean Church. Yet, the flaws of the church were apparent to my interviewees. In response to my question about his thoughts on the Korean church, Isaac said “To be honest, I think if you talk to any second gen Korean American, they're going to say there's a lot of things wrong with the Korean church.”. This sentiment was shared among all of my interviewees. When the Korean Church was mentioned, my interviewees were quick to discuss the weakness of the Korean Church.

One weakness that was given was the lack of solid leadership in the English ministries. Eddie elaborates on this point saying, “until two years ago…my church never had an ordained English-speaking pastor serving in the Korean church…you got very much a mixed bag in terms of…style [and] competence between these interns who are coming in and staying with us for a few years...”. Bobby also commented on how his home church was only “Presbyterian” by name. The structure of the church and the theology that was preached was far from the Presbyterian name written on the sign in front of the church. This weakness stands in sharp contrast to the students’ responses to the value of a seminary education, where strong foundational systems of thought was emphasized. Another failure of the Korean Church is its inability to foster a bridge between the Korean speaking ministry of the students’ parents and their own English-speaking ministry. Both Eddie and Isaac mentioned that the lack of familial worship is a prevalent occurrence in most Korean churches, though they recognize that this arose out of language barriers between generations. In spite of this, Eddie told me he still believes “it is significant even now that the immigrant church kids don't get to see their parents worshiping God in church.”.

Despite my interviewees’ critical outlook on the Korean Church, they also mentioned one key strength: community. In all of my interviews, community stood out as the defining feature of the Korean immigrant church. Eddie told me

I think the Asian aspect of it makes a community a sense of bond in the…church particularly strong. I have noticed that it does seem to be particularly strong among Koreans…You know…being the minority [in] larger white society…people are drawn to people who look [like [each other] . And that connection is…It's made meaningful when, you know the basis of your personal connection is not just that you look alike, but that you realize…you're also in the same boat spiritually, ontologically…

Eddie’s comments are reflective of Cha’s findings, where his 12 undergraduates formed positive experiences with the community at their youth groups. For my interviewees, this positive outlook on the community was shaped by not only religious identity, but racial identity as well.

The community was deeply personal for Paul, who notes, “[The church] gave me…a community [of] people who cared about me, showed love to me, even though I myself was kind of hard to love.” The love mentioned by Paul is seen from the encouragement and support given to my interviewees when they had decided to go to seminary.

The strengths and weaknesses observed by my interviewees seem to underly many of their experiences in seminary. However, one area where the church explicitly affected their experience was in their post-grad aspirations. One of my interviewees felt his experience in the immigrant church turned him away from it. He told me, “I would not like to remain in the immigrant church. I think it would take me a while to unpack that, since I haven't really processed…to be frank a large part of it probably is an aversion to some of the weaknesses that I have observed.” Rather than returning to the immigrant church, this student prefers entering a second-generation church, citing that his abilities line up in this type of church more than an immigrant church. He also goes on to say that “it would be easier not to, frankly, to have to deal with some of the issues of the Korean church.”

I had expected most of my interviewees to follow this same pattern. Yet, every other student was either not opposed to returning to the Korean Church or expressed a desire of wanting to return to the Korean Church. One interviewee, despite recognizing the weaknesses of the church, told me, “But on the other hand, it's like, well, who knows better about the Korean church than maybe a Korean person…I think it's because I understand them that I feel like I can be more helpful to them.” Another student shared similar thoughts but added heightened stakes.

I actually have a passion for English ministry, not just like second gen ministry, but in an immigrant church… I want our [Korean and English ministries] to be perfectly united…because [immigrant] churches will not disappear. There’ll always be immigrants and as long as there are immigrants, there'll be children of immigrants…If I can put it bluntly, if we don’t figure it out in our generation, it’s not our generation that's going to suffer. It's not the previous generation that's offers. It really is the next generation.

Much like Bobby’s parent-child analogy, this student feels that he should return to take care of the church, not just for the sake of the church, but for its future members. Rather than just returning, this student has aspirations of reform. By remedying the weaknesses he sees in the church, he wants to build upon the strengths and create a united church.

A different student also had plans of “reforming”. Instead of unification, he told me, “I want to build on the English side of the church…make [the church] more international.... right now, every face I see, besides two, is Korean. We can’t carry that on, especially here.” Although this student had aspirations of returning to the Korean immigrant church he grew up in, he didn’t expect a future with the Korean ministry. Since his church is situated in a diverse area, he believes that continuing with an immigrant church model is not feasible. Instead, his aspiration for ministry is a church that is open to everyone—immigrants, Asian-Americans, white Americans, African Americans—rather than focusing on one particular group.

**VI. Conclusions**

These interviews were conducted to observe the lived experience of Korean American students, focusing on their decision to attend seminary, how they view the value of their education, and their aspirations after graduation. Specifically, I had wanted to see if or how the Korean Church had influenced any of these three focuses. Due the nature of my research, I remained wary of drawing extraneous conclusions, instead opting to rely on only quotes and what was explicitly mentioned during my interviews.

The value of a seminary education was found both the vocational and educational aspects. Rather than viewing it solely as a mechanism to get to pastoral ministry, the importance of seminary came from the interplay between the educational content and the vocational training. These two things worked together—the education given at Westminster provides the basis for a strong pastoral skills. The decision to attend seminary seemed to come from experiences outside of the church, ranging from dissatisfaction with career prospects or the desire for strong theological knowledge.

Ultimately, the Korean Church played the biggest role in forming my interviewees’ post-grad aspirations. It was a polarizing institution with lots of weaknesses and strengths. Although for one of my interviewees, the weaknesses of the church led him towards a different path, my other interviewees wanted to stay with the immigrant church. Since I had decided to avoid extrapolations and predictions based on my interviewees’ responses, I found less of a connection to the Korean Church than I had initially expected. However, traces of their thoughts on the Korean Church found their way into their experiences and thoughts on seminary. It is possible to claim that the lack of consistent leadership in the English ministries influenced some of my interviewees’ decisions to attend seminary (though this was not explicitly said).

Since my research was limited to only six students, there is a great potential for further research. Furthermore, since the scholarship on Korean American seminarians is sparse, this paper is meant to act as a launch pad for future studies. Particularly, there is still more to learn about the Korean Church and its relationship to the students. Are my findings consistent across larger samples? Why do the perceived weaknesses of the Korean Church drive some to stay while driving others to leave? Many other questions remain to be explored. However, it is clear that in some shape or form, the Korean church has played a significant role in the formation of my interviewees’ lives. As one of my interviewees said, the Korean immigrant church will not disappear. Understanding it will provide insights not only into the lives of seminary students, but for Korean Americans today and in future generations.

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