

Tribute to David J. Cho, 1924–2020

BY **GREG PARSONS**

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One of the most accomplished mission leaders of our lifetime died in June. His life is a story of deep commitment to the Lord and commission to spreading the gospel around the globe. Unfortunately, few in the West noticed his passing. His life intersected with Ralph D. Winter. They were peers in missions – born weeks and worlds apart.¹

David Dong-Jin Cho was born near the Korea-China border before there was a “North” Korea. He was saved as a young boy, received theological training, planted a church and then pursued more training in missions and evangelism. At twenty-nine years old, Dr. Cho founded InterVarsity (IFES) in Korea and the Korean Evangelical Fellowship – the Korean “branch” of the World Evangelical Fellowship.

I have recorded interviews with Dr. Cho, the last one when he attended a small meeting of some very innovative, younger leaders in Asia. **That was reflective of a characteristic rare in Korean leaders: Dr. Cho was willing to buck the system when it wasn't working—and sometimes when it needed prodding!**

The fascinating thing about him, is the multiplication and impact of all that engagement in people's lives. He is known as “Mr. Mission” in Korea. If you know almost any Korean middle-aged missions or church leader, it is *very* likely that they were mentored by Cho. **At a minimum, they were influenced by his legacy.** Many top mission leaders I've met in the last 25 years worked with him and learned from him at some point. They either: (1) trained at one of the missions study programs he started, (2) sat under his teaching and mentorship, (3) worked with him within a sending organization he founded or led, (4) engaged in key mission issues through missiological societies he helped found, or led or (5) networked within an association he started. I could name specific examples of Korean leaders I know in each of those categories.

Cho received his PhD from William Carey International University in 1993. He headed WCIU's Korean studies program from 1980-1999 and helped connect WCIU (not to mention the U.S. government!) with North Korea. That started in 1992 with Cho's first meeting with Kim Il Sung (the founder and Supreme Leader of North Korea, and

¹ For more on his life see “My Pilgrimage in Mission”, October 2009, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, p 195 ff.



grandfather of the current leader). Cho hosted the Ambassador of North Korea on a visit to the U.S. and they visited Jimmy Carter's home and the WCIU campus in Pasadena. Cho brokered a partnership between Kim Il Sung University and Pyongyang Seminary in North Korea, where Cho would lecture when he visited and WCIU donated 2,700 books. You may remember that Jimmy Carter was a key player in North Korean diplomacy for many years *starting* at the same time!

But long before that, in 1973, Cho became well known in Korean Christian circles, in part, because of his role as the Planning General Secretary and Arrangement Chairman for the Billy Graham Crusade in Seoul. This was the largest crusade of all and perhaps the largest gathering of people in one



Billy Graham Crusade in Seoul Korea in 1973

place in the world ever. The last time I saw Dr. Cho, in Manila at the Asian Missions Association Convention, (which he had founded about 45 years earlier), I told him my favorite photo of him is from that event. You can see in front of Billy Graham are about one million people. Cho is sitting on the stage step, facing the camera with his back to Graham, trying not to be a distraction! It is as if his job is done, and it is up to Billy and the Lord now! He looks a bit weary! I'm guessing that someone took his seat when he was speaking?

As early as 1969, Ralph D. Winter began to publish papers reflecting his engagement with issues related to the interrelationship of mission sending structures and churches. That culminated in his seminal

paper on the subject “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission,”² which was originally presented in Korea in 1973 at the All-Asia Mission Consultation in Seoul, Korea.

And that is where Cho and Ralph Winter deepened their relationship. Before the meeting, in the late 1960s, Cho was longing for deeper connections with Western agencies.

He visited several western sending mission agencies based in Singapore, the U.K. and the U.S., but at least five different mission agencies turned him down. They had no vision for partnering with the then fairly small Korean missions world.

² This is still in the *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* Reader, page 244.

In 1971, the Korea International Mission (also founded by Cho) had their First Strategy Conference. They discussed “the urgent necessity of a consultation among Asian mission leaders ... and a proposition to promote and start the framework of an All-Asia Mission Consultation...” was made. After building consensus with Asian mission and church leaders from Korea, Japan, Indonesia, India, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan, the date for the All-Asia Mission Consultation was set for August of 1973. Later in 1971, Cho was in the U.S. at the mission leaders meetings (IFMA/EFMA) and he invited any/all of the leaders to come.

In all, **not counting the westerners, twenty-five mission leaders from thirteen countries around Asia came together.**³ Note that only five of the twenty-five delegates were from Korea and there were nine non-Asian participants (such as Clyde Taylor, Ralph Winter, Arthur Glasser, C. Peter Wagner, and George Peters). These mission leaders gathered around the purposes to: (1) promote cooperation for Asian mission activities among Asian countries, (2) seek cooperation between the East and West, and (3) form an organization to coordinate efforts among Asian countries. One of the main outcomes of this event was to bring the awareness of non-Western missionaries into sharper focus, especially in Asia.⁴


3 The event was followed by weeks of intensive training for 64 Asian mission candidates.

4 This is clearly written up in an MTh Thesis at Fuller Seminary in 1975, by Chaeok Chun, titled **"The All-Asia Mission Consultation"** p 6, 51-52.

A report on the event noted that 100 agencies had been established in Asia over the previous 20 years, but "there had been no conference during the previous two decades which was specifically geared to Asian missions and missionaries at home and on the field."

With their relationship solidified at that small gathering, Cho and Winter were committed to each other. Cho wrote:

*"For thirty-six years, from 1973 until his death in May 2009, he was associated with my activities of missionary leadership development and networking of Third World missions. I often requested him to join me in mission work—in Seoul, Manila, Thailand, Moscow, Ephesus, and elsewhere—and he never said no. He also never hesitated to write North Korean leaders, inviting them to William Carey International University for my peace mission movement with North Korea."*⁵

We honor David Cho whose life was marked by multiplication of disciples. **It is hard to imagine what the leadership in Korean missions would look like, if God had not used David Cho in these ways.** Today, you could easily argue, it is not as likely that someone would have the same depth and breadth of impact. But we must all examine ourselves and reflect on how we are multiplying what God has given us. Who will carry the torch when we are gone? Cho may not have ever asked that question of himself, but there is no question that there are many who are carrying on in his footsteps. Thanks be to the Lord! 

5 "My Pilgrimage in Mission", October 2009, **International Bulletin of Missionary Research**, p 195 ff.

David Cho (R) with President Jimmy Carter, 1991

