

Life of rural church in Jinan

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It is my honor to join this 24 hour online meeting around the globe. I believe this program is a brilliant idea that can make all of the rural Christians around the world feel connected together in prayer and in the presence of God. My name is H. June Kim. I am a preacher working at Gowon Church. I live in Jinan. It is one of the remotest areas in Korea. We are surrounded by woods and agricultural fields. We have more wild animals than humans living here. In our church there are about 40 members including children. Many of them are devout descendants of the first generation Korean Christians.

I have worked here since 2015 along with another assistant preacher. Our church members are usually farmers. Majority are over 65. This is a unique situation. And it made me think hard about myself and my mission. Ministry in the farming community seems to ask me what I should do more than just preaching. I felt that I needed to seriously reflect on where I am working as a preacher. So I started to talk to my assistant preacher about what more we should do. After a long debate over this matter we came to a conclusion that cooperating with the church members in their business of agriculture should be the way we are to follow. We decided to start our own farming respectively. We learned the basic farming skills like cultivation methods, how to operate tractors and small tillers for a year at the county agricultural education centers. Now we are growing blueberries and mountain herbs named 'Goats' beard'. It is a delicious, healthy, green sprout we harvest in the early Spring while it is still covered with snow. And you know what blueberries are. They are one of the best treats we can enjoy in summer.

Now with the preachers also engaging in farming there seems to be no clear line between the bible and farming in our church. In fact this kind of life or ministry was the last thing I expected in my life. I was born in Seoul, the biggest city over here. And I grew up as a city dweller far from the rural areas. Long ago, I thought the food I eat everyday is just something we can take for granted. But I came to know that it was the painful outcome of an enormous human labor. Farming is the hardest experience I've ever had. But farming was not just hard labor. It gave me a kind of good feeling that I am alive and that I am blessed by God. We could see the evidence when we harvested.

Now in our church all of us, as Christian farmers, often get together and talk about farming and selling business. I am a preacher on Sundays and a farmer on weekdays just like many of my church members. Inside the church building we worship and praise God and outside in the fields we live helping one another and sharing the labor and time necessary for farming. This cooperative tradition is the best gift God gave us in our church. This rural church life, as we believe, must be another version of the Gospel. We feel blessed in our everyday lives because we are a Christian and at the same time a Christian farmer. This double title, I believe, is something only the rural Christians can enjoy in their lives.

Rural communities in Korea are having a serious problem of population decrease. In my village area, for example, there are about 1,600 people now. The official statistical estimate says there will be only 650 people in the year 2030 which will arrive in 8 years. This means that the rapid decrease of Christians in our churches is imminent like the day of the Lord. This is a prevalent crisis of Churches in Korea especially in the rural areas. Nowadays seminaries also, they say, cannot recruit the required number of students who will serve the future rural churches. Young Christians are also decreasing in number due to the low birth rate in recent decades. Rural areas are literally evaporating due to population decrease. Many rural churches will be gone in the coming years. And it seems inevitable.

So I tried to think about the future of the rural churches with my colleague preachers. We asked ourselves. What do the future churches look like, especially in the rural areas? We don't know the exact answers. But churches will get smaller in size and number and many preachers will have to work for a living to fulfill their ministry missions. But I think this is not the worst case we can imagine. Still we will have churches to work at. We will still have mission fields even in the worse situations. Quite a few ministers already chose to work and alleviate the burden of the rapidly aging rural churches. Preachers are not great people, but the bottom line is the mission of God should not be renounced. We should stay in the fields of God's mission no matter what the future might be. The ministry situation will be quite different from now in the near future. We have to be ready for the change. And I believe this change of situation will be a big challenge in the history of the Korean Church. Perhaps the churches in Korea must continue to be reformed in many respects for the future. God may give us better ministers than our generation to continue to work at the rural churches so the words of the Gospel will be heard until the end of history. Thank you for your concerns and prayers.