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A Crowning Achievement
Kyung Chik Han Wins the 1992 Templeton Prize

In 1945, Kyung Chik Han set off on a clandestine flight from the town of Sinuiju in North Korea, where post-war redistribution had replaced a tyrannical Japanese regime with hostile Soviet forces. Driven into hiding to escape persecution, Han — a 1929 Princeton graduate who had gained influence throughout Korea during his twelve years as pastor of Sinuiju's Second Presbyterian Church — crossed mountains and rivers, sometimes hiking as many as fifty miles in a night. Finally, after two bone-wearying weeks, he arrived at the safe haven of Seoul, then occupied by American forces.

Within a few days, he and twenty-seven other refugees from his former pastorate met for prayers and established the Bethany Evangelical Church. Renamed within a year to the Young Nak (Everlasting Joy) Church, that body would eventually grow into the largest Presbyterian congregation in the world, and Kyung Chik Han would ultimately become one of Korea's most prominent pastors of this century — an evangelist whose commitment to helping refugees and the poor has drawn worldwide attention to the growth of Christianity in Korea. Han's influence in Korea has been so great, in fact, that he recently joined the ranks of such noted spiritual leaders as Mother Teresa, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and former Princeton president James I. McCord as a recipient of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

During a recent visit to Princeton, Kyung Chik Han (center) is accompanied by Dr. Sang Lee (right) following the morning worship service in Miller Chapel. Lee became the first Kyung Chik Han Associate Professor of Systematic Theology when the chair was endowed at the Seminary two years ago.

The Templeton Prize, awarded annually to those who best advance the world's understanding of religion, was founded in 1972 by Sir John Marks Templeton, a world-renowned financier and Presbyterian elder who was president of Princeton's board of trustees during the years 1967-73 and 1979-85. Templeton initiated the ecumenical prize as a counterpart to the Nobel awards, which he felt overlooked issues of faith and spirituality, and he emphasized that the award would honor achievements that increased human love or understanding of God, rather than "saintliness or mere good works." He also made it the largest annual monetary prize in the world; as this year's winner, Han received more than one million dollars, a sum that the pastor used to further Christianity in Korea.

"For many years I have dreamed of seeing North and South Korea reunited and the Christian church flourishing again in the north," said Han, who retired and was named pastor emeritus of Young Nak in 1973. "That is why I...set aside the majority of the prize money to rebuild the churches in the north as soon as it is

politically possible." Upon receipt of the check, he immediately gave the money to the pastor of the Young Nak Church. "I was a millionaire for less than one hour," Han said with the good-natured humor for which he is noted.

Han's selection was announced at the Church Center for the United Nations on March 11. At Princeton, during a visit on May 11 to preach in Miller Chapel, Han was honored during a ceremony in which his portrait, commissioned by the elders of the Young Nak Church, was unveiled in Speer Library.

"Dr. Han represents what God can do through faithful, courageous, and wise pastoral ministry in the church for the sake of the world," President Thomas W. Gillespie said. "He has become in retirement the 'elder statesman' of the Christian church in Korea, honored for his ministry and revered for his wisdom. To meet Dr. Han personally is to be in the presence of a humble, self-effacing fellow believer whose life has quite evidently been touched and blessed by the spirit of God."

Han, who was born in 1902 to Confu-

A Ministry of Everlasting Joy

Kyung Chik Han, founder of the world's largest Presbyterian congregation, wins the 1992 Templeton Prize



cian parents in northern Korean, was seven years old when a recently converted cousin introduced him to Christ's message. The future pastor quickly took that message to heart. However, the most critical moment in his path toward Christian ministry came in 1923 when, while walking on an empty beach along the Yellow Sea, Han experienced a call from God to commit his life to evangelism. That call soon led him to Princeton Seminary, where he earned a Bachelor of Divinity degree. (He also was elected class president during his senior year, a measure of his classmates' esteem.)

Han returned to Korea after spending two years in the western United States recovering from tuberculosis, and in 1933 he became pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church. Han's accomplishments as pastor included building one of the country's first orphanages. But his growing popularity and educational ties to America made him suspect to the Japanese regime, which ultimately came to view the pastor as one more adversary. Han was imprisoned briefly in 1942 for refusing to worship Emperor Hirohito at a Shinto shrine, then was stripped of his church position. Japan's defeat led to only a brief time of peace for Han, a respite that ended with the Communist occupation.

During his almost thirty years as senior pastor of the Young Nak Church, Han committed himself to helping those refugees who, as he had, sought to escape persecution in North Korea. He led the construction of both an orphanage and a home for the elderly in the South Korean capital, and Young Nak quickly earned a reputation as the "refugee church." The turmoil caused by North Korea's invasion of South Korea in 1950 — the same year the Young Nak congregation constructed a Gothic stone building as its permanent home — only served to strengthen the mission of Han and Young Nak. The church went on to establish homes for widows in Pusan and Seoul, a library, and educational institutions ranging from a primary school for impoverished children to the Seoul Women's Theological Seminary. Through it all the church membership continued to grow, and today Young Nak has a congregation of sixty thousand, as well as five hundred new churches founded by members throughout the world.

In addition to his work through the Young Nak Church, Han served for many years as moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Korea. He was instrumental in establishing the

Presbyterian Theological Seminary and Soongsil College in South Korea after they were shut down in the north, and during the late 1950s he served as president of the college. His achievements have earned him numerous accolades, including the Rose of Sharon (the highest medal granted to civilians by the South Korean government), two honorary doctorates, and a Distinguished Alumnus Award from Princeton — a collection now crowned by the Templeton Prize.

Despite such accomplishments, those

who meet Han are most impressed by his humility. "Dr. Han is very committed to Christ, to the church, and to the work that has been his life, but he maintains a very low profile," says Fred W. Cassell, Princeton's vice-president for seminary relations, who preached at Young Nak Church in 1990 while accompanying the Seminary Singers on a trip to Seoul. "Dr. Han is very quiet, very humble, very kind — but I don't think any Korean Presbyterian would do a thing without having first consulted with him. He knows who he is, and everybody else knows it as well. He is held in great reverence."

"I think Dr. Han is the quintessential pastor," says Dr. Sang Lee, who became the first Kyung Chik Han Associate Professor in Systematic Theology when the chair was endowed at Princeton two years ago. (The endowment is believed to be the first at an American seminary to honor an Asian Christian.) "In Asian culture, we have a term called *te*, which can be best defined as a combination of humility and compassion. Dr. Han has a great deal of *te*."

Lee has visited Han often over the years, and he still laughingly recalls the time when he translated a sermon delivered by President Gillespie at the Young Nak Church, and the reverse power struggle that occurred between himself and Dr. Han over who would take the hon-

ored pulpit chair next to the Princeton president.

"Dr. Han insisted that I sit next to the president, and that he would sit in the end chair," Lee says. "But I knew in my Asian heart this was not the thing to do." What ensued was a stand-off of politeness between the two men. After about ten seconds that must have felt like ten minutes under the stares of several thousand worshippers, Lee triumphed; Han sat, turned to the president, and said with characteristic simplicity, "He won."

That lack of affectation is still displayed in all aspects of the pastor's life. Since retiring, Han has lived on the Young Nak Church grounds in a modest, three-room house, the receiving area of which contains space for little more than a few chairs, a table, and a small plant recently sent to him by the republic's president in congratulations for winning the Templeton Prize. He and his late



Sir John Marks Templeton, a past president of Princeton's board of trustees, initiated his prize in 1972 to honor those who best advance the world's understanding of religion.

wife, Chan Bin Kim, had one son and one daughter, and today Han is grandfather to seven children and great-grandfather to nine.

However humble, Han still maintains a vitality that enables him to deliver a monthly sermon at Young Nak (he is especially noted for his simple yet powerful language) and to chair the "Love Rice" movement, which has been providing food to the world's poor since 1990. Now in his tenth decade, he continues to impart to the world, through his energy and his gentle, powerful spirit, an example of what it means to live fully the message of Christ.

Perhaps Han's life can best be summed up in a statement John Templeton once made to the *New York Times* about the nature of his prize. "The laws of love and charity differ from the laws of mathematics," the noted financier said. "The more we give away, the more we have left." ■