

# The Growth of Christianity in Asia and its Impact on Mission



---

Author: Dr Julie Ma, Research Tutor (Missiology), Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.

## 1. Introduction

The gospel arrived in different parts of Asia at various times, and in many cases it blossomed through the collaborative work between missionaries and nationals. In spite of the errors and flaws of missionaries, and struggles between the two parties, the Holy Spirit has been at work in dispersing the gospel through fragile human agency.

To most Asians, Christianity was a foreign religion very different from their traditional religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism and animism. It is a contrast between monotheism (except Islam) and polytheism. The latter believes in more than one god or spirit, thus allowing room to incorporate a new religious belief into the existing ones. This makes most traditional religions incredibly flexible and versatile. On the other hand, Christianity, with its absolute claims, has no such flexibility. As a result, when a conversion takes place in a family, it immediately causes friction and disharmony between the new Christian and the rest of the family who find it difficult that he or she now follows a “western” religion, and one that is stubbornly inflexible.

Another critical issue of the gospel bearers is the insensitivity to or even ignorance of the receptor’s culture and its practices. When one comes to Christ, the expectation of his or her church is for the new believer to abandon old religious practices immediately. We know that they should eventually be removed, but time should be allowed to make a gradual shift in his or her religious orientation, as the Word provides a basis for understanding and Christian fellowship provides an encouraging environment. Despite human errors and difficulties in the process, churches grew in number and influence, and some of them have become strong missionary-sending bodies. Western missionaries and the Asian church have come a long way.

In this brief study, I will highlight two aspects: the growth of Christianity in Asia, with particular examples coming from China and Korea, and the rapid development of Asian missions.

## 2. Christian Expansion in Asia

The book of Acts presents a pattern: where the gospel is heard, house churches are formed initially among a small number of believers. When the churches grow larger, members are sent to share the Word of God, and this in turn results in almost an automatic process of a house church movement. This pattern of expansion is noted in many parts of Asia.

### 2.1 China

China is regarded as the world’s most fruitful single mission field today. In spite of political suppression of religion, including Christianity, for decades, churches have been rapidly growing. The estimate of Chinese Christians current ranges anywhere between 20 million to 120 million, and some observers propose still higher numbers. [1] It is further noted,

According to the Chinese government itself, perhaps 20 million people, 1.6 percent of the total population, worship in government-registered churches, but that figure is an absolute minimum, which takes no account of unapproved congregations and private house churches. ... In its annual survey of International Religious Freedom, the U.S. State Department suggests that the total Chinese Christian population may run as high as 8 percent of the whole, 100 million souls. ... That would place the Christian population on par with the far older-established Chinese religion of Buddhism. [2]

If this statement is correct, then Christianity has not only survived under such inauspicious circumstances, but it has in fact enjoyed something of a population explosion through two generations of often violent anti-religious persecution. By this gauge, China today has ten times as many Christians as it did when Mao Zedong's forces began its control of the country in 1949. [3] What is more amazing is the missionary zeal among Chinese Christians. The popular "Back to Jerusalem" commitment, for example, has brought several scattered house church networks together for a higher goal.

Christianity has made rapid progress among overseas Chinese as well. In fact, the flourishing network of Chinese communities throughout the Pacific Rim makes the global role of Chinese Christianity more likely. Such a network not only mobilizes Chinese both within and without the country, but also provides an infrastructure for the missionary expansion of Chinese Christianity. Among other features, training programmes for missionary work are mushrooming in many countries.

## **2.2 South Korea**

One immense Christian success story in Asia is South Korea. Christianity was first introduced to this "Hermit Kingdom" in the 1590s, initially as part of the broader Catholic missions to the Far East. Protestant missionaries came later, in the nineteenth century. The number of Christians in the country was only about 300,000 in 1920, but it has now ascended to 10 to 12 million, about a quarter of the national population. [4] It is stated that,

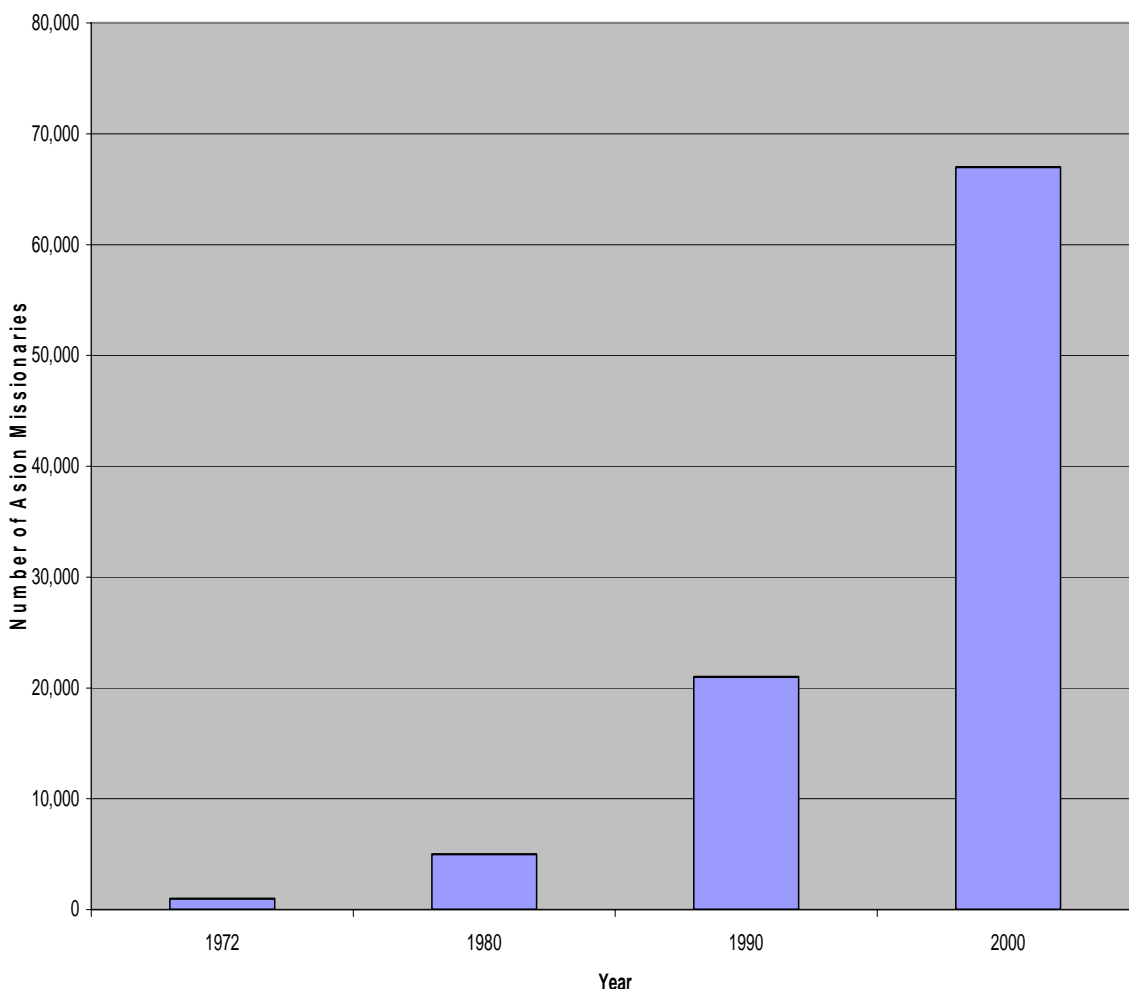
Korean Protestants outnumber Roman Catholics by about three to one, and, as in Latin America, protestant growth has been largely Pentecostal. At the time of the Korean War, the nation's Pentecostal believers could be counted only in the hundreds, but by the early 1980s, their ranks had swelled to almost half a million. [5]

Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul currently reports having 750,000 members, gaining it a place in the Guinness Book of Records as the world's largest solitary congregation. The Kwang Lim Methodist Church began with 150 members in 1971; it had 85,000 members by the end of the century. Many Protestant denominations have also recorded an exceptional growth. Today, there are approximately twice as many Presbyterians in South Korea as in the United States.<sup>6</sup> There are other mega churches across denominations. Korean churches indeed experienced spiritual and material blessings. With increasing economic success, the Korean church has become a strong missionary force, now deploying around 14,000 missionaries to over 180 countries. It has replaced the United Kingdom as the second largest missionary-sending country in the world.

### 3. Growing Missionary Movements in Asia

Since the 1960s, churches in the Two-Thirds World have gained the missionary vision and mission burden to send their own cross-cultural missionaries to other countries. Three billion people in Asia constitute 60% of the total world population, and fewer than 10 percent are Christian. Undoubtedly the spiritual need of Asia brings enormous challenges to the Christian church in Asia today. In 1975, there were 3,411 missionaries from the Two-Thirds World working in 86 countries and representing 209 mission agencies. [7] However, the number of missionaries sent each year has increased, achieving an average annual growth rate of 15.4 percent. [8]

Year	Number of Asian Missionaries	Note
1972	1,000	
1980	5,000	368% growth
1990	21,000	
2000	67,000	



## **4. Missionary Movements in Several Asian Countries**

The increase of missionary commitment among several Asian nations is briefly discussed below.

### **4.1 Increase**

According to the 1990-91 Directory of Korean Missionaries and Mission Societies, Korean churches sent 1,123 cross-cultural missionaries to 87 countries from 54 mission agencies. It is stated that “the Korean Church is financially capable of sending at least 5,000 missionaries, if churches in Seoul (7,000) offer only 10% of their total budget.” [9] Christianity Today forecast that the Korean church will soon be the most missionary-sending church. South Korea already sends more missionaries than any other countries but the United States of America, And it will be number one missionary sending nation before long. [10] The Korea World Missions Association (KWMA) has released current statistics of the Korean mission. The figure of Korean missionaries as of February 2006 is 14,086 in 180 countries (about 19,000 according to non-official counts). [11] The Korean church and mission agencies made a commitment to send one million tent-making missionaries by 2020 and 100,000 missionaries by 2030. [12] Although the above presented figure is beyond one’s imagination, with the Spirit of God it can be feasible. It is a bold faith projection, but not an impossible task.

There are 604 Filipino missionaries, working in 23 countries. Among several, one outstanding mission agency called the Asian Center for Missionary Education under the leadership of Met Castillo, has been used to train Filipino missionaries. [13]

More than 5,000 missionaries have been sent by the Indian churches to reach the numerous Hindus and Muslims inside and outside India. The India Evangelical Mission alone has 307 missionaries working on 52 stations. Funds come not from the West: they are supported through the sacrificial giving of Indian Christians. The motto of IEM, shared by Theodore Williams, the General Secretary, reflects this principle, “Vision, Faith and Sacrifice.” This indigenous missionary principle has become an important inspiration in bringing dynamic mobilization for mission. [14]

The Indonesia Missionary Fellowship which Petrus Octavianus directs has 280 missionaries. [15] Perhaps the current number of missionaries will become higher as more mission agencies and missionary fellowships are formed. The Indonesian Bible Institute in Batu-Malang of East Java has also actively been training missionaries.

### **4.2 Missionary Work**

Several ministries characterise typical Asian missionary work.

#### **4.2.1 Pre-Evangelism**

There are many tools to bring people to Christ. One of them is pre-evangelism. Prior to actual evangelism, relational groundwork is crucial as this provides an excellent opportunity to know target people and their felt needs. The key is to identify a need which the missionary can really do something about. Personal involvement with the community’s problems is necessary before trying a large-scale evangelistic programme. Talking to social workers,

government officials, and newspaper reporters to find out the critical needs is helpful. For instance, if a town or community encounters a serious problem with an increase in drug addicts, holding a series of drug prevention seminars would aid people to open their hearts to Christians. Personal interactions between the seminar conductor (a missionary or any Christian resource person) and town people during the session will be a wonderful way to open their hearts to the gospel. Soon a house church can be established.

#### **4.2.2 Power Evangelism**

People in Asia in general are more person-oriented than westerners are. They tend to look at the universe and natural phenomenon, like storms and typhoons, as personal. Also the underlying religiosity of Asia is animism. In this milieu, the message of God's love is best expressed in the manifestation of his love in his power. As traditional Asian religions are centered on the concept of power, such ministry demonstrates God's supremacy over their deities.

For instance, the Irogort tribes in the Philippines, like many tribes, tend to be under the grip of fear. They view the spirit beings as inhabiting, and having control over, nature. Spirits, especially malevolent ones, are believed to cause sickness, volcanic eruptions, accidents, sudden death, bad luck, success or failure. [16] Often the spirits are vengeful and capricious. Naturally animists seek the help of spiritual power to have control over their environment. In such settings, one of the most biblical and effective approaches is the demonstration of God's power through healing, miracles and exorcism. This needs to be well complemented by the presentation of God's truth. The book of Acts shows this pattern: the two key biblical methods are power manifestation and preaching.

#### **4.3 Social Concern**

Western missionaries have engaged in a variety of social ministry, including education, orphanages, health clinics and hospitals, medical assistance, AIDS education, job training, drug rehabilitation, child care facilities and others. Asian missionaries are now engaged in diverse social ministries. In China, for example, Asian English instructors gain an easy access to the country and its people. In several countries, children's programmes such as feeding and caring for street children have proved to be significant mission work. Social development in Cambodia and relief work in disaster areas are some examples of growing ministries, often in partnership between Asian and western missionaries.

The Word of God should be in the centre of these works. We have to remember that all social concerns and development have its fulfillment only when Christ is presented as the Saviour.

### **5. Expansion of the Church: Emphasis on Reproduction**

At the heart of missionary work is the planting and expansion of local churches. According to Bruce Metzger, [17] the church geographically experienced expansion to six locations. The first was throughout Jerusalem (Acts 1:1-6:7), as Acts 6:7 says, "...the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (6:7). Acts 1:8 also notes, "...and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem...." The second region was throughout Palestine (6:8-9:31): "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened: and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord" (9:1). The third geographic expansion was beyond the Jewish boundaries (9:32-12:24): "But the word of

God continued to increase and spread” (12:24). The fourth location that the apostles reached was throughout Cyprus and into Central Asia Minor (12:25-16:5): “So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers” (16:5). The fifth place was western Asia Minor (16:6-19:20): “In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power” (19:20). The sixth and last location was Rome. During his journey to Jerusalem, Paul was arrested, but finally arrived at his destination, Rome (19:21-28:31). Luke is not only focusing on church growth but also the triumph of the new and liberating faith as it “breaks through barriers that are religious, racial and national.” [18]

Out of my own experience in church planting among a tribal group for more than a decade, I can stress that an important goal of a new church is to equip it to become reproductive. Normally at a church dedication, there is a good opportunity to remind the church of this call. In the middle of the celebration and thanksgiving, we make it a regular practice of challenging the church to plant daughter churches in nearby communities. In fact, our agreement with the congregation is that only through the reproducing work, will our partnership continue. It was our pledge to assist or work with them in developing new churches. Such a covenant often serves to stimulate them to begin a new house church in a nearby village where there is no Bible-believing church. In fact, some churches, anticipating our firm expectation, had already started new ministry before their church building was dedicated.

Frequently a ground-breaking ceremony would take place with a handful of believers under a big mango tree which protected them from the scorching sunshine. To our surprise, one by one, villagers would come to join the joyful gospel choruses. The quickest response usually came from children. As they were not yet religiously oriented to their traditional animistic beliefs, they were considerably receptive and open to the stories of the Gospel. Of course, the children were always full of curiosity. Often a vacation Bible school was held in an entirely odd place, and this has proved to be an exceptionally efficient means for evangelism. Soon their parents who watched them from a distance joined in this new Christian gathering. Labilab, an Ibaloi tribal village in Benguet Province of the Philippines, is a typical case. A nearby Ibaloi church sent a team to this community to offer a vacation Bible school. By the time of its conclusion, a new church was born. Now the church has its own building with about sixty active members. They are now helping their “daughter church” to build their own church. According to my mission experience, it is very important for missionaries to be involved in planting churches that will reproduce. This is multiplication of God’s Kingdom.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this short paper, I have illustrated how Asian missionaries have made an important contribution to the expansion of the church. As part of this growing missionary movement, I was privileged to serve in a neighboring Asian country. Truly the Spirit of God’s missionary vision is among Asian churches and missionaries.

However, the missionary movement in Asia is only at its beginning. There are many issues which the Asian church has to tackle: the mobilization of local churches, the recruitment and training of missionary candidates, their support and care, religious pluralism, poverty, wide spread corruption, lack of resources and many others. However, the strongest motivation for mission is the sense of calling and the ever increasing number of committed young believers. I pray Asian churches and mission agencies will passionately work closely with one another and with western churches to mobilize the Asian church for God’s mission.

---

## Endnotes:

- 1 Archie R. Crouch, Steven Agoratus, Arthur Emerson, Debra E. Soled, and John King Fairbank, *Christianity in China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1989), p. 59.
- 2 Ibid.,
- 3 Limin Bao, "The Intellectual Influence of Christianity in a Changing Maoist Society," *Theology Today* 55 (1999), Pp. 532-46.
- 4 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2002), p. 71.
- 5 Gayle White, "Flourishing Churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America," *Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, (December 26, 1999), Pp.
- 6 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, p. 71.
- 7 Bong Rin Ro, "Historical Analysis of Missions in Asia," *World Missions: The Asian Challenge*, Met Q Castillo et al. (A Compendium of the Asia Missions Congress' 90, 1991), Pp. 44-57.
- 8 Ibid.,
- 9 Ibid.,
- 10 Rob Moll, "Missions Incredible," *Christianity Today*, February 24, 2006.
- 11 Sung Sam Kang, "The Statistics of the Korean Church Mission and Future Ministry," *Kidok Shinmoon*, February 15, 2006.
- 12 kwma.org.
- 13 Ibid.,
- 14 Ibid.,
- 15 Ibid.,
- 16 Julie Ma, *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), p.
- 17 Bruce Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth and Content* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), 239.
- 18 Luther E. Copeland, "Who Really Sent the First Missionaries?" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 11:4 (1975), 233-239.

---

Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

If you would like to respond to this article, please use the 'Voice your comments' form on the [Encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/mission) website ([www.redcliffe.org/mission](http://www.redcliffe.org/mission)). You may prefer to email your response to [mission@redcliffe.org](mailto:mission@redcliffe.org), in which case please remember to include your full name, your organisation/role and whether you would like your comments posted on the [Encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/mission) discussion board.