

The Man Who Dreamed BIG

David Yonggi Cho, pastor of the world's largest church, has set his sights on planting new churches in Korea and Japan.

PLUS: David du Plessis, Jimmy Swaggart

Korea was just beginning to recover from the devastating Korean War when a young dreamer named David Yonggi Cho put up a tent near Seoul. It was 1958, and Cho, a recent graduate of an Assemblies of God Bible school, was planting a church. In faith he asked God for what at that time seemed impossible: 150 members for his fledgling congregation.

Little did he know the miracle that would become the Yoido Full Gospel Church, which since its humble beginnings has swelled to the almost unimaginable number of 700,000 members, making it the largest church on the planet and a literal oasis of Christianity in a sea of Buddhism, Islam and atheism in Asia.

Right after he began his ministry, Cho was drafted into the army and put the leadership of his church in the hands of an American missionary, John Hurston. The church had grown to 500 members by the time Cho returned. Within a few short years the membership grew to 2,000.

The rapid growth, however, took its toll on the young minister. In the middle of an impossible schedule, Cho finally collapsed with exhaustion. He suffered an almost complete nervous breakdown.

While recuperating he began

reading both Exodus 18, which describes how Moses was advised to share the burden of ministry with capable leaders, and passages in the New Testament that described how first-century believers met in homes. Cho immediately selected 12 people from the congregation to be house-church leaders and help carry the burden.

These house churches formed the core of the church, and the Sunday morning service became more of a celebration time. This small-group model, considered revolutionary in the 1970s, eventually stirred international interest, and pastors from around the world flocked to Seoul to see how a church could grow from “cell groups.”

Today, 716 pastors and evangelists, who oversee 50,000 local leaders, administer the church’s immense ministry. The church has sent almost 621 missionaries overseas, including to the United States, Europe and the Middle East. Most notable is the church’s missionary outreach to Japan.

The historic occupation of Korea by Japan from 1910-1945 left towering walls of division between the two countries. Koreans were forced to learn Japanese, adopt Japanese names and worship the emperor. But Cho’s decision to send missionaries to Japan in 1974 became a pivotal turning point for reconciliation.

While there have been moves recently to ask forgiveness for the sins of the past by church leaders from the West, Cho and his mother, Jashil Choi, started this trend more

than 25 years ago. They publicly forgave the Japanese for the brutal colonization of Korea, and their actions triggered such

a response that it became a regular occurrence for church leaders from Japan to open their meetings by bowing on the floor to ask for forgiveness from their Korean brothers and sisters.

Committed as he always has been to clear, concrete goals, Cho began to discuss with Japanese pastors a goal for salvations in Japan. They decided that the Holy Spirit wanted them to exercise their faith to reach 10 percent of Japan's population of 100 million people. Thus was born the rallying cry that to this day is heard throughout Japan: issen man kyurei or "10 million salvations."

Cho's missionary work in Japan has since birthed almost 40 churches. His church in Seoul intends to start 60 more.

However, the explosive growth that defined Yoido Full Gospel Church is not occurring today. The congregation has been at the 700,000 level for several years.

Today, the church's leaders reportedly see a need to plant new churches rather than to continue to expand Yoido. A goal has been set to plant 5,000 churches in Korea, sources in Cho's Japan office told Charisma.

During a recent service, Cho was so exhausted that he sat in the front of the church while a video of his preaching from an earlier service was played on the screen above. But observers say this isn't a signal that the tireless church-planter is slowing down. When he's resting, he's probably getting another big dream.

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