

Pruning the World's Largest Church

The pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church says it is poised  for growth—now that it's smaller

On Jan. 1, the world's largest church got considerably smaller—and its pastor says the move has led to growth and spiritual renewal.

After boasting more than 780,000 members, Yoido Full Gospel Church released 20 satellite congregations to become independent, effectively reducing the church roll by some 360,000 members.

Yoido pastor Young Hoon Lee, who succeeded church founder David Yonggi Cho in May 2008, says he has no regrets. "Each church is experiencing new revival," he told *Charisma*. "Yoido Full Gospel Church is also continuing to grow, and more than 1,000 new converts are being added to the church membership every month."

Known for Cho's teaching on prayer and its prayer mountain where hundreds of thousands of believers intercede each week, Yoido has been a leader in developing church-growth strategies for decades. The church helped pioneer the cell church model and peaked near 1 million members before reaching 780,000 in recent years.

Cho says he was in full support of giving the churches autonomy. "[The] mother church should release the satellite church to have an independent power to grow," Cho said in an e-mail interview.

Still the largest congregation in the world, Yoido remains influential in Asia and beyond. Lee is general superintendent of the Assemblies of God of Korea and co-president of the

Christian Council of Korea, an evangelism-focused group that includes 80 percent of Korea's churches. This year he spoke at the Edinburgh 2010 world missions conference in Scotland and at the Pentecostal World Conference in Sweden. In 2013, Yoido will host the World Council of Churches' 10th international assembly.

James Leggett, former chairman of the Pentecostal World Fellowship (PWF), says it's clear that church leadership is shifting toward the global south—Africa, Latin America and Asia—a trend missiologists have been predicting for years. In August, the Rev. Prince Guneratnam, senior pastor of Calvary Church in Malaysia, succeeded Leggett as PWF chairman, becoming the first non-Western leader of the international group.

"Some of the fire and excitement and enthusiasm from the church in the south may be the revitalization and re-evangelization of America eventually," Leggett says. "There is a sense that God is in [the leadership shift] and God is moving, and I think the church in North America is saying, 'Praise God this is happening.'"

Cho retired in 2006 but returned to ministry because of infighting among the remaining ministers. Lee was elected with more than 90 percent of the vote of the church board, and the leadership transition lasted nearly two years.

Cho maintains an office at the church, serving as senior pastor emeritus, and now leads the Sharing Love and Happiness Foundation, an outreach to the poor. The veteran pastor said Lee was well-qualified to succeed him. "Dr. Lee is 100 percent dependent on the Holy Spirit, very obedient and humble to God and His people, and full of compassion for poor people," Cho says.

A fourth-generation Christian, Lee and his family joined Yoido in 1964 when Lee was still in elementary school. He joined the

church staff after graduating from Yonsei University and Full Gospel Theological Seminary, and in 1982 was ordained as a pastor.

He later spent several years in the U.S., earning master's and doctoral degrees from Temple University in Philadelphia, and led Yoido-affiliated congregations in Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles; and Tokyo.

Lee says his vision is to see another great revival at 52-year-old Yoido. That includes returning to the church's roots by emphasizing prayer, evangelism, the baptism in the Holy Spirit, divine healing and personal sanctification.

He says the next Korean revival would also be marked by a practical demonstration of Christ's love. To that end, Yoido is supporting humanitarian work in North Korea and working to build a large cardiac hospital there.