

Dr. Cho's Greatest Gift to the Global Church

The world mourned this week after learning that Dr. David Yonggi Cho – pastor of the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea – died on September 14. Known as a visionary leader who taught his followers to change the world through prayer, Dr. Cho was hospitalized for more than a year because of a brain hemorrhage. He was 85 when he died.

For decades, Cho was admired as the quintessential megachurch pastor at a time when megachurches were just beginning to spring up in the United States in the 1980s. He started his church in 1958 with a handful of people meeting in a small tent. Cho's church grew from five to fifty; then from fifty to 3,000. After embracing a "cell church" strategy, the church grew to 8,000 members – quite a feat in 1968 when few Christian leaders could imagine a church that size.

The Yoido church grew to 400,000 by 1984 and then expanded to 700,000 by 1992. It was then that Cho made the decision to plant satellite churches in other parts of Seoul instead of expanding the main campus. He became a global spokesman on church growth.

Hundreds of church leaders began to flock to South Korea during the 1970s and 1980s to observe the remarkable success of Yoido. Pastors from the United States, Europe, Africa and South America wanted to know Cho's secret.

When the Americans returned from their trips, they announced that the Pentecostal pastor's secret was two-fold: First, Cho heavily relied on prayer and motivated his massive congregation to pray corporately two hours a week. Second, American pastors said Cho's church grew fast because he divided his congregation into small cell groups that met in

homes, giving converts an effective outlet for personal discipleship.

So in typical American fashion, churches in the United States adopted prayer programs and experimented with various cell church models. The goal was to build American churches as big as Yoido.

But so far, the largest churches in the United States have barely broken the 20,000-member threshold. Obviously we missed something when we tried to copy the Korean formula.

While prayer certainly was a key ingredient in the spreading of the gospel in Seoul, Cho revealed in 1999 during a meeting with pastors and missionaries in Italy that experts had overlooked a major factor in his success. Cho went on to inform the audience that women played a key role in his ministry – even from the beginning when he began his church with Choi Ja-shil, a female colleague who eventually became his mother-in-law.

Cho explained to the attendees at the Italy event that he collapsed from exhaustion in 1964 when he was ministering to his 3,000-member congregation. When he told his male leaders that he wanted to divide the church into home cells, they resisted the idea. They didn't want him to delegate his work to them. "We are not trained to do that and we are not paid to do that," the men told Cho.

But when Cho presented his idea to Yoido's female leaders, they eagerly embraced the concept and asked him to teach them how to lead. "Teach us, pastor," the women told Cho. "We will do anything for you."

Cho admitted that he had to step out of the pastorate briefly in the 1960s because of stress. He crashed emotionally and physically because of exhaustion. But during those five years, when mostly women led the cell groups at Yoido, the church grew from 3,000 to 18,000.

When Yoiddo hit the 700,000 mark, with 50,000 cell groups meeting in homes, the church had 600 associate pastors – and 400 of them were women.

When Dr. Cho addressed the leaders in Italy, he brought a stinging indictment against the Western church. He said:

“For 5,000 years in Korea, women had no voice at all. They were only to cater to the needs of the men. Then Christianity came and set women free. Especially in the church, women are free in Korea. In the ministry, they are equal with men. They are licensed. They are ordained. And they become the cell leaders ... Without women, I don’t think I could have build up this big church.

“If you ever train the women, and delegate your ministry to them, they will become tremendous messengers for the Lord. Some of you are going to quote 1 Corinthians 14:34 (MOUNCE), ‘Women are to be silent in the church.’ I’ll tell you one thing, brothers and sisters. Once women are called into the ministry, they no longer belong to the category of women. They are messengers of the Lord.

“So I’m not afraid of having women workers, because by empowering women we are evangelizing all of Korea. I’m encouraging American churches to use women. European churches are very slow to learn this. I come and encourage them to use women.”

Dr. Cho was not perfect. Like all leaders, he had feet of clay and he made unfortunate mistakes – particularly near the end of this ministry when he got in trouble with Korean authorities for promoting a questionable financial scheme. But in spite of his flaws, Cho taught us to believe God for the impossible and to empower every Christian – both male and female – to preach the gospel with the Holy Spirit’s power. I pray we never forget Dr. Cho’s legacy. {eo}

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