



a Pioneer in Multicultural Ministry, and
Witness to the 20th Century Korean Immigration History

About Reverend Tong-jin Lee (1915-2010)

Pastor Tongjin Samuel Lee was born in Gangseo, Pyeongannam-do, in 1915. In 1919, at age 5, he made the Taegeukgi (Korean flags) with his father's church members in the Sarangbang on the eve of the March 1st Independence Movement. His father, Pastor Yongrin Lee, who led the March 1st Movement near Pyongyang, was the head of a Korean Young Adult Association working to liberate Korea from the Japanese occupation. After the March 1st movement, Pastor Yongrin Lee was chased for months by the Japanese police. He was captured and sentenced to harsh imprisonment.

Rev. Lee studied at Soongsil College in Pyongyang from 1929. Soongsil College was forced to close when the faculty and students refused to worship the Japanese Emperor. He left for China to continue with his studies, but he was arrested by the Japanese police, who followed him to China and forced him to return to Pyongyang. Afterward, he moved to Japan, entered Doshisha University in Tokyo in 1936, and graduated two years later. He went to study in the United States in 1938 under the arrangement of the Presbyterian missionary Dr. George McCune, who had been exiled to the United States after Soongshil College was shut down.

His first connection with Hawaii was a brief stopover in Hawaii on his way to San Francisco by ship. He said he never imagined that Hawaii would become his home. He majored in psychology at Parsons College in Iowa, graduated from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Kentucky, and was ordained as a Presbyterian pastor in 1943. He was drafted into the U.S. Department of Defense Intelligence Agency during World War II and worked as a propaganda broadcast against Japan, which later became "the Voice of America." Rev. Lee recalls: "Because I knew English and Japanese, I translated propaganda from English into Japanese and broadcast it directly on the radio." He left his job at the U.S. Department of Defense Intelligence and became a missionary to the Native American tribes in South Dakota, Washington State, and Oregon. At the request of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which was desperately looking for a Korean and English bilingual pastor for the first-generation and second-generation Koreans in Honolulu, he became the senior pastor of the First Korean Methodist Church (now Christ United Methodist Church) in 1952. He had been known as a living witness to Hawaii's Korean community history. He participated in the 50th, 75th, 90th, and the centennial anniversary of Korean immigration to Hawaii. He was one of the few people who had seen how the Korean community in Hawaii changed, struggled, and grew.

Rev. Lee retired from active ministry in 1982 and became a pastor emeritus of Christ United Methodist Church. He became a 'wise elder' to various Korean organizations as an advisor, including the Korean American Women's Association, Korean Artist Association, and International Bright Society Movement). During the 90th anniversary of Korean immigration to Hawaii, he was an editorial member of the book, 'In Their Footsteps.'

In the United States, Rev. T. Samuel Lee served multiracial and multiethnic churches: Native American, Korean American, Japanese American, Caucasian, Filipino, and Samoan congregations. Rev. Lee donated scholarships to Korea's Soongsil Middle and High School, Soongsil University, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Claremont School of Theology, and Wesley Theological Seminary. He also contributed to an endowment scholarship for students and pastors in the Hawaii District, later becoming the T. Samuel Lee Memorial Endowment Fund at Claremont School of Theology.

In recognition of his contributions, Rev. Lee received the Distinguished Alumni Award from his alma maters, Soongshil University and Louisville Theological Seminary. The Korean government awarded him the 'Magnolia Medal of National Merit' in 2005. Under his father's influence, who maintained nonviolence and dignity while resisting Japanese colonial rule, Rev. Lee overcame hardships through faith, found meaning in life, and set the direction for his ministry. He left Korea, which was not yet a divided country, at 23 and became a respected elder in Hawaii until his death at 94. He was a highly respected pastor and a living witness to the 20th-century Korean and Korean immigration history. His story illustrates the indomitable spirit of the Korean people who pioneered their path without losing hope despite oppression. It also exemplifies the process of adapting and integrating into a multicultural society and overcoming life's difficulties through the power of faith. His life has deeply touched and inspired many people, including his descendants.

