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## **Between Unity and Division: The Ecumenical Movement in the Korean Church – History, Characteristics, and Prospects**

### *Abstract.*

This article examines the ecumenical movement in the Korean church as a historically layered and socially embodied pursuit of Christian unity. Rather than defining unity only in terms of doctrinal agreement or institutional merger, the article approaches it as a comprehensive field of activity comprising historical development, theological discourse, institutional organization, and ritual practice. Such an approach is necessary because the Korean ecumenical movement has unfolded not simply as an intra-church theological project but as a dynamic response to the political and social crises of modern Korean history. Japanese colonialism, national division, the Korean War, authoritarian modernization, democratization, and contemporary polarization each shaped both the possibilities and the limitations of ecumenical engagement. The article therefore argues that the Korean ecumenical movement must be understood within the entangled history of Korean Christianity and Korean society.

The study proceeds in four analytical stages. First, it traces the historical development of the movement from missionary coordination under colonial rule, through post-liberation reconstruction and denominational schism, to the public activism of the democratization era and the diversification and decline of recent decades. In this process,

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anti-communism, denominational division, and the growth of conservative Protestant organizations emerge as decisive forces that configured the split between ecumenical and anti-ecumenical camps. Second, the article considers the theological dimension of the movement. It shows that, despite the early adoption of broad confessional standards and the later reception of global ecumenical themes such as *Missio Dei*, Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, and the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, Korean Protestantism has not produced a broadly shared modern confession of unity. Theological discussion has often remained confined to specialists and has rarely been translated into the ordinary life of congregations.

Third, the article analyses the institutional dimension of Korean ecumenism. The National Council of Churches in Korea functioned for decades as the central organizational vehicle of the movement, linking churches, para-church agencies, and global ecumenical networks, yet its public role has weakened since democratization because of conservative Protestant mobilization, the transfer of activist energy to civil society, and declining international support. At the same time, newer forms of inter-church cooperation, including the Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches, suggest that ecumenical life in Korea has not disappeared but has changed its form and field of operation. Fourth, the article explores the ritual dimension of unity through World Communion Sunday, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Easter joint services, and prayers for peace and reunification on the Korean Peninsula. These practices demonstrate that liturgical expressions of unity exist, but they also reveal the continuing distance between ecumenical leadership and congregational reception.

On the basis of this analysis, the article argues that the Korean ecumenical movement has been historically influential but structurally fragile. It has been stronger as a movement for social witness than as a project of visible ecclesial convergence; stronger in national crises than in the patient cultivation of ordinary habits of inter-church trust; and stronger among elite leaders than among local congregations. The future of Korean ecumenism therefore depends on widening participation, renewing theological education, strengthening the role of women, younger Christians, and lay professionals, and recovering the ecclesiological, catechetical, and liturgical dimensions that were often overshadowed by activist urgency. The article concludes that Korean ecumenism still retains enduring significance, not because it has overcome division but because it continues to witness to the claim that the church cannot detach itself from the suffering, fragmentation, and common life of the nation.

**Keywords:** Korean ecumenical movement, Korean Protestantism, Korean church, Korean church history, NCKK, anti-communism, church unity, democratization, faith and order

## I. Introduction

The ecumenical movement is a movement of Christian churches towards visible unity. It is grounded in faith in the one God and in Scripture, and it responds to Jesus's prayer that all may be one (John 17:21). Christians are therefore called to receive unity as God's gift and to embody it in confession, worship, and practice. Yet, in Korea, the movement that sought unity also generated conflict and division. The Korean church thus bears a distinct trauma: the very discourse of unity has often intensified denominational antagonism.

This article examines "unity in the Korean church" not only as doctrinal agreement but as the total field of activities carried out in pursuit of unity. In this broader sense, unity includes the historical development of the ecumenical movement, its theological discourses, its institutional forms, and its ritual practices. Such an approach makes it possible to describe the Korean ecumenical movement more fully than a definition confined to creeds or inter-church agreements.

The discussion proceeds in two stages. Section II surveys the Korean ecumenical movement in four dimensions: history, theology, organization, and ritual. The historical section traces the movement through major social and political transitions; the theological section examines confessions, creeds, and ecumenical theological discourse; the organizational section reviews institutions and networks that carried the movement; and the ritual section considers worship, prayer, and symbolic liturgical practices. Section III then evaluates the status, characteristics, and prospects of the movement by focusing on three questions: the religious landscape in which it operates, the actors who sustain it, and the themes that have defined it.

In this article, "ecumenical movement", "unity movement", and "ecumenism" are used in a broad sense. They refer not only to doctrinal convergence but also to the larger history, institutions, and practices of Christian efforts towards unity. For convenience, churches that have participated in ecumenical organizations are called the "ecumenical side", while those that have opposed them are called the "anti-ecumenical side". Although "ecumenical" is not the exclusive property of any one faction, this distinction remains analytically useful in the Korean context.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For Korean Ecumenical Movement see, JEON, Taek-bu (1979): *Hanguk Ekyumenikal Undongsa* [A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Korea]. Seoul, Hanguk Gidogyo Hyeobuihoe; LIM,

The scope of the article is limited. Although it concerns “the Korean church”, the discussion focuses mainly on the Protestant ecumenical movement, because Korean ecumenism developed historically within Protestantism and has remained centred there. Catholic and Orthodox participation, especially in more recent forms of Christian cooperation, will be noted where relevant, but the argument primarily concerns the Protestant ecumenical field.

## **II. The Development and Current Status of the Ecumenical Movement in Korea**

### ***1. History: The Development of the Ecumenical Movement in the Korean Church***

The history of the Korean ecumenical movement must be read within the larger history of Korean society. Japanese colonialism, national division, the Korean War, military dictatorship, industrialization, democratization, and neoliberal polarization all shaped both the possibilities and the limits of church unity. The ecumenical movement was never a purely internal theological development. It emerged at the intersection of church life and national history, and for that reason it often assumed a strongly social and political form.

The first period, from the introduction of Protestantism to the end of Japanese colonial rule, was the formative stage of Korean ecumenism. During the late Joseon Dynasty, foreign intervention intensified and the sense of national crisis deepened. Korean Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, participated in educational reform, enlightenment movements, and nationalist efforts. Protestantism in particular developed in close contact with social transformation. Yet the ecumenical movement itself began not from an indigenous ecclesiology but from missionary coordination. Because missionaries

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Hee-guk (2008): Hanguk Gyohoesaeseo Jeongaedoeo On Ekyumenikal Undong [The Ecumenical Movement as Developed in Korean Church History]. In: *21segi Hanguk Gyohoui Ekyumenikal Undong* [The Ecumenical Movement of the Korean Church in the Twenty-First Century]. Ed. Daehan Yesu Gyo Jangnohoe Chonghoe Ekyumenikal Wiwonhoe [The Presbyterian Church of Korea Ecumenical Committee]. Seoul, Daehan Gidokgyo Seohwe. 287–309.

divided fields and established denominational structures, Korean Protestantism did not form a single institutional church. Even so, missionary and Korean church leaders created cooperative organizations such as the Federal Council of Protestant Missions in Korea, the Bible Society, and the Christian Literature Society. The representative body was the Joseon National Christian Council, founded in 1924.<sup>3</sup>

The background is important. Korean Catholicism and Protestantism both possessed significant self-propagating elements. Catholicism took root through the study of Western Learning by Korean scholars before missionary structures were firmly established, and Protestantism also spread through translated Scripture and Korean evangelists before foreign missionaries came into Korea. Yet this relative indigenous vitality did not produce an indigenous ecumenical structure. What emerged instead was a cooperative system framed by mission boards, missionary conferences, and practical coordination. From the beginning, then, Korean ecumenism bore an ambiguity: it was both a response to the needs of local Christianity and a product of missionary management.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Joseon Yesugyo Yeonhap Gonguihoe [the Joseon National Christian Council] was established with a total of 53 representatives from Presbyterian and Methodist churches in attendance. At the time, this organization included not only denominations but also various Protestant organizations as members. The member organizations were the Joseon Presbyterian Church, the American Methodist Conference, the Southern Methodist Conference, the American North and South Presbyterian Church, the Canadian Presbyterian Church, the Australian Presbyterian Church, the American North and South Methodist Church Mission, the British Bible Society, the Joseon Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Canadian United Church Mission, the Joseon Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and the Joseon Sunday School Association. The Joseon Christian Literature Society joined in 1930 and the Korean Women's Christian Temperance Association in 1931. Because this organization included both churches and missionary organizations, it was called the Christian Council rather than the Council of Churches.

<sup>4</sup> AHN, Gyo-seong (2009): Haebang Jeon Hanguk Ekyumenikal Undongui Teukjing [Characteristics of the Korean Ecumenical Movement before Liberation]. In: *Gidokgyo Yeoksa Yeonguso Sosik* [News of the Institute of Christian History]. 88. 7-17; AHN, Gyo-seong (2011b): Yeoksau Hwa hae, Hwa haei Yeoksa [Reconciliation in History, the History of Reconciliation]. In: *Hanguk Gyohesahakhoeji* [Journal of Korean Church History]. 30. 303-332; PARK, Gyeong-su (2011): Hanguk Gaesingyo Chogi Gyohoe Yeonhap Undongui Yusan [The Legacy of Early Church Union Movements in Korean Protestantism]. In: *Jangrogyohoe wa Sinhak* [Presbyterian Church and Theology]. 8. 201-228.; PARK, Sungkon (2021): John Calvin's Ecclesiology and Korean Presbyterian Church. In: *Teológiai Fórum*. 2021/15/1. 42-67.

Through the Joseon National Christian Council, Korean churches entered wider ecumenical networks. In 1925, it joined the International Missionary Council, and Korean representatives participated in international missionary meetings. At the same time, the movement was constrained by colonial rule. Japanese repression, the imprisonment and exile of Christian leaders, missionary accommodation to imperial policy, and conflict over Shinto shrine worship weakened cooperation. The dissolution of the Joseon National Christian Council in 1938 and the absorption of Korean Protestant denominations into the Japanese church order effectively halted ecumenical activity. Even so, this period established two lasting features of Korean ecumenism: its institutional beginnings under missionary leadership and its tendency to link unity with broader political and social concerns.

The second period, from liberation in 1945 to around 1960, was marked by reconstruction, division, and ideological conflict. The end of colonial rule was followed by national division, the establishment of separate regimes, the Korean War, and the first military coup. Churches attempted to rebuild denominational and social structures, but reconstruction proceeded amid bitter disputes over collaboration, legitimacy, theology, and authority. In Korean Protestantism, especially within Presbyterian Church, these disputes resulted in repeated schisms.<sup>5</sup> The Presbyterian Church split into Kosin, Kijang

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<sup>5</sup> Much of the discussion on the causes and process of the division of the Presbyterian Church reveals a partisan tendency to emphasize their own legitimacy and justification during the division process. YEON, Gyu-hong (2006): *Hanguk Jangrogyohoe Bunyeorui Jeongchijeok Yoin e Daehan Yeongu* [A Study of the Political Causes of the Division of the Korean Presbyterian Church]. In: *Jangrogyohoe wa Sinhak* [Presbyterian Church and Theology]. 3. 87–110; LEE, Sang-gyu (2006): 1950nyeondae Hanguk Jangrogyohoe Bunyeolgwa Yeonhab e Daehan Geomto [A Review of Division and Union in the Korean Presbyterian Church in the 1950s]. In: *Jangrogyohoe wa Sinhak*. 3. 47–86; LEE, Sang-gyu (2010): Hanguk Jangrogyohoseoui Segyeyohoebyeobuihoe (W.C.C.) [The World Council of Churches in the Korean Presbyterian Church]. In: *Gaehyeok Sinhak* [Reformed Theology]. 16. 45–88; KIM, Myeong-bae (2008): Hanguk Jangrogyohoe Bunyeorui Yeoksawa Ilchi Chugu Bangan e Gwanhan Yeongu [A Study on the History of Division in the Korean Presbyterian Church and Ways of Pursuing Unity]. In: *Hanguk Gaehyeok Sinhak*. 23. 241–277; PARK, Eung-gyu (2011): 1959nyeong Hanguk Jangrogyohoe Bunyeore Daehan Jaejomyeong [A Re-examination of the 1959 Division of the Korean Presbyterian Church]. In: *Jangrogyohoe wa Sinhak*. 8. 149–182; LIM, Hee-guk (2011): Hanguk Jangrogyohoei Bunyeorui Yeoksa [The History of Division in the Korean Presbyterian Church]. In: *Jangrogyohoe wa Sinhak*. 8. 39–82; CHUNG Byung-joon (2011): 1959nyeong Hanguk Jangrogyohoe Bunyeol Woninge

(PROK), Tonghap, and Hapdong, while new denominations, such as the Lutheran Church, also appeared. The denominational landscape became more complex than before liberation.

The decisive external factor in this period was the Korean War. The war solidified the division of the peninsula and of the churches. Protestant leaders and believers who fled from the North became a powerful force in South Korean Protestantism and carried with them a strong anti-communist orientation. This anti-communism shaped both Korean society and the churches for decades and later became a major foundation of anti-ecumenical Protestantism. In the postwar South, anti-communism was not merely a political sentiment; it became a theological and ecclesial lens through which ecumenism, social engagement, and even inter-church cooperation were judged.

After liberation, Korean churches resumed contact with the global church. Korean Protestants attended the first assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948. Yet from the mid-1950s opposition to the WCC intensified. In 1959, the Presbyterian Church split between Tonghap, which maintained links to ecumenical bodies, and Hapdong, which rejected them.<sup>6</sup> More broadly, major denominations took diverging positions: some joined both domestic and international ecumenical bodies, some joined selectively, and others severed ties altogether. The ecumenical side developed relations with the WCC; the anti-ecumenical side aligned itself more closely with conservative international bodies such as the NAE and, for a time, the ICCC.<sup>7</sup>

The significance of this phase lies in the way institutional and ideological division reinforced each other. Debates over the WCC were never only about ecclesiology. They were inseparable from Cold War politics, the fear of communism, anxieties over doctrinal purity, and struggles over denominational control. The anti-ecumenical position therefore

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Daehan Saeroun Jeopgeun [A New Approach to the Causes of the 1959 Division of the Korean Presbyterian Church]. In: *Jangrogyohoe wa Sinhak*. 8. 183–198.

<sup>6</sup> For the relationship between the church divisions of the 1950s and the ecumenical movement, see AHN, Gyo-seong (2011a): *Ekyumenikal Gyohoeroseoui Daehan Yesu Gyo Jangnohoe (Tonghap)ui Jeongcheseonggwa Jeungeon* [The Identity and Witness of the Presbyterian Church of Korea (Tonghap) as an Ecumenical Church]. In: *Jangsin Nondan* [Journal of Presbyterian Theology]. 40. 11–35.

<sup>7</sup> PARK, Yong-gyu (2004): *Hanguk Gidogyohoesa* [History of Christianity in Korea]. 2. Seoul, Saengmyeongui Malsseumsa. 925; KIM, In-su (1998): *Hanguk Gidogyohoei Yeoksa* [History of the Korean Christian Church]. Seoul, Jangrohoe Sinhakdaehakgyo Chulpanbu. 641.

drew strength not only from theological conservatism but also from a powerful national narrative in which anti-communism functioned as a marker of orthodoxy, patriotism, and moral legitimacy.

This period fixed the basic terrain of Korean ecumenism. Anti-communism, intensified by war, became a major dividing line, and ecclesial conflict hardened into a durable split between ecumenical and anti-ecumenical camps. From this point onward, ecumenism in Korea was no longer a broadly shared Protestant concern but increasingly the project of one side of a divided church landscape.

The third period, from the 1960s to democratization in the late 1980s, was the period of consolidation and greatest public influence for the ecumenical movement. South Korea experienced military authoritarianism, rapid industrialization, urbanization, and widening social inequality. In response, the ecumenical side became deeply involved in democratization, labour struggles, human rights, and, later, national reunification. In the 1980s, it broadened its agenda to include peace and inter-Korean relations. The 1988 “Declaration of the Korean Christian Church on National Reunification and Peace” and the proclamation of 1995 as a national jubilee were among the most visible expressions of this orientation. Urban-industrial mission, Minjung theology, and grassroots church activism supplied much of the movement’s energy.

This was also the period in which ecumenism in Korea became more than a denominational programme. It drew on student Christian movements, labour mission, social mission agencies, and theological networks that connected local struggles with global ecumenical discourse. The language of justice, participation, Minjung, and liberation gave Korean ecumenism a distinctive profile within the wider global church. Although these emphases did not always produce doctrinal convergence, they did create a recognizable form of Christian public witness.

By contrast, the anti-ecumenical side tended to support the state-centred anti-communist order and to identify more closely with conservative social forces. Large churches in particular expanded under this arrangement and became socially influential. From the 1980s onward, anti-ecumenical groups mobilized strongly against ecumenical engagement with democratization and reunification.<sup>8</sup> The 1988 Declaration became a

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<sup>8</sup> Campus Crusade for Christ, the Korea Presidential (National) Prayer Breakfast, the Christian Businessmen’s Association, the ICCC Korea branch, the Korean Christian Anti-Communist League, the National Salvation Mission and the Military Salvation Crusade, and the Unification

major point of contention and helped conservative Protestants organize more effectively in the public sphere.

Despite growing polarization, the ecumenical movement reached its high point in this period. Compared with the 1970s, when ecumenical activism was concentrated among relatively small circles, the movement in the 1980s acquired a more public and inter-church character. It also entered into limited cooperation with Catholics and, at times, with other religious communities, while deepening ties with overseas ecumenical institutions. Much of its work depended on financial and moral support from the global church. In this period, Korean ecumenism became a significant actor within the wider democratization movement and helped shape Christian public witness in South Korea.

The fourth period, from democratization to the present, has been a period of diversification but also decline. Although political democratization advanced, social inequality deepened and the public credibility of Korean Protestantism weakened. Within the churches, anti-ecumenical forces grew stronger, not only among conservative denominations but also among large churches within ecumenical denominations that shared anti-communist and conservative instincts. As a result, the ecumenical side experienced a crisis of representation, leadership, and identity. The status of the NCKC declined, and its fields of activity narrowed.<sup>9</sup>

Several factors account for this shift. First, the establishment of the Christian Council of Korea in 1989 ended the NCKC's effective monopoly as a Protestant

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Church defended the conservative social system. Also, mainstream ecumenical leaders and mega churches, such as Han Kyung-jik and Yeongnak Church, became part of the ruling system based on anti-communism. See: CHUNG, Byung-joon (2022): Park Chung-hee Jeonggwongwa Gidoggyo: Gyohoe-Gukga Gwangyee Daehan Yeongusareul Jungsimeuro [The Park Chung Hee Regime and Christianity: Focusing on Research History on Church-State Relations]. In: *Hanguk Gidoggyowa Yeoksa* [Christianity and History in Korea]. 56. 5–39.

<sup>9</sup> SON, Seung-ho (2018a): 1987nyeon Ihu Hanguk Gidoggyo Gyohoe Hyeobuihoei Byeonhwa [Changes in the National Council of Churches in Korea since 1987]. In: *Gidoggyo Sasang* [Christian Thought]. 709. 30–39; SON, Seung-ho (2018b): Minjuhwa Ihu Ekyumenikal Undongui Chimchewa Hwalro Moseok: Hanguk Gidoggyo Gyohoe Hyeobuihoereul Jungsimeuro [The Stagnation of the Ecumenical Movement and the Search for a Way Forward after Democratization: Focusing on the National Council of Churches in Korea]. In: *Hanguk Gidoggyowa Yeoksa* [Christianity and History in Korea]. 48. 31–68; KANG, In-cheol (2012): *Minjuhwa wa Jonggyo* [Democratization and Religion]. Osan, Hansin Daehakgyo Chulpanbu.

representative body. Second, areas once dominated by ecumenical activism, such as democratization and rights advocacy, were increasingly taken up by civic movements and NGOs. Many Protestant activists moved from church-based organizations into civil society. Third, financial support from the global church diminished. These changes weakened ecumenical institutions and encouraged a more denominational and managerial form of church politics within the NCKK itself.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, the ecumenical movement diversified.<sup>11</sup> It continued to address reunification but expanded into issues such as ecology, women, rural communities, migrant workers, disability, and economic justice. The NCKK reorganized committees around just peace, peace and reunification, economic justice, climate justice, and ecological justice. This represented a shift from grand nationalist or class-centred agendas towards the social and ethical problems of everyday life.

The post-democratization period also brought institutional change. The NCKK became more strongly centred on member denominations, while its regional movement character weakened. Financial insecurity and the growing influence of conservative constituencies affected its internal balance. Yet, even amidst decline, the ecumenical side achieved some visible successes in international exchange, most notably the WCC's 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Busan in 2013. That event did not overcome the division of Korean Protestantism, but it demonstrated that the ecumenical movement still retained international significance.

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<sup>10</sup> SHIN, Jaeshik (2005): *Hanguk Simin Undonggywa Gaesingyo: Jeongaewa Jeonmang* [Korean Civil Movements and Protestantism: Development and Prospects]. In: *Hanguk Gaesingyoga Hanguk Geunhyeondaewi Sahoe-Munhwajeok Byeondonge Kikin Yeonghyang Yeongu* [A Study of the Influence of Korean Protestantism on Socio-cultural Transformations in Modern Korean History]. Osan, Hanguk Sinhak Yeonguso. 253–277; JANG, Gyu-sik (2018): *Minjuhwa Ihu Hangugui Gaesingyowa Siminsahoe* [Korean Protestantism and Civil Society after Democratization]. In: *Hanguk Gidogyowa Yeoksa*. 48. 5–30.

<sup>11</sup> HWANG, Hong-ryeol (2016): *Ekyumenikal Undongeseo Bon Hanguk Gidogyoui Hoesingwa Byeonhyeogui Gwaeje* [Tasks of Conversion and Transformation of Korean Christianity from the Perspective of the Ecumenical Movement]. In: *Seongyo wa Sinhak* [Mission and Theology]. 40. 107–149; HWANG, Hong-ryeol (2014): *WCCui Saengmyeong Seongyowa Hanguk Gyohoui Saengmyeong Seongyo Gwaeje* [The WCC's Mission of Life and the Tasks of the Korean Church's Mission of Life]. In: *Seongyo wa Sinhak*. 34. 50–70.

Taken together, these four periods reveal the main historical determinants of Korean ecumenism: Japanese colonialism gave it a strong national and social orientation; the Korean War intensified anti-communism; denominational schism divided the Protestant field into ecumenical and anti-ecumenical camps; and democratization both expanded ecumenical influence and, paradoxically, weakened the institutional centrality of church-based activism. For this reason, Korean ecumenism has generally been more movement- than institution-centred. It has sought social witness more often than visible ecclesial union, and that tension continues to shape its present condition.

## ***2. Theology: Confessions of Faith and Creeds in the Ecumenical Movement***

From a theological perspective, the Korean ecumenical movement may be examined through confessions of faith, creeds, and the reception of wider ecumenical theology. Yet in this area the Korean church has achieved relatively little visible unity. There is no broadly shared modern confession of faith representing Korean Protestantism as a whole. Apart from the 1932 social creed of the Korean church, Korean ecumenism has not generated a unifying confessional text comparable to its social activism.

Early missionaries adopted the so-called Twelve Articles of Faith, which functioned in parts of Asia as a basic Protestant confession. Because they hoped for ecclesial unity, they used a comparatively broad doctrinal standard at the beginning of the Protestant mission.<sup>12</sup> After denominational divisions, however, each church consolidated its own confessional identity. Among the major Presbyterian bodies, Tonghap, Hapdong, Kijang, and Kosin all received the Twelve Articles in some form, while Tonghap, Hapdong, and Kosin also accepted the Westminster Confession. Tonghap later produced additional confessional statements; Kijang adopted the “Declaration of Faith” in 1972; Hapdong and Kosin adhered more closely to inherited confessional documents.

The details matter because they show that unity in the Korean Protestant church has been sought more often through coexistence than through confessional convergence. Tonghap attempted modest confessional development without breaking with the Westminster tradition, Kijang pursued a more self-consciously contextual confession,

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<sup>12</sup> AHN 2011a, 17.

and Hapdong and Kosin treated doctrinal continuity as a marker of orthodoxy. Each position carried an implicit ecclesiology and an implicit attitude towards ecumenical openness. Confessional pluralization thus expressed a deeper division over how tradition itself should be received.

Other member churches of the NCKK followed their own traditions. The Methodist Church maintained its Articles of Religion and later developed a Methodist confession and social creed. The Anglican Church used the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. The Orthodox Church received the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The Salvation Army, Lutheran Church, and Pentecostal denominations likewise retained distinct doctrinal standards. In short, Korean Protestantism has remained confessionally plural.

This confessional diversity is partly historical. Korean Protestantism developed without a stable parish system and without the experience of a state or dominant church. Local church identity became strong, while awareness of the church as a wider catholic reality remained comparatively weak. During denominational division, disputes over power and governance often mattered more than theological dialogue. The result was not only institutional fragmentation but also the hardening of separate theological traditions.

The same pattern appears in relation to ecumenical theology. Korean discussions of ecumenism often identify it simply with WCC theology, but there is no single, unified "ecumenical theology" in Korea. This reflects the character of the ecumenical movement itself, which is a coalition of traditions rather than a system with one official theology. Even so, major ecumenical themes from the global church – *Missio Dei*, Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, and the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace – were introduced into Korea relatively quickly and influenced movements for democratization, human rights, urban-industrial mission, reunification, justice, peace, and life.

Yet reception was uneven. While Korean scholars introduced the work of the WCC's Faith and Order Commission, including *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, these texts had limited impact at the congregational and pastoral level.<sup>13</sup> They were discussed within relatively narrow scholarly and

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<sup>13</sup> For the discussion on Faith and Order Commission, see LEE, Hyeong-gi (2009): *Je2cha Batikan Gonguihoe Ihu Roma Gatollik Gyohoei Ekyumenijeungwa Ekyumenikal Undonge Daehan Yeongu* [A Study of Roman Catholic Ecumenism and the Ecumenical Movement after Vatican II]. In: *Catholic Theology and Thought*. 64. 221–257; LEE, Seung-gap (2011): Sinangwa Jikje, Geu

denominational circles and were seldom integrated deeply into local church education or ordinary worshipping communities.<sup>14</sup> The ecumenical side often excelled in social interpretation but did less to translate ecclesiological discussion into the everyday language of church formation.

This imbalance helps explain one of the central weaknesses of Korean ecumenism. It has often been more persuasive in ethical and political witness than in articulating why divided churches should understand one another as participants in a common ecclesial reality. Theological reflection on unity therefore remained relatively specialized, while many church members encountered ecumenism chiefly as a political orientation. The gap between ecumenical theology and congregational consciousness thus became one of the major obstacles to reception.

Alongside the reception of global ecumenical theology, Korean churches also developed their own spaces for theological conversation. The Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches, which includes Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox participation, has held annual forums and pursued theological dialogue on Christian faith, church life, and contemporary social questions. These efforts have value, but they have not yet generated a broad theological convergence capable of overcoming division between ecumenical and anti-ecumenical Protestants.

Thus the central theological problem remains clear. The historical split of Korean Protestantism has left a deep gap in theological outlook, ecclesiology, and the interpretation

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Jisokjeogin Sinhakjeok Daehwauwi Yeoksawa Mirae Jeonmang [Faith and Order, Its History of Continuous Theological Dialogue and Future Prospects]. In: *Hanguk Gidoggyo Sinhak Nonchong* [Korean Journal of Christian Theology]. 76, 1. 119–143; SHIN, Jaeshik (2024): Sinanggwa Jikje anaewi Jeonguiwa Pyeonghwauwi Sunrye Nonui [Discourse on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace within Faith and Order]. In: *Sinhak Ihae* [Theological Understanding]. 58; SHIN, Jaeshik (2025): Sinanggwa Jikjeui Choeguen Yeongu Donghyang: Busaneseo Karlsruhekekaji [Research Trends of Faith and Order: From Busan to Karlsruhe]. In: *Sinhak Ihae*. 59.

<sup>14</sup> For the discussion on Church, see JEON, Cheol (2016): 21segi Ekyumenikal Undonggwa Gyohoe Ilchiui Gwaeje: *Gyohoe: Gongdongui Bijeoneul Hyanghayeo* (WCC, 2013)reul Jungsimeuro [The Tasks of Church Unity in the Twenty-First-Century Ecumenical Movement]. In: *Sinhak Yeongu* [Theological Research]. 68. 85–110; PARK, Do-woong (2021): Ekyumenikal Gyohoeronui Jungyo Jujewa Jonghap [Major Themes and Synthesis of Ecumenical Ecclesiology]. In: *Gyohoehyeob Sinhak Wiwonhoe Gyohoeron Simpojum Jaryojip* [Proceedings of the NCKK Theological Committee Symposium on Ecclesiology] (2021.8.26.). 5–26.

of tradition itself. Without addressing that divide, neither a common confession nor a substantial theological unity is likely to emerge. If Korean ecumenism is to achieve something more visible in the future, one crucial task will be the formation of theological language rooted in Korean history, culture, and social reality while remaining open to wider Christian convergence.

### ***3. Organization: Institutions and Organizations in the Ecumenical Movement***

The Korean ecumenical movement has been sustained by a range of institutions. Among the best known are the NCKK, the Korean Bible Society, the Christian Literature Society, Christian educational bodies, Christian broadcasting organizations, and student and youth movements. Of these, the NCKK has played the central role.

Its institutional history begins with the Joseon National Christian Council in 1924. After liberation, this body was reorganized several times and eventually became the National Council of Churches in Korea in 1970. Today, the NCKK includes major Protestant denominations and related institutions. Historically, it served as the most important organizational centre of Korean ecumenism, linking domestic churches with the global ecumenical movement and coordinating church responses to major social issues.

The NCKK's importance lay not only in formal representation but also in mediation. It linked denominational churches, para-church agencies, overseas partners, social mission groups, and theological networks. In periods of authoritarian rule, it offered one of the few legitimate public spaces in which churches could articulate social criticism. This mediating function gave it influence beyond its formal size.

Since democratization, however, the NCKK has entered a period of relative stagnation. Externally, the political urgency that once gave ecumenical activism public influence diminished as democratization advanced and civic organizations multiplied. Many activists moved from church structures into secular civil society. Internally, the NCKK became more denomination- and less movement-centred. Conservative voices within member churches grew stronger, conflicts over direction intensified, and institutional politics weakened its capacity to function as an innovative ecumenical movement.

The emergence of conservative Protestant federations accelerated this change. The Christian Council of Korea, founded in 1989 in opposition to the 1988 Declaration,

united a broad range of conservative churches and organizations.<sup>15</sup> It fixed more firmly the division between ecumenical and anti-ecumenical Protestantism and, for a time, became a much larger representative body than the NCKK. It also enjoyed considerable political influence, especially under conservative governments. Although later weakened by internal conflict and scandal, the CCK was succeeded in part by other conservative federations, including the UCKK.<sup>16</sup> These bodies ensured that no single organization could any longer claim exclusive Protestant representation.

Institutional ecumenism was accompanied by other forms of cooperation. Organizations such as the National Association of Korean Christian Pastors sought church renewal and unity at the level of clergy networks rather than denominational structures. Research institutes and Christian think tanks, including the Christian Academy, the Christian Institute for the Study of Justice and Development, and the Korea Theological Research Institute, functioned for many years as intellectual centres of ecumenical reflection. Yet many of these groups suffered from declining overseas support after the 1990s, and their reduced resources contributed to the broader weakening of ecumenical public discourse.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, the ecumenical field in Korea widened beyond Protestantism. A particularly important development was the establishment in 2014 of the Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches. This body includes the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, the NCKK, and several member denominations of the NCKK.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For a comparison of the NCKK and the CCK, see PARK, Myeong-su (2009): *Bangong, Tongil, geurigo Bukhan Seongyo – Hanguk Gidoggyo Gyohoe Hyeobuihoe(NCKK)wa Hanguk Gidoggyo Chongyeonhaphoe (CCK) ui Bigyo Yeongu* [Anti-communism, Unification, and North Korea Mission: A Comparative Study of the NCKK and the CCK]. In: *Seonggyeol Gyohoe wa Sinhak* [Holiness Church and Theology]. 21. 119–145.

<sup>16</sup> For the Hegemony of Conservative Protestantism in the 1990s, see KANG, In-cheol (2004): *Suryeom, Hokeun Hegeomoni?: 1990nyeondae Hanguk Gaesingyo Jihyeongui Byeonhwa* [Convergence, or Hegemony?: Changes in the Topography of Korean Protestantism in the 1990s]. In: *Gyeongjewa Sahoe* [Economy and Society]. 62. 18–53.

<sup>17</sup> For information on the status of Protestant research groups since the 2000s, see SON, Seung-ho (2020): *2000nyeondae Ihu Gidoggyo Singkeutaengkeuui Dunhwa* [The Decline of Christian Think Tanks since the 2000s]. In: *Gidoggyo Sasang* [Christian Thought]. 744. 41–53.

<sup>18</sup> On the member churches and institutions of the NCKK, see *Hanguk Gidoggyo Gyohoe Hyeobuihoe* [National Council of Churches in Korea]. Available at: <http://www.kncc.or.kr> (last accessed on: 28 March 2026).

Although not formally part of the WCC's Faith and Order Commission, it follows a similar model by promoting theological dialogue, common study, and practical cooperation. Its activities, including the Korean Academy of Christian Unity and the annual Christian Unity Forum, represent one of the most significant recent attempts to move Korean ecumenism beyond the boundaries of Protestant denominational politics.<sup>19</sup>

Even here, however, the limits are clear. Major anti-ecumenical Protestant denominations, especially Hapdong, have refused participation on theological grounds.<sup>20</sup> As a result, the most developed institutional form of all-Korean Christian dialogue still lacks the involvement of a large portion of Korean Protestantism. The challenge is not only to maintain such structures but to broaden participation without erasing genuine theological disagreement.

#### ***4. Ritual: Worship and Liturgy in the Ecumenical Movement***

If unity is understood as *koinonia*, then it must be expressed not only in statements and institutions but also in worship, sacrament, and prayer. Ritual is therefore a crucial measure of ecumenical reality. In this respect, the Korean church has made meaningful but limited progress.

One representative practice is World Communion Sunday. Since the ecumenical discussions culminating in *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, many churches around the world have observed the first Sunday of October as a sign of Eucharistic fellowship within the one church of Christ. In Korea, however, observance has been partial. Some ecumenically engaged denominations include it in their liturgical calendars, while others do not. This suggests that even among churches formally connected to ecumenical bodies, the liturgical embodiment of unity remains uneven.

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<sup>19</sup> On the themes of the Ilchi Forum [Unity Forum] from the first forum in 2000 to the twenty-first forum in 2025, see Hanguk Geuriseudogyo Sinanggwa Jikje Hyeobuihoe: Ilchi Forum. Available at: <http://fno.or.kr/forum> (last accessed on: 28 March 2026).

<sup>20</sup> KIM, Gil-seong (2018): NCKwa Roma Gatollik Gyohoei Choegeun Hwaldonge Daehan Yeongu [A Study of Recent Activities of the NCK and the Roman Catholic Church]. In: *Sinhak Jinam* [Theological Guide]. 85, 3. 29–71.

Another important practice is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Materials prepared jointly by the WCC's Faith and Order Commission and the Vatican have been translated and circulated in Korea, especially through the Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches. Some local congregations observe the week, but it has not become a widely rooted practice across Korean Protestantism. The gap between ecumenical leadership and congregational reception is again evident.

Two more public rituals deserve attention. The Easter joint service, first held in 1947, became a visible symbol of Protestant cooperation in Korea. Yet it also reflected denominational conflict. After Presbyterian division, the ecumenical and anti-ecumenical sides held separate Easter services for a time. Although later efforts restored common celebration, disputes over sponsorship and representational legitimacy continued. The Easter service therefore illustrates both the desire for unity and the competitive politics that frequently accompany it.

The other ritual is the joint Sunday of prayer for the peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula. Following the WCC assembly in Busan, churches were encouraged to observe a common Sunday of prayer for peace and reunification. The NCKK also prepared inter-Korean common prayers in cooperation with the Korean Christian Federation in the North. These liturgical acts linked ecumenism with the national question and embodied one of the movement's central concerns. Yet they have remained vulnerable to political shifts and deteriorating inter-Korean relations.

Overall, the ritual life of Korean ecumenism reveals a familiar pattern. Liturgical symbols of unity exist and can be powerful, but they have not yet become widely shared habits across the churches. Ecumenical prayer and worship remain strongest where institutional relationships already exist; they are weakest where denominational suspicion persists.

Ritual therefore discloses both the promise and the incompleteness of Korean ecumenism. Worship can condense in symbolic form what institutions and theological dialogues struggle to achieve. Yet if liturgical practice is not received in local congregations, it remains exceptional and representative rather than formative. The future of ecumenical ritual in Korea depends less on producing new symbolic events than on cultivating repeated habits of shared prayer that can slowly reshape ecclesial imagination.

### **III. The Status, Characteristics, and Prospects of the Korean Ecumenical Movement**

#### ***1. The Status of the Korean Ecumenical Movement***

The present status of the Korean ecumenical movement can be assessed from three angles: the religious landscape in which it operates, the actors who sustain it, and the themes it has emphasized. These dimensions together show both the movement's continuing importance and its clear limitations.

First, the religious landscape. Korean society is religiously plural and increasingly secular. Recent survey data indicate that the majority of the population identifies as non-religious, while Protestants form only a minority.<sup>21</sup> Since the ecumenical movement in Korea has been largely a Protestant phenomenon, its numerical base within the total population has always been limited. Even within Protestantism, ecumenical participation has involved only part of the church. The split between ecumenical and anti-ecumenical camps, especially among Presbyterians, means that the ecumenical movement effectively represents only about half of Korean Protestantism, and therefore only a relatively small portion of Korean society as a whole. The Korean Ecumenical group might be considered as approximately 10% of Korean population.

Yet numerical limitation does not mean historical insignificance. For much of the twentieth century, ecumenical Christianity exercised influence out of proportion to its size through its role in democratization, rights advocacy, and public ethics. The problem today is that its moral and public authority has declined as civil society has expanded, the prestige of Protestantism has fallen, and conservative Protestant organizations have become more visible in public debate. The ecumenical movement thus remains historically important but structurally marginalized.

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<sup>21</sup> Approximately 60% of Koreans are non-religious and 40% of Koreans have a religion: Protestantism 18-20%, Buddhism 16%, and Catholicism 6-11%. 2025 Korean Religion Statistics by Gallup Korea (2026): 2025 *Hanguk Jonggyo Hyeonhwang* [The Religious Situation in Korea, 2025]. Available at: <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1628> (last accessed on: 28 March 2026).

Second, the problem of agency. Organizationally, the NCKK has long stood at the centre of Korean ecumenism. Socially, however, the movement has been carried disproportionately by a particular generation: men shaped by the Korean War, anti-dictatorship activism, and Christian youth or student movements. Many of the most influential ecumenical leaders emerged from the student Christian movement and later moved into church institutions, civic organizations, and public advocacy.<sup>22</sup> Their contribution was immense, but the movement has not reproduced leadership effectively.

This failure has serious consequences. Younger generations have often found greater opportunity in civil society than in aging church organizations. Women and lay professionals have also had limited space within structures increasingly dominated by clergy and denominational politics.<sup>23</sup> As ecumenical institutions became more pastor-centred and bureaucratic, they lost some of the wider participatory energy that once sustained them. The problem of succession is therefore not incidental; it is one of the central reasons for ecumenism's present weakness.<sup>24</sup>

The issue is not only demographic but structural. Older ecumenical leadership was formed in movements where church, academy, and civil resistance were closely linked. That network has largely disappeared. New leaders are formed in a different environment, one shaped by precarious work, digital communication, weakened denominational loyalty, and a more sceptical attitude towards institutional religion itself. Unless ecumenical bodies recognize this altered context, appeals to “the next generation” will remain rhetorical.

Third, the question of theme. Korean ecumenism has been strongly movement-oriented. Its leaders focused on democratization, human rights, and reunification because those were the urgent demands of Korean society, and this gave the movement

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<sup>22</sup> The overwhelming majority of the core group of the unity movement came from the Christian youth movement. For the role of the Korean ecumenical movement and Christian youth movement, see CHO, Byeong-ho (2005): *Hanguk Gidok Cheongnyeon Haksaeng Undong 100nyeonsa Sanchaek* [A Stroll through One Hundred Years of the Korean Christian Youth and Student Movement]. Seoul, Ttange Ssein Geulssi.

<sup>23</sup> For an experience of the ecumenical movement from a feminist theological perspective, see SHIN, Seon (2005): *Ekyumenikal Undongui Yeojeong* [The Journey of the Ecumenical Movement]. In: *Hanguk Yeoseong Sinhak* [Korean Feminist Theology]. 63. 127–134.

<sup>24</sup> SON 2020, 51–52.

public relevance. Yet the strength of this orientation also created imbalance. Compared with ecumenical discussions elsewhere, Korean ecumenism invested less sustained attention in ecclesiology, ministry, sacrament, and the ordinary forms of common church life. For many Christians, “ecumenism” therefore came to signify social participation or political engagement rather than church unity in a fuller theological sense.

More recently, ecumenical concerns have expanded into life issues such as migration, ecology, disability, gender, and economic justice. This shift has opened new avenues of relevance, but it has not solved the problem of reception at the congregational level. The movement still faces the task of articulating themes that can speak both to polarized church constituencies and to local churches that do not identify themselves with classic ecumenical institutions.

A further difficulty is the fragmentation of the Protestant public sphere itself. In earlier decades, ecumenical and anti-ecumenical leaders alike addressed a relatively concentrated church public through denominational newspapers, assemblies, seminaries, and revival networks. Today that sphere is far more dispersed. Digital media, online preaching, issue-based mobilization, and individualized patterns of religious consumption have altered the channels through which authority is produced. This means that ecumenical institutions can no longer assume that official statements, assemblies, or elite dialogues will trickle down into congregational consciousness. If Korean ecumenism is to regain traction, it must learn to work not only through councils and committees but also through pedagogy, media, local worship resources, and forms of communication capable of reaching ordinary believers.

This in turn raises the question of language. Much ecumenical discourse in Korea has remained either highly institutional or highly activist. It has often spoken in the vocabulary of declarations, commissions, and social movements. That vocabulary was historically necessary, but it does not always speak persuasively to congregations formed by devotional practice, pastoral concerns, and local church loyalties. One strategic task, therefore, is translational rather than merely ideological: the movement must render its theological and ethical commitments into language that congregations can inhabit without feeling that they are being conscripted into a partisan camp. Unless ecumenism is narrated as a dimension of Christian discipleship, catholicity, prayer, and common witness, it will remain vulnerable to reduction either to denominational politics or to progressive activism.

There is also a geographical issue. Korean ecumenism has often been concentrated in national institutions, seminaries, and metropolitan networks. Regional ecumenical bodies have weakened, and many local churches encounter ecumenism only distantly, if at all. Yet local reception is decisive. Without regional and congregational forms of encounter, national agreements and commemorative events cannot generate durable change. Future renewal therefore requires not only better theology and wider representation but also a thicker local ecology of shared prayer, clergy relationships, theological education, and common service.

## ***2. Characteristics of the Korean Ecumenical Movement***

Several characteristics of Korean ecumenism emerge from this historical survey. First, it developed in a social setting very different from that of the Western churches where modern ecumenism first took shape. Christianity in Korea has always been a minority religion in a multi-religious society. It has never been the unquestioned public religion or an established national church. As a result, Korean ecumenism did not grow out of the management of long-established confessional churches but out of mission, colonization, modernization, and national crisis. This difference helps explain both its dynamism and its instability.

Second, although Korean Christianity itself had strong indigenous elements, the ecumenical movement began under Protestant missionary leadership and remained Protestant-centred for a long time. Cooperation among Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians is comparatively recent. The historical weight of Protestant denominational formation has therefore deeply shaped the entire field.

Third, Korean ecumenism was from the beginning strongly movement-oriented. It addressed Korean society at large through nationalism, enlightenment, democratization, human rights, labour activism, and reunification. This gave it prophetic force, but it also meant that theological reflection on church unity was often overshadowed by urgent social action.

Fourth, the movement depended significantly on the global church. International ecumenical networks supplied recognition, theological resources, and financial support. These connections strengthened Korean ecumenism, but they also created dependency.

When overseas support declined, ecumenical institutions struggled to sustain their work and to root themselves more deeply in local church life.

Fifth, ecumenism became one of the factors that hardened division within Korean Protestantism. Opposition to ecumenism was never simply theological. It was tied to anti-communism, political conservatism, class interest, and ecclesial power. Consequently, support for or resistance to ecumenism in Korea must be understood as a complex socio-political formation rather than as a narrow doctrinal dispute.

Sixth, there remains a gap between ecumenical elites and ordinary congregations. Ecumenical theology was introduced by scholars and leaders relatively quickly, but it did not spread broadly through congregational education, liturgy, and local church culture. There is still considerable distance between ecumenical institutions and member denominations, between national and regional ecumenism, and between denominational headquarters and local congregations. In this sense, Korean ecumenism has remained thinly rooted among ordinary church members.

These characteristics also suggest why Korean ecumenism has had an unusual combination of strength and fragility. It was strong when linked to national crises and democratizing energies, but fragile when asked to sustain patient, ordinary practices of church reception. It could mobilize around public issues more effectively than it could stabilize durable patterns of inter-confessional trust. This asymmetry remains one of its defining marks.

For that reason, the future of Korean ecumenism may depend on a double movement. On the one hand, it must preserve the historical gains of the classic ecumenical movement – its concern for justice, peace, democracy, reconciliation, and the global church. On the other hand, it must recover dimensions that were comparatively underdeveloped in Korea: ecclesiology, spiritual formation, catechesis, liturgical reception, and ordinary habits of inter-church fellowship. Only by bringing these two poles together can it move beyond the opposition between a movement-centred ecumenism and an institution-centred longing for formal unity.

### ***3. Prospects and Direction of the Korean Ecumenical Movement***

The future of the Korean ecumenical movement is difficult to view optimistically. The Korean church today shows stronger tendencies towards maintaining, and even

intensifying, division than towards seeking visible unity. Since their historical separation, both ecumenical and anti-ecumenical camps have built coherent internal worlds of theology, memory, leadership, finance, and institutional survival. Each side has justified its own past and transmitted its identity to subsequent generations. The result is not simply disagreement but the consolidation of separate church ecosystems.

For that reason, any serious pursuit of unity requires more than goodwill. It entails critical engagement with the histories, myths, and power structures through which division has been normalized. Nevertheless, continued work for unity remains necessary. The first task is to widen the scope of ecumenical reflection beyond the existing ecumenical camp. If Korean church unity is to mean anything substantial, it must include the question of how ecumenical and anti-ecumenical Protestants might coexist, communicate, and cooperate without denying their real disagreements.

A second task is honest recognition. Korean Protestantism is divided not only institutionally but also socially, politically, and culturally. Mutual recognition of this reality is a precondition for any future conversation. Respect, communication, and hospitality cannot develop where each side is treated only as an enemy or heretic. Because older generations often remain tied to the trauma and polemics of division, new possibilities may depend on a new generation less shaped by those conflicts.

A third task is ecclesiological. In a situation of deep theological distance, the most promising starting point may not be immediate doctrinal or institutional merger. Instead, Korean churches need renewed reflection on what it means to be the one body of Christ and how that confession bears on common responsibility in Korean society. Cooperation for the common good may provide a practical path towards rebuilding trust where direct debates over confessional or organizational unity quickly stall.

Such cooperation should not be misunderstood as a substitute for theology. Rather, it can create the relational space in which theological conversation becomes possible again. Shared action on poverty, peace, migration, ecology, and public responsibility may not dissolve doctrinal differences, but it can weaken the habits of mutual caricature that have blocked dialogue for decades. In the Korean context, where the trauma of division is deeply institutionalized, practical collaboration may be the most realistic bridge towards fuller forms of unity.

Finally, the issue of education is decisive. Controversy over ecumenism in Korea has been fuelled not only by conviction but also by ignorance, caricature, and the

absence of adequate theological formation. Theological education in Korea has generally been oriented towards the training of clergy for specific denominations and local congregations. It therefore tends to reproduce denominational self-enclosure. If the churches are to move beyond anti-ecumenical hostility, ecumenical triumphalism, and narrow congregationalism alike, they will need forms of theological education that cultivate catholicity, historical self-criticism, and the capacity for dialogue.

This educational renewal also requires a broader social imagination. Future ecumenical leadership cannot be reproduced simply by repeating the models of the democratization generation. It must make space for women, lay professionals, younger theologians, and Christians formed in contexts shaped by migration, ecological crisis, digital media, and deepening inequality. If ecumenism remains confined to inherited institutions and aging leadership cultures, it will continue to narrow. If, however, it becomes a school of catholic imagination and public responsibility, it may still offer the Korean church a way beyond sectarian exhaustion.

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks**

The ecumenical movement in Korea is inseparable from the larger historical experience of the nation. It was shaped by colonization, nationalism, war, anti-communism, dictatorship, industrialization, democratization, and contemporary social fragmentation. These forces became the warp and weft from which the distinctive pattern of Korean ecumenism was woven.

This article has examined that pattern through four dimensions: history, theology, organization, and ritual. Historically, the movement moved from missionary coordination under colonialism, through postwar division and ideological conflict, to public activism during democratization and institutional weakening thereafter. Theologically, it revealed strong engagement with social ethics and global ecumenical themes but relatively limited achievement in confessional or ecclesiological convergence. Organizationally, it was sustained above all by the NCKK and related bodies, while also facing competition from conservative federations and the decline of older ecumenical networks. Ritually, it generated meaningful practices of common prayer and symbolic worship, though these remain only partially rooted across the churches.

The status of the movement today reflects its mixed legacy. It has been historically influential but numerically limited, morally significant but institutionally weakened, prophetic in public issues yet insufficiently grounded in the everyday life of congregations. It has also depended too heavily on an older generation of male leadership and has not adequately opened space for women, youth, and lay professionals.

Even so, the Korean ecumenical movement should not be judged solely by its institutional decline. Its enduring significance lies in its witness that the church cannot isolate itself from the suffering, division, and common life of the nation. If a new generation can carry this witness forward with greater theological depth, wider participation, and more rooted ecclesial practices, Korean ecumenism may yet move beyond the trauma of division towards a more genuinely local and catholic form of unity.

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