

Prodigal Elders Return

Things had been going pretty well for Pastor Ahn since he moved from being the assistant pastor to serving in the interim lead pastor role at Seokwang Presbyterian Church. But then came the Sunday when two former members showed up.

In its 50 year history, Seokwang Presbyterian Church, a Korean church located in a large U.S. city, has had four pastors. The departures of the first three were acrimonious, with some church members leaving along with the former pastors to start new churches. Then Pastor Kim arrived. During his seven years as the senior pastor the church thrived, with membership growing from 250 to 450 and the congregation experiencing spiritual vitality. The church would have been happy for him to stay for a long time, but a few months ago Pastor Kim left to take a position as a seminary professor. Pastor Kim's was a harmonious parting, with the church celebrating and blessing him as he and his family moved on.

The congregation expected the associate pastor, Pastor Ahn, to take over all of Pastor Kim's responsibilities until a new lead pastor was chosen and Pastor Ahn has willingly stepped up. He has expanded his preaching role to include the two regular Sunday morning services, the Sunday evening service, the five weekday morning services, and the Wednesday night service. So now he is regularly preaching nine times a week which is fairly normal for Korean pastors. He has also taken on pastoral care responsibilities. He does home visitation two evenings a week from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. and also visits anyone who is in the hospital. His administrative duties now include leading weekly staff meetings and the monthly session (elder board) meetings. As the acting lead pastor, he chairs these session meetings. He has his hands full, but the load is normal in his context. As he has settled into this new role over the last few months things have gone relatively smoothly.

Then three weeks ago Hwang and Shim came to the Sunday morning worship service for the first time in seven years. As Pastor Ahn would find out, they had quite a history with Seokwang Presbyterian Church. Seven years ago Hwang and Shim were on the elder board when accusations of financial impropriety were brought against the then current pastor, Pastor Jung. Some of the elders called for Pastor Jung to resign, while others argued that these charges were just a pretext for malcontents to get rid of him, as they had previous pastors. The elder board narrowly voted to fire Pastor Jung. Hwang and Shim felt vehemently that this was the wrong decision, and in response they decided to leave the church and to start a new church nearby with Pastor Jung. They influenced about 100 members to leave with them.

Because of the ugly nature of the split, the elder board at Seokwang Presbyterian Church decided that they would not recognize the elder status of individuals from the new church and would not accept anyone as a member who had served as an elder at the new church. If non-elders from the new church wanted to return and become members again, Seokwang Presbyterian Church would accept them as members. Normally in the Korean Presbyterian church, once a person is appointed as an elder in one church, that person is recognized as an elder by all churches until the person turns 70 or formally submits a letter of resignation. If the person moves to a new church, he/she is still called "elder" even if he/she has not been chosen to formally serve on the local session.

At the new church, recently it was discovered that Pastor Jung had used church funds for his own matters, the same thing he had been accused of at his old church. Hwang and Shim decided that they had been wrong years earlier to oppose the elder board decision to remove Pastor Jung as the lead pastor at Seokwang Presbyterian Church and that they had been wrong to leave that church. So on Sunday morning three weeks ago they came back to worship at Seokwang Presbyterian Church.

The current elders at Seokwang Presbyterian Church are not happy that Hwang and Shim have showed back up. They are sure these two will only cause trouble and they do not want extend the honor to Hwang and Shim of being addressed with the title “elder.”

Pastor Ahn reached out to Hwang and Shim and met with them a day or two after that Sunday. They shared that they want to humbly come back to the community and to quietly worship here. Pastor Ahn would like to welcome them back. The elders also met with Hwang and Shim after their initial return and told them that they are not welcome to come back, but Hwang and Shim attended worship again the next Sunday anyway.

Some in the church are saying that the elders need to show the love of Christ and welcome back anyone who wants to be a member. But the elders feel that they can forgive and still ask Hwang and Shim to find another church. The elders feel that this would be beset for their church. Also, some elders still have bitterness and anger about what happened seven years ago, though the elders do not want to reveal all the details of that painful church split.

Pastor Ahn faces several dilemmas. First of all, he is in his mid-30s, 15-20 years younger than Hwang, Shim, and his church elders. Culturally, he is expected to show great deference to people older than him. The cultural norm is that he would address the two returning men as “Elder Hwang” and “Elder Shim.” To call them anything else would be taken as disrespectful and insulting. But because the elders of his church are upset about the situation, they do not want to acknowledge Hwang and Shim as elders by having them addressed as such. There is a strong expectation that, because of his age, Pastor Ahn will follow the wishes of the elder board.

Another dynamic has to do with Pastor Ahn’s status as the interim lead pastor. In this role he bears all the responsibilities of the lead pastor but he is not accorded the authority of a permanent lead pastor. He has little positional power which he can bring to bear on the current state of affairs.

A third factor is the way conflict is normally handled in the Korean culture. Confronting one’s elders is a delicate matter, if it can be done at all. It would be completely inappropriate culturally for Pastor Ahn to directly confront his elder board about their perspectives and it would be difficult for them to accept from him theological insights that might re-frame the situation.

Pastor Ahn is tempted to sit back and just watch what happens. But this temptation is in tension with his sense that God has given him gifts, responsibilities, and perspectives which he should bring to bear on the current circumstances.