

A MISSIOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF
DAVID YONGGI CHO'S CHURCH GROWTH¹

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1. Introduction

As the founding and senior pastor of the largest mega-church in the world so far, Rev. Dr. David Yonggi Cho (hereafter, Cho) has clearly been an effective leader of church growth (CG) in Korea and the world. What were the various factors that contributed to such phenomenal growth in Yoido Full Gospel Church (YFGC)? What other factors could have helped make it more effective in terms of evangelism and missions?

This essay critically evaluates six distinct characteristics of Cho's CG model: From missiological (theological and practical) perspectives, what are the positive and negative aspects of Cho's model of CG? My data are collected from published literature, especially Cho's, and includes some interviews with YFGC leaders as reported in Hong.²

2. Definition of Church Growth

"Church growth" (CG) may be defined as "a consciously planned effort to affect increase in membership in a local church." This was

¹ This work is a major revision of a paper entitled "Cho Yonggi's Charismatic Leadership and Church Growth" that was presented at the First Youngsan International Church Growth Conference, Seoul, Korea in August 2003.

² Young-gi Hong, "The Charisma of Cho Yonggi and Its Routinization in the Yoido Full Gospel Church of Korea," *Journal of Asian Mission* 2:1 (2000), pp. 65-90. Hong is a scholarly participant-observer, being an ordained minister of YFGC who grew up in this church.

popularized by the Fuller School of World Mission,³ but found one of its best models in the YFGC. But unknown to many, Cho had already established Church Growth International (CGI) as a training and publishing institute in his church campus as early as 1976 to promote and share his CG experience with the global church.

The emphasis of CG is “conversion growth,” not “biological growth” nor “transfer growth,” as the main means of increasing membership through an ongoing program of evangelism and discipleship in a church.⁴ Based on a 1998 survey, the membership increase through “transfer growth” at YFGC was only 52%, lower than that of the average church in Korea (60.7%).⁵

I consider 1964 as the starting point of Cho’s mega-church type of church growth based on his creative cell system. He can therefore be considered the first church leader to conceive of and implement such a structure, which has gained global impact, providing the inspiration and a good model for subsequent ones.⁶ Cho started his church with five members in a small tent in 1958, which grew to 800 in 1962; 2,000 in 1964; 18,000 in 1973; 200,000 in 1981; 503,000 in 1986; 593,000 in 1990; 671,000 in 1993; 709,070 in 1997; and 720,000 in 1998-99.⁷ In the latest statistics that I have (1998-99), YFGC had 667 assistant pastors (ordained and non-ordained), 1,159 elders, 80,759 deacons, 831 overseas missionaries, 16,993 home cell groups in 25 large districts and 13 local sanctuaries, and 230,000 regular adult church attenders.⁸

³ Cf. Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow: Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Church*, rev. ed. (Glendale: Regal, 1984).

⁴ Cf. Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*.

⁵ Hong, “The Charisma of Cho Yonggi,” p. 86 n. 81. The rates of “conversion growth” and “biological growth” are not given.

⁶ Cf. Joel Comiskey, *Groups of 12* (Houston: Touch Publications, 1999).

⁷ Hong, “The Charisma of Cho Yonggi,” p. 105. YFGC also branched off two mega-churches: Eunhye wa Chilli Church in 1981, and Full Gospel Incheon Church in 1983.

⁸ Hong, “The Charisma of Cho Yonggi,” p. 70.

3. Positive Aspects of Cho's Church Growth Model

This study proceeds to show the four positive aspects of Cho's CG model that are worthy of emulation: spiritual leadership, empowering structure, constant renewal and holistic witness.

3.1 Spiritual Leadership

Foremost is the spiritual quality of Cho's leadership that sustained the CG of YFGC. Though only God can read hearts and motives, Cho's integrity may be discerned from the fruit of his life (or lifestyle). Based on the pattern of his life in more than forty years of ministry, he has remained humble in spirit, as evidenced by the simplicity of his lifestyle. Pride has not gone into his head. In spite of the success and popularity gained from his CG, he has remained not just humble and simple, but also teachable and servant-like, open and willing to share his experiences and insights with other colleagues.

It seems clear that Cho has used his gifts with a very spiritual motive: "in the Spirit" for the glory of God and not "in the flesh" for self-glory. He also exercised his leadership in a most spiritual manner: in servanthood for the good of his co-pastors and church members, and not in domination and exploitation for the good of himself and his family.

Though Cho does not directly refer to himself as one possessing "charisma," his church members perceive him to be "spiritual" and "charismatic," that he speaks God's words as God's chosen servant. In fact, according to Hong's 1998 survey, YFGC members rate Cho as more charismatic than how other Korean church members (even of other mega-churches) perceive their senior pastors!⁹

His spiritual leadership is seen foremost in his experience of special supernatural endowment. His strong sense of divine calling and mission in life is built on his supernatural experiences,¹⁰ particularly his

⁹ Hong, "The Charisma of Cho Yonggi," p. 72 notes that he compared the charismatic perception, religiosity and CG, with a sample size of 110 from YFGC, 640 from other mega-churches, 265 from large churches and 245 from small and medium-sized churches.

¹⁰ On the significance of spiritual experiences in the emergence of religious leaders, cf. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 3 vols. (New York: Bedminster, 1968), pp. 1112, 1117; H. M. Trice and J. M. Beyer, "Charisma and Its Routinization in Two Social Movement Organizations," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 8 (1986), pp. 113-64 (141); L. R. Rambo, "Charisma

miraculous healing from a terminal disease and his dramatic conversion.¹¹ He must have used these events to not just remind himself constantly, but also to repeat them to his constituents and the public. In many of his messages, he claims (and has been seen to have) direct contact with God and given his abilities by God. He proclaims that he ministers with the help of God, and calls the Holy Spirit as his Senior Partner.¹² He always attributes the secret of his fabulous CG to God's sovereign grace and will.¹³

With regards to CG, he also emphasizes the divine dimension: the need for prayer and fasting in bringing revival.¹⁴ He also taught about "visualized" supernatural guidance. When he began to pioneer a church in 1958, he gained a "burning desire" to build the largest church in Korea.¹⁵ In 1960, he started to ask God for 1,000 more members each year; in 1969 for 1,000 more members each month; and in 1979 up to 20,000 more per year.¹⁶ In 1969, he had the assurance or "substance" even before plans were made that he will be able to build a 10,000-seat church sanctuary at \$5million.¹⁷ He recalls that in spite of his hesitance to believe in 1974 that he can build a center for CG International (CGI),

and Conversion," *Pastoral Psychology* 31:2 (1982), pp. 96-108 (100); Anthony Storr, *Feet of Clay: A Study of Gurus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996). In the OT cases of Saul and David, cf. Tamas Czovek, "Three Charismatic Leaders: Part One: Saul," *Transformation* 19:3 (July 2002), pp. 169-182 (179-80); and "Part Two: David," pp. 182-98 (196-97).

¹¹ On Cho's dramatic healing and conversion story, see David (Paul) Yonggi Cho, *The Fourth Dimension*, vol. 1 (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1979), pp. 9-12; Cho, *The Fourth Dimension*, vol. 2 (South Plainfield, NJ: Bridge Publishing, 1983), pp. xii-xvii; YFGC, *The 30-Year History of Yoido Full Gospel Church* (Seoul: YFGC, 1989), pp. 289-90.

¹² Cho, *The Holy Spirit, My Senior Partner* (Altamonte Springs, FL: Creation House, 1989).

¹³ Hong, "The Charisma of Cho Yonggi," p. 77.

¹⁴ Cho, *More than Numbers* (Waco: Word, 1984), pp. 96-99, 108.

¹⁵ *The Fourth Dimension*, p. 31.

¹⁶ *The Fourth Dimension*, p. 31.

¹⁷ *The Fourth Dimension*, pp. 34, 191-94. At that time, the Board of elders and 600 deacons objected because the church had only \$2,000 in hand; but with his faith and his church's commitment, they moved to the new sanctuary in Yoido in 1973 (*The Fourth Dimension*, pp. 191-94).

his request for a “fleece” of \$1million was collected in the exact full amount in just one Sunday.¹⁸

Then in 1984, he also envisioned to build an additional 15-story building for \$10 million, expand the Prayer Mountain for \$3 million, and enlarge the existing sanctuary by building a larger church complex around it for another \$10 million.¹⁹ In 1988, he visualized the establishment of the nationally circulated *Kookmin Daily* newspaper with a Christian section, which has become the third largest circulation daily in Korea.²⁰ He also got the assurance in early 1991 that his church will reach 700,000 members soon.²¹ In all these, what was visualized looked almost impossible to be achieved, yet they all came to pass!

Corollary to this is Cho’s passion and enthusiasm for his ministry.²² Leadership requires one to be passionate about what s/he is doing. Such leaders speak enthusiastically and excitedly about their dream and mission in life. They breathe it, study it, talk about it, and teach it.²³ Cho invested time in praying and thinking about his goals and took confident action to be sure that others will share his passions also.

The foundation for spiritual leadership is a person’s spiritual discipline. It is the outward measure of one’s determination to have integrity of character and fitness for the long haul. Like most Korean pastors and perhaps also exceeding them, Cho has lived a life of strict self-discipline and hard work. Cho himself clearly understands that the pastor’s personal, especially his/her spiritual disposition is a key factor that affects the life and growth of his/her church. So he emphasizes this right in the first chapters of his books.²⁴

Cho believes in the importance of intimate communion with the Holy Spirit, since the latter is his “senior partner” in ministry; so he teaches this to all his leaders.²⁵ He claims that he has the habit of rising

¹⁸ *Successful Home Cell Groups* (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1997), pp. 98-99.

¹⁹ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 171-72.

²⁰ Hong, “The Charisma of Cho Yonggi,” p. 82.

²¹ *The Fourth Dimension*, p. 36.

²² Hong, “The Charisma of Cho Yonggi,” p. 71.

²³ Stephen R. Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990).

²⁴ Cf. *The Fourth Dimension*, vol. 2, pp. 1-34; *More than Numbers*, 15-30; *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 1-12.

²⁵ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 119-34; cf. *More than Numbers*, p. 117.

very early each day and spending at least one hour with God before doing anything else.²⁶ He has taken periodic prolonged retreats, sometimes to the Prayer Mountain. He also prays and dreams (with 60% of his prayer times) in tongues.²⁷ This kind of self-discipline extended also his family time, diet, exercise regimen, etc., and even to the way he learned foreign languages.²⁸ With such a lived example, he has been able to encourage and teach his members to have similar spiritual experiences. When his members experience such themselves, it adds to their perception of his charisma and intensifies their loyalty to his ministry, thereby contributing to CG.²⁹

The most important mark of spiritual leaders lies in their great dedication to serve people. They work hard to serve those whom they lead so that they can develop their talents, grow as persons and work in service themselves. In short, spiritual leadership is also “servant leadership.”³⁰

Cho believes that love is the highest motivational force in life, which can free people from stress and anxiety, and thus can keep them physically well.³¹ This he shows in his preaching: the goal in his sermons is “to introduce Jesus and help people succeed in life.”³² His intention is not to be eloquent, but to turn his pulpit into a counseling room, to meet the needs of his audience and to uplift and encourage them.³³ He has also

²⁶ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 130-34.

²⁷ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 131.

²⁸ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 131-32.

²⁹ Hong, “The Charisma of Cho Yonggi,” pp. 84-85; cf. Young-gi Hong, “The Backgrounds and Characteristics of Charismatic Mega-churches in Korea,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 3:1 (2000), pp. 99-118.

³⁰ Cf. Covey, *Seven Habits*; Nelson Price, *Servants, Not Celebrities* (Nashville: Broadman, 1989); Lawrence Richards and C. Hoeldtke, *Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988); Viv Thomas, *Future Leader* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002); Walter C. Wright, *Relational Leadership* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000).

³¹ *The Fourth Dimension*, vol. 2, pp. 147-81; cf. *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 140-41.

³² *The Fourth Dimension*, vol. 2, pp. 147-60.

³³ *The Fourth Dimension*, pp. 156-60; cf. Charles Camic, “Charisma: Its Varieties, Preconditions, and Consequences,” *Sociological Inquiry* 50 (1980), pp. 5-23.

used proper rituals in the dynamic worship services to provide psychological upliftment for the member's spiritual needs.³⁴

Cho also trains his associates and trainees in "authority with love," to not "exercise too much control over their members."³⁵ The leader's authority is not based on the power of his/her position or on human maneuvering. In YFGC's case, they follow Cho, "because they know I genuinely love them. If I make a mistake, I publicly confess it to them and ask them to pray for me. When a pastor can be open to his congregation like that, they will respect him and obey him. In Christianity all authority must be based on love, just as God's authority over us is based on love."³⁶ Hence he also teaches, "I never encourage our members to become dependent on the cell leaders, because that would be as bad as Communism or the Moonies. Anything that destroys personal independence and the individual's personality and responsibility is from the devil. God never created us to be puppets."³⁷

His servanthood extends to his unselfishness to share the principles and practices that he found to be helpful for CG, without trying to control or strongly influence the decisions of the pastors and churches he ministers to. This is what effective leadership is all about.

Another major mark of spiritual leadership is "simple lifestyle" that reflects their commitment to the cause that they are working for. Unlike many televangelists and pastors, Cho testifies that he lives a "simple yet comfortable lifestyle."³⁸ Although he receives much donations for personal use in the various conferences and crusades where he had been invited to speak, he has refused to "live like a king." He says, "My heart's desire is to give" to those in need, and the remainder to the church's international outreach ministry funds. He is very conscious that he should set an example to his church about giving, as well as that he should avoid being accused of ill motives in ministry.³⁹

³⁴ Hong, "The Charisma of Cho Yonggi," p. 84; cf. S. L. Carlton-Ford, "Charisma, Ritual, Collective Effervescence, and Self-esteem," *Sociological Quarterly* 33:3 (1992), pp. 365-87.

³⁵ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 93-94.

³⁶ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 94-95.

³⁷ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 94.

³⁸ *More than Numbers*, pp. 37, 119.

³⁹ *More than Numbers*, pp. 37, 119.

In all these, we can even surmise that in the future, he will remain “broken before the Lord.” In the continuous exercise of leadership, there will be limits to CG as has been shown by the cessation of rapid increase in membership, perhaps except for biological and transfer growth, and even the possible decline in YFGC’s membership since 1996.⁴⁰ He will have to face the growth of nominalism in his church (as is all ready happening in many Korean churches)⁴¹ and eventual decline in the spiritual quality of his members.⁴² He will have to wrestle with the issues that will arise from the limits to the effectivity of his version of “positive thinking” and “prosperity gospel,” as expressed in his Fourth Dimension teachings of “The Fivefold Gospel” and “Triple Salvation (Blessings).”⁴³ His parishioners’ ill-health and eventual death will have to be explained by not only spiritual causes (their lack of faith, and sin), but also natural ones (gradual decay of aging, viral attacks, etc.), which may conflict with his present beliefs so far.⁴⁴ There may also be a possible decline in “signs and wonders” like in other Pentecostal-charismatic churches. These apparent “setbacks” will serve as checks to possible temptations for him to become proud.

Nonetheless, Cho’s spiritual leadership enhanced the productivity of his church, since it elicits greater dedication to the organization and its goals from the constituents.⁴⁵ The high quality of his spiritual leadership has undoubtedly been a major factor in YFGC’s growth.

⁴⁰ Cho claims 700,000 members by 1996, *The Fourth Dimension*, 3rd ed., preface.

⁴¹ Young-gi Hong, “Nominalism in Korean Protestantism,” *Transformation* 16:4 (1999), pp. 135-141.

⁴² Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 242 notes, “If proof and success eludes the leader for long, if he appears deserted by his god or his magical or heroic powers, above all, if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear.”

⁴³ *The Fourth Dimension; The Fourth Dimension*, vol. 2.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Solving Life’s Problems* (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1980); *How Can I Be Healed* (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1999).

⁴⁵ Cf. Robert J. House, “A 1976 Theory of Charismatic Leadership,” in *Leadership: The Cutting Edge*, eds. J. G. Hunt and L. L. Larson (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), pp. 189-207; Robert J. House, James Woycke, and Eugene M. Fodor, “Charismatic and Non-charismatic Leaders: Differences in Behavior and Effectiveness,” in *Charismatic Leadership: The*

3.2 Empowering Structure

Yet beyond Cho's personal quality is his institutionalization (or routinization) of an organizational structure that may preserve if not outgrow the CG that he has achieved so far.⁴⁶ He seems to have solved the problem of possible disintegration that can arise from the inevitable need for succession.⁴⁷ In 1964, he found the best possible solution in the lay empowerment model through participatory management by institutionalizing the cell system.⁴⁸ He views that home cell groups (HCG) is "the basic part of our church. It is not another church program—it is the program of our church."⁴⁹

Through the cell system, he is able to develop a steady stream of leaders for CG and for expansion. Research shows that large churches can maintain high levels of commitment and conformity if they are divided into small homogenous units,⁵⁰ and Cho affirms that for CG, "the real secret is home cell groups."⁵¹ And for mission extension, "The expansion of any movement is in direct proportion to its success in

Elusive Factor in Organizational Effectiveness, eds. J. A. Conger and R. N. Kanungo (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988), pp. 98-121 (116).

⁴⁶ Charismatic leaders and their followers will desire to transform their movements into more permanent institutions. *Routinization* refers to the process by which the dynamism of charismatic leadership is translated into the stability of traditional or bureaucratic organization. This is necessary if the charisma of the leader is to be preserved, be expanded and stand a better chance of survival. See Weber, *Economy and Society*, pp. 241-50, 1112-117 on how the process of structural development takes place.

⁴⁷ Cf. Alan Bryman, *Charisma and Leadership in Organizations* (London: Sage, 1992), p. 71; Jay A. Conger, "Charismatic and Transformational Leadership in Organization: An Insider's Perspective on These Developing Streams of Research," *Leadership Quarterly* 10:2 (1999), pp. 145-79 (168-71).

⁴⁸ For a full narrative of this important discovery, read *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 13-29.

⁴⁹ *More than Numbers*, p. 42.

⁵⁰ Roger Finke, "The Quiet Transformation: Changes in Size and Leadership of Southern Baptist Churches," *Review of Religious Research* 36:1 (1994), pp. 3-22 (8).

⁵¹ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. vi.

mobilizing its total membership in continuous propagation of its beliefs.”⁵²

Yet perhaps above all, the cell system of home cell groups (HCG) provides a structure in which the issue of succession becomes insignificant. Cho asserts,

This system of home cell groups does not depend on one person. In our church, it does not depend on me. It depends on the ministry of the Holy Spirit, because He is the one who energizes the leaders.... Those members don't depend on me; they depend on one another and on the Holy Spirit.⁵³

He also says, “Churches should not have to depend on a single strong pastor,”⁵⁴ and “My church is not the church of Paul Yonggi Cho, although I'm the founding pastor. My church belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ and cannot be centered on my personality. With the cell system, the actual ministry is done on the cell level. Although the people hold me in high esteem and are loyal, they can go on without me.”⁵⁵ He has even empowered each HCG to be self-supporting: each cell has its own collection recorded and dispensed by its treasurer.⁵⁶

This empowering structure is nurtured by his “participatory management” style. Cho has had the confidence to delegate, to share power as much as possible. Though effective leaders may be known for being decisive, superior problem-solvers and good at inspiring people to follow their lead, they know that they must share power with their subordinates, allowing them to make their own decisions themselves by helping them to develop judgment skills rather than by making them wait for the leader's decisions. The more power s/he gives to others, the more s/he will be seen as a visionary leader who is able to focus on strategic issues.

Cho delegates most decisions to his immediate staff, which consists of the assistant pastors and elders. He remains aloof from the routines of the various internal organizations of YFGC. One of his secretaries told

⁵² Kenneth Strachan, *The Inescapable Calling* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 108.

⁵³ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 86.

⁵⁴ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 52.

⁵⁵ *More than Numbers*, p. 41.

⁵⁶ *More than Numbers*, p. 49.

Hong, “Cho hardly lectures people. He delegates most of administrative affairs to his staffs.”⁵⁷ Cho allows his “fellow-workers to make mistakes and learn from them as God does with me.”⁵⁸

Avoiding interference in mundane details actually adds to his charisma: “the separation of administrative concerns from the personal attention of the charismatic helps to preserve his or her aura of extraordinariness.”⁵⁹ The social distance that evolved because of the increased size of YFGC may have helped to promote his charisma among his members: “Social distance may not have been deliberately created to generate charismatic images, but the product, a sense of distance and awe, may be a result of the creation of a social charismatic image.”⁶⁰

In fact, he relates to only a relatively small number of leaders who “have others under them who shepherd the cell leaders, and it is the cell leaders who perform the bulk of the ministry of our church.”⁶¹ What he has done was just to turn his church into a training center, investing in his people, the ultimate resource! Without direct knowledge of each leader, he just has to see to it that they are trained in the skills necessary to be effective cell leaders, thereby contributing to his goal of CG!

3.3 Constant Renewal

Cho’s CG has not been static, but dynamic; it was constantly being renewed through new initiatives that built on previous achievements. Research show that big organizations find it very difficult to respond to prophetic voices, especially those that will differ from the leader.⁶² Catering to mass audiences, mega-churches will also tend to lose their prophetic voices, because their huge assets have to be protected through “compromise” with government and business interests, including those of their own influential upper class members who benefit from the status quo. Their pastors will tend to mainly focus on comforting the afflicted,

⁵⁷ Hong, “The Charisma of Cho Yonggi,” p. 82.

⁵⁸ *More than Numbers*, p. 29.

⁵⁹ Trice & Beyer, “Charisma and Its Routinization,” p. 144.

⁶⁰ Hong, “The Charisma of Cho Yonggi,” p. 75.

⁶¹ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 65.

⁶² Hong, “The Charisma of Cho Yonggi,” pp. 87-88.

and hardly on afflicting the comfortable!⁶³ Moreover, in a big bureaucracy, decision-making will be based more on rational thinking and efficiency (which is not always negative) but less on affective action and spiritual guidance.⁶⁴ Yet Cho's CG overcame these dangers, and in fact, YFGC has grown into quite an open and creative church!

Even from the start of Cho's ministry among the urban poor of Seoul, his openness to the Spirit gave him the sensitivity to give contextualized teachings to his people. His messages of "positive faith" helped his ailing and destitute members gain a good sense of identity and hope of life; they can be delivered from spiritual emptiness and material poverty.⁶⁵ He testifies that his "blessings theology" was developed in the context of suffering and devastation of the Korean War.⁶⁶ Thereby the poor are able to gain self-confidence and are equipped to labor for the Kingdom of God amidst the needs and hardships of life. They are trained to be leaders, in spite of their low socio-economic and educational backgrounds.

In 1964, he was willing to break Korean church and social tradition: he not only instituted the cell system, but also appointed women to be the cell leaders. He was the first pastor in Korea to actively train and empower women to lead in the church's HCG;⁶⁷ in fact, almost all of his first HCG leaders were women.⁶⁸ Today, women members still outnumber men by about three to two,⁶⁹ perhaps because of the tendency of women to be more attracted to charismatic leaders.⁷⁰ But Cho has a

⁶³ Cf., Chai Sik Chung, "Beyond Indigenization: Toward a Christian Transcendence in Korea," *Mission Studies* 18:1 (2001), pp. 61-77.

⁶⁴ Cf. Margaret M. Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 112, 127-38.

⁶⁵ Young-gi Hong, "The Influence of the Reverend David Yonggi Cho's Church Growth on Korean Society," in *Charis and Charisma* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), pp. 291-318 (294, 298).

⁶⁶ Hong, "The Influence," p. 295.

⁶⁷ Hong, "The Charisma of Cho Yonggi," p. 73.

⁶⁸ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 21-29.

⁶⁹ Hong, "The Charisma of Cho Yonggi," p. 70.

⁷⁰ A. R. Willner, *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

correct and better explanation: women are better evangelists than men, and his CG is mainly due to women-to-women evangelism.⁷¹

Then in 1982, Cho had YFGC start the “Love in Practice” or “Sharing Movement,” to provide basic necessities to indigents in the neighborhood, and later to orphanages, homes for the aged and leprosaria. In 1984, the church began to offer free heart surgeries, which later extended to Uzbekistan, Nepal, Cambodia and Ukraine. In 1988, there were three new initiatives: blood donation drive, “Love-Bread Movement” to provide aid to poor neighbors, and Elim Welfare Town (with free technical school for poor youth and free nursing home for the aged) in Gunpo City.⁷²

There were other initiatives in socio-cultural fronts in the 1980s. A school was started that developed into Hansei University, and Bethesda University grew out of the Full Gospel School of Theology.⁷³ Cho launched “Invitation to Happiness,” the first Christian television ministry in Korea, and the *Kookmin Daily News*, the first Christian daily newspaper in Korea.⁷⁴ In 1995, YFGC set up its Environmental Preservation Division, and in 1996, YFGC began the first satellite mission on Korea’s communication satellite Moogoonghwa (Rose of Sharon). Later, the church also launched Internet Broadcasting Department for cyber-evangelism and now Video on Demand (VOD).⁷⁵ Lately, in 1999, they established “Good People,” the first church-based non-government organization (NGO) in Korea, mainly to support holistic “mission to unreached Third World countries...with the love and righteousness of God.”⁷⁶

Such constant renewal seems to be institutionalized in Cho’s practice of “constant goal-setting.” It is not enough to have faith and visions, but these must be translated into goals, strategies, programs and projects. It is through goal-setting that leaders motivate others to achieve

⁷¹ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 60-61.

⁷² Hong, “The Influence,” pp. 304-305.

⁷³ Hong, “The Influence,” p. 303.

⁷⁴ Hong, “The Influence,” p. 305.

⁷⁵ Hong, “The Influence,” p. 303.

⁷⁶ Hong, “The Influence,” p. 308.

their vision.⁷⁷ As goals are reached, and feelings of success prevail, one's charisma increases: "success is more important in the initial attribution of charisma"⁷⁸ and "nothing succeeds like success."

Cho emphasizes the importance of goal-setting in CG.⁷⁹ Here one needs to find a balance of being both realistic and ambitious at the same time. Realism makes one aware of the natural rate of growth, thus not pushing growth beyond the limits of growth: natural growth comes by increments, so one can't force growth against its inherent nature. Yet to inspire, leaders must set goals which are somehow beyond people's grasp, and in spiritual leadership, beyond human capacities, where God's power can be demonstrated.

On setting goals, Cho means the development of five-year plans, with budgets to achieve specific goals.⁸⁰ Then these goals and plans are consistently communicated to the people, thus giving the whole church a clear sense of direction. From among the crowd, leaders have to be recruited; hence Cho also has an eye to detect informal leaders "who naturally attract others to themselves. Sometimes people who have a knack for communicating with other people make excellent leaders."⁸¹ Then he sees to it that each leader is trained⁸² and has a clear goal and plan; they get this at least through the annual cell leaders' convention.⁸³ He also knows how to motivate these lay leaders through recognition, praise and caring.⁸⁴

⁷⁷ B. Shamir, R. J. House and M. B. Arthur, "The Motivational Effects of Charismatic Leadership: A Self-concept Based Theory," *Organizational Science* 4 (1993), 1-17 (5-8).

⁷⁸ S. M. Puffer, "Attributions of Charismatic Leadership: The Impact of Decision Style, Outcome and Observer Characteristics," *Leadership Quarterly* 1 (1990), pp. 177-92.

⁷⁹ *More than Numbers*, pp. 109-11, 161-62.

⁸⁰ *More than Numbers*, pp. 36, 113-15.

⁸¹ *More than Numbers*, p. 50.

⁸² *More than Numbers*, pp. 112-13.

⁸³ *More than Numbers*, pp. 112-13.

⁸⁴ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 135-41.

Hence CG leadership requires one to be a constant strategist.⁸⁵ Very early in Cho's ministry, in 1964, while almost dying from an unknown disease, he discovered the Exodus 18 formula of structuring his church in a cell system, whereby he can train and use lay leaders (as non-paid assistants!) to lead multitudes.⁸⁶ And to keep his church financially sustainable, he organized over 2,000 businessmen into a mission fellowship.⁸⁷

So, Cho and YFGC have seen to it that they are constantly renewed. CG is not static, but dynamic. Given Cho's openness to creative initiatives and use of constant goal-setting, there are grounds for optimism that he will continue to keep YFGC on the path of constant church renewal in the years to come.

3.4 Holistic Witness

A significant distinctive in Cho's CG model has been the "beyond CG" impact that he has made in Korean society and beyond. It appears that through the leadership of Cho, YFGC has been able to not just increase in quantity of church membership, but also in quality of social transformation. The main highlight may be in May 3, 1996, when Cho was awarded the Moogoonghwa medallion, the highest medal given to Korean citizens, primarily for his contributions to the free heart operation movement.⁸⁸

When the concept of CG and phenomenon of mega-churches (not so different from centralized structures of denominations) became popular in the late 1970s, many Evangelical church leaders, especially from the Two-Thirds world have been very critical of it. Most critical are those who see CG as the product of a westernized non-holistic approach to mission that is not concerned for the discipling (or transformation) of societies, viewing evangelism and church development as the main (if not the only) goal of the Great Commission.

Yet as seen in the previous section, it looks like that Cho has successfully led YFGC to move in a more holistic role in society. In

⁸⁵ Using David's case, Czovek, "Three Charismatic Leaders," p. 186 notes, "Charismatic deliverers, if they are to prevail are to be strategists—taking advantage of every opportunity."

⁸⁶ *More than Numbers*, pp. 31-35.

⁸⁷ Hong, "The Charisma of Cho Yonggi," p. 81.

⁸⁸ Hong, "The Influence," p. 305.

many modern cities like Seoul, the main holistic issue is the growing gap between the rich and the poor. It seems that from YFGC's "sharing movement" and its various social ministries from the early 1980s onwards, Cho has developed a CG that has also been able to turn an increasingly materialistic society into a more compassionate and caring one. Through media, esp. the *Kookmin Daily News*, the nation (not just the church) has been mobilized to help thousands of boy or girl-led households, donate blood, and volunteer in medical service corps; in 1992, 1,300 civic groups joined in a national "Kind Neighbor, Bright Society" movement to develop kindness as a way of life,⁸⁹ and in 2001, a "donation culture" was promoted through feature stories in the newspaper.⁹⁰

Through its two universities, YFGC can develop young people in various professions to provide Christian leadership in society. In 1998, a model "ecological garden" was set up on the banks of Han River in Yoido, which formed "ecological schools" to teach on environmental issues. Since 1999, the church-based NGO "Good People" has sent food, fertilizers and medicine to North Korea; rebuilt schools in India; funded AIDS prevention program in Kenya, sent emergency relief to Kosovo, Turkey, Afghanistan, etc.; aided flood victims in Korea; and many other social work with national and global reach.⁹¹

Cho has shown that CG can lead to holistic ministries, which can outgrow CG goals and can impact society. All that is needed is for church leaders to expand their horizons, equip their members to develop their gifts and empower them to make their dreams come true.

4. Negative Aspects of Cho's Church Growth Model

4.1 Lack of Transformational Contextualization

Most CG advocates, like Cho, have now accepted the Lausanne Covenant formula that both evangelism and socio-political action are parts of the church's mission. As seen above, like many Evangelical and Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, Cho's YFGC has developed many social ministries. Yet like most of them, Cho lacks a stronger prophetic

⁸⁹ Hong, "The Influence," pp. 305-306.

⁹⁰ Hong, "The Influence," p. 307.

⁹¹ Hong, "The Influence," pp. 308-310.

(social and ethical) critique of society. He perpetuates a “false consciousness” that Korea is “the last remaining powerhouse of world Christianity” and that the Korean church is a “house of prayer” when in fact it may be “swollen with pride in thinking that religion is a way to become rich, successful and respectable.”⁹² His theology of “Threefold Blessings” (or good health and good fortune) seems to be no different “from the contemporary ethos of a crassly materialistic, newly industrializing Korean society that idolizes mammon.”⁹³ Where is the biblical “theology of the cross” in all these?

More recent Pentecostal theologians have raised this issue, too.⁹⁴ Of note is:

Pentecostals must take seriously the critique that, in spite of their significant contributions in areas of social concern within their communities, there has been little conscious effort to provide a horizontal linkage from their experiments in ways of coping with life in their own context to a larger forum where they would have more direct access to the means of cultural production. If Pentecostals are content to form only their own “substitute societies,” they may forfeit the opportunity to participate in radical change or structural transformation.⁹⁵

In many modern cities like Seoul, where “globalization” means the expansion of “consumer societies,” the main issue for “mission as transformation” is the growing gap between the rich and the poor. Research should be done to see whether YFGC’s various social ministries have been able to truly equip the rich to serve the poor and to empower the poor to serve others.

Moreover there seems to be an absence of dialogue and witness to people and leaders of other faiths, particularly shamans, Buddhists and Confucianists. There appears to be a dearth of interaction with them that can result in models of contextualized witness to religiously inclined

⁹² Chung, “Beyond Indigenization,” pp. 63-64.

⁹³ Chung, “Beyond Indigenization,” p. 73.

⁹⁴ E.g., Murray Dempster, “A Theology of the Kingdom: A Pentecostal Contribution,” in *Mission as Transformation*, eds. V. Samuel and C. Sugden (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), pp. 45-75; Douglas Petersen, “Pentecostals: Who are They?” in *Mission as Transformation*, pp. 76-111.

⁹⁵ Petersen, “Pentecostals: Who Are They?” pp. 110-111.

people with their own distinct spiritualities. Will YFGC be able to be a transformational witness among the religions in Korea and beyond?

Given YFGC and Cho's presence in civil society and in public media, there may be grounds for optimism that pressing social issues will challenge him and his church to become fully holistic and advocate for truly transformational (or prophetic which may often be counter-cultural) concerns in the future.

4.2 Multiplication Potential

Given the above distinctives of Cho's CG, we can look forward to a greater impact of his ministry. He has shown that there is almost nothing impossible that a spiritual leader can do for CG, church renewal, social transformation and even global impact. As Cho has emphasized, the most critical gift for leadership is "dreams and visions" that are set into goals, which are constantly upgraded as they are achieved! May I show an example of what a possible "vision" that he and other church leaders can consider in our time.

Recent mission practitioners are offering the further "higher goal beyond CG" of church multiplication through "church planting movements" (CPM),⁹⁶ or "house church networks" (HCN).⁹⁷ They view the centralized mega-churches (and their latest forms, like "cell churches" and "Groups of 12" (G-12)⁹⁸ to be unable to use the full potential of the whole church to evangelize and transform the whole world, particularly the 10/40 Window.

Theologically, CG perpetuates the "Babylonian captivity" of the church in Christendom structures inherited from centuries of theological

⁹⁶ E.g., David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board of Southern Baptist Convention, 1999); David S. Lim, *The Only Way to Disciple Whole Nations: Church Multiplication through Tentmakers* (Quezon City: China Ministries International-Philippines, 2003).

⁹⁷ E.g., Robert and Julia Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Sutherland: Albatross Books, 1989); Wolfgang Simson, *Houses That Change the World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001); cf. Charles Ringma, *Catch the Wind* (Sutherland: Albatross, 1994); C. Rene Padilla, "The Future of Christianity in Latin America: Missiological Perspectives and Challenges," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23:3 (July, 1999), pp. 105-112; Jim Montgomery, *I'm Gonna Let It Shine!* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2001).

⁹⁸ Cf. Ralph Neighbor, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here?* (Houston: Touch Publications, 1990); Comiskey, *Groups of 12*.

emphasis on the “priesthood of a few” (that is, the clergy) rather than the Reformation breakthrough into a servant-church structure based on the biblical teaching of the “priesthood of all believers.” CG thinking continues to require hierarchical power centers (best exemplified in the papal system of the Roman Catholic Church) that is opposite to the egalitarian partnership structures of house-churches (or “basic Christian communities,” BCC) and facilitative functions of servant-leadership in the New Testament).⁹⁹ Unless these mega-forms of CG truly decentralize to let each cell function fully as autonomous (self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating) churches, with their own leaders, budgets and programs,¹⁰⁰ God’s church will continue to deprive almost 90% (the unequipped laity) of the church from exercising their priesthood, prophethood and rulership in Christ.

Strategically, the centralized and hierarchical structure of mega-church type of CG has been disadvantageous to the full growth of the church and its mission. Cho’s empowerment model seems to be not empowering enough! In his ideals, each HCG “has limited size, usually not more than 15 families,” which is good, but he continues, “It has a definite goal set by my associate ministers and myself. It has a definite plan, given to each cell in written form. It has definite leadership, trained

⁹⁹ Cf. Hans Kung, “The Charismatic Structure of the Church,” *Concilium IV: The Church and Ecumenism* (New York: Paulist, 1965); J. D. G. Dunn, “Ministry and the Ministry: The Charismatic Renewal’s Challenge to Traditional Ecclesiology,” in *Charismatic Experiences in History*, ed. C. M. Robeck, Jr. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1985), pp. 81-101; David S. Lim, “The Servant Nature of the Church in the Pauline Corpus” (Ph.D. Diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1987) and *The Only Way to Disciple Whole Nations*; Simson, *Houses That Change the World*. Thus there was no need for celebrative worship and governing centers among the people of God in each village or city, except three times a year in the temple in the OT. Yet there were no local shrines nor temples in OT times, just as there were no local church structures in NT times. In every city, the “local church” consisted of a fellowship of inter-dependent leaders (usually called “elders”) of house-churches, with no central governing body. Our Lord Jesus, Peter, Paul and Apollos were charismatic leaders, but each of them did not build a centralized nor hierarchical structure.

¹⁰⁰ On servant-leadership and servant-structures, cf. Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership* (New York: Paulist, 1977); Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992); Edgar J. Elliston, *Home Grown Leaders* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1993); Lim, “The Servant Nature of the Church.”

in our school,”¹⁰¹ which reveals a dependency that hinders their self-developing potential for Kingdom expansion and church multiplication. There is a big difference between training leaders and training followers.¹⁰²

This lack of full empowerment will necessarily lead to increasing nominalism in the church: there are increasing numbers of YFGC members who join for prestige, success and/or upward social mobility.¹⁰³ In a big bureaucracy, decision-making will be based more on rational thinking and efficiency (which is not always negative) but less on affective action and spiritual guidance.¹⁰⁴ The mega-church will also find it very difficult to respond to prophetic voices, esp. those that will differ from the leader.¹⁰⁵

Catering to mass audiences, mega-churches will also tend to lose their prophetic voices, because its huge assets have to be protected through “compromise” with government and business interests, including those of their own influential upper class members who benefit from the status quo.¹⁰⁶ Their pastors will tend to mainly focus on comforting the afflicted, and hardly on afflicting the comfortable!

The major limitation of mega-church type of CG is its hindrance to effective world missions, on at least two counts: a) these big churches model mere addition growth for mega-cities, instead of more church multiplication for national saturation evangelization; and b) they absorb a disproportionate amount of resources (time, money and energy) for church development, and discourage increased spending for holistic cross-cultural missions; they are too expensive to replicate and too heavy to carry elsewhere! If they try, their short-term and resident missionaries

¹⁰¹ *More than Numbers*, p. 42; cf. *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 113-14.

¹⁰² Paul G. Hiebert, “Training Leaders, Training Followers,” *Theology, News and Notes* (June 1989), pp. 23-24; cf. Gene Getz, *Serving One Another* (Wheaton: Victor, 1984).

¹⁰³ Hong, “The Charisma of Cho Yonggi,” pp. 85-86.

¹⁰⁴ Margaret M. Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), pp. 112, 127-38.

¹⁰⁵ Hong, “The Charisma of Cho Yonggi,” pp. 87-88.

¹⁰⁶ Cho will find it more difficult to change from his stance on non-involvement in politics as long as there is freedom to preach the gospel (*More than Numbers*, pp. 69-70).

have been ineffective to plant contextualized and transformational churches.

The mega-church model of CG has grown mainly in secularized and urbanized societies which allow religious freedom. But CG has failed and will continue to fail in areas dominated by secularism (western Europe), Communism (Indo-China, North Korea), Islam (Middle East, Central Asia, North Africa, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Brunei), Theravada Buddhism (Sri Lanka, Myanmar), Shinto Buddhism (Japan) and Judaism (Israel). Mega-churches have not been effective in planting indigenous churches and church planting movements in the 10/40 Window nor even in the saturation evangelization of their own nations. Their church constituencies are mostly low quality church-going Christians rather than quality disciples (servant-leaders) who can disciple others!

Actually Cho has begun to do a type of “church multiplication” in more recent years. Though he pioneered only three churches in his first twenty-six years,¹⁰⁷ by 1989 he had already 75 churches and mission work in different parts of the world, like Japan,¹⁰⁸ Australia, U.S.A., Latin America and Europe,¹⁰⁹ and recent reports say that he has about 250 churches in Korea and about 650 churches in the world, including some in “closed countries.” If any HCG leader wants to become a licensed minister, Cho pays for her/his Bible School tuition, on condition that s/he serves at least three years in YFGC. If later they want to start their own church, Cho helps them financially for the first six months.¹¹⁰ He does not provide them anything to give to nationals by teaching them to “depend on God as their total resource”; the nationals are not to depend on foreign funding,¹¹¹ so Cho’s missionaries are told not to give the impression that they are bringing riches to them.¹¹² And he believes

¹⁰⁷ *More than Numbers*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁸ Cho chose an ordinary lady minister to plant the YFGC in Japan with a goal of 1,000 members in five years, and she did it! (*Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 76).

¹⁰⁹ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 47, 79.

¹¹⁰ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 79-80.

¹¹¹ Cho himself never asked for financial help from foreign missionaries or churches, even when he was ministering among the poor (*Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 179).

¹¹² *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 175-76.

that this kind of church-planting can be done anywhere!¹¹³ Hopefully this can be implemented more frequently and more vigorously.

Moreover, Cho also shares the CPM/HCN view that the church meets any time and anywhere: it “meets everyday in factories, schools, offices, homes, restaurants and club buildings.” If the Communists take over and kill the pastors, they cannot destroy the 18,000 cells.¹¹⁴ He sees that such a system is not just persecution-proof, but also poverty/depression-proof!¹¹⁵ Yet in his ministry, in spite of his apparent desire to emphasize the decentralized form of the church, with no need for the presence and ministry of pastors, the focus still flows back to his mega-structure and his personal leadership! Such is the main danger of huge structures: they tend to create high dependency of staff and members on the leaders and especially the top leader.¹¹⁶

Yet given his ecclesiology and openness to the Spirit, Cho may be able to lead his church (and the church worldwide) to a multiplication mode! And the global impact will be very great. The evangelistic and transformational impact of one church of 200,000 members (in CG programs) will almost surely be less than that of 500 churches of 400 each (in traditional church-planting programs), and much less than that of 10,000 churches of 20 each (in church multiplication movements)! Cho saw this in China,¹¹⁷ and he can lead in making this replicated all over the world!

5. Conclusion

As shown in this study, Cho has served our generation excellently with this God-endowed leadership gifts. He has been a charismatic leader *par excellence*, yet he remained humble and simple, a model of mature spirituality and servant-leadership. He has faithfully used his gifts

¹¹³ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 174-76.

¹¹⁴ *More than Numbers*, p. 41.

¹¹⁵ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 84-86.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Jay A. Conger, *The Charismatic Leader: Behind the Mystique of Exceptional Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989); Gary A. Yukl, “An Evaluation of Conceptual Weaknesses in Transformational and Charismatic Leadership Theories,” *Leadership Quarterly* 10:2 (1999), pp. 285-305.

¹¹⁷ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 84.

effectively not just for the growth of YFGC, but also for the development of many churches worldwide. And the resultant CG has been of constant internal renewal that has had social impact in Korea and the world!

This study has also shown that most importantly, Cho has effectively moved his mega-church to empower almost 10% of his laity to be HCG leaders and church leaders through the cell system. Perhaps he can lead YFGC to its logical or theological end (empowerment of 100% for NT “priesthood of all believers”) and to its practical or strategic end (mobilization of 100% for CPM missions). May his next goal be “church multiplication,” not just “cell multiplication.” May he train, commission and send most (if not all) of his leaders to plant many more multiplying churches,¹¹⁸ in Korea and in the non-Christian world! With or without his leadership, the house churches in China are already using the “church multiplication” model as they seek to send 100,000 missionaries across the 10/40 Window in their “Back to Jerusalem” movement.¹¹⁹

Or perhaps it is the best that Cho could do in the hierarchical cultural milieu of Korea (his cultural heritage) and the centralized hierarchical system of Christian denominations (his ecclesiastical heritage) in his generation. The challenge for the next generation of those who aspire to church leadership and CG in the post-modern era should be: are we going to continue to develop more hierarchical and centralized mega-churches or make a “paradigm shift” to more egalitarian and decentralized servant-churches (or HCN) for CPMs in the new millennium? May God use Cho’s exemplary leadership to inspire us to obey the Great Commission, to bear explosive witness among the nations, so that “the end will come” (cf. Matt 24:14)! Maranatha!

¹¹⁸ Most CPMs nowadays believe that it takes a maximum of three years to disciple a believer to become a disciple-maker (servant-leader of a house-church). The discipler just has to be a few steps ahead of his disciple(s), thus 2 Tim 2:2 (cf. John 14:12-14; Acts 20:17-35) can be done in just a few months if not a few weeks!

¹¹⁹ Paul Hattaway, et al., *Back to Jerusalem* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2003).