

METHODISM IN RUSSIAN SIBERIA, 1920-1929

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In 1988 Dr. Dana Robert published one of the first comprehensive studies¹ of the Siberia-Manchuria Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (henceforth, MECS), which I included in the volume *Methodism in Russia and the Baltic States, History and Renewal*.² The Siberia-Manchuria Mission had two primary components: Russian and Korean. As Dr. Robert makes clear in her study, the final takeover of Vladivostok by the Bolsheviks on October 25, 1922, made the continuation of the Russian part of the mission so difficult that finally all of that work, and the missionaries assigned to it, were transferred to the flourishing Russian Methodist mission in Harbin, China, a city to which many Russians fleeing the Bolsheviks had emigrated.

What has not been heretofore fully examined or brought to light is that the work of the MECS in Vladivostok, Nikolsk-Ussurisk, and the surrounding areas did not end in 1922. As a matter of fact, the Korean MECS congregations, which included Koreans who had fled the Japanese regime in Korea (from 1910), as well as many Russian Koreans whose forebears had migrated north into Siberia in the mid-19th century to farm the vast expanse of land, survived until 1929. In that year many Koreans, who had the financial resources, left Russian Siberia for other countries seeking freedom. The poor and those of lesser means were left behind and became the victims of the Russian deportation of Koreans in 1937 to Kazakhstan, Tashkent, etc. Documents which have now come to light from the State Historical Archives in Vladivostok, Russia and the Minutes of the Siberian-Korean Mission 1921-1929 help to reconstruct this amazing story of faith, perseverance, and suffering.

The work of the Siberia-Manchuria Mission was begun in 1920 in Nikolsk-Ussurisk and Vladivostok at first among Koreans, some of whom may have been Methodists, who had fled Korea after the Japanese annexation of 1910.

As Dr. Robert has already shown, this mission work had phenomenal success within an extremely short period of time. The Rev. W. G. Cram, Superintendent of the work, reported: "At the Annual Meeting of the Board of Missions in May 1920 the Siberia-Manchuria Mission was ordered to be established for the Koreans who had migrated into Siberia and Manchuria. A

¹"The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Mission to Russians in Manchuria, 1920-1927," *Methodist History* 26:2 (1988), 67-83.

²(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

survey was to be made of the needs of the Russian population looking forward toward Christian work among them also.”³

On the first journey of W. G. Cram, J. S. Ryang, and Chung Chai Duk mission work was begun in Kirin and Harbin in Northern Manchuria. They found Koreans in Kirin and some 500 of them in Harbin. Chung Chai Duk stayed behind in Manchuria and began Korean work in Kirin and Harbin, while Ryang and Cram pressed on to Nikolsk-Ussurisk and Vladivostok. In the former city they found a population of 5,000 Koreans and in the latter some 15,000. “It was decided that the center of our operations should be from the two cities of Vladivostok and Nikolsk and that we should lay great stress on the immediate advance into the Ussuri river valley region.”⁴

By May 1921 there were flourishing MECS groups in Kirin, Harbin, Nikolsk, and Vladivostok. Cram reported that there were already 60 members in the Vladivostok congregation and 150 in the Nikolsk congregation. Property had been purchased in Nikolsk to be used as a church and school. In the period from October to July 1921, two ordained Korean clergy and twelve Korean helpers had organized thirty groups with 224 full members and a constituency of 1,261 and 11 Sunday schools with 20 teachers and 630 pupils. These were the statistics given in the report at the First Annual Meeting of the Siberia-Manchuria Mission of the MECS held in the church compound in Nikolsk-Ussurisk, July 31–August 1, 1921, with Bishop Lambuth presiding.

The Second Annual Meeting of the Siberia-Manchuria Mission was held in Vladivostok, October 10–12, 1922, just two weeks prior to the final Bolshevik takeover of Vladivostok on October 25. By this time another missionary, George F. Erwin, and his family had arrived from Georgia. Though he was to have worked in Vladivostok, he and J. O. J. Taylor were assigned to the “Russian Work” in Harbin. His daughter, Eunice Erwin Brown, a resident of Macon, Georgia, recalls standing at the window of their apartment at No. 35 Pushkinskaya Street and watching the bedraggled Bolshevik soldiers march into Vladivostok.

The Second Annual Meeting was convened in the newly built Methodist Episcopal Church on Habarovskaya Street in Vladivostok with Bishop H. A. Boaz presiding. Within one year property had been acquired and an imposing structure built by the Russian builders Pestrikoff and Naamen.

In the summer of 1922 a Bible Training School was held in Nikolsk with 39 persons enrolled (11 women and 28 men). By this time schools had been established in Vladivostok and Nikolsk.

It was recorded in the *Minutes* of 1922 that the next annual meeting would be in Nikolsk-Ussurisk, but this never transpired due to the increasingly difficult political situation in the region.

It is important to note that in 1922 four districts of the MECS Korean Siberia-Manchuria Mission were officially designated: three were in Russian

³*Minutes of the First Annual Meeting of the Siberia-Manchuria Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Nikolsk-Ussurisk, Siberia, July 31–August 1, 1921), 10.

⁴*Minutes*, 11.

Siberia (Vladivostok District, Yern-choo District, Nikolsk District) and one in China (North Kondo District). Many of the circuit appointments were in Korean villages in the countryside. Rev. Kim Young Hak was assigned as pastor in charge in Vladivostok, a position in which he remained until 1929, the final year for which there are official records of the work of the Korean mission of the MECS in Siberia.

A special meeting of the missionaries was held in Seoul, Korea from December 28 to 31, 1922, no doubt precipitated by the new political situation created by the Bolshevik takeover of Russian Siberia in October 1922. The legal status of the mission in Russia was one of the subjects of discussion. No doubt it was envisaged that the Russian work would have its concentration in Harbin and the Rev. George F. Erwin was assigned to Harbin by Bishop Boaz. A school was to be organized in Harbin but it was decided that no further school activity should be attempted in Vladivostok.

The minutes of this special meeting contain a detailed outline of financial responsibilities and guidelines for the missionaries and operation of the mission, as well as a substantial statement regarding “Denominational Policy of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Europe,” which focuses on evangelism, social service, self-determination, and cooperation.

At the annual meeting of 1923, convened in Rong Jung, North Kondo (China), there were a total of 27 pastoral appointments in the Korean Department and 5 in the Russian Department. All of the latter were in Harbin, except for Vladivostok, which was listed as “to be supplied.”

The year 1923 appears to be the turning point in the makeup and structure of the Mission’s work. The Russian outreach shifted almost exclusively to Harbin and the Korean work in Russian Siberia (Vladivostok, Nikolsk-Ussurisk and the Yern-choo Districts) continued to flourish, though under grave difficulties. Even so, Rev. Kim Yung Hak of Vladivostok reported at the Third Annual Meeting of 1923: “our people had really been blessed by the difficulties they had to experience under the Soviet regime.”⁵

The statistics reported at this meeting indicate the rapid growth of the work.

Ordained Korean clergy	6
Licensed Preachers	18
Full Members	1,518
Total Adherents	5,176
Sunday Schools	37
Sunday School Teachers	128
No. of Church Buildings	25
Boys Schools	17
Total Students	623
Girls Schools	5
Total Students	167

⁵*Journal of the Third Annual Meeting of the Siberia Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Rong Jung, North Kondo, September 26–28, 1923), 1.

The request was made at this annual meeting that the bishop "ask the Board of Missions in Nashville to establish out of the Siberia Mission, two separate missions, one for the Koreans and one for the Russians, since the work naturally falls into two separate departments and both having grown rapidly."⁶

This request was granted and in 1924 the annual meeting of both departments was held in Harbin, China with Bishop H. A. Boaz presiding. The following delegates from Russia were present:

Rev. Kim Yung Hak, Vladivostok
 Rev. Yu Choon Kei, Nikolsk-Ussurisk
 (ordained deacon at this annual meeting)
 Hyen Byeng Chan, lay delegate Nikolsk City
 Rev. Yi In Sun, Nikolsk District, Choo-poong Circuit
 Rev. Suh Yung Bok, Yern-choo District

A portion of the Superintendent's report at the 1924 Annual Meeting in Harbin describes the growing difficulties for churches seeking to survive in the Soviet system.

During the past twenty months, the Korean Department of the Siberia Mission has had some of the most difficult experiences in the history of modern missions. Many of the workers have been imprisoned, all of the schools in Siberian side have been forced to close, the Vladivostok church, the only church building we have erected in Siberia, has been confiscated, and many other unpleasant things have been happening besides many of our faithful members in Siberia were compelled to move away by the political and economic conditions. These bitter experiences have compelled the church to hold back in making progress and the number of the church adherents has been considerably decreased, but the spiritual condition of our people, I am happy to say, has become stronger as gold becomes finer after having been in the fire. . . .

As long as God is in heaven and as long as faithful workers are in the church, we should have no fear of the future. Forty-two workers have been employed by the Department this year—twenty-six preachers, fourteen Bible women, one colporteur, and one general helper, of which fourteen are located in Manchuria side and twenty-eight in Siberian side. . . . I thank God once more for their heroic mission. It is very gratifying to find that nearly four thousand Korean people are still with us, even though the storm of persecution has not yet passed away."⁷

Both departments of the Siberian-Manchurian Mission held their meetings simultaneously in 1925 in Harbin, although only minutes of the Russian Department appear to have survived. It seems that the 1925 meeting was actually the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Russian Department and the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Korean Department.

The Russian Department convened on September 17 and the Korean Department from September 20–22. A joint session was held on September 23 at 8:30 p.m. in the Central Methodist Church, New Town, Harbin. A resolu-

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁷*Minutes of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Korean Department of the Siberia Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Harbin, Manchuria, September 20–22, 1924), 7–8.

tion was passed urging the Board of Missions to create the two departments of the Mission and that the Russian Mission include “all work among the Russinas in Manchuria, Siberia, and Russia.”⁸

Small though the attendance was at the 1925 meeting, it was international. Also present were: the Rev. Harada of the Japanese Methodist Church in Harbin, the Rev. J. C. Hawk, missionary to the Chinese in Harbin, Prof. H. W. Jenkins, Superintendent of the Russian Department of the Mission in Harbin, and the Rev. George F. Erwin, missionary in the same department, and the Russian delegates from Harbin. There is no record of who, if anyone, was in attendance from Vladivostok, Nikolsk, and Yern-choo districts of Russia.

It is now clear from documents recently examined in the State Historical Archives located in Vladivostok that during the years 1925 and 1926 the congregation in Vladivostok had increasing difficulties with the Revolutionary Committee of the Communist Party and other local authorities. Hence, it is not surprising that the *Minutes of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Siberia Korean Mission of the MECS*, September 18–19, 1926, which convened in Rong Jung, North Kondo (China), report that the pastors from Russian Siberia Kim Young Hak (Vladivostok), Yu Choon Kei (Nikolsk-Ussurisk), and Yi Woon Ho (Choolami) could not attend, as they were not granted passports by the Soviet government.⁹ All sent written reports which were received. Only two delegates are listed as being from Russia: Minn Heung Sik (Yern-choo District, Mongogai Circuit) and Pak Hyen Choong (Nikolsk Country Circuit). The appointment of both is registered simply as “preacher,” meaning that they were “Licensed preachers” according to the *Book of Discipline*. Kim Duek Soo gave a report on the Nikolsk Country Circuit but no details of the report are included. Kim Anna, the Bible Woman in the Mongogai Circuit, “traveled over three thousand miles in eight days to attend the conference.”¹⁰

The Minutes of the Fourth Annual Meeting of The Korean Department of The Siberian Mission listed four districts with three of them distinctly in Russian Siberia (Vladivostok, Nikolsk, and Yern-choo) with 21 pastoral charges. The 1926 *Minutes*, however, list only two districts: Siberia with 9 appointments and North Kondo with 8 appointments. This structural change no doubt indicates the difficulties of church survival under the Soviet regime.

The report of Superintendent J. S. Ryang provides a sense of the gravity of the situation under which Methodists were laboring and of their confidence in sustaining the work. In speaking of continuing the ministries in Siberia he says,

It is one of the greatest mission fields in the world; yea, it is a battle field between the idealism of Jesus Christ and the materialism of Karl Marx. It is therefore the place where the evangelical church should not give way under any circumstances. . . . There have been all

⁸*Minutes of the Fourth Annual Session of the Siberia-Mission (Russian Department) of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Harbin, China, 1925), 9.

⁹*Minutes of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Siberia Korean Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Rong Jung, North Kondo, September 18–19, 1926), 3.

¹⁰*Minutes*, 4.

sorts of Christians in the Church, but most of the Christians we have now are those who have been tried in the fire and stood the test. They are like pure gold and grain. Even though the idea of materialism has been thrust upon them, they firmly believe God is the Creator of the universe and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who is the only Saviour of the world. We have over a thousand new believers in the Mission and one hundred fifty-three adults and eighty-five infants have been baptized during the year. . . . The total number of adherents in the Mission is three thousand six hundred and thirty-nine, including one thousand five hundred members and fifteen baptized children.¹¹

It is also in Ryang's report that we learn that the MECS Church in Vladivostok had been confiscated.

Vladivostok

Given the report of Ryang at the 1926 Annual Meeting regarding the confiscation of the MECS Church in Vladivostok, it is appropriate to turn to the situation of the MECS congregation in that city, since the newly examined archival records shed considerable light on the same.

On October 26, 1922, the day after the final Bolshevik takeover of Vladivostok, the Rev. J. O. J. Taylor, the head of the MECS Mission in Russian Siberia, wrote a letter to the officials of the new government describing the MECS and its work in Siberia, which was primarily threefold: evangelistic, educational, and medical. He also stated that it was the intent of the church to cooperate with the government. This was the beginning of lengthy struggle to maintain the integrity of the MECS, its work, and its property.

On August 11, 1923 an agreement was made between the Revolutionary Committee of the Primorski District and members of the Vladivostok MECS congregation. It is in principle a lease agreement with no time limitation. The property on which the church was located is designated as being in the "New Korean Settlement of the city." It is described as "Part III, block #91, plots 424 and 425." The contents of the "Methodist Building" are then enumerated. The agreement states that the undersigned agree to the following:

- 1) to use the building according to this agreement;
- 2) to use the building only for religious purposes;
- 3) not to organize political meetings, distribute literature, or make speeches opposing the Soviet government, and not to use a bell to gather the people;
- 4) to pay all expenses for repairs, heating, insurance, watchman/guard, and taxes;
- 5) to provide a special inventory list of all current property and any property obtained thereafter;
- 6) to provide free access to the building by representatives of the Revolutionary Committee;
- 7) to be responsible for payment of any items of property sold or destroyed;
- 8) in the event of leasing of the property to return same to the Revolutionary Committee in its present condition;
- 9) to hold all funerals at the same price and with the same ritual of all;
- 10) if all the regulations herein are not obeyed and there is a breach in conformity to the agreement, it will be nullified;

¹¹*Minutes*, 10–11, 13.

- 11) if the undersigned decide to cancel this agreement, they must give a one-week advance notice in writing and must complete all necessary agreements in accordance with Revolutionary legislation;
- 12) should anyone withdraw from the agreement, everyone who signs the agreement must submit an explanation in writing to the Revolutionary Committee, and if the person withdrawing is responsible for destruction, all are obligated to pay for same;
- 13) all are obligated to sign this agreement on August 11, 1923 and promise to participate in the management of the property, which shall be shared equally by all who sign.

Finally the document states that the original will reside with the Revolutionary Committee and a copy with special seals will be given to the group who have signed. There are thirty-seven names affixed to the document including the MECS pastors Kim Young Hak and Chang Chook Sup.

In March 1923 the same thirty-seven individuals had signed a document required by the Revolutionary Committee specifying the property of the MECS Church in Vladivostok as follows:

- 1) two pieces of land with a wire fence
- 2) a two-story wooden building with a cement basement
- 3) a metal roof
- 4) a custodian or watchman's room
- 5) 5 classrooms on the first floor with a teachers' room for Bible school
- 6) a meeting and recreation hall on the second floor
- 7) another building under construction that is usable
- 8) the land was obtained from the former city government; the value of the building is fixed at 18,000 Rubles
- 9) 60 benches
- 10) a pulpit
- 11) an organ
- 12) a wall clock
- 13) 2 desks
- 14) 5 oil/Kerosene lamps
- 15) 1 small desk
- 16) 50 special school desks valued at 150 Rubles
- 17) 4 blackboards valued at 8 Rubles
- 18) 4 chairs valued at 4 Rubles
- 19) 1 coat rack valued at 2 Rubles
- 20) 1 bookcase valued at 7 Rubles
- 21) 10 simple benches (no backs)

The total value for all items is listed as 476 Rubles. Add to that sum the value of the building and the grant total is 18,476 Rubles.

There is a communiqué dated September 29, 1923 among the papers at the State Historical Archives in Vladivostok that indicates how the confiscated process slowly began. It is a letter to the Vladivostok Communal Department from the Revolutionary Committee, which reports that 20 benches have been removed from the church by a Communist youth organization for use in a cultural club and states that the organization promises to preserve the benches. Later there was an inquiry from the church members regarding the whereabouts of the benches. The Communist youth organization replied that it needed a copy of the official paper regarding the benches. Trivial though this

matter may seem, the fact that documents survive about such a matter indicates the subtle way the confiscation of the MECS property began and the ultimate forced demise of the MECS congregation.

A letter from the MECS to the Communal Committee of Vladivostok dated October 28, 1923 states that a request has come to the members to relinquish the use of the first and second floors of the church and confine Methodist activities only to the basement. The letter maintains that this is not in accordance with the agreement of August 11, 1923, and the church appeals to the prosecutor of Primorski to judge the case in accordance with the previous agreement, since the building was built specifically for the MECS mission of America. The church, the letter maintains, is used as a place of worship and as a school, and requests that the prosecutor prevent the Methodists having to relinquish use of the building. It is requested that an independent legal authority decide what is to be done in this case.

The efforts of the church authorities and members, however, were futile. According to an affidavit dated January 15, 1926, of the Vladivostok Commission on Church Properties the Methodist church was given to a school as communal property. The document indicates that the decision has been reached to make an additional inventory, since authorities have found items in the church not previously listed. The following list appears in the document:

- 3 lamps
- 4 benches
- 27 wooden benches
- 1 iron stove
- 2 bells
- 2 Korean books having to do with evangelism valued at 4 Rubles

There are 65 signatures of church members, including the pastors, that appear on the document.

A fragmentary document dated "February 1927" states that there was a special meeting of the city Soviet on September 13, 1926 and that after February 27, 1926 all rights to the MECS property will reside with the Militia.

Nevertheless, the Methodists in Vladivostok did not abandon their attempts to have access to the church for worship services. A document dated January 21, 1928 survives from the Vladivostok Militia granting permission to hold a worship service within the period January 27 to February 7. The congregation was forced to request a permit for every worship service and the permit was to be visibly posted. Also a list of all persons who were to attend had to be provided listing the person's name, age, and address. Such a list dated January 31, 1928 survives, including 76 names. It is interesting that the names numbered 64 through 76 are Russian, not Korean.

Another document dated November 1, 1929 states clearly that all MECS and Presbyterian Church properties in Vladivostok "by special agreement" have been given to schools. Even so, the use of the Methodist church does not appear

completely clear, since an appeal dated November 21, 1929 from School #2 to the Militia states that there is some kind of misunderstanding, since some other organization ("Ch R K") is in the building and they want them out.

What happened to the Korean congregations of the MECS, in Russian Siberia after 1929 remains a mystery. The situation of the congregation in Vladivostok was no doubt characteristic of the other MECS congregations in the Nikolsk-Ussurisk and Yern-choo Districts. There was substantial property in the city of Nikolsk-Ussurisk, but its fate must have been identical to that of Vladivostok, although to date no documentation regarding it has surfaced.

In 1929 many Koreans with sufficient financial means left Russian Siberia and in 1937 Stalin inaugurated the deportation of Koreans from Russian Siberia to Kazakhstan, Tashkent, etc. The Korean Methodist Church became autonomous in 1930 and to date there is no evidence that it had any ongoing continuity with the Korean mission in Russian Siberia inaugurated by the MECS. Today, there are, however, missionaries of the Korean Methodist Church in Vladivostok and Nikolsk-Ussurisk.

What is historically now verifiable is that the work of the MECS in Russian Siberia among Koreans was sustained with continuity from 1921 until 1929. These nine years reflect phenomenal growth, courage, and perseverance on the part of a Korean population that endured both subtle and overt persecution under the Soviet regime. Their story is one worthy to be told time and again. It is imperative for the mission of the church today. The story is, however, very incomplete and hopefully historians, missiologists, and theologians will commit themselves to its study and sharing for the present and future.