

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Lee Jae-seok Crossing the Walls of Religion

Knut Holdhus
August 23, 2026



Lee Jae-seok (1933-2021), here in 1981

세계일보

Segye Ilbo

Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

Building bridges where others saw walls: When religious rivals sat down together demonstrating the power of dialogue

Continued from part 1: [Building Bridges Across Korea's Religious Divide](#)

As religion reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수) decribed in the first part of his [article](#) in the South Korean daily newspaper [Segye Ilbo](#) on 21st August, Lee Jae-seok (이재석), a devoted member of [Unificationism](#) (통일교) spent decades in an effort to build bridges of dialogue between the faith organization [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명) had [founded in 1954](#) and other religious communities in South Korea. In a country where religious and ideological divides often have been difficult to cross.

The encounter with Kang Won-yong

After a series of setbacks, Lee therefore decided to approach Kang Won-yong (강원용), one of the most influential Protestant leaders in Korea at the time. His message was straightforward: whatever one's opinion of [Unificationism](#), it had become a significant presence in Korean society and could not simply be ignored.

Lee wanted to persuade Kang that opposition and isolation were not productive strategies, and that a new relationship based on mutual understanding and cooperation should be explored.

Kang's busy schedule made a meeting difficult. When Lee learned that the Protestant leader would be travelling to Busan, he bought a ticket for the same flight. At Gimpo Airport, Lee approached him and explained that he had come because he wanted the opportunity to speak with him - even if that meant having the conversation aboard the airplane.

His persistence eventually produced a remarkable meeting.

An unprecedented religious encounter

In September 1968, a gathering took place at Academy House in Suyu-ri, Seoul. Thirty leaders from established Christian churches met with ten representatives of [Unificationism](#), including [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명).

The meeting followed a formal program. Methodist theological leader Hong Hyeon-seol (홍현설) offered the opening prayer, Kang Won-yong (강원용) delivered the opening remarks, and [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명) gave greetings. Eu Hyo-won (유효원), then a leading figure in [Unificationism](#), presented its teachings, known as the [Unification Principles](#) (통일원리), followed by questions and answers.



Rev. Dr. Kang Won-yong (1917 - 2006), refugee from North Korea, influential Christian leader, peace activist, and champion for democracy. He distinguished himself as a pioneer in the ecumenical movement (cooperation between different Christian denominations) and dedicated his life to dialogue, reconciliation, and social justice during South Korea's turbulent era of modernization and military dictatorship (1961-1987). Photo (1973)



[Sun Myung Moon](#) in September 1965

The encounter did not develop into a sustained institutional dialogue between the two sides. Nevertheless, the meeting itself was significant. At a time when [Unificationism](#) was frequently treated by its Protestant opponents as an organization to be rejected rather than engaged, representatives of the two sides had actually sat down together and listened to each other.

For Lee, this was precisely the kind of encounter he had been trying to make possible.

From Christian dialogue to interreligious cooperation

Lee's ambitions eventually extended beyond relations between Christian denominations. He became involved in efforts to promote dialogue among different religions, working through the Korea Institute for the Study of Religious Problems, which brought together figures including Catholic and Anglican clergy.

In 1970, another important development followed. [Unificationism](#) became the eighth religious body to join what was then known as the Korean Association of Religious People, now the Korean Council of Religions (한국종교협의회).

This placed [Unificationism](#) alongside seven established religious traditions: Catholicism, Anglicanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Cheondogyo (천도교) [See editor's note 1 below], Won

Buddhism (원불교) and Daejonggyo (대종교) [See editor's note 2 below]. The significance was not that these religions had suddenly reached agreement on theology. Rather, they were participating in a common forum where representatives of different traditions could communicate and cooperate.

Lee later became chairman of the Council of Religions in 1988, bringing his decades-long commitment to interreligious engagement into a formal leadership role.

A broader lesson about religious pluralism

[Segye Ilbo](#) acknowledges that Lee's activities and their historical significance can be viewed differently depending on one's religious perspective. Nevertheless, the [newspaper](#) identifies one characteristic of his life as particularly clear: **he refused to give up on dialogue.**

The [article](#) argues that religious harmony should not be understood as eliminating theological differences. People do not have to agree about doctrine in order to recognize one another as neighbors or cooperate for the common good.

That message has relevance beyond Korea's religious history. Contemporary societies continue to be divided by religion, politics, ideology and generational differences. People are often tempted to determine first which group someone belongs to before considering what that person is actually saying.

For Lee, the central question was therefore not simply whether people agreed, but whether they were willing to meet.

His life, as presented by [Segye Ilbo](#), offers a particular answer to the question of how the social value of religion might be measured. It may not be measured only by the strength of a religious institution or the number of its followers, but also by its ability to **lower barriers, create relationships and bring people into conversation.**

For a member of a persecuted minority religion who had personally experienced rejection from established churches, Lee Jae-seok's decision to spend his later life building bridges rather than reinforcing divisions was, in the [newspaper's telling](#), the most important expression of his faith.



말씀을 생명으로 알고
살아온 삶

이재석 자서전

정원강

정원강

"A Life Lived by Knowing God's Word as Life", the autobiography of Lee Jae-seok, published in 2021 by Cheonwonsa, the official publishing house of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#).



The flag of Cheondoism



The flag of Daejongism

His legacy can therefore be summed up in a single word: **dialogue**.

Lee Jae-seok (이재석) was [blessed in marriage](#) with Jeong Won-gang (정원강) as one of the 36 couples on 15th May 1961. He served as the 5th president of the [Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity](#) ([Unificationism](#) or [Unification Church](#)) in Korea 1981 - 1988.

See also part 1: [Building Bridges Across Korea's Religious Divide](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[Editor's note 1: Cheondogyo or Cheondoism (천도교, "Religion of the Heavenly Way") is a Korean religion that developed from the earlier Donghak ("Eastern Learning") movement. In 1905, the movement was reorganized and renamed by Son Byeong-hui (손병희 - 1861-1922) to emphasize its spiritual character and adapt to the changing political conditions of Korea under increasing foreign domination.

The central doctrine of Cheondogyo is Innaecheon ("Humanity is Heaven"), the belief that the divine resides within every human being. As a result, all people possess inherent dignity and should be treated with respect and equality. Cheondogyo stresses moral cultivation, social responsibility, and the improvement of society through ethical action rather than withdrawal from the world.

Unlike many religions that sharply separate the sacred and the secular, Cheondogyo teaches that everyday life is the proper arena for spiritual practice. Historically, its followers played a significant role in Korea's modernization and independence movement, including participation in the March First Movement against Japanese colonial rule.

Today, Cheondogyo remains one of Korea's indigenous religions, preserving the humanistic and reformist ideals inherited from Donghak.]

[Editor's note 2: Daejonggyo or Daejongism (대종교) is a modern Korean nationalist religion founded by Na Cheol (나철 - 羅喆) in 1909 that venerates the legendary progenitor Dangun (단군) as a divine ancestor, emphasizing Korean identity, ethical living, reverence for Korea's divine origins, and spiritual renewal rooted in indigenous traditions.]

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Today The Family Federation

The Unificationist who built religious bridges in a South Korea where denominational and ideological divisions have often been intense

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The logo of the *Segye Ilbo*

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Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수). Photo (2025): *Segye Ilbo*

correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수) published by the South Korean daily *Segye Ilbo* on 21st August 2026, looks back at the life of Lee Jae-seok (이재석 – 1933-2021), a prominent figure in [Unificationism](#) (통일교) who spent decades trying to promote dialogue between the faith he had chosen and other religious communities in South Korea. Written by religion correspondent Jeong Seong-su (정성수), the [article](#) presents Lee's story as an example of the difficulties – and possibilities – of religious reconciliation in a country where denominational and ideological divisions have often been intense.

See part 2: [Crossing the Walls of Religion](#)

For readers unfamiliar with Korea's modern religious landscape, Lee's story is particularly significant because it illustrates an unusual transition. He began his religious life as a committed member of [Unificationism](#) at a time when relations between the new religious movement founded by [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명 – 1920-2012) and established Protestant denominations were deeply antagonistic. Yet rather than responding to opposition by withdrawing into his own religious community, Lee eventually made dialogue with other faiths and religions one of the central aims of his life.

From law student to Unificationism evangelist



Lee Jae-seok (이재석 – 1933-2021), here speaking in Tarrytown, New York, USA in 1988. Photo: *FFWPU*, improved resolution by Grok xAI, August 2026.

Lee was born in 1933 in rural Cheongyang County on the South Korean west coast. As a young man, he studied law at Chung-Ang University in Seoul and hoped to become a judge. While preparing for Korea's highly competitive

national civil-service examination, however, his plans changed.

In 1956, during his third year at university, Lee encountered [Unificationism](#), then still a relatively small and persecuted

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[Unificationism](#), then still a relatively small and persecuted religious organization. The encounter profoundly affected him. The following year, he became involved in evangelizing work in the city of Cheonan, about 80 km. south of Seoul.



From 1956, the year Lee Jae-seok joined [Unificationism](#): Seated in front, from left: [Sun Myung Moon](#), Pastor Joshua McCabe who was sent by the Apostolic Church in Australia to study the Korean [new religious movement](#) for close to 80 days in 1956. Beside him, Professor Young Oon Kim (Kim Yeong-oon), the author of several books on [Unificationism](#) theology. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

His early commitment was intense. After completing a seven-day fast in the summer of 1957, he went to Cheonan, where he spent approximately ten months conducting outreach work, going from neighborhood to neighborhood and speaking with people about his faith.

At the time, the relationship between [Unificationism](#) and established Protestant churches was highly confrontational. Lee experienced this hostility personally. On one occasion, he visited a Presbyterian church and attempted to discuss religious doctrine with its pastor. Instead of engaging in a theological debate, the pastor reportedly denounced him as a heretic and expelled him from the church.

Yet these experiences of rejection would eventually lead Lee in a surprising direction.

Trying to build bridges

The decisive change came in the mid-1960s. By 1966, Lee was serving as pastor of [Unificationism](#)'s Third Church in Seoul. Rather than concentrating exclusively on the growth of his own denomination, he began seeking opportunities for contact with Protestant ministers outside [Unificationism](#).

He helped organize joint revival meetings involving Protestant pastors and, in November 1966, participated in establishing an organization called the *Headquarters for the Interdenominational Christian Movement*. Its purpose was to encourage Christians from different denominations to meet and cooperate despite their doctrinal differences.

The organization's first major initiative was a gathering for Christian ministers in Seoul. The organizers had not expected a particularly large response, but 180 pastors representing 27 denominations attended.

For Lee, this was evidence that many Christian leaders were willing to cross denominational boundaries if given an opportunity to meet directly.

The initiative also reflected a broader principle associated with [Unificationism](#) teachings: the idea that humanity should ultimately overcome divisions between denominations and religions in pursuit of peace and harmony. In this sense, Lee's interdenominational activities represented not a departure from his religious convictions but an attempt to put them into practice.

The response, however, was far from uniformly positive.

“Who is doing it?” rather than “What is being done?”

Once the wider Protestant community became aware that the interdenominational movement was connected with [Unificationism](#), opposition increased sharply. Planned joint revival meetings were cancelled, while some of the ministers who had initially participated withdrew.

Lee came to believe that the controversy revealed a deeper problem within Korean Christianity. As he later put it, he had discovered that people were often more concerned about **“who is doing it”** than **“what is being done”**.

In other words, the religious identity or institutional affiliation of the person proposing an initiative could matter more than the initiative itself.

This observation became an important theme in Lee's subsequent efforts. He recognized that simply arguing that Unificationism was sincere in seeking dialogue would not be enough. Someone had to create opportunities for people on opposing sides actually to meet.

Continued in part 2: [Crossing the Walls of Religion](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

Featured image above: Lee Jae-seok ([이재석](#) – 1933-2021).
Photo: From front cover page of his autobiography from 2021, improved resolution by ChatGPT, August 2026.

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