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The Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago

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Vol. 72, No. 2

## **Soongook Choi: Our taesonbae**

A tribute by alumnus Timothy Sanghoon Lee, Assistant Professor, Brite Divinity School

Former DDH trustee (1989-97) Rev. Soongook Choi, passed away September 16, 2002, after a decade-long struggle with a progressively debilitating paralysis. Among Korean-American Disciples, Soongook is known as a taesonbae, literally a "big predecessor"- a deeply respected person who has made lasting contributions to his community.

To me, Soongook was a friend and mentor, a relationship that began in 1986 when, as a Disciples House Scholar and student at the Divinity School, I joined his Chicago Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I was a disillusioned Evangelical in search of a level-headed liberal spirit, which I found as I participated in the ministry of his church, as a Sunday school teacher and student-minister. I was ordained there in 1996.

As a churchman, Soongook was a trailblazer. He co-founded Chicago Christian Church in the early 1970s, originally as an Independent church, but soon one of the very first Korean Disciples churches. He faithfully served this little community while working full time as chaplain at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge. In the process he mentored a number of our leaders, including Dr. Geunhee Yu, executive pastor of Pacific Asian ministries, and Rev. John Donggook Roh, a DDH alumnus and founding minister of Evergreen Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Arlington Heights, Illinois.

Along with the late David Kagiwada, another DDH alumnus, and JoAnne Kagiwada, a DDH trustee, and a few others, Soongook laid the foundation of the North American Pacific-Asian Disciples (NA PAD), an umbrella organization whose members now approach eighty congregations. Soongook was also instrumental in the founding of the Korean Disciples Convocation. He was well known within the Stone-Campbell community in Korea, having served as president of Korean Christian College in Seoul before emigrating to the United States. His work with Disciples House and within the Chicago area continually emphasized the importance of not only the Korean community, but all racial-ethnic minority groups within the church.

Soongook was fluent in Korean, Japanese, and English, and had a degree from Vanderbilt Divinity School. Originally I wondered what in the Stone-Campbell movement attracted him. It didn't take long for me to realize that much in the Disciples ethos suited his independent, strong-willed, and peculiarly compassionate-albeit sometimes verging on eccentric-personality. When the Korean War erupted in 1950 it was this personality that compelled him to join a small volunteer corps, composed of Korean residents in Japan, to repel the invading communists. Out of thirty some volunteers in this combat unit, he was one of only three survivors.

Even when he was almost completely paralyzed, he continued to be a leader and mentor. Refusing to mope and languish, he spent many hours every day undergoing often painful physical therapy. His drive inspired other similarly disabled patients in the ward, and shamed at least one dejected younger patient into renewing his exercises. Moreover, Soongook never relinquished his interests in and prayers for the church. Right up to the day he died, he was calling and counseling various NA PAD leaders. Until the very end, Soongook lived up to the sobriquet with which his community honored him. Rev. Choi is survived by his wife, Myonghi, and two sons, Midong and David.

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