

Room to speak: Korean-American women in the PCUSA

by [Theresa Cho](#) in the [November 30, 2010](#) issue

In 2004, I was the 40th Korean-American clergywoman to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Forty seems a small number when you consider that in 2011, Korean-American clergywomen will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the first ordination in their ranks. The road to becoming a Korean-American clergywoman remains hard. Women who seek to be pastors lack community support and mentors and often have trouble obtaining a call to a church.

I was not aware of these difficulties when I felt a call to seminary. I had just met Mary Paik, one of the first Korean-American women to be ordained in the PCUSA, and she was proof to me that anything was possible.

At last summer's PCUSA General Assembly in Minneapolis, Korean-American women were given a historic, if awkward, opportunity to present our particular struggles to the church. Some Korean congregations had organized to form a Korean-language presbytery. Congregations in the PCUSA are typically organized into presbyteries according to geographic region. Korean-speaking congregations had asked to form a presbytery based on language. The plan for a nongeographic presbytery was overwhelmingly approved by an assembly committee.

I was part of a group of women who decided that we had to speak to the General Assembly about the issue. Our decision was galvanized after attending a luncheon sponsored by the National Council of Korean Presbyterian Churches. As delightful as our hosts were and as grateful as we were for the dishes of kimchee, we were dismayed by the way that Korean-American clergywomen were treated at this luncheon. Though six Korean-American women served as commissioners, or delegates, at the assembly—four in significant leadership positions—only the accomplishments of the men were recognized. All the kimchee in the world couldn't make up for the invisibility we felt.

We well understood the reasons that some people sought a nongeographic presbytery. Korean church leaders often feel that their voices are lost in the regional presbyteries and that their concerns are not addressed.

But we also knew that the plan carried a risk for Korean-American clergywomen. We knew that a nongeographic presbytery would make it more likely that Korean-American churches would seek clergy from within their own group—and that in those groups men's voices are heard much more easily than women's.

In the end, three of us Korean-American women spoke to the assembly. We tried to make it clear that we did not devalue the reasons and the desire for a nongeographic presbytery. We said that just as Korean-speaking pastors and elders find it challenging to participate in presbyteries that are primarily English-speaking, women have difficulty participating in Korean-language presbyteries, because their voices traditionally are not honored and respected. Our contention was that Korean women are more likely to have a voice when they are able to speak within the whole body of the church rather than only within the Korean community. A Korean-American presbytery would create an insular environment and promote male-only leadership.

Our three voices were able to shift the conversation. The proposal for a nongeographic presbytery was defeated 514-125. We were overwhelmed by the support.

The theme for the assembly was "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." I never felt the power of living water more than at that moment. My hope is that this action will make room for a conversation in which all voices can be heard. My hope is that living water will flow for all.