

Why are Korean missionaries flocking to Kenya?

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Curiosity about a four-day Bible study extravaganza had been building here for weeks. Across Nairobi, Korean pastor Ock Soo Park's smiling face has beamed down from posters as Kenyan followers handed out inviting fliers to locals.

The event was the Good News Mission Church's first African "National Bible Crusade," held last week in Nairobi's Nyayo Stadium to mark 20 years since Park first came to Kenya.

Inside the stadium, famous Korean and Kenya gospel singers performed, and Kenyan religious leaders translated Korean sermons. Locals danced and clapped on the field as Korean visitors strummed guitars on stage and sang in Swahili.

In South Korea, the Good News Mission Church is controversial in some quarters, with many mainstream Korean Christian groups rejecting its unorthodox understandings of sin and salvation.

But those details didn't deter roughly 2,000 Kenyans—many of whom were not evangelicals—from gathering on November 13 to dance and pray in a cold drizzle, or the 1,000 religious leaders who endorsed the "crusade," or Park's many Kenyan adherents.

As the presence of American and European missionaries has waned in Kenya since its mid-1900s heyday, mainstream and evangelical churches from Korea have trickled in. About 70 percent of Kenyans are Christian, and the country has become a bridgehead for Korean missions to Africa. For this current wave of missionaries, the aim appears to be less about conversion and more about propagating their view of correct biblical teachings.

Kenya has drawn more Korean missionaries than any other African country, says Barnabas Ra, a Korean missionary who has worked here for 14 years. The missions

began around 1981, and today there are 130 such “units”—singles and families—in the country. About 40 percent stay in urban areas; the rest fan out to more rural parts. Those working under the Korean Mission Fellowship, an umbrella group that does not include the Good News Mission Church, raise \$4 million to \$5 million a year for Kenyan churches.

Korean churches are drawn to Kenya by the prevalence of English, the relative proximity to South Korea, and an existing tradition of Korean missionaries. Their numbers are slowly rising in other African countries as well, Ra said.

### **'Wide, but shallow'?**

Grace Muthungu, a senior program officer with the National Council of Churches of Kenya, an umbrella organization for nonevangelical churches, says the surge in Korean missionaries is perplexing, given Christianity's prevalence. But their intentions seem good, she says.

“They have a sound doctrine; the Bible is their authority,” Muthungu said. “They’re not trying to bring a culture that is foreign to the people.”

And she acknowledges that Kenyan churches need outside help. The early American and European missionaries didn’t finish fully teaching the Christian faith, she said. Now that they’ve “gone quiet,” Kenyans need help from elsewhere.

Ra agreed. “There is a big population of Christian Kenyans, but when you study it more deeply, [you see that] Kenyan Christianity is shallow—wide, but shallow,” he said.

He sees the job of Korean missionaries like himself as teaching Kenyans “proper” gospel and training local pastors—and helping Christians to stand on their own. They try to stay out of cultural issues like tribal practices, although his mission has tried to end the practice of female genital mutilation here.

“Teach someone how to fish—that’s what [the Koreans] do for us,” said Isaac Lugaka, a pastor who traveled from the central Kenya city of Nakuru to attend this week's event. He said of early missionaries, “in the beginning they brought the Bible, but they didn’t teach us how to read it.”

### **Cultural mismatch?**

The delivery of services by Korean missionaries has created some mismatched expectations here. For example, while a Kenyan church might expect the missionaries to leave after they build a school or borehole, the missionaries often see that as just the start of the partnership.

Then there are cultural miscues, notes Good News Mission member Grace Muita. Koreans are calm, and enjoy classical instruments in their services, while Kenyans “are used to jumping and running around,” she says, laughing. But Korean missionaries are also learning Swahili to reach out to Kenyans.

Muthungu of the National Council of Churches says Korean missionaries could be role models for Kenya's vibrant Christian community.

“The Koreans have been bold enough to go to Africa. Maybe we need to emulate them,” she said. “If Koreans can come here, we to can send missionaries out.”