

Transforming Congregations through Community

Faith Formation from the Seminary to the Church

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Preface

This book is not about church growth or revitalization. Rather it explores ways to transform individualism in theological education and ministry and presents a pedagogical model for communal faith and ministry. Notwithstanding that, the revitalization of the mainline has been on my mind throughout the time that I have worked on this manuscript. As the global recession has worsened since 2008, its impact is reshaping mainline churches and theological schools as reflected in their shaky financial stability and shrinking enrollment. Churches and seminaries are trying to come up with solutions for this unfamiliar phenomenon by reinventing their identity, mission, and modes of curriculum delivery. Both clergy and laity and theological educators and students alike constantly ask hard questions: Will the mainline church survive in the twenty-first century? How do we stop the mainline from declining? Will theological education, as it is, make sense to the twenty-first-century church? What should we do differently to be relevant for the changing time? The hardest part of finding answers to these questions is that no one seems to have clear answers, and the future is so uncertain.

Much to the disappointment of readers, I also do not have answers to these questions. Rather, in this book, I offer a Christian religious educator's analysis of the current situation of the mainline church and make pedagogical suggestions for its transformation. If most of us are uncertain about the future of the church and theological education, I believe that it is necessary for us to closely look at what is working, or

not working, in our current ministry and education and find clues for the future. Integrating my own experiences in pastoral ministry and theological education over the last twenty-five years, I offer analyses and suggestions for the mainline and its theological education from an Asian American postcolonial feminist religious educator's perspective.

In this book I particularly explore ways to transform individualism, which I consider as the fundamental problem in our society as well as in theological education and ministry of the mainline, and present a pedagogical model for communal faith and ministry. There have been numerous critiques of individualism in theological discourse, and diverse small-group ministry models have been introduced to the local church; yet individualism is still a prevailing feature of the mainline churches. Throughout my personal and scholarly engagements, I have found that small-group movements, which are supposed to create and promote community, have actually perpetuated individualism in the mainline. As someone who grew up in Korea, one of the most communal cultures that still upholds almost a pure form of Confucian communal values, I have often found that my definition of community is not necessarily the same as that of my colleagues and friends who grew up in the United States. However, I could not explain the difference until one of my mentors, the late Christian educator Dr. David Ng, helped me to articulate it during a dinner conversation at the 1996 annual meeting of American Academy of Religion in New Orleans. The East Asian notion of community is based on solidarity, whereas the mainline US idea of community is more associated with relationships. A community of solidarity arising from common responsibilities and interests of its members cannot be easily broken, even when members are not satisfied with the community. However, if members understand community as relationships, then individual needs often have higher priority than those of the community. The members can relatively easily cut themselves off from relationships when and if they feel the community does not serve their needs.

In this book, I first analyze how individualistic the mainline's views of community are through a comparison with those of communal cultures (Chapter 1). I call the mainline's notion of community "collectivism" and that of communal cultures like East Asian countries "communalism." However, I do not offer a communal culture's model as an alternative to the mainline. Although communal cultures acknowledge and uphold the fundamental nature of the human as a communal being, they have their own problems, which in my opinion

are as serious as those of individualism: e.g., social harmony at the cost of the powerless and the deprivation of each member's individuality. Therefore in this book, I advocate a model of community that achieves a dual task: first, acknowledgment that a communal worldview respects human groups' relatedness; and second, overcoming notions of community that would sacrifice one's sacred calling as an individual to social hierarchy and nepotism.

I find such an ideal community in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scripture. In Chapters 2 and 3, I examine biblical notions of community as reflected in the People of God and the Body of Christ. Interpreting from a postcolonial feminist perspective, I find that biblical community offers a much-needed, albeit problematic, sense of community for the mainline church and theological education as it simultaneously uplifts humanity's communal nature and each member's unique individuality and accountability. Although a biblical sense of community provides fundamental directions for this book, the highlight of the book is Part 2 where I explore pedagogical principles to transform current mainline churches to such a community in the twenty-first century.

In Part 2, I argue that if the mainline rethinks its ministry through pedagogical reformation, a healthy community can be created and promoted. I introduce and utilize particular foundational educational principles that are very familiar to religious educators but not necessarily to ministers and theologians. The first principle is that schooling and education are not the same. Although schooling is a form of education, many people misunderstand it as an equal concept to education. Schooling mainly happens in classroom contexts with teachers who have authority to transmit knowledge to students who are recipients of deposited information, whereas education is a holistic endeavor that involves people's whole being and their entire community. It happens in every life context of the people, including schools. In Chapter 4, I show concrete differences between the two and argue that the mainline can create a healthy community by approaching its entire ministry as an educational endeavor.

The second principle is that education in the church happens in and through everything we do beyond the explicit educational programming. Therefore, a church's entire ministry of worship, fellowship, teaching, mission, and proclamation can serve as its curriculum. Even without participating in an educational event, people teach and learn how to be a member of the community through the church's basic forms of ministry. In Chapter 5, through several concrete examples, I explain the meaning

of curriculum, which is different from the narrowly understood conventional view, and show a holistic view of curriculum to help mainline churches move towards communal ways of being the church.

Both of these principles are well articulated by religious educator Maria Harris in her book *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*.¹ Most of my students at the Graduate Theological Union are very excited about her proposals to move the church towards being a transformative community. However, others express their frustration at not being able to translate the principles for their own particular ministerial contexts. Therefore, in Chapter 6 I address those concerns raised by my students and provide a step-by-step guideline for developing a curriculum for communal faith formation.

In Part 3, I present detailed educational methodologies and examples for communal faith formation. Particularly, I show what “the entire life of the church” as a curriculum would look like. In Chapter 7, I propose a communal preaching and Bible study model and method that utilize postcolonial biblical hermeneutics, which conjoins critical thinking with multiethnic, multireligious, and multicultural voices. Through this model I challenge mainline Christians to reconsider their notions about community and to redraw the boundaries for God’s reign. In Chapter 8, I continue to explore a new way to teach the Bible. Here, I introduce the Traveling Bible Study to provide people who experience learning cul-de-sacs in church education programs to get easier access to faith formation. This study model is also designed to help people apply theology to places beyond the church; to cultivate meaningful connections between their study and daily life contexts; and, thus, to expand the boundaries of community. In Chapter 9, I focus on the church’s administrative system. To create and promote a sense of community, both programs and the administrative structure of the church should be communal. However, many faith communities only focus on communal programs with a compartmentalized structure which, in fact, contradicts their efforts. In this chapter I explore processes to create a communal administrative system that can strengthen the sense of community. In the last chapter, as an alternative to the current prevailing multiculturalism of mainline churches, an individualistic and colonial way of engaging with different racial and ethnic communities, I offer interculturalism and explore how it helps the mainline church to build a communal church that is also an interculturally engaging church. Throughout the book, I conclude each chapter with discussion topics and praxis exercises. My hope is that this

practical theology book helps seminary students, clergy, and laity of progressive mainline denominations to explore ways to revitalize the church through transforming individualism in theological education and diverse ministry contexts.

There are many people who shared in the process of creating this project and who have been an important part of my journey as a communitarian theologian and educator. To all of them I would like to express my indescribable thanks. First, I would like to thank my parishioners in Korea, California, and New England, especially those whom I met in Sinbanpo Methodist Church, and Dr. Kejoon Lee, and those at Bolton United Methodist Church in Bolton, Connecticut. Without their generosity and support, this project might still be germinating. I also would like to acknowledge the special friendship offered to me by some of my friends, especially during the difficult time I experienced after the sudden death of my spouse: Jinwon Kim, Rev. Kristin Langstraat, Dansil Kye, Rev. Kyungmoon Yoon, Dr. Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, Dr. Soo Young Kwon of Yonsei University, and my childhood friends Eunjoo and Meehyun. I am ever grateful to have them as my friends. Through their friendship, I have experienced the healing power of a community of friends.

I am also in great debt to my esteemed colleagues at Pacific School of Religion (PSR) in Berkeley, California, who genuinely care about creating a just community. I am proud to be their colleague. Judith Berling, Jeffrey Kuan, Benny Liew, Fumitaka Matsuoka, and Randi Walker, along with their families, created a true family-like community for me when I thought that I had lost one. My friends and mentors from Pacific, Asian, North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM), especially Seung Ai Yang, Rita Brock, Kwok Pui Lan, Anne Joh, and Nami Kim, helped me to believe that a just academic community is also possible and exists in real life. A special thanks also goes to my students at PSR and the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) who are ever eager to ask critical questions and challenge my assumptions. They comprise part of my philosophical checks and balances. Among them I give special thanks to Beth Ritter-Conn and A. Vanessa Hawkins, doctoral students at the GTU, who read the entire manuscript, providing careful editing support. Without their help, this book would not have been the same.

I give very special thanks to my family whose godly love I cannot find words to describe, especially to Mom and Dad, who have taken my ministry and scholarship to heart with sacrifice, prayer, and love.

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PART 1

**UNDERSTANDING
COMMUNITY AND
A BIBLICAL CALL
FOR COMMUNAL FAITH**

Chapter 1

Individualism, Collectivism, and Communalism

What Do We Mean by Community?

“Is this *OUR* husband?” “I am so glad to meet you, *OUR* husband!” These were words used by some of my students when they meet my late husband. To introduce communal cultures’ view of community and compare it with that of many North Americans, I often frame my class discussions using Korean communal linguistics. Although Koreans have words for “I,” “me,” “my,” and “mine,” we seldom use them. For example, the most culturally acceptable way to introduce one’s spouse is by saying, “This is *OUR* husband,” or “This is *OUR* wife.” Although “my husband” is grammatically correct, using “I” language is culturally awkward.

Korean communal linguistics originated in a communal worldview. Koreans, like many African, Hispanic, Native, and other Asian American cultures, view the person as a part of a whole. In contrast, most

European American cultures see the person as an independent and autonomous entity. These differences in the view of the person are reflected in each worldview's concept of community. In communal cultures, community is generally identified with people's solidarity, regardless of their individual circumstances. In individually oriented worldviews, the community is constituted of individuals who share similar interests.¹ For example, a Korean word for "group," *moim*, originated from the word *mom*, "body." Thus "group" in Korean means people *within* the same boundary; those who identify themselves as one body. Conceptually, this is very different from its English counterpart, which connotes a relationship between their units instead of organic wholeness.

In this chapter, I compare concepts of community. By focusing on different notions of the person, I invite readers to identify the concept of community used in their faith communities. Throughout, I frame this discussion with observations by social scientists, especially their research on anthropology; namely, I ask what it means to be an individual, and, more importantly, what identity an individual has relative to others, and whether "others" connotes a group in the Korean linguistic sense or *many* individuals.

SMALL AS BIG

For religious institutions, small groups are the rage. According to Robert Wuthnow, who studied small groups in American religious settings in partnership with the Gallup organization, about 40 percent of adult Americans are currently involved in some form of small group, and approximately 60 percent of these members belong to a group formally associated with a church or synagogue.² In other words, almost half of adult Americans across racial, gender, age, class, and geographic lines regularly participate in small groups. Although the number of mainline Christians involved in small groups is not as big as that of conservative Protestant Christians,³ small groups are a growing phenomenon in the mainline church. Cell groups, home groups, covenant groups, ChristCare groups, in addition to Bible studies, which constitute the most widespread small group, cut a noteworthy swath across the mainline.

Regarding this phenomenon, Wuthnow observes that small groups

provide a sense of community and family in the midst of “turbulent upheaval.” According to Wuthnow, the average family moves at least once every three years, and half of those families are restructured by divorce.⁴ Lonely Americans find support and encouragement for life in small groups as they care for each other, pray with one another, and share stories of life together. The American church’s increasing attention to small-group ministries may be a response to an apprehended yearning for community by its constituency. It also may be an effort by churches to calm angst about changes in the social order. Sadly, though, the traditional ministry of the church, which greatly depends on clergy leadership for spiritual growth, arguably is inefficient and inadequate to respond to these changes. Weekend services are no longer convenient for many Americans because of members’ demanding careers and family lives, so both conservative and mainline churches find small groups to be efficient alternative ministries. Small groups waylay the cost of physical plants and are attractive to those looking for support groups, ones that sometimes make few demands.⁵

Based on Wuthnow’s observations, one could argue that the popular notion of Americans as alienated individualists is no longer valid: that Americans are becoming communalists like those in other parts of the world. However, if one looks closely at the nature of small groups, one easily sees that small groups typically exhibit what I call “collectivism,” rather than communalism. The sense of community undergirding the current American trend in small groups is far different from that of communalists for they lack solidarity and kinship-like relationships; rather, the notion of community in mainline small groups is more like a gathering of individuals in reciprocal relationships. These groups are made up of individuals who share similar needs and interests. Individuals purportedly gather on a regular basis to develop their personal spirituality. Members support and pray for each other, especially for those who are in crisis. They even make occasional sacrifices for other group members. However, if they find the group burdensome or unfulfilling, they frequently abandon it.⁶ Wuthnow’s observation about group identity is directly on point:

Members are not people who are disproportionately oriented toward community or toward fitting in, helping others, or bending their interests toward the will of the group. They are strong individualists who bring their individual needs and interests to their group.⁷

Hereto, group identity is predicated on personal attainment, which rarely entails sacrifice. I will present my own research findings shortly, ones that parallel Wuthnow's observations. In the interim, I turn to a discussion about how individualism and communalism view the world and community differently.

THE TWO DIFFERENT VIEWS OF THE PERSON: INDIVIDUALISM AND COMMUNALISM

The topic of individualism and communalism was a major research subject in Geert Hofstede's *Culture's Consequences*.⁸ After analyzing about 117,000 protocols that IBM collected from its own employees in 66 countries, Hofstede defines individualism and communalism as follows:

Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.⁹

Individualism and communalism are two completely different cultural patterns that lead people to view the world and life through different lenses. Harry Triandis, who has done extensive studies on the two patterns of culture, articulates the differences on the basis of ingroup/outgroup dynamics.¹⁰ In communal societies, emphasis is on:

- a) the views, needs, and goals of the ingroup rather than those of oneself;
- b) social norms and duty defined by the ingroup rather than by one's pleasure;
- c) beliefs shared with the ingroup rather than on beliefs that distinguish oneself from the ingroup; and
- d) great readiness to cooperate with ingroup members.

Individualistic societies emphasize:

- a) one's own views, needs, and goals rather than those of others;

- b) pleasure, fun, personal enjoyment rather than social norms or duty as defined by others;
- c) one's beliefs as unique; and
- d) maximizing one's own outcomes.

In general, the individualistic cultural pattern is found in most northern and western regions of Europe and in North America, whereas the communal cultural pattern is prevalent in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific.¹¹ These cultural differences result in different emphases on relationship and behavior patterns. Individualistic societies emphasize "I" consciousness: emotional independence, individual initiative, right to privacy, and specific friendship. Separated from family, religion, and agreement as sources of authority, duty, and moral example, individualists seek to work out their own form of action by autonomously pursuing happiness and satisfying their wants. Unlike individualistic societies, communal societies stress "we" consciousness: communal identity, emotional dependence, group-minded friendship, group decision making, and particularism.¹² A person in communal cultures is perceived as an adjunct of the family system, and the identity of an individual is neither independent nor important. Group cohesion and conformity dominate the family structure. Therefore the needs and goals of people are often sacrificed for the attainment of the community's interests. C. Harry Hui and Harry Trandis sum up these characteristics of communalism as "Concern of Others."¹³

COMMUNAL CONCEPT OF THE PERSON

Communalists view themselves primarily as parts of the whole, as clearly reflected in the Chinese word for person, a notion shared by most East Asians. The word for person in Chinese (人) connotes two people leaning against each other. The pictographic syntax of the word assumes sharing of ego boundaries, and, accordingly, the formation of personhood is in relationship with that of others. The communalists' notion of person includes the attributes of the group to which a person belongs, whether that group is that of a larger region or of a tribe. For example, whenever unacquainted Koreans meet, it is very common for them immediately to determine their possible relatedness by asking which region they are from, which schools they attended, and to which surname family branch they belong. For instance, if two people belong

to the same branch of the Lee family, the next step is to determine their respective generation by determining one another's own or parents' and grandparents' shared generation names. This way a younger generation can show proper respect to older members of his or her family. As soon as Koreans determine their relatedness, the two immediately revere this "we" relationship. Once relationships are established, communalists are expected to accede to the goals of the group rather than to esteem personal goals. One is expected to do what the group expects, asks, or demands, without undermining it or voicing opposition.¹⁴

When conflict exists between the group and the individual, communalists are expected to choose the goals of the group for the sake of its harmony, even sacrificing their personal lives. Since a communalist's personhood is only defined in relationship with that of others, it is important for communalists to maintain good relationships with ingroup members, even if from a self-serving perspective it is not in their best interests to do so. As long as communalists consistently show loyalty to the group, the group will ensure support and security for each person.

Another example of the communalist worldview is seen in Korean and Japanese linguistics. As mentioned earlier, Koreans use "we" or "our" even when they refer to their own thing: "our house" or "our husband" instead of "my house" or "my husband." Korean cultural convention expects a married woman, who neither shares her husband with others nor has an intention to do so, to say "our husband" even though "my husband" is grammatically correct. Here, *We* does not mean the coexistence of *I* and *You* as independent individual units; rather it indicates that, for example, *You* and *You* and *You* and *I* are the same reality. As Soo-Won Lee observe, "I and you exist not as separate units but as a unified one. At the moment when two individuals abandon their own perspective and put themselves in their partner's shoes, they become one, not a separate two."¹⁵

A similar example is found in Japanese linguistics. The English word "self" is usually translated by the Japanese word *jibun*, and vice versa. However, unlike the English word for self, *jibun* connotes "one's share of the shared life space";¹⁶ that is, oneself as an inseparable part of ourselves. So when two Japanese people exchange greetings by asking how the other party is, the customary way of saying it is, "How is *jibun*?" which literally means, "How is ourselves?"¹⁷

In sum, persons in communal societies can be fully understood only in connection with the larger social whole. "Others are included within the boundaries of the self."¹⁸ Accordingly, attachments, relatedness,

connectedness, oneness, and dependency among people are much more important than independence and individuality in communal society. Communalists find themselves adrift when they fail to adjust to the community to which they belong. Since everyone needs one another, this need forces people to be vulnerable when facing the loss of the relationship.

INDIVIDUALISTIC VIEW OF THE PERSON

A “healthy” adult in the individualistic culture is described as an autonomous, competitive, independent, achievement- and freedom-oriented individual.¹⁹ Accordingly, autonomy, separation, and independence are emphasized as positive characteristics. Development means moving toward independence. Maturity is understood as self-reliance and personal autonomy. Mature and healthy people are expected to be in charge of themselves and in control of their own behavior. Robert Bellah, who has done extensive studies on American individualism, gives an example of this individualistic value and way of life. Brian, one of his interviewees says:

The rule of thumb out here is that if you’ve got the money, honey, you can do things as long as your thing doesn’t destroy someone else’s property, or interrupt their sleep, or bother their privacy, then that’s fine. If you want to go in your house and smoke marijuana and shoot dope and get all screwed up, that’s your business, but don’t bring that out on the street, don’t expose my children to it, just do your thing.²⁰

Thus, individualists are motivated by their own preferences, needs, and rights.²¹ If an individual has personal goals that are inconsistent with the goals of his or her groups, it is regarded as natural that the individual attempts to reach his or her goals and ignore those of the group. In other words, an individual is the only owner of the person. This notion is well reflected in the writings of John Locke, who is regarded as an enormously influential figure for this worldview. Locke says,

From all, which it is evident, that through the things of nature are given in common, yet man, by being master of himself, and proprietor of his own person, and the actions or labor of it, has still in himself the great foundation of property: and that, which made up the great part of what he applied to the support or comport of

his being, when invention and arts had improved the conveniences of life, was perfectly his own, and did not belong in common to others.²²

To Locke, the individual is prior to society, which comes into existence only through the voluntary contract of individuals trying to maximize their own self-interest. In sum, the person in individualist cultures is defined apart from his or her specific collectives and contexts. M. Brinton Lykes calls this view of the person autonomous individualism.²³ Whether one's need for affiliation is high or low, the person is thought to be independent from others.

SHADES OF COMMUNALISM IN RECENT WESTERN THOUGHT: COLLECTIVISM

The autonomous self is academia's primary focus in discussions about personhood, especially in psychology.²⁴ Communal personhood as understood by the majority of the world (Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans) is not taken seriously nor has it been a major player in academic discourse. Only recently have scholars started looking at communal personhood. For instance, Edward Sampson asserts that the autonomous individualistic notion of the self is an ahistorical and overbroad universalist understanding, one that ignores both the socio-historical context of the "subjects" and the social context that shapes the development of one's psychological wherewithal.²⁵

Sampson argues that people shape their personhood in a particular context in which they live. Through interaction with others who share the values and ideology of a larger whole, a person internalizes those values and tries to be a desirable person, someone that society values. When they feel that they are accepted and valued by society, they have a positive self-concept. If they feel that they do not fit into the norms of society and are not valued, their self-concept becomes negative. This, then, brings focus to the problem as Sampson understands it, for autonomous individualism defines the person apart from his or her historical context; it describes the person as a self-contained, separate entity whose essence can be meaningfully abstracted from his or her relationships and contexts.²⁶ Arguably, the autonomous individualistic view of the person is not only incomplete, but it is an inauthentic understanding of the person. Hereto some of the dominant theories of psychology (e.g., Psychoanalytic Theory, Object Relation Theory,

Behaviorism, Cognitivism, Eriksonian Ego Identity Theory, and even the Humanistic Movement in psychology represented by Abraham Maslow) are based on a Western individualistic worldview, one that generalizes human nature anecdotally.²⁷

Although the autonomous individualistic view of the person is a description of the person imagined solely by one particular constituency (namely, it is that of white, middle-class, college-educated males), it has become the universal understanding of the person.²⁸ The prevalence of this individualistic view of the person is associated with the Enlightenment, which sought to find a fundamental universality and a deep structure that all groups and, hence, individuals share.²⁹ With a universal norm also came an aversion to otherness and the differences suggested by it. Even though the Enlightenment sought far-reaching equality, Sampson insists that it was a homogenized one. Unless one shared the sameness of Western individualism, one was not equal. The views of women, people of color, and people of subordinate social class were excluded.

Today the Western world dominates the world intellectually, economically, and politically, so alternative anthropologies are short-changed. Accordingly, Sampson argues that the Western individualistic view of the person now is a means for maintaining a white, male status quo, one whose privilege is unwittingly supported by contemporary psychology.

As an alternative, some critics advocate a communal approach. Emphasizing the dialogic nature of the human person, Sampson insists that human nature is socially constructed in and through dialogues, conversations, and talk, and is therefore to be found only through relationships between and among people. There are no lone rangers when it comes to making meaning. Hereto, Sampson even suggests the shared ownership of self: “a person’s interior is conversationally constituted and conversationally sustained. The presence of other is invariably involved.”³⁰

Echoing Sampson, philosopher Kathryn Addelson argues that nothing is completely independent in this world. Like Sampson, she also opines that an individualistic anthropology—one that reflects a male, Western, well-to-do worldview—dominates intellectual life.³¹ Addelson submits that an individualistic perspective is a major obstacle to doing intellectually and morally responsible work in academia because it is so pervasive in higher education’s epistemology, ethics, politics, and notion of truth and time. For example, in epistemology and ethics, an indi-

vidualistic perspective leads a researcher to become a judging observer, an objective outsider, who is separated from time, place, social position, body, and intimate relations. This is a misunderstanding of the collective nature of human life, for even scientists, who seek objectivity, never do so without interacting with the world that they are studying. “Truth” is always against a backdrop of collective action that includes legislators passing laws and police and court officials enforcing them.³² Every dimension of human social life is an outcome of what people do together. Individuals are products of collective action; they are inseparable from customs, norms, beliefs, and meanings. Hence, facts and truths are collectively enacted. Accordingly, one must utilize a collective philosophical anthropology to address human life fully.

Acknowledging the Western individualistic view’s dominance and limitations is a good start. The next step will always be tricky, however, lest a communal-based worldview be communal only in name.³³ Korean psychologists Sang-Chin Choi and Soo-Hyang Choi argue that the concept of “collectivism,” a term typically used in Western psychological literature to reference communal identity, bespeaks Western individualism. “[Collectivism] . . . appears to be formulated to conveniently provide an accentuating comparability to the Western individualistic framework.”³⁴ According to Choi and Choi, one of the consistent themes associated with collectivism is its emphasis on group identity, which refers to a collection of individuals rather than to a group. Communalism as “many individuals” is an individualistic perspective, one that radically reshapes communal cultures’ notion of personhood. The Western notion of communalism as a group ignores the contextual framework of communal societies; namely, it effectively voids the binding force and relationship that Korean “We-ness” discourse requires.³⁵

The idea of community as a collection of individuals comes from individualists’ understanding of “we” as the coexistence of independent “I” and “you.” However, to a communalist, “I” and “you” are not individual units but, rather, a unified single entity.³⁶ Choi and Choi warn that an individualistically driven understanding of community is liable not only to turn the meaning of communal culture on its head but also to perpetuate witlessness about genuine cross-cultural differences, thereby perpetuating dominance of the individualistic perspective in the area of psychology, gussied up as “multiculturalism.”³⁷

CHURCH AS THERAPY? OBSERVATIONS FROM THE BAY AREA

I asked a group of people who belong to a ChristCare group at a United Methodist church in suburban San Francisco to name the most representative feature of their small group. All of them said that the ChristCare group is their weekly therapy session. One female member said,

I am a quite successful lawyer. But the success comes with hard and stressful work. The ChristCare provides me a calm and non-competitive space that I don't find at work and home. I don't know how I can survive without this weekly "therapy" group meeting. These people know me and understand my hectic work and home life. Through praying with them, and doing a Bible study here every week, I gain encouragement and deeper faith.

When I asked the group's members whether they sacrifice time, energy, money, and personal freedom to help each other, they were silent for a while and smiled at each other. Then a member said that they always support each other, but no one could cite an instance except that they meet with each other weekly. Like Wuthnow's interviewees, members of this group help each other as long as their personal lives are not disrupted, and hence the misidentification of sacrifice with the act of meeting once a week. Privacy and personal life come before community.

This notion of community is a world apart from that of members of a Korean-American United Methodist church and a Tongan United Methodist church in the same area. Neither church has a ChristCare group. Unlike many mainline small groups that are driven by group members' needs or appetites, the members of the Korean and the Tongan churches belong to a class according to their residential district. As a class, they meet once a week for class prayer and fellowship. They meet not in the church, but at a member's home, which arguably provides a higher comfort level for newcomers. In their meetings, members talk about their past week's activities; about their concerns, hopes, sorrows, and joys. Generally a meal is served. As class members, they also participate in and take responsibilities for wide-ranging church activities. In the case of Koreans, each class takes a turn to provide lunch for the entire church every Sunday. Accordingly, they meet more than once a week. In addition to church activities, class members attend family ceremonial observance such as weddings, funerals, birthdays, and so on. Often households provide free childcare for other members, and

they provide labor-laden services for other members such as preparing food for the aforementioned observances.

When asked to provide the best word to describe the meaning of the class, both Koreans and Tongans used “family.” In fact, many Koreans refer to group members as family members. When asked whether a group like this is a burden, the response of a Korean woman summed up the typical response. She said that, “Yes, [belonging is a burden]. Once in a while it feels too much, but that is what family is about. We do it because we are family!”

This clearly suggests different concepts of community between the Anglo United Methodist small-group members and ethnic United Methodist class members. The Anglo members identify themselves collectively. They belong to and are dependent on their small group for personal fulfillment. Ironically, though, and from the standpoint of communal identity, the group is community only because it says so. There is no merging of egos incident to a larger purpose. People seek to fulfill individual needs and interests in a group setting. In this sense, the growing small-group movement of the mainline is rather promoting individualism than community. In fact, Wuthnow’s reports conclude that one of the most salient features of American small groups is “Me-First religion”:

Group members are encouraged to think about the ways in which spirituality can help them, to apply faith concepts to their personal problems, and to share these problems with the group. In the process, it is easy for these practical, personal applications of faith to take precedence over everything.³⁸

In most small groups, discussions, prayers, and studies are heavily focused on the needs and interests of individuals. Members are encouraged to understand a topic through the lens of their personal lives. To relate it to a larger whole and then back to themselves is seen as dogmatically impersonal. For example, Daniel Olson, who conducted an ethnographical research of a Disciple Bible study group at a United Methodist Church, reports that,

Most of the life changes that group participants reported are of an inward, personal nature. During the interviews, six of the members told me that their participation in the Disciple program had given them a stronger faith, an inner peace, and a great ability to cope with stress.³⁹

In sum, small-group ministries provide structure and environment for personal growth and communal support in a time-wise economical way. However, unlike one's expectation that small-group movements would transform individualism in mainline churches to a world-is-my-parish gospel, they strengthen individualism by promoting personal faith growth as an end in itself. As I do my research and listen to mainline Christian stories, there is much excitement for the potential change that small groups would bring to the church: that they purportedly are reintroducing community to the mainline. Yet I see them only promoting more individualism.

COMMUNAL WORLDVIEWS' POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

If the individualistic notion of community that prevails in mainline churches does not create and promote an authentic sense of community, what is the alternative? Where do we look for wisdom? Admittedly I emphasize different senses of community as culled from racial and ethnic mainline churches, so readers may think that my repertoire is too limited: that I should use communal worldviews and then some as models for mainline churches.

Communal cultures frame the interactive, group nature of human existence. Although communal cultures acknowledge human existence as a group endeavor, something which individualism misses, it admittedly has shortcomings. Since communal cultures require individuals to define themselves as part of the community, especially as members of the family, and thus to subordinate personal goals to those of the community, they hinder development of their own individuality and personhood. Moreover, the values of harmony and community that many communal societies emphasize are based on a hierarchical view of the person. The hierarchy of superior and inferior maintains the orderliness and harmony of power.⁴⁰ The superior partners have rights and duties of educating inferior partners, and the inferior partners have only obligations and no rights. In these hierarchical relationships, the inferior ones are forced to sacrifice for the value of harmony. Without their sacrifice, harmony is not possible. Therefore, it can be said that for inferior partners, the value of harmony ironically is a system of dehumanization and injustice.

Young Ae Kim, a Korean feminist, pastoral psychologist, finds low

self-esteem among many Korean people as a result of communalism based on hierarchy.⁴¹ The Korean communal sense of connectedness has less rigid ego boundaries, so that identification and projection of one person onto another occurs easily. When a person's ego faces that of another, there is ready identification with the other as one adapts one's own ego thus to orchestrate harmony. This tendency toward identification with others, especially with the powerful, forces people to align themselves with power and status. In other words, as culture inculcates respects between parties, the result is that of psychological dependency and lack of self-identity. Women, in particular, are forced to uphold patriarchy, but in doing so they lose their self-identity. An overemphasis on relatedness deprives Korean women of the power to know themselves, and it contributes to repressed feelings, diffused boundaries, low self-esteem, and dependency on others. Sacrificing one's needs for others' gain may result in anxiety about one's role in the universe, shame, and cluelessness about one's own talents and God's calling for oneself.

Communal cultures in general, and Korean society in particular, highly regard a person who is not very expressive—someone who is calm and prudent. The hierarchical and patriarchal social structure forces women and the powerless to be subordinate and silent. Silence blocks people from hearing their own voice, and the lack of power to know one's inner wisdom or knowledge forces one to defer to outer authority.⁴² One becomes completely dependent on authority. If people hear their inner voices, they feel guilty toward persons in authority, as if they were depriving them of their power. Through this process, people in powerless situations not only lose their voices but also the power to claim their own *raison d'être*. In other words, they are socialized into being dependent and powerless beings. Jean Baker Miller notes that while the powerful define the powerless as inferior, even the powerless cannot believe in their abilities. Because the powerless have to survive, they tend not to disturb the powerful.⁴³

Communal cultures, which favor ingroup members over outgroup members, also create conflicts and antagonism among themselves.⁴⁴ One of the salient features of communalism is its clear distinction between ingroup and outgroup. Those who have “we” relations are considered members of the ingroup, and those who do not belong are members of the outgroups. The most prevalent “we” networks in communal societies are family, region, and school. “When people are connected through these networks, they treat others as members of ‘we.’ Once people are regarded as being within the boundary of ‘we,’ they incur

instant closeness, assume social interdependence, and consequently give more favor to others in the group.”⁴⁵ Accordingly, the more networks people share, the more smoothly business flows. Although the primary purpose of these networks is to promote good social relations, since they are only ingroup-centered networks, those networks often cause conflicts between ingroup and outgroup members of a communal society.

Such ingroup-centered networks not only create social favoritism, preventing outgroup members from having fair opportunities, but also hamper the process of forming society as a whole.⁴⁶ For instance, one of the most serious social problems in Korea is regional antagonism. Although it is a small country, people from three different regions, namely Kyungsango, Chonrado, and Choongchungdo, have had serious conflicts over many issues, especially about politics. Political parties are organized by people from the same region rather than by political positions, and national elections provide the opportunity to have people from the same region elected. Among laypeople, such regional conflicts are also prevalent. People from Chonrado and Kyungsango try to avoid establishing any possible relationships through marriages, job transfers, and so on. The Korean Psychological Association held several symposia on regional antagonism in Korea, the first being held in June 1988, under the theme, “The psychological viewpoint on regional antagonism in Korea.” Korean social psychologists Kyung-Hwan Min and Hai-Sook Kim argue that regional antagonism in Korea is a pathological case of communalism that has created tension between ingroups and outgroups.⁴⁷ That is, although communalism itself is not to blame for intergroup conflict within a society, when the range of the ingroup is limited to a specific subgroup within a society, such as native region, rather than on a more superordinate level of category, such as the entire nation or humankind, it can result in pathological outgroup rejection and ingroup favoritism.

A model of community for the mainline needs a dual task: first, acknowledgment that a communal worldview celebrates our group relatedness; and, second, this model needs to challenge notions of community that would sacrifice one’s sacred calling as an individual to social hierarchy and nepotism. In other words, a balance between communal culture’s worldview and individualistic culture’s stress on each person’s novelty is an ideal pursuit for the mainline. I find such a balance in biblical models of community, which is the subject of the next two chapters.

SUGGESTED EXERCISE AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

Exercise: Tell Me about Your Family⁴⁸

1. Have people get into two-member groups. One party will be A and the other will be B.
2. Give A and B the following instructions, respectively:

Instruction for A:

Tell your partner a particular story about your (extended) family from your childhood. After you finish, listen to your partner's family story. While your partner is telling his or her story, count how many times s/he uses these words—I, me, my, and mine. Your partner should not know that you are counting.

Instruction for B:

Your partner will tell you a story about his or her family from childhood. Listen to his or her story attentively. After your partner is done, tell him/her your own family story.

1. Ask A to tell B what A was doing and the number of times that B used "I" words.
2. Ask groups to reflect on their experiences.
3. Ask groups to retell the same family stories, this time using only "we" language.
4. Ask the groups to share their observations with one another.

Suggested Discussion Topics

1. What are some of the core characteristics of individualism, collectivism, and communalism? Name some examples. How are they similar to or different from each other?
2. Reflect on your faith community, especially on a particular program intended to build community. Name five characteristics of the program. Compare them to the characteristics that you named in number 1. What is the nature of the "community" in your faith communities? How is it helping or hindering?