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# Unity Movement of the Korean Presbyterian Church

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**Abstract**

This study examines the 2005 reunion of the Presbyterian Church of Korea's Hapdong and Gaehyuk denominations as a case of ecclesial reconciliation within modern Korean Protestantism. While scholarship has often emphasised narratives of schism, this work reconstructs the historical, theological, and socio-political dynamics that produced repeated divisions and the pathways that enabled reunification. An integrated theoretical framework combines historical reconstruction, phenomenological hermeneutics, narrative identity, and contextualist intellectual history with theological analysis of the church, ecclesial communion, and reconciliation. Central attention is given to the leadership and repentant agency of Pastor Kyu-Oh Chung, long regarded as a principal figure behind nearly every major schism within Korean Presbyterianism. The very leader once associated with division became the agent of repentance and, by taking a prominent role at the forefront of the unity negotiations, decisively enabled the success of the 2005 "Union Principles Agreement." Documentary sources identify the importance of union committees, mutual recognition among presbyteries and seminaries, and public reaffirmation of union at the 90th General Assembly.The study illustrates that reunion was theologically based on biblical themes of reconciliation and unity. It was institutionally based on negotiated recognition among seminaries, presbyteries, and the media, and politically in a public reaffirmation that confronted contemporary issues. The work contends that diversity in confession is compatible with unity. Open government and reciprocal recognition can sustain doctrinal integrity and cure the wounds inflicted on broken relationships. It offers an empirically nuanced and theoretically astute examination of Christian unity in Korea and argues that repentance, leadership, and institutional form function as essential mediators between theological principle and ecclesial practice. Building on these findings, it sets forth a mobile approach for post-conflict settlement churches, contending that humility, theological norms held in common, and incremental organizational integration can transform difference into durable unity with enduring significance for the global church.

**Keywords:** Gaehyuk, Hapdong, Kyu-Oh Chung, Korean Presbyterian Church (KPC), ecclesial reconciliation

## Introduction

The schism in the Korean Presbyterian Church (KPC) was the culmination of a multifaceted interplay of historical, theological, and sociopolitical factors, which was ongoing for many decades. To appreciate fully the depth at which divisions had set in, one has to take note of internal doctrinal disputes as well as varying external conditions on the part of the KPC. The KPC grew to be a powerful religious organization in the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, with its members campaigning for social and national reform and evangelisation (Jeong et al., 2021). The church played a crucial role in the early Korean independence movement, social justice, education, and health care movements and thus became one of the dominant religious institutions in Korean life. All the prominent KPC leaders became popular during the March First Movement of 1919 when Korea was struggling for independence against Japanese colonial rule between 1910 and 1945 (Park & Chung, 2024). In accordance with its social and spiritual restoration mission, the church rationalized its engagement in such activities (Choi, 2020). But then, internal theological conflicts and occupation by the Japanese imperial state threatened to undo those early efforts at church unification. Christian clergy and other church ministers were forced by Japanese colonial occupation in Korea to join in worship at Shinto shrines, further fueling the crisis (Kim & Chung, 2023).This was an issue both of profound moral gravity and of theology for the Korean Church. The majority of Christians believed that shrine worship in Shinto was idolatry and against the first commandment in the Bible. The Presbyterian Church of Korea (Kosin) was established in 1952 by Sang-Dong Han, Nam-Seon Ju, and other traditionalist pastors who had resisted Shinto shrine worship during Japanese occupation with an emphasis on doctrinal purity and tradition of anti-Shinto stance (Chung & Kim, 2017; Kim, 2025). Conflicts regarding Japanese Shinto religion among the KPC leadership were responsible for this split.

The second split of KPC took place in 1953, and it was mainly due to a doctrine dispute between the liberal and conservative factions. Dispute over the authority of the Bible and contemporary theology led to the establishment of the Korean Christian Presbyterian Church (Kijang). The adherents of Kijang were more liberal in their approach, calling for dialogue with contemporary theologians and ecumenists. Kyu-Oh Chung (1914–2006) was a prominent member of the radical KPC (Kang et al., 2025). He strongly opposed liberal theology and embraced fundamentalist views, including a strong belief in the infallibility of Scripture (Kim, 2007). In September 1945, Chung entered the Chosun Theological Seminary, where he studied together with Du-Seop Eom, who later became a famous professor of spiritual studies, and Joon-Gon Kim, who later founded the Korea Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC). It was during this period that the growing influence of liberal theology began to be recognized in the seminary (Kang et al., 2025). In reaction to that backlash, Chung and other radical student leaders organized themselves in 1947 under the banner of the Faithful Association(also referred to as the Fellowship), with the explicit intention of upholding and defending Reformed theology. Chung not only emerged as a central leader within this movement but also defended the church against the growing influence of theological liberalism (Kang et al., 2025). Under his leadership, radical members of the KPC mobilized to resist what they perceived as a dangerous accommodation to modern liberal theology. Chung's active involvement in the Faithful Association (Fellowship) became a major catalyst in the intensifying theological schism within the KPC, a division that ultimately culminated in the denomination's split in 1953 (Chung & Kim, 2017). This schism had a rippling effect there and changed the face of Korean Presbyterianism.

There was another big split within the KPC in 1959, this time over membership in the World Council of Churches (WCC). Pastor Kyung-Jik Han and his supporters believed that WCC membership would enliven Korean church around the world through ecumenism (Kang et al., 2025). The church would be considered an integral part of the larger international Christian community if it was to move towards the goal of WCC to deepen the unity of Christians. Pastor Kyu-Oh Chung also expressed concern that membership in the WCC could compromise the doctrinal purity, particularly the Reformed orientation, of the church. His apprehension should be understood within the historical and ecclesial context of his ministry. At the time, the World Council of Churcheswas still shaping its identity, and many churches were uncertain about how ecumenical engagement might influence confessional traditions. In this sense, Chung's concern was neither unfounded nor unique; rather, it reflected a broader tension between ecumenical openness and the preservation of denominational identity. Chung held a strong conviction regarding the distinctiveness of Reformed theology and feared that closer alignment with the WCC could undermine the authority of Scripture, a central element of Reformed faith. In response, he and several like-minded leaders in Korea established the National Association of Evangelicals in July 1953, seeking a more conservative doctrinal path (Kang et al., 2025). This divergence in theological understanding eventually contributed to a significant division within the Korean church. While the Presbyterian Church of Korea (Tonghap) embraced the ecumenical orientation of the WCC, the Presbyterian Church in Korea (Hapdong) adhered firmly to Reformed theology (Jeong, 2019).

Biblical disagreements within the Hapdong denomination concerning leadership, control of the seminary, and the church's relationship to political authority created the fourth major split in 1979. These tensions intensified under the military dictatorship, as questions regarding the church's prophetic mission and institutional integrity became unavoidable (Lee & Suh, 2024; Kim & Chung, 2021). By this time, most of the Hapdong leadership had already developed close ties with state power and maintained a cooperative stance toward the authoritarian regime, while only a small minority resisted political interference and defended the independence of the church.These conflicting convictions isolated the emerging Gaehyuk (Reformed) movement from the Hapdong mainstream. Within this struggle, Pastor Kyu-Oh Chung emerged as a central figure of the Gaehyuk minority, advocating for ecclesial reform and ethical integrity. Chung held the pro-government leadership responsible for abandoning the church's prophetic role by compromising with the military regime. He argued that the Hapdong leadership had failed to uphold the church's calling to confront social injustice and persecution (Kang et al., 2025; Grayson, 2013). In his view, the church was forfeiting its moral authority by aligning itself with state interests instead of defending the oppressed. Chung openly criticized Pastor Yeong-Soo Lee and other senior leaders in Hapdong for using political influence to consolidate denominational power (Kim & Chung, 2021). He condemned the leadership of the General Assembly's seminary for placing institutional ambition above theological responsibility, thereby jeopardizing the future of the Korean church. His critique resonated widely among ministers and congregations who were increasingly disillusioned by the denomination's accommodation to authoritarian power, and it permanently polarized Hapdong and Gaehyuk into opposing factions (Kang et al., 2025; Radner, 2019). Thus, continuing conflicts regarding leadership, governance, and the church's stance toward political authority eventually led to the rupture between Hapdong's mainstream leadership and the Gaehyuk minority in 1979.

Despite longstanding tensions, the KPC later made significant progress toward restoring unity, culminating in the 2005 reunion between the Gaehyuk and Hapdong Presbyterian denominations. Chung's public apology for the division and his leadership in promoting reconciliation marked a turning point in the history of the KPC and remains one of the most decisive factors in the reunification process (Kim & Chung, 2021). From this paper, the

historical trajectory and wider background of such schisms are explored, specifically with respect to their eventual reunification. The phenomenal reunification of the Hapdong and Gaehyuk branches in Korean Presbyterianism is a unique event which may serve as an inspiration for resolving religious and social disputes around the world. Despite its profound historical and theological significance, the subject has been largely neglected not only in international scholarship but also in Korea, where it has appeared only sporadically in newspapers or in the writings of Christian historians without any sustained or rigorous academic investigation. By addressing this scholarly deficit, the present study not only provides a substantive academic resource but also demonstrates the relevance of this event to ecclesiastical history and current discourses on reconciliation.

## Methodology

This study employs an explanatory, multi-method qualitative design in order to analyse both the genesis of division and the mechanisms of reconciliation that culminated in the 2005 reunion of Hapdong and Gaehyuk. The case is deliberately bounded by the processes that produced the “Union Principles Agreement” and the ceremonial enactment of unity at the 90th General Assembly, while earlier schisms (1952, 1953, 1959, 1979) are treated as antecedent conditions that configured the opportunity structure for reunion (Kang et al., 2025; Kim, 2018). The evidentiary corpus consists of authoritative ecclesial documents such as assembly minutes and resolutions from both denominations, union-committee records, and seminary regulations; public interventions and testimonies including Kyu-Oh Chung’s 1998 confession and speeches by Ki-Haeng Seo and Jeong-Yi Hong; denominational newspapers and commemorations; and secondary scholarship situating theological and sociopolitical context (Choi, 2020; Grayson, 2013). Sources were included when they combined authorship credibility, temporal proximity to key events, and clear relevance to at least one analytic concept, and documents of questionable provenance or exclusively polemical intent were retained only if they were corroborated by multiple accounts.

Analytically, the study integrates documentary analysis, process tracing, and interpretive theory. Documentary materials were analysed using a hybrid coding method that combined predetermined themes—such as church unity, fellowship, practical steps toward unity, responsibility for reconciliation, and faithfulness to core teaching—with additional ideas that emerged directly from the documents themselves, including terms like “providence of God”, “mutual acknowledgement”, and “status of the seminary”. The process involved several rounds of review, during which notes were taken to explain why certain decisions were made, ensuring transparency in the research (Collingwood, 1994). Process tracing was used to arrange the key events in order, beginning with the confession in 1998, followed by the formation of committees and drafting stages in 2004–2005, and ending with the final decision made by the assembly. During this methodological approach, different explanations were examined. These included whether the reunion happened because of doctrinal agreement, political advantage and resource consolidation, or the influence of key leaders combined with sincere repentance (Skinner, 2002). Evidence was evaluated cautiously, and it was accepted only when various sources—such as official documents, speeches, and historical analyses—pointed to the same conclusion.

Interpretation drew on phenomenological hermeneutics, narrative theory, and contextualist intellectual history. Following Gadamer (2004), the analysis reads texts at the fusion of horizons between the Reformed Presbyterian tradition and late-twentieth-century Korean church politics. In accordance with Ricoeur (2006), it gives precedence to the narrative reconfiguration of institutional memory by acts of repentance, and Skinner's (2002) intentionalism situates key speech-acts within their standard linguistic and strategic

backgrounds, hence accounting for intention rid of anachronism. Results validity was increased through triangulation among ecclesial minutes, public media, and scholarly reports, and reliability through an open coding protocol and stability checks. Confirmability was ensured by reflexive memoing on the researcher's theological stance and potential reconciliation bias, and transferability was enabled by thick description of institutional arrangements such as presbytery thresholds, transitional recognition of schools, and the setting up of a special handling committee that other post-conflict churches could analogise.

Nevertheless, the account inevitably privileges elite and institutional voices since meeting minutes, leaders' speeches, and formal agreements are the most accessible and verifiable sources (Jeong et al., 2021). Grass-roots perspectives—ordinary clergy, presbytery delegates beyond leadership, and laity—are comparatively muted, which risks producing an overly institutional reading of reconciliation. Archival survivorship also constrains inference: not every draft, caucus conversation, or informal negotiation is preserved, so certain links in the causal chain rest on process plausibility rather than direct “smoking-gun” documentation. Furthermore, commemorative texts tend to teleologise the past and cast reunion as providential inevitability, and although rival-explanation testing mitigates this tendency, it cannot be entirely eliminated. A portion of the material circulates in translation or paraphrase, introducing semantic slippage around key theological terms such as repentance, providence, and koinonia (Radner, 2019). Finally, the findings are analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable, since Korea’s denominational ecology and state–church history are context-specific (Kim & Chung, 2023).

These limitations suggest that future research should broaden the evidentiary base through oral histories with negotiators, presbytery delegates, and lay participants, and should also pursue comparative analyses—both within Korea, for example Tonghap–Kijang relations, and beyond it in other Reformed traditions—that could test the portability of the repentance and institutional design mechanism. Congregational-level studies can examine post-2005 integration within deployments of clergy, compliance of presbyteries, and pipelines at the seminaries, and text-as-data and network analyses can map changes in rhetoric on unity and coalitions at assemblies over time. Long-term assessment of 2005–2025 results, particularly the impact of reunion on social action, public theology, and youth participation, would determine if the 'visible communion' of 2005 has developed into enduring koinonia robust enough to support Korea's present challenges.

## Discussions

### The Role of Pastor Kyu-Oh Chung

Pastor Kyu-Oh Chung's role in the reunification of the KPC after it had split cannot be quantified. Chung was a divisive and unifying figure within the conservative Reformed tradition because of his uncompromising commitment to theological essentials such as Scripture's inerrancy and the purity of the Reformed faith (Kim & Chung, 2021). He participated in the most disputed debates within the church due to his absolute resistance to theological liberalism and the ecumenical movement, specifically in relation to the WCC. Besides mere theology, Chung's impact extended to the governance of Korean Presbyterian institutions, especially seminaries. As the church itself divided in the mid-twentieth century, rival schools arose, with Hapdong schools stressing authentic Reformed doctrine. Under Chung's administration, Kwangshin University solidified its orthodox doctrine. Chung imparted to his students a firm belief in the Reformed theological essentials. But it became apparent over time that the KPC's divisions had wrought deep relational scars. A notable change in Chung's stance was in 1998, when he publicly issued an apology: "I was a divisive figure", Chung

stated during his sermon at the Jeonju Dongbu Church, acknowledging his part in causing division (Chung, 2009: 162). The split in the Korean Church is "all my fault, and I beg for your forgiveness . . . I will be meeting God soon, and I pray to you: May the many denominations that are currently divided be united as one" (Chung, 2009: 162). In light of his own record of involvement in creating the very divides he was now trying to bring together, his acknowledgment of guilt and request for forgiveness were all the more genuine. Vulnerability and humility have a profound impact on the Korean church, bringing about never-before-seen discussions regarding unification.

Apart from his leadership in theology, Chung's call for unification was very pragmatic. During his private talks with prominent figures from the Hapdong and Gaehyuk groups, he emphasized the need for reconciliation above theological purity wherever feasible. His well-known statement to Pastor Ki-Haeng Seo, "You are in this position for such a time as this", demonstrated his conviction that the KPC's unity was not only a desired but a divinely-mandated leadership quality (Chung, 2009: 164). Hans-Georg Gadamer's phenomenological hermeneutics offers a profound comprehension of Chung's deed of contrition and leadership in the reunion endeavor. The 'fusion of horizons' *(Horizontverschmelzung*) between the past and the present, according to Gadamer, is more important than just re-creating the past in order to comprehend history (Gadamer, 2004). It is possible to see Chung's confession as a bridge between the historical desire for reconciliation and the cultural and religious traditions that preceded it. His public acknowledgement and repentance also illustrate that reconciliation is not just a structural or institutional process, but a profoundly personal one. Moreover, Chung's willingness to embody humility in leadership contributed significantly to ecclesial healing, echoing the principle expressed in Matthew 5:5: that meekness can become a transformative force within the community.

By taking an active position in the church's history and confessing his part in prior schisms, he allowed the past to shape the present and provided a roadmap for reunification. For Gadamer, tradition shapes contemporary knowledge and action by merging past errors with current remedies. In the same vein, Paul Ricoeur's (2006) narrative hermeneutics offers a paradigm for seeing Chung's repentance as a story that changes the church's identity rather than just a historical truth. Ricoeur believes that the construction of narratives surrounding past events is a critical component in the construction of meaningful histories, which in turn bind memory and identity. Here, Chung's act of remorse reframes the story of his participation in the church's division, giving rise to a new narrative of reconciliation as it reshaped its identity and purpose via this tale, which has become part of their collective memory. In theological and historical discourse, the recounting of this repentance emphasizes the need for unity in the church's history, which helps to establish a unified goal.

The background and objectives underlying Chung's acts may be better understood with the aid of Quentin Skinner's (2002) intentionalist method. According to Skinner, we need to put ourselves in the shoes of historical figures in order to understand their motivations and the weight of their acts. A more comprehensive understanding of the theological and political forces at work within Korean Presbyterianism during Chung's period of repentance and reunion is necessary. His turning away from sin was more than just a change in attitude or belief; it was a calculated move to protect the church against division. Using Skinner's theory, we can see that Chung's leadership throughout the unification process was an attempt to strike a balance between the institutional cohesiveness that was necessary for the church's expansion and the humility of church leaders that he had newly championed. By combining these theoretical viewpoints from Gadamer, Racoeur, and Skinner, we can gain a deeper understanding of Pastor Kyu-Oh Chung's crucial involvement in the 2005 Hapdong and Gaehyuk factions' reunion. Beyond doctrinal disagreement, his deeds reflect wider cultural, historical, and strategic concerns that will echo throughout the church's history**.**

**Union Efforts by Hapdong and Gaehyuk Leaders**

Some prominent figures embraced Pastor Kyu-Oh Chung's goal of bringing together Presbyterian denominations. In particular, Pastor Ki-Haeng Seo of the Hapdong denomination had the belief that the merger with the Gaehyuk denomination was a divine calling. He had high regard for Pastor Chung. Following Chung's unity proposal, Pastor Seo faced fierce criticism and even death threats for his unwavering commitment to this cause (Kim, 2007). The Hapdong and Gaehyuk factions' top officials first seriously considered a merger effort in 2004. The Hapdong leaders met at the General Assembly Hall on March 5, 2004, to discuss incorporating the Gaehyuk denomination (Chung, 2015). Soon after, on April 27th of that year, they established the "Committee for Incorporating the Gaehyuk General Assembly" and chose Pastor Seo to preside over it. To avoid an unfriendly relationship characterized by animosity and distrust, this committee sought a harmonic accord with the Gaehyuk denomination. In response, thirty respected Gaehyuk leaders elected Pastor Jeong-Jung Kim as head of the "Special Commission for Union." The two denominational leaders held an introductory meeting on May 27, 2004. On Hapdong's side, "the Seven Members Committee for Incorporating the Gaehyuk General Assembly" consisted of Pastors Ki-Haeng Seo, Ki-Chae Choi, Sang-Goo Choi, Yong-Kil Kim, and Jae-Young Lee. Two elders, Young Sik Kwon and Won-Jong Shin, also took part. Along with Elders Sang-Sool Kim and Young-Chul Joo, Pastors Jeong-Jung Kim, Han-Kyu Byun, Nam-Ju Byun, Nak-Jung Yoon, and Gab-Yong Park represented the Gaehyuk side in the "Seven Members Committee for Union" (Chung, 2015). That same day, they reached a consensus to form a six-person subcommittee to coordinate and plan the unification in enormous detail.

Each side would have three representatives. On June 11, 2004, in the Gwangju Family Center, the six members—Ki-Haeng Seo, Sang-Goo Choi, and Young-Sik Kwon from the Hapdong side, and Jeong-Jung Kim, Nam-Ju Byun, and Sang-Sool Kim from the Gaehyuk side—met to discuss the union in detail. Despite being 91 years old, Pastor Kyu-Oh Chung made it to the meeting to provide words of encouragement to the committee members and make sure the merger went well. The whole committees of both denominations met at the Palace Hotel in Seoul on August 19, 2004, and resolved to propose the idea of merging the two denominations before the 89th General Assembly on September 21, 2004 (Kim, 2007). What followed was a flurry of activity as representatives from the two faiths' union commissions met, spoke, and prayed. They established a "Twelve-Point Agreement on Union Principles" on 21 June 2005, with Ki-Haeng Seo of the Hapdong denomination and Jeong-Yi Hong of the Gaehyuk denomination's formal signatures. The Union Principles Agreement adopted at the 90th General Assembly in 2005 provided both a theological foundation and an institutional framework for the reunification of the Hapdong and Gaehyuk denominations. It explicitly affirmed that "the name of the united denomination shall be the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Korea (Hapdong)"and that the Assembly would "convene in the same location and time under the names of both denominations' presidents and secretaries"(Chung, 2015). The agreement further stipulated mutual recognition of ministers and presbyteries, with the proviso that each presbytery must consist of at least twenty-one sessions within three years.

Aside from these fundamental affirmations, the document also addressed structural and institutional concerns. It placed denominational workers under a single administrative entity, unified the journals of both Assemblies, and defined the interim character of seminaries. The Kwangshin University was formally accepted as an accredited theological institution, while the Reformed Theological Research Institute of the Gaehyuk group was conditionally accepted, pending government accreditation (Chung, 2025). Students were promised academic continuity, and their records were to be processed by Chongshin Theological Seminary. For its implementation, a "Special Handling Committee" was formed, consisting of nine

delegates—five representing the Hapdong and four from the Gaehyuk side. In these provisions, the Union Principles Agreementhad merged biblical appeals for unity—"that they may be one" (John 17:11) and the appeal by Paul to "maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3) with operational systems for harmonising presbyteries, seminaries, and administrative alignments. The agreement thus demonstrated that reconciliation ecclesial required not merely theology faith but also wise institutional design, serving as a case study in how repentance, negotiation, and organisational integration could be made into concrete communion out of divisions (Chung, 2015).

The two denominational committees for unity, whose sustained commitment made the merger possible, participated in the 90th General Assembly on September 27, 2005, at Daejeon Central Church. As the 461 delegates of the Gaehyuk General Assembly entered the hall, the 976 delegates of the Hapdong General Assembly rose in a standing ovation, symbolising mutual recognition and reconciliation after decades of estrangement (Chung, 2015: 266). The service itself was highly liturgical and ecclesiastically significant: Moderator Ki-Haeng Seo of the Hapdong General Assembly presided, Moderator Jeong-Yi Hong of the Gaehyuk General Assembly offered a prayer, Pastor Ho-Yeong Gong of Gaehyuk read Scripture, former Moderator John Park of Hapdong preached the sermon, and Vice Moderator Seong-Gi Hwang of Hapdong pronounced the benediction. The careful distribution of roles highlighted equality between the two assemblies and reinforced the theological meaning of unity as a shared act of worship.

At the heart of the ceremony was the Declaration of Union, publicly read by Pastor Jae-Yeong Lee of Hapdong and Pastor Nak-Jung Yoon of Gaehyuk. The declaration began by acknowledging the paradox of Korean Presbyterian history: “For 120 years, preachers have preached Christ’s gospel in Korea, and thanks to God’s amazing grace, the church has grown tremendously and played a significant role in the gospel’s worldwide spread. Nonetheless, the division and separation that accompanied this expansion were not without their sorrows” (Chung, 2015: 266). This confession of past brokenness was followed by an affirmation of theological conviction, stressing that “Faith that is God-centered, Bible-centered, and church-centered is the bedrock of our Reformed conservative theology, and we hold fast to it” (Chung, 2015: 266).The declaration then articulated a renewed missional vision: “We promise to do everything in our power to spread the gospel throughout the country and around the world, so that God’s kingdom may come to earth” (Chung, 2015: 266).

Finally, it proclaimed unity as an eschatological sign, resolving that “God’s mercy has written a new chapter of togetherness among us … we shall now choose unity over separation, forgiveness over condemnation, and collaboration over dispersion” (Chung, 2015: 267). In closing, it invoked Scripture: “As stated in 1 Corinthians 10:31 all honor is due to God”(Chung, 2015: 267). The Declaration of Union was not simply a political arrangement or an administrative merger, but a deeply theological statement. It spoke of repentance, agreement in faith, and hope for God’s future, presenting the 2005 reunion as an act of divine reconciliation. By grounding unity in God’s sovereignty and the Westminster Confession of Faith, the declaration redefined institutional union as a testimony to the gospel. Its joint public reading by leaders of both the Hapdong and Gaehyuk groups ensured that the union was not imposed by one side, but freely affirmed by both, giving it genuine church legitimacy (Chung, 2015: 266-267).

A scholarly review of the *Kidok News* article "15 Years of the Presbyterian Church Union: Reflecting on the Present and Building the Future", Jung (2020) offers a nuanced theology and institutional analysis of the 2005 unification of the Hapdong and Gaehyeok denominations by three prominent ecclesiastical leaders of the KPC. Pastor Ki-Haeng Seo sees the merger more as the result of God's providence rather than human endeavor within the church. Pastor

Seo confirms the perseverance of the Reformation faith, insisting that common commitment to Reformed theology formed the grounds for unity. Theological unity in the form of church chastity can overcome denominational dissolution, asserts Seo, endorsing the merger as a model for Korean Presbyterian reunification and worldwide world church reunification. Seo reiterates the motif of "God's providence" (*providentia Dei)* in his observations, attributing the achievement of unity to God's grace and sovereignty.

As a theological and institutional affirmation of the Reformed tradition's vitality, Pastor Jeong-Yi Hong emphasizes the symbolic nature of the marriage in explaining God's grace within the church. Hong is especially strong in his emphasis on leadership, praising Pastor Kyu-Oh Chung specifically for his pivotal role in advancing unity. Hong further states that the merger is a message to more pluralistic Korean Presbyterianism (with over 200 groups) concerning the viability of both theological and organisational ecclesial unity (Jung, 2020). Meanwhile, Pastor Kang-Seok So, the current moderator of the Hapdong General Assembly, regards the merger as watershed in his own spiritual and ecclesiastical development, seeing it as a validation of the Hapdong Church's function as the head of Korean Christianity spiritually. In his interpretation, the merger was a reconciliation act ordained by God that cemented the church teaching and reunited the ecclesiastical community. Though initially opposed to the merger, at the time of the union ceremony, he valued its divine ordination through spiritual sense, demonstrating the strength of spiritual awakening in leading changes in organizational structures.

Each pastor provides a methodologically sound plan for the future of the KPC according to its religious, educational, and cultural contexts. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which Pastor Seo sees as the call of God for the spiritual resurrection, he argues that Christians must focus on the crucifixion and the resurrection. Theological institutions, such as Chongshin University, should be institutionally funded, according to Pastor Hong, since they are the foundation for the next generation of ecclesiastical leadership. Pastor So points out the need to be a response to world social issues while maintaining one's spiritual faith, especially in light of the world health pandemic. Lastly, the theological insights of these leaders provide a grander ecclesiological plan for the KPC's future based on church purity, interaction with contemporary society, and theological education. Generally, their reflections inform the debate on the ways in which the unity of the church reinforces its theological and institutional mission union both locally and globally (Jung, 2020).

## Research Findings

### The Union of the KPC exemplifies the Biblical Principle of Unity

The reunion of Korean Presbyterian denominations provides a dramatic illustration of the biblical principle of unity. Jesus' high priestly prayer (John 17:20–23), reflecting the unity of God in the Trinity, stresses unity by calling Christians to be one as the Father and the Son are one. This prayer underlines the significance of the church's worldwide witness as a manifestation of divine unity, which is indispensable to its mission. Unity of the church is not simply an organisational goal but an expression of theological reality, showing how God's action shapes the life of the church. Also, the Apostle Paul stresses the unity of the various members of the church by calling the church the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–27). Bruce (1988) states that any division in this body hinders it from its proper functioning and from testifying everywhere in the world. This is supported by recent scholarship showing that the missional intent of ecclesial unity transcends its institutional function, embodying the church's vocation to reflect Christ's redemptive mission in the world. Contemporary scholars such as Schreiter and Jorgensen (2013) argue that cooperation enhances the mission of the

church. In this context, Paul's teaching explains that unity does not imply sameness, but a cooperative synergy of diverse gifts and functions, which is needed to build up the body of Christ.

In Ephesians 4:1–6, Paul urges Christians to be spiritually united, subject to the caveat that it is the Holy Spirit who achieves such unity and sustains it through humility, patience, and tolerance. This is again developed in greater depth in Paul's reconciliation theology (2 Corinthians 5:18–19), where the church is seen to be a living witness to Christ's redemptive power, thus explicitly identifying unity with the ministry of reconciliation. An early example of unity was the first-century church in Acts 2:42–47. Through communal living, sharing of possessions, and common worship, many came to faith. The growth and influence of the early church is an example of the missional value of unity, Barrett (1956) has observed. Ferguson (2012) affirms this, describing visible unity in the church as a tangible expression of the power of the gospel for the advancement of the kingdom of God. This work has identified the active reconciliation function of the church—carrying one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) and living under the lordship of Christ through love and service. Such reconciliation impacts deeply at the missional level and contributes mightily to social transformation.

**Theological Significance**

The theological significance of the church reunion is that it is built on essential notions such as ecclesial unity, koinonia, and catholicity. The church as the body of Christ is ontologically and visibly one, and it is precisely this point that the notion of ecclesial unity seeks to emphasize. Theologically, this is based on John 17:21, in which Jesus prays for the unity of the church (McFarland, 2019). Levering (2013) contends that the Holy Spirit resides in every believer, providing them with an ontological unity that is realized in the communal actions of the church in the world. Division of the church is therefore an important theological shock that is opposed to Christ's will that his disciples should be together (John 17:21). A visible communion that is supposed to symbolize the inner life of the Trinity is distorted by divisions. Fellowship and shared membership in Christ's life are emphasized by Koinonia, as pointed out in Acts 2:42 and 1 Corinthians 1:9. The text admirably brings out the significance of relationships and community within Christian life, emphasizing the interconnectedness of Christians in Christ's body. To Radner (2019), the Holy Spirit creates a koinonia among Christians that goes beyond friendship and into a heavenward existence. Therefore, ecclesial fragmentation, rather than legitimate diversity, undermines this holy bond of koinonia. Catholicism, or *katholikos*, refers to the belief that there is one church body that reaches all people regardless of their background or religion.

The church's vocation is to be a global community witnessing the cosmic breadth of salvation, as revealed by scholars like Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (2021). Catholicity, in a theological sense, demands that the church's unity is a witness to the world independent of geography or denominational affiliation (Root, 2021). Discord discredits the church's witness to Christ's universal mission. A key aspect of catholicity emphasised by the early church was doctrinal unity with legitimate plurality in secondary matters. This principle remains central to contemporary debates on ecclesial reunification. Unity also carries an eschatological orientation, for the church anticipates the coming kingdom of God. In this light, Radner (2019) calls the church to embody, however imperfectly in history, the eschatological communionthat will be consummated at the end of time. Revelation 7:9–10 anticipates the eschatological destiny of unity with an image of united people from every tribe, nation, and tongue before God's throne beyond the divisions of the present. Radner emphasizes that the visible unity of the church is at once simultaneously both a commandment of the moment and a foretaste of the reality of heaven.

**Socio-political Implications**

After the reunification of the Hapdong and Gaehyuk denominations, the church became the biggest Protestant denomination in Korea, better equipped to address Korea's urgent social issues. The free-falling rate of South Korea's marriage and birth rates has led to a demographic disaster, which has made fewer laborers available (Seok & Chung, 2023). Due to economic difficulties, the young generations resist marriage and childbearing, thereby causing a decline in the labor force and compromising its future sustainability (Kim & Chung, 2024). Korea has adopted large numbers of foreign laborers due to the widespread scarcity of indigenous workers. Unfortunately, the majority of such foreign laborers have been exploited economically and subjected to violation of their basic human rights. It is the religious and ethical duty of the church to safeguard workers' rights against economic oppression and structural injustices. This makes the church achieve reforms that usher dignity and justice to the underprivileged. The Korean elderly are also poor and commit suicides at a high rate (Kim & Chung, 2023; Teng & Chung, 2024). This tragic incident indicates the severe social isolation and economic deprivation the elderly Koreans experience. The church cannot be bothered with just providing money to such marginalised groups, but instead it has to try to develop a culture of sympathy and communal support in an effort to overcome the forces leading to isolation and despair. We need to encourage the church to be an 'activist public church' that prophetically promotes social justice, dignity, and equality in society. The church has been able to use more channels of political advocacy since reunification. With the renewed unity of the two denominations, the KPC can return to its decades-long tradition of engaging in social justice, religious liberty, and human rights, as it has in the past.

Pastor Kyu-Oh Chung's remorse was mainly responsible for reunifying the Hapdong and Gaehyuk branches of the KPC in 2005. Such remorse personifies the very theme of humility, sacrifice, and redemption, which is central to the Christian account of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection (Kang et al., 2025). The ultimate act of Jesus Christ on the cross is to give one's life for others, whereas his resurrection to life depicts new chances offered through selfless love. The Christian spirit was reflected in Chung's regret, whose refusal of pride broke doors open for reconciling and reunifying churches. If leaders of nations such as Russia, China, Israel, and the US would adopt this same Christian ethic, it could create radical changes.

The principles of forgiveness, humility, and reconciliation that were central to Jesus' death and resurrection could best make war a thing of the past and make real peace between rival nations possible. Respect and comprehension between individuals can grow in a society if leaders make the common good secondary to their own or their country's interests. Humility, as practiced by Kyu-Oh Chung and patterned after Jesus, is essential of leaders for this purpose to change. For this to happen, persons must sublimate the higher good above their own egos, aspirations, and drives for power. Spiritual learning, such as contemplative practices like prayer, meditation, and service to others, can enable leaders to cultivate humility. Leadership should be selflessness and service, not egocentric, and leaders should be surrounded with counselors and institutions that promote this virtue. World leaders could be selfless advocates for peace and reconciliation if we instill a culture where modesty and service take precedence over ambition.

## Conclusion

The 2005 reunion of the Gaehyuk and Hapdong denominations of the Korean Presbyterian Church (KPC) was a milestone in not only Korean church history but also in the wider annals of Christian reconciliation in the world. It was not an organisational or administrative turn but a theological enactment of the gospel's call to unity, repentance, and common engagement.

Grounded in the biblical imperatives of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18‑19; John 17:20‑23), the gathering testified to the conviction that Christian unity should not be viewed as an institutional courtesy but as an ontological and missional fact grounded in the very existence of the triune God. This development was guided by the repentant leadership of Pastor Kyu-Oh Chung, whose confession of what he described as the silence of the Christian mind reframed decades of division within a renewed narrative of grace and restoration. His response was an expression of humility forged through lifelong reflection. In the twilight of his years, approaching death, he expressed a deep yearning for forgiveness from God and from the ecclesial community for the serious errors of his past. His act of contrition illustrates how theological repentance, when integrated into institutional decision-making, is a driving force for change and the re-newal of ecclesial identity.

The repentance of Chung, and those of other Hapdong and Gaehyuk leaders, illustrate the necessity of moral courage, intentional reconciliation, and mutual governance in forming visible communion.Theologically, the unity demonstrates that reconciliation does not require sacrificing doctrinal purity but rather sustaining unity through respect for one another, open government, and ongoing dialogue. Since the reunion, the presbyteries have remained largely stable, although the continued existence of many Presbyterian bodies in South Korea indicates the need for further efforts toward broader unity, especially in light of increasing social criticism of Protestantism. Former separations have not re-emerged as institutional divisions, though occasional tensions rooted in earlier disputes still appear from time to time. Theological unity has encouraged joint mission and social engagement in several areas, but such cooperation has not always been consistent and often reflects differing priorities among individual presbyteries.

Socio-politically, the reunion made the church's voice more relevant to address major issues facing Korean society, including aging population, intergenerational alienation, exploitation of laborers, and poverty among the elderly. Regaining its identity as a public church, the reunified KPC has been able to mount an amplified prophetic voice in advocating for justice, dignity, and solidarity of people. Theologically, the 2005 agreement is an eschatological indicator, directing us beyond earthly divisions to the ultimate consummation of God's kingdom, in which the redeemed of all nations shall be gathered together to worship before the throne (Revelation 7:9–10). This study has shown that the Korean case can serve as an exportable paradigm for churches around the world: reconciliation becomes possible when humility, shared theological minima, and wise institutional design intersect. But its implications go still deeper: reconciliation between Hapdong and Gaehyuk shows that unity among churches can become a living witness to society, exhibiting forgiveness, mutual recognition, and redemption of enmity through communion.

Still, questions persist. The longer-term sustainability of the 2005 agreement—especially in terms of generational transition, seminary education, and congregational unity—needs on-going evaluation. In addition, the lack of grass-roots voices in most of the documentation available suggests an omission in knowledge regarding how the unity was experienced and lived at the level of common clergy and laity. Follow-up research must address oral histories of actors, comparative study with other divided denominations within Korea (e.g., Tonghap–Kijang relationships) and beyond Korea (e.g., Reformed and Lutheran traditions), and longitudinal study of governance, education, and mission changes since 2005. Quantitative assessments of membership trends, youth participation, and public trust would be a useful complement to theological and historical studies, casting a more complete picture of the reunion's influence. In addition, the use of digital humanities methods, such as network analysis of assembly debates or text-mining of denominational papers, has the possibility of yielding new understandings of how unity rhetoric has evolved in the past two decades. Last but not least, the 2005 KPC reunion stands as evidence for the potential for ecclesial healing

in contexts marked by profound division. It reminds the Korean church and the wider Christian world that reconciliation may be attainable even at a price when there is repentance, leadership, and institutional framework concuring under the Holy Spirit's guidance. Its continuing mission is to make that magnificent act a vibrant culture of communion—until it makes the Korean Presbyterian Church a credible, cohesive witness amid Korea's present social challenges and a shining model for the global church in an age of disintegration. Although this model of unity emerged within a relatively shared Reformed tradition, its emphasis on mutual recognition, transparent governance, and sustained dialogue offers transferable principles for other settings with more diverse ecclesial ecologies, including contexts shaped by multiple confessional identities or complex historical divisions. This study, however, has limitations, as it relies primarily on documentary sources and does not incorporate wider perspectives from clergy, seminary students, elders, or lay members whose lived experience of reunification may reveal differing levels of lasting accord. Future research could therefore include interviews across these groups, as well as longitudinal analysis of data from 2005 to the present—such as membership patterns, presbytery reorganisations, and mission collaboration—to assess how fully the reunion has been realised both structurally and missiologically.

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