



A fruitful Christian lay man movement: A case study of University Bible Fellowship

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Abstract

Crisis phenomena (wars, epidemics) push people to seek spirituality. Scholars also need to study the experience of successful religious movements to identify effective management approaches in this area. An example of such a movement is the University Bible Fellowship (UBF). The study aims to identify effective methods of building a lay movement and methods of managing it and its development, based on the example of the UBF. To achieve this goal, the historical-genetic and historical-functional methods were used. It turned out that small group and one-on-one Bible studies are the most effective, as these didactic approaches have a therapeutic effect on movement members and candidates. An important role in the functioning of the Fellowship is played by the practice of writing personal testimony (sogam). From the point of view of ecclesiology, a certain amount of uncertainty is useful for the lay movement, which allows it to attract representatives of different denominations. The ability of the founders of the movement and its leaders to use their leadership qualities was important, as is seen in the examples of Samuel Lee and Sarah Barry. Some types of activities of religious organisations, such as presence on social media, are notable to convey religious experience but are necessary in the modern world. The rapid involvement of movement members in missionary or volunteer activities also plays an important role. The results of this study can be used both to further study the history of the UBF and to create lay movements using the most effective methods of management, evangelism, and didactic influence.

Keywords: religious organisations, missionary movement, Protestantism in Korea, evangelism, biblical hermeneutics, Presbyterianism



Introduction

Christian lay movements are developing around the world, exerting an increasing effect on young people's religious education, moral and ethical discipline, charity, and other aspects of social life. Most lay organizations, especially new ones, have very limited resources, and lack influence in the areas of marketing, evangelism, improving the organization's infrastructure and technology, and funding to hire and pay full-time staff. The successful and productive experiences of religious lay organisations that have succeeded in these difficult circumstances need to be studied to provide practical advice for future lay movements (Min & Lee, 2023). The methods used by these organisations can add much theoretical and practical material to such disciplines as management of religious organisations, missiology, methods of evangelisation and religious education. All this will allow us to find new means of spreading spirituality, and to better understand the role of Christianity, and religion in general, in modern conditions. Raising the spirituality of the population and their awareness of religious issues is fundamentally important in a crisis world that is experiencing a period of spreading epidemics, wars, and other existential challenges (Kim et al., 2022).

At the moment, specific successful cases of lay movements have not been intensely studied, which created obstacles for this particular study but also shaped its scientific novelty. The biographical data of UBF founders S. Lee and S. Barry, as well as the missiological aspects of UBF's activities, were reviewed in research by Chung (2003), but he neither covered the last 20 years of the organisation's existence, nor did he systematise its ecclesiological and evangelistic approaches. Kim et al. (2023) investigated the situation of the Korean Protestant Church at the time of the UBF's creation and highlighted the need for future research into the UBF's ministry. A study of the effectiveness of the use of social media by the UBF lay movement was conducted by Choi and Chung (2023), without considering it in the broader context of the lay movement. The use of the one-on-one dialogue method in Bible study in Korean lay people and Protestant religious organisations was studied by Lee (2022). However, the author did not compare it with other methods of religious education. Jung (2023) studied the activities of some Korean missionaries, including UBF missionaries, in high-risk countries, but it is essentially only possible to understand the origins of the effective work of missionaries when the entire history of the movement is considered. The usefulness of the "pastoral care" method in the establishment and development of lay movements, evangelism and religious education was studied by Taejin (2022). The author did not compare this method with others, nor did he consider it in the broader structure of the influence of pastoral leadership on the effectiveness of a religious organisation. Also an important consideration is the concept of Christian leadership by John et al. (2022), who indicate the main principles but do not consider them in any specific example.

UBF is to promote spiritual development and enhance comprehension of biblical teachings among students and young professionals. This is achieved through the facilitation of small group Bible studies, individual mentorship, and engagement in community service activities (Kulumzhanov et al., 2021). The primary objective of this organisation is to spread the teachings of Christianity, provide knowledge and skills, and enable individuals to live by Christian values. This, in turn, leads to a positive transformation in their lives as well as the communities they are a part of (Bardik, 2023). This is accomplished through regular gatherings for the study of the Bible, conferences, missionary endeavours, and acts of charity, all under the guidance of the leadership qualities demonstrated by Jesus Christ. The UBF aims to establish a worldwide network of individuals who are spiritually enlightened and socially conscientious, dedicated to disseminating the gospel and effecting a beneficial influence on society (Kim, 2017). The UBF seeks to cultivate a new cohort of leaders who exemplify Christian principles and possess the skills to address the spiritual and practical needs of their peers and communities by increasing its presence in universities and communities globally. The objective of this study was to determine the most efficient strategies for managing, marketing, promoting, and educating through lay movements, with the UBF serving as a successful example. The study emphasised the significance of having a well-defined mission and vision for the movement's achievement.



Materials and Methods

The study was based on a historical approach since it was the review of the UBF's fruitful case that allowed us to identify productive methods for organising the activities of lay movements. The historical panorama provided a comprehensive overview of the organization's management and its educational and spiritual system. This encompasses various aspects such as management, education, spiritual development, leadership, ecclesiology, charitable work, evangelism, and marketing. Additionally, it highlights the importance of the personal leadership qualities exhibited by the movement's founders and leaders in attaining noteworthy outcomes (Kim, 2021).

The historical-genetic method, which is a fairly new research approach, allowed us to review and systematise the history of the formation and development of UBF at different stages and in different conditions. We could thus change the research lens from studying the phenomena to the studying of processes, from the "objects under study" to "process under study". It also allowed us to track the consequences of using certain methods of management, missiology, and evangelism. Some of them were identified as effective, and others as ineffective or even harmful. It is the historical-genetic review of a successful case that is useful for finding practical advice for lay organisations because it allows us to see the process of the movement in its dynamics. The historical-genetic approach makes visible the problems and difficulties that exist at the start and also reflects the complexities that arise over time as the movement scales up, sends out missionaries, and expands to other campuses, cities, and states (Freeks & Lee, 2023).

The historical functional method was used to identify the functional role of each method not only in the historical perspective but also in the holistic system of the UBF organisation. This allowed us to better understand the specifics of each historical stage of the organisation's development and draw general conclusions about effective tools for the development of religious organisations created by lay people. The historical-functional method contributes to the most effective search for the advantages of a particular case, as well as the search for the reasons that made this case successful. This method considers all the elements that influence the activities of the organisation, because each of them has a special function in the system, even if this function is not obvious (Chung, 2023).

Additionally, the hermeneutic method was used to interpret various practices that are characteristic of the lay movement in a meaningful way. The hermeneutical method allowed us to place such didactic practices as writing sograms (personal testimonies) and reading the Bible in small groups in a broader context—the context of the psychological state of the members of the UBF, establishing their communication with each other and preparing them for missionary work. The hermeneutic method was also necessary for the processing of materials—scientific articles, dissertations, and monographs that are devoted to effective practices of lay movements and religious organisations, the principles of Jesus Christ's leadership, as well as the UBF case study (Kim, 2022).

The study employed systemic-historical and systemic-functional methods to analyse the organisational structure of the UBF and the functional roles of its different components over time. This analysis provided valuable insights for the comprehensive analysis and conclusions of the study. This entailed analysing the development and interaction of the UBF's educational and spiritual practices, leadership attributes, philanthropic endeavours, and utilisation of social media, all of which played a role in the movement's achievement. Through a comprehensive analysis of the entire system and its constituent parts, the study successfully attained a holistic comprehension of the UBF's development and discerned the most efficacious approaches for overseeing and expanding a lay movement.

Results

The UBF had to be created in a situation of post-war stress, ideological divisions in society, destroyed infrastructure, and a decline in national culture (Ryu, 2022). During 1950-1953, Korea suffered from a devastating and bloody civil war: many people died, and many lost relatives, friends, jobs, and a vision of the future. After the war was 'frozen', the situation did not return to normal immediately—it



took several decades. There was a high level of distrust in the society and ideological differences between citizens. Furthermore, many South Koreans chose to leave aside their Korean culture for the time being and tended to adopt American societal customs. In these circumstances, classical leadership approaches based on long-standing Confucianism were ineffective, but the model of spiritual leadership of Jesus Christ was able to exert a bigger influence on people's hearts. In 1961, immediately after the *coup d'état*, in which the military in South Korea assumed control organized and carried out by Park Chung Hee and his allies who formed the Military Revolutionary Committee, the UBF was founded in Gwangju. The founding of the organisation is associated with Two figures: Presbyterian Church pastor Samuel Chang-Woo Lee and American Southern Presbyterian Church missionary Sarah Barry. Their leadership skills played an important role in the UBF case study, so it is necessary to review their biographies (Banaszak, 2022).

When the war broke out, Samuel Lee joined the military and was assigned to a student unit. Following the war, he enrolled in a Presbyterian seminary in Seoul, since his military experience was one of the motivating factors that prompted him to seek theological school. Following graduation, he became the pastor of Deok-jin Presbyterian Church in Jeonju, near Chunbuk National University, where he continued his advanced academic education, particularly in the subject of philosophy (Chung, 2003). Sarah Barry's life includes hard work for the development of local Presbyterian churches in the south-western region of Korea and, later, for the creation of UBF. The missionary impressed her followers with her self-sacrifice, the capacity to comprehend and love another culture, and her strong desire for autonomous action. By her example, she demonstrated to fellow UBF missionaries that this labour was not for profit. Although Barry founded such an amazing organisation together with Lee, she always lived in extremely basic conditions, spending very little money on herself. The movement's young missionaries later adopted self-sacrifice (Chung, 1992). The characters of both UBF founders demonstrate the importance of leadership in religious associations, which was already mentioned by Augustine (Cawthorn, 2002). Later, the Christian concept of leadership was systematised and improved by Nsiah (2013) and John et al. (2022). Both works emphasised that Christian leadership should be based on the pastor's imitation of the behaviour, values, and actions of Jesus Christ.

John et al. (2022) believed that the characteristics of a true pastor were love, care, the ability to show the direction of a joint movement, defining the goal, and sacrifice. The "flock" must follow the pastor, hearing his voice. The pastor's mission is to provide spiritual water and food for his "flock". The researchers also pointed to the following characteristics of Jesus' leadership: love of God and neighbours; compassion for people (feeding, caring for, and healing the sick); transferring of Christian values; forming a team for mission; selecting future leaders and passing on the mission to them; and of course, sacrifice (Stackhouse, 2022). Each of these points is reflected in the activities of the UBF leaders. The founders of the organization cared about the value of education for students and set their sacrificial example by feeding and treating them, thus increasing the number of doctorate missionaries in the organization later. This greatly influenced the level of trust of others in the lay movement (Ahn, 2022).

Gradually, the lay movement expanded, and more and more students began to regularly attend UBF meetings (Chung, 2003). This was enough to create chapters in other cities across the country. Although UBF began in Gwangju in 1961, Lee and Barry moved to Seoul, the socio-political-economic-cultural centre of South Korea, in 1966, making it the UBF headquarters in Korea and having a tremendous vision to pioneer prominent campuses such as Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University. During the same period, UBF also established branches in Daejeon, Daegu, and Jeonju. In the 1970s, many more branches appeared, including centres in Cheongju, Busan, and Suwon. The most active expansion took place in the 1980s, when more than 20 branches appeared in South Korea (Chung, 1992).

The UBF's missionary work began in other provinces of Korea, such as Jeju, but the UBF began training overseas missionaries in 1969. Then S. Lee learned that several nurses were planning to go to West Germany to work. He asked them to hold off on moving and to receive missionary training first. Thus, the first three UBF lay missionaries were trained and went to Germany (Chung, 2003).



Therefore, the success of the UBF was not due to conventional management but to the leadership model conceptualized by John et al. (2022). S. Lee had a candid conversation with the members of the movement, proving to them that it was appropriate to change their life plans to achieve a common goal and objectives.

Nursing missionary training was a significant solution for the UBF, which allowed it to send missionaries abroad despite limited financial resources. Thus, in the early 1970s, UBF nurses went on admission to the United States of America. This event marked the beginning of the formation of the Chicago Centre, which was later taken over by Lee himself. Since 1978, Sarah Barry, who also returned home from Seoul, has been working there (Timlin & Vucekovich, 2006). Although the development of individual regional offices was slow, the UBF leadership did not stop and continued to train missionaries. In 1976, missionaries were also sent to Argentina and Guatemala, in 1979 to Bangladesh, and in 1984 to Mexico and the Philippines. In 1985, the UBF began to increase its presence in Europe, where it already had a strong centre in Germany. By 1990, missionaries had also been sent to Saudi Arabia, Australia, Switzerland, Austria, New Zealand, Kenya, Venezuela, Peru, China, and Sweden. UBF missionaries were active even in the Soviet Union, and after its collapse, they continued to work in independent post-Soviet states (Chung, 2003).

Another activity of the UBF is the organization of conferences on biblical hermeneutics, missiology, and lay movements. These conferences are a great opportunity for UBF members from different parts of the world and are also a tool for attracting new members to the movement. The first such conference was held in 1974 in Switzerland. It was attended by 169 people. Today, each regional branch of the UBF holds two or more public conferences a year. These conferences are attended by well-known Christian thinkers, philosophers, new UBF students, and missionaries (e.g. Richard Choi, Joshua Bae). Since then, the number of conference attendees has increased significantly.

For example, in 2011, the 50th anniversary of the UBF was celebrated with a conference on World Mission Reports in Seoul. Approximately five thousand people attended (Chung, 2003). The founders of the UBF systematically developed the educational component of the lay movement. The main form of education they called discipline, was the study of the Holy Bible (Zavialova et al., 2020). Every week, usually on Friday evenings, meetings are held for students. This allows for regular Bible study as well as biblical hermeneutics and counselling practice through the writing and sharing of a testimony known as “sogam” (University Bible Fellowship, 2020).

Sogam is a unique form of religious and educational practice for the UBF. It entails a member writing a personal testimony based on specific Bible chapters and verses. UBF encourages its members to write one large sogam per week and a short sogam daily. The text of the sogam is then read out at meetings. During these meetings, the UBF pastors and lay chapter director’s comment on the sogams of the UBF members in ways of biblical counselling (Lee, 2020), thus practicing pastoral care and approaching the ideal of leadership of Jesus Christ as described by John et al. (2022) and Nsiah (2013). This is an interesting practice for students that unlocks their creative and communicative potential; it teaches them to be open and helps them to study and understand the Bible text and the idea of Christianity more deeply.

Teaching methods used by UBF include one-on-one tutoring, group Bible studies, Bible conferences, and public Bible lectures by UBF lay leaders and scholars. Other activities include prayer meetings on campuses, early morning prayer meetings and times of silence, establishing Bible schools and academies, summer and winter Bible schools, and publishing books and brochures for Fellowship members: Bible study texts, the so-called “Daily Bread”, and other books. To evangelize more people, the traditional method of “fishing” is used by lay movements (University Bible Fellowship, 2020). The specifics of UBF’s methods of education and spiritual activities are described in more detail in Table 1.



Table1. Methods of educational and spiritual influence at UBF

Name of the method of educational and spiritual influence	Role in UBF's activities and their priorities	Method description
Method of writing sogams	First-priority	Each member of the movement reads passages from the Bible and writes a short essay with reflections. The essay is then read out during the meeting. This method has been used since mid-1960.
The one-to-one Bible study method	First-priority	A member studies the Bible personally with a more experienced UBF member. The method has also been used since mid-1960.
A method of small group fellowship meeting	First-priority	Fellowship is an integrated unit to help UBF members get together, giving them spiritual identity and discipline. The method has also been used since mid-1960.
A method of getting involved in the movement quickly	Secondary	A method of quickly involving movement members in the preparation of events and missionary activities. It has a positive effect on movement activity and excellent communication but is not always used.
Method of holding conferences and seasonal schools	Primary	A method of conducting training schools for movement members A method that reinforces the skills and knowledge gained at weekly meetings.
Prayer meetings and other shared religious experiences	Primary	A method of gaining a common religious experience through collective prayer or listening to a pastor It is a priority for any religious organization, including lay movements.
Book and brochure distribution	Secondary	A method of creating texts and distributing them to positively influence the education and spiritual development of movement members. It was used immediately and remains primarily auxiliary.

Source: compiled by the authors.

The effectiveness and efficiency of UBF's activities can be seen in the history of its participation in charity events. Every year, the UBF sends aid to hospitals, sanatoriums, orphanages, and nursing homes. UBF first took part in a major charity project in 1971, when it sent 1100 USD to refugees from Bangladesh, and in 1976, 11000 USD to World Vision and Christian Charity in Bangladesh. In 1985, UBF sent aid to Mexican refugees after the earthquake. Later, aid was sent to Somalia and other African countries, as well as to North Korea. When a powerful earthquake struck Kobe, Japan, in 1995, about 50 UBF volunteers went there to help the people who had suffered (University Bible Fellowship, 2020).

The COVID-19 epidemic has pushed the lay movement to become more active online. This is largely a forced step; as of April 2023, only about 250 people in Chicago were attending face-to-face services. The reason was the corona virus epidemic. The online meetings were attended by about 50 people, which is not very many for this organization but also an achievement in times of crisis (Choi & Chung, 2023). In such circumstances, conventional management is once again insufficient, and only the leadership model of Jesus Christ can truly develop the lay movement.



Discussion

Cha (2022) concludes that it was the Cold War that contributed to the transformation of Protestant Korea and made it possible to create such a powerful lay movement as the UBF. These conclusions are consistent with the results of the view of the preconditions for the creation of the UBF, which were identified in this article. The Korean War, as an element of the Cold War, contributed to the formation of the worldview and character of S. Lee, the founder of the movement. The first student members of the UBF, who later became UBF Chapter Directors and Fellowship Leaders and held other important positions in the organization, also had a devastating experience of war. In addition, the Cold War had an impact on the formation of the US “evangelical empire”. The partnership between South Korea and the United States gave many Koreans the opportunity to study the Bible with Americans and participate in joint projects.

Wigner (2022) points to group Bible studies as an effective method of evangelisation and education of lay members. In his opinion, this method not only has an active value but also has the potential to open the experience to a collective mystical experience, which is fundamental to building a religious community. Gaining such experience in a small group can be an important reason for theists or supporters of another religion to join the movement and change their religious position or denomination. A study of UBF’s activities confirms this thesis, as group work at meetings, reading, cohabitation during studies, and collective prayer allow for attracting new members to the movement and retaining those believers who have already been evangelized. This role was especially important in the first decade of the UBF’s activity, as much of the movement was based on the personal leadership of S. Lee and S. Barry and their ability to show “pastoral care”.

Okruszek et al. (2022) point out that during the COVID-19 epidemic, it became clear that the involvement of social media in the activities of religious organizations and lay movements is a necessity of our times. The use of social media does not provide a religious experience but plays an important role in marketing, evangelism, informing movement members, educational processes, and spiritual support for believers in normal as well as difficult times. The UBF’s experience confirms these, albeit only partially. For example, the UBF YouTube channel is watched by almost 70 thousand people, but it has only 1 thousand subscribers, which is quite small for such a large-scale movement. UBF’s experience also proves that social networking sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Snap Chat, TikTok, Instagram, and Zoom are suitable for spreading religious ideas.

Choi and Chung (2023) examined the same topic, but in the context of UBF activities. They agree that the use of social media is necessary nowadays, but they also believe that its effectiveness is not very high. The number of followers demonstrates that group experience is still very important when it comes to the functioning of a religious movement, and the online format is capable of performing a very limited range of tasks. Another side of the involvement of information technology by Korean missionaries was considered by Lehto (2023). He points out that Korean missionaries are very effective in using social media in regions where the level of education of the population is very low. He uses the example of Cambodia, where missionaries can communicate through video or audio what they could not have communicated in textual form. The effectiveness of the lay movement is highly dependent on its ability to communicate with native people. However, instead of using video and audio, S. Lee strongly encouraged UBF missionaries to enrol in educational institutions in the respective mission fields to get doctorates, become professors in those nations, and readily communicate the gospel with students.

Park (2023) states that an effective method of religious education in lay movements is to keep a journal of reflections, which is updated daily in the process of learning. UBF’s experience shows that this format is more productive. Sogams are not only written by students but also read in collaborative meetings. This teaches students to be open and communicate with others, which plays an important role in the formation of religious consciousness. Sogam is also not just a reflection on the educational process; these small texts are dedicated to the student’s reflection on a specific passage of the Bible. Thus, in contrast to a reflection journal, a sogam is more involved in small group experiences and develops in students the ability to communicate their own religious experience of reading the Bible.



This experience of forming thoughts will be useful in future missionary work. These observations about the benefits of the sogam writing method are in line with the findings of Lee (2022). He concludes that storytelling plays a very important role in the process of evangelisation and religious education. It helps students express their feelings toward like-minded people, learn the basics of missionary work, and gain a therapeutic experience through frank communication about an intimate topic of religious faith. It also plays a very important role in evangelising new members of the UBF because it is the story of one's experience with a peer that can inspire a sense of trust and interest in another person. The method of writing sogams can be considered an extremely effective combination of these two methods: a journal of reflection and storytelling.

Thus, the results of the study demonstrate that UBF uses a large number of methods that are considered very effective and promising in the spiritual community. Some Fellowship practices, such as sogam writing, have not yet been sufficiently conceptualized at the scientific level, which should be the goal of further research, as this particular method of spiritual and educational work demonstrates a very positive impact on the level of students' Bible learning. This includes their evangelism, preparation for missionary work, and adaptation to the UBF Fellowship to which they are attached. All of the above studies also support the view that Korean missionaries are currently performing very well and are one of the most powerful missionary organizations to come out of Korea – the UBF. These successes are due not only to management using social media but also to a well-thought-out system of education, counselling, and training programs, regular meetings of UBF members, and conferences under the leadership of S. Lee and S. Barry.

Conclusions

The UBF has existed for more than 60 years and has become a powerful lay movement that actively participates in charity events, sends missionaries around the world, implements cultural and educational events, and is active on social media. The movement's members are no longer only Koreans but also representatives of other nations that spread UBF values in their countries. Therefore, this lay organization can be considered a successful and productive case study.

The study identifies the following methods of developing a lay movement that contributed to the success of the UBF: ecclesiological methods (ecclesiological uncertainty and attachment to the campus), methods of education and spiritual influence (the method of writing sogams, small groups, and one-on-one Bible studies), methods of pastoral care in a manner of biblical counselling and personal leadership, and methods of involvement in activities (involvement of UBF members in organising and holding meetings and conferences, as well as their participation in fishing). The leadership format implemented in the UBF is similar to the ideas formed in the concepts of St. Augustine: humility. An important role in resolving the movement's early financial difficulties was played by the approach that each UBF member should have as a secular profession and, accordingly, his or her income source. The article also identifies the important role of marketing and direct evangelism for the success of the lay movement—for example, the UBF uses methods of public lectures and conferences, social media, fishing, PR effects from participation in charity events, cooperation with large organisations, well-known philosophers, theologians, and scientists. In addition, the history of the UBF demonstrates that Christian lay movements are fruitful in countries with predominantly Christian or atheist populations. The organization has managed to withstand the blow of the COVID-19 epidemic; despite the difficulties of transitioning to an online format, most members of the movement have retained their desire to actively participate in UBF activities.

The results of the study can possibly serve as a foundation for further research into the history of Korean protestant movements and the UBF movement itself. The method of "oral history" would help to collect more empirical material on the history of the UBF. The list of effective methods of lay movement in the article is not exhaustive; it is necessary to continue researching successful cases of lay movement. There are other successful protestant movements even in South Korea, and considering the whole world, the number of successful cases will be even greater to consider.



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