A Crowning Achievement
Kyung Chik Han Wins the 1992 Templeton Prize
In 1945, Kyung Chik Han set off on a clandestine flight from the town of Sinuju in North Korea, where postwar redistribution had replaced a tyrannical Japanese regime with hostile Soviet forces. Driven into hiding to escape persecution, Han—a 1929 Princeton graduate who had gained influence throughout Korea during his twelve years as pastor of Sinuju’s Second Presbyterian Church—crossed mountains and rivers, sometimes hiking as many as fifty miles in a night. Finally, after two bone-wearying weeks, he arrived at the safe haven of Seoul, then occupied by American forces.

Within a few days, he and twenty-seven other refugees from his former pastorate met for prayers and established the Bethany Evangelical Church. Renamed within a year to the Young Nak (Everlasting Joy) Church, that body would eventually grow into the largest Presbyterian congregation in the world, and Kyung Chik Han would ultimately become one of Korea’s most prominent pastors of this century—an evangelist whose commitment to helping refugees and the poor has drawn worldwide attention to the growth of Christianity in Korea.

Han’s influence in Korea has been so great, in fact, that he recently joined the ranks of such noted spiritual leaders as Mother Teresa, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and former Princeton president James I. McCord as a recipient of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

The Templeton Prize, awarded annually to those who best advance the world’s understanding of religion, was founded in 1972 by Sir John Marks Templeton, a world-renowned financier and Presbyterian elder who was president of Princeton’s board of trustees during the years 1967-73 and 1979-85. Templeton initiated the ecumenical prize as a counterpart to the Nobel awards, which he felt overlooked issues of faith and spirituality, and he emphasized that the award would honor achievements that increased human love or understanding of God, rather than “sainthood or mere good works.” He also made it the largest annual monetary prize in the world; as this year’s winner, Han received more than one million dollars, a sum that the pastor used to further Christianity in Korea.

“For many years I have dreamed of seeing North and South Korea reunited and the Christian church flourishing again in the north,” said Han, who retired and was named pastor emeritus of Young Nak in 1973. “That is why I...set aside the majority of the prize money to rebuild the churches in the north as soon as it is politically possible.” Upon receipt of the check, he immediately gave the money to the pastor of the Young Nak Church.

“I was a millionaire for less than one hour,” Han said with the good-natured humor for which he is noted.

Han’s selection was announced at the Church Center for the United Nations on March 11. At Princeton, during a visit on May 11 to preach in Miller Chapel, Han was honored during a ceremony in which his portrait, commissioned by the elders of the Young Nak Church, was unveiled in Speer Library.

“Dr. Han represents what God can do through faithful, courageous, and wise pastoral ministry in the church for the sake of the world,” President Thomas W. Gillespie said. “He has become in retirement the ‘elder statesman’ of the Christian church in Korea, honored for his ministry and revered for his wisdom. To meet Dr. Han personally is to be in the presence of a humble, self-effacing fellow believer whose life has quite evidently been touched and blessed by the spirit of God.”

Han, who was born in 1902 to Confu-

A Ministry of Everlasting Joy

Kyung Chik Han, founder of the world’s largest Presbyterian congregation, wins the 1992 Templeton Prize

During a recent visit to Princeton, Kyung Chik Han (center) is accompanied by Dr. Sang Lee (right) following the morning worship service in Miller Chapel. Lee became the first Kyung Chik Han Associate Professor of Systematic Theology when the chair was endowed at the Seminary two years ago.
bian parents in northern Korea, was seven years old when a recently con-
verted cousin introduced him to Christ’s message. The future pastor quickly took
that message to heart. However, the most critical moment in his path toward
Christian ministry came in 1923 when, while walking on an empty beach al-
ong the Yellow Sea, Han experienced a call from God to commit his life to evan-
gelism. That call soon led him to Princeton Seminary, where he earned a Bachelor of
Divinity degree. (He also was elected class president during his senior year, a
measure of his classmates’ esteem.)

Han returned to Korea after spending two years in the western United States
recovering from tuberculosis, and in 1933 he became pastor of the Second Presbyte-
rian Church. Han’s accomplishments as pastor included building one of the coun-
try’s first orphanages. But his growing popularity and educational ties to Amer-
ica made him suspect to the Japanese regime, which ultimately came to view
the pastor as one more adversary. Han was imprisoned briefly in 1942 for refus-
ing to worship Emperor Hirohito at a Shinto shrine, then was stripped of his
church position. Japan’s defeat led to
only a brief time of peace for Han, a
respite that ended with the Communist occu-

dation.

During his almost thirty years as
senior pastor of the Young Nak Church,
Han committed himself to helping those
refugees who, as he had, sought to escape
persecution in North Korea. He led the
construction of both an orphanage and a
home for the elderly in the South Korean
capital, and Young Nak quickly earned a
reputation as the “refugee church.” The
turmoil caused by North Korea’s invasion
of South Korea in 1950 — the same year
the Young Nak congregation constructed
a Gothic stone building as its permanent
home — only served to strengthen the mis-


dation of Han and Young Nak. The church
went on to establish homes for widows in
Pusan and Seoul, a library, and education-
al institutions ranging from a primary
school for impoverished children to the
Seoul Women’s Theological Seminary.
Through it all the church membership con-
tinued to grow, and today Young Nak has
a congregation of sixty thousand, as well as
five hundred new churches founded by
members throughout the world.

In addition to his work through the
Young Nak Church, Han served for many
years as moderator of the General Assem-
by of the Presbyterian Church of Korea.
He was instrumental in establishing the
Presbyterian Theological Seminary and
Soongsil College in South Korea after they
were shut down in the north, and during
the late 1950s he served as president of
the college. His achievements have earned
him numerous accolades, including the
Rose of Sharon (the highest medal granted
to civilians by the South Korean government),
two honorary doctorates, and a
Distinguished Alumnus Award from
Princeton — a collection now crowned by
the Templeton Prize.

Despite such accomplishments, those
who meet Han are most impressed by his
humility. “Dr. Han is very com-
mitted to Christ, to the church,
and to the work that has been his
life, but he maintains a very low
profile,” says Fred W. Cassell,
Princeton’s vice-presi-
dent for
seminary relations,
who preached at
Young Nak
Church in 1990
while accompany-
ing the
Seminary Sing-
ers on a trip to
Seoul. “Dr. Han
is very quiet,
very humble, very kind — but I don’t
think any Korean Presbyterian would do
a thing without having first consulted
with him. He knows who he is, and
everybody else knows it as well. He is
held in great reverence.”

“I think Dr. Han is the quintessential
pastor,” says Dr. Sang Lee, who became
the first Kyung Chik Han Associate Pro-
fessor in Systematic Theology when the
chair was endowed at Princeton two years
ago. (The endowment is believed to be
the first at an American seminary to honor
an Asian Christian.) “In Asian culture, we
have a term called te, which can be best
defined as a combination of humility and
compassion. Dr. Han has a great deal of te.”

Lee has visited Han often over the
years, and he still laughingly recalls the
time when he translated a sermon deliv-
ered by President Gillespie at the Young
Nak Church, and the reverse power strug-
gle that occurred between himself and
Dr. Han over who would take the hon-
ored pulpit chair next to the Princeton
president.

“Dr. Han insisted that I sit next to the
president, and that he would sit in the
end chair,” Lee says. “But I knew in my
Asian heart this was not the thing to do.”
What ensued was a stand-off of polite-
ness between the two men. After about
ten seconds that must have felt like ten
minutes under the stares of several thou-
sand worshipers, Lee triumphed; Han
sat, turned to the president, and said
with characteristic simplicity, “He won.”

That lack of affectation is still
displayed in all aspects of the
pastor’s life. Since retiring,
Han has lived on the
Young Nak
Church grounds
in a modest,
three-room
house, the receiv-
ing area of which
contains space
for little more
than a few chairs,
a table, and a
small plant
recently sent to
him by the
republic’s presi-
dent in con-
gratulations for
winning the
Templeton Prize.

He and his late
wife, Chan Bin Kim, had one son and
doctor; and today Han is grand-
father to seven children and great-
grandfather to nine.

However humble, Han still main-
tains a vitality that enables him to deliv-
er a monthly sermon at Young Nak (he is
especially noted for his simple yet pow-
ful language) and to chair the “Love
Rice” movement, which has been provid-
ing food to the world’s poor since 1990.
Now in his tenth decade, he continues to
impart to the world, through his energy
and his gentle, powerful spirit, an
example of what it means to live fully the
message of Christ.

Perhaps Han’s life can best be summed
up in a statement John Templeton once
made to the New York Times about the
nature of his prize. “The laws of love
and charity differ from the laws of mathe-
matics,” the noted financier said. “The
more we give away, the more we have
left.”