

PASTOR, PROPHET, PIONEER

Sang Chul Lee, Chancellor of Victoria University

By Mike Milne

The Very Reverend Dr. Sang Chul Lee leans back in his chair and laughs, filling his small, neat office with the rolling peals that so often punctuate a conversation with the diminutive Korean-Canadian pastor. It's been his travelling companion, this sense of humour, a survival tool and a weapon. It's nourished by his quick eye for irony and his thirst for life. It helps him make personal connections and hides his fears.

And it lets you know that, even though he is Chancellor of Victoria University, near the end of one three-year term and about to begin a second, Sang Chul Lee remains a good-natured, affable guy, with no pretensions. Not overpowered by the honours and recognition and responsibilities that have come his way, he is still breaking down barriers of mistrust and misunderstanding, still seeking a path towards social and spiritual harmony, still making his way with humility, humour and wisdom.

Since he first left his home to attend a United Church-run missionary high school in Loong Jing, China, in the late 1930s, Sang Chul Lee's story has been one of journey, survival and searching. It's a story of faith, too, faith in the value of education and of hard work, and—once he became a convert to Christianity—faith in a God of justice, forgiveness and love.

That this journey has led Lee to Victoria University is no accident. Founded by Methodists, with strong links to The United Church of Canada, Victoria is a good match with Lee. But when offered the chancellor's chair in 1992, two years after finishing his term as moderator of the United Church of Canada and reaching his official retirement, he hesitated.

"This kind of job for me was more difficult in a sense from moderator, because it is, in a way, strange land for me," he says, with a shrug and more laughter. Victoria University is located literally minutes from the Bloor Street church where Lee served for 20 years as pastor to the Toronto Korean United Church congregation. And Emmanuel College, the United Church theological school, is part of

Victoria University. But academic life is a far cry from the hurly-burly of the church and human-rights work that has marked Lee's career in Canada. As he says with his habitual infectious smile, "I'm not really an academic-oriented person." Faced with a journey in a 'strange land', Lee has often hesitated, but never halted.

The eldest son of a poor Korean farmer and labourer, Lee was born in rural Siberia in 1924. At the age of seven, he fled with his family to Manchuria, to escape Communism. But life in that Chinese province, soon to be occupied by Japan, was also repressive and brutal. The Japanese occupation initially brought construction work and increased prosperity, but as Japanese authorities suppressed Korean independence movements, oppression increased. As a young boy, Lee witnessed summary executions and the public humiliation of his fellow Koreans, was forced to take a Japanese name, and was prevented from studying the Korean language and culture.

Once, as part of a group of students who were privately studying Korean, Lee was imprisoned for two weeks, and beaten and tortured by Japanese authorities, aided by a Korean collaborator. Lee tells a powerful story about meeting his hated tormentor after the defeat of Japan, suppressing the urge to kill the man or report him as a collaborator (which would also bring the man certain death)—instead sparing his life and forgiving him. "I began to understand that the Christian precepts of forgiveness and benevolence are not simply ideals for self-improvement," Lee writes in his autobiography, *The Wanderer*. "They have practical significance as well. Anger and revenge are self-destructive and perpetuate violence. Overcoming that violence within ourselves brings a healing power into society. Making peace is much more difficult than making war. Yet it is also infinitely more

productive."

The young man was absorbing lessons that would serve him well later in life when, coming to Canada as a pastor, he was called by a largely Japanese congregation and when, as moderator, he faced a United Church wracked by dissension and dispute

**"...I'm doing
bridge-work
between
the university
and the church..."**

Cover Story

over the question of ordaining self-declared homosexual candidates for the ministry.

After spending two of the later years of World War II working in civil engineering, Lee returned to his home in Manchuria to teach school. But, with Soviet occupiers replacing the Japanese, Christians and those promoting Korean culture or national feelings were coming under increased scrutiny. Sought by police, Lee escaped Manchuria and migrated south, finally reaching Seoul, in what was to become South Korea, early in 1946.

As the Communist grip tightened on China, communication and travel became impossible, and Lee would never see or hear from his parents, sisters or younger brother again.



Over the next ten years, through the post-war hardships, the strictures of military government, and the turmoil and terror of the partition of Korea and the Korean War, Lee studied theology at the Presbyterian Chosun Theological Seminary. He earned an undergraduate degree and in 1956 a Master of Theology, and was ordained. His early service in the church was in several mostly poor parishes. Marrying Shin Jah Kim, the daughter of the seminary's principal, he began a family. Along with his father-in-law, he was immersed in the religious controversy that resulted in the creation of the liberal Presbyterian Church of the Republic of Korea (PROK) in a break with other, more conservative Presbyterians. As secretary of PROK's student work in 1960, Lee was involved in a student rebellion that helped topple the government of Syngman Rhee and bring democracy, albeit briefly, to Korea.

Then, in 1961, came a chance to study at Vancouver's Union College (now part of the Vancouver School of Theology at the University of British Columbia), with a two-year scholarship leading to an S.T.M. degree. Leaving his wife and three children behind, Lee spent the two years studying and working in Vancouver, followed by another year at the Ecumenical Institute, related to the World Council of Churches, near Geneva in Switzerland. "People from about 25 churches from all over the world were there," says Lee, recalling his time at the Institute. "It was not a lecturing kind of system, but usually we just made presentations and debated with each other...It was just a tremendous experience. We were stunned that we were so different from each other. Then we all realized how narrow we are."

"Lee returned to South Korea well educated and ready to continue his ministry, but restless as well. After about a year and a half, he was called by the Steveston United Church in Richmond, BC, half of whose congregation was Japanese-, half English-speaking. His wife

and three daughters joined him there, beginning their life as Canadians. As someone who could speak Japanese and English, Lee was an ideal candidate, but as a Korean who had been persecuted by Japanese soldiers, he had hesitated.

"When they approached me, I sort of wondered whether I can control my emotions, because I had a quite bad time with the Japanese when I was young," he says. "But it's funny, as soon as I started my ministry, I forgot that they are Japanese, they are just people. I am the pastor and they are my people."

"Later on, I confessed to them that I had fears. And one of their elders stood up and said, 'In fact, we had the same fears in the beginning. But as soon as you started your ministry, we forgot you were not Japanese.' And that was a very interesting experience. I concluded that it was only the power of Christian love that makes that kind of thing possible. And that kind of experience opened me up."

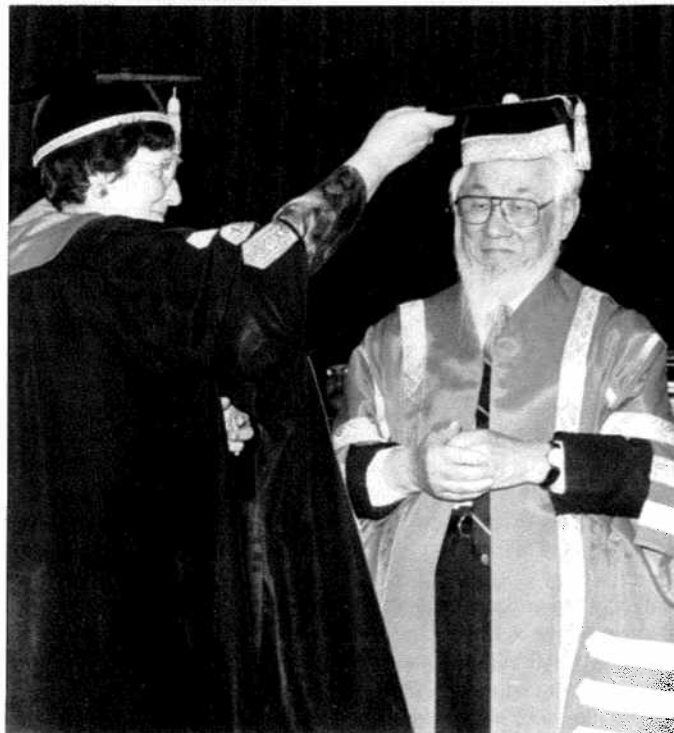
Having also begun a ministry with the growing Vancouver-area Korean community, Lee was called to Toronto, where he would spend 20 years as pastor of the active Toronto Korean United Church, which shares space with Bloor Street United Church, a few blocks from Vic. Here, he led a congregation of liberal Korean Christians, but also got involved with work in the wider United Church.

"Until my time, those oriental church leaders—they already had Japanese and Chinese—they being so shy, they were cautious about entering the mainstream," says Lee. "But I felt during that period, unless we participate, we couldn't make any contribution. So I determined myself I would participate. So I did go to Presbytery and Conference and General Council, that sort of thing."

"It wasn't easy, but somehow I was able to survive and continue my participation, and the church accepted me." Lee erupts in uproarious laughter at the thought. No one who knows him would describe him as shy.

Within the ethnic communities, too, Lee has made waves, reminding immigrants that, while holding on to their basic cultural values, they must adjust to the new reality that is Canada. "My spirit is that I want to share what I have, I want to learn from others," Lee explains. "And also I have to tell my people that this is the lifestyle you have to adapt to in this country. Because whether you like it or not, this is the direction this country is taking."

The Reverend Richard Choe (Emm 8T9) is a young United Church pastor in Mississauga, Ontario, and a fellow Korean-Canadian. He says Sang Chul Lee is a very pragmatic man who has served as a role model for many of Choe's generation. He also remembers Lee, during his time at Toronto Korean United Church, taking an interest in him and his fellow students at Emmanuel College. "It didn't matter if it was a Christian or a non-Christian group," Choe



The Very Reverend Dr. Sang Chul Lee with Dr. Eva Kushner, at his installation as Chancellor of Victoria University, 1992

says. "I remember one time I was organizing this group for a play—there were about 20 of us—and he took us all out to a Korean restaurant and bought us dinner. And that was on a pastor's salary."

Above all, Lee remains a pastor, helping people deal with the changes they face. Despite having dealt with many very wide-ranging, life-changing upheavals, he too has moments of doubt and fear. "Whatever change comes to us, it is always a frightening experience," he says. "A guy even like me. Every time, tremendous anxieties, uncertainties. Scared."

"When I was elected as the moderator, in the beginning I was scared. Look around the church, it is so white. But somehow we begin to realize we have gifts to share with one another. And I guess some of them just said about me, 'Let's just see what the little guy is going to do.' I think that's what some of them thought, but that's okay." More laughter shakes the room. As moderator, Lee did not duck the issue of homosexuality and the ministry that rocked the United Church, but constantly reminded people that it was not the single or most important issue they faced as Christians.

"If the church, as a living body, locked herself in one single issue, to me, that's almost a suicidal attitude. The church has to get things into a holistic way. Otherwise you're sort of a dead rock. But it was interesting, within about three months, that kind of attitude was accepted by many."

Lee's life experiences had taught him that the church would survive the turmoil and that Christians needed to set their sights on the larger scene, to learn how to live with differences of race, culture and opinion. That's clear, says Lee, "particularly to a guy like me, when I am thinking of my boyhood, how people reacted to each other, how they exploited each other, how they despised each other. I came through that and come to this point and see the people realize that in order to survive, there is no choice, that we have to somehow live together....Very often reluctantly, we accept that reality. Because it's difficult. I can understand why some people feel it so difficult to accept all this. But is there any choice?"

As past moderator, Lee is still widely consulted, and keeps up an active preaching schedule. Since taking over as chancellor, he has limited the preaching engagements to two Sundays a month, usually for church anniversaries and other special events. While retirement is a relative term for a man like Lee, nevertheless it has taken him and Shin Ja out of downtown Toronto to suburban Newmarket, Ontario, where they are closer to two of their daughters, their husbands and three grandchildren. The oldest



Sang Chul Lee and his family. Top left, Lee in 1936; right, 1939; bottom, the Lees and their daughters in 1960.

daughter lives in Sarnia, Ontario, with her husband and two children.

As Victoria's chancellor, Lee has carved out a niche for himself. "He's a delightful guy," says the Reverend John Hoffman, principal of Emmanuel College, who encouraged the former United Church moderator to take the university post. "Sang Chul Lee is a warm, unassuming man. And he's a great person to work with. He doesn't try to be a Norrie Frye." Lee expects no comparison with his predecessor, and while he feels the university should concentrate on strengthening its undergraduate courses—"the really basic work of a university"—he also has some ideas about what a university can do to help people get along with each other.

"I think a university is supposed to be a very open society," the Chancellor says. "And at this point when we look at the student body, it is a very open society. But when you look around at the teaching staff, there is a limited number of women—that has to be changed in my view—and limited number of non-white teaching staff. That has already started to change, but that will change gradually. That area, I think we have to face. You don't have much choice; it's coming."

After surviving as moderator of the United Church of Canada

and shepherding it through its most turbulent time since church union, Lee has no trouble chairing the polite, if less animated meetings of the Victoria Senate. "They do things in a very organized way," he says, also citing good and helpful relations with the university president, Dr. Roseann Runte.

Generous donors, many of them Vic alumni, have helped to keep the university financially healthy, Lee says. But the threat of federal funding cuts remains. Then there are the challenges of bringing in students from across Canada to build a more national, less Ontario-based student body, of keeping the university accessible through entrance scholarships, and of providing more residence space for women.

With all the number crunching and program planning, there's one thing that keeps Lee going, that keeps him focused.

"It's the personal contacts that are always for me exciting, with the officials and students. And also for me, I'm always conscious that I'm doing bridge-work between the university and the church, and the university and the visible-minority communities, and that awareness inside me makes me feel that it's important."

Mike Milne is a freelance writer who lives in Owen Sound, Ontario. His work often appears in The United Church Observer.