

Traveling pastor brings together Chinese Christian Church

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Billy Ko, pastor of the Columbia Chinese Christian Church, talks with a member of the church. | [Zac Boesch](#)

BY [Jennifer Liu](#)

COLUMBIA — Reaching Billy Ko can be quite a challenge.

The pastor of the [Columbia Chinese Christian Church](#) spends an average of 15 hours every week on the road. His ministry takes him to Kansas, Illinois, Arkansas, Nebraska and, annually, to China.

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Congregation members file into a prayer service after a potluck dinner on a Friday night at the Columbia Chinese Christian Church.

When his destinations are more than a three-hour drive away, he will often fire up his own [BD-4 experimental aircraft](#) and take to the skies.

Ko is the pastor of the Chinese Christian Church on Rock Quarry Road, which caters to the resident Chinese population, but Ko has reached beyond his congregation to help other Chinese students in several Midwestern states embrace Christianity.

He is the director of the [Christian Witness Center](#) in Warsaw, Mo. The independent nonprofit organization serves Chinese campus Bible study groups and other Christian churches in the Midwest.

Ko also leads people from Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, Malaysia and the Philippines who want to grow spiritually and promote evangelism and missions around the world.

Helping others find a home

The first thing Chinese Christian Church members often say about their pastor is how busy he is.

Next, they usually mention the time and compassion he dedicates to the individuals of his congregation.

Ru Dai, originally from China, has been with the church since she came to Columbia from the University of Central Missouri during the fall of 2011. She credits the relationships she has built with Ko and other members of the congregation for her smooth adjustment to a new environment.

"When we have troubles in our studying and our lives, I like to talk with him, and he'll give me suggestions," she said. "I feel better when I talk with him about my problems. Even when we have small troubles, we can talk with him."

Dai's husband, Hongwei Wang, joined his wife at the church two months ago and was quickly welcomed into the congregation.

"The people here are very kind and like a family," he said.

It's this sense of family that Ko strives for, especially since most members of his congregation are university students and international scholars who are a long way from home.

According to the [International Institute of Education](#), university students from China make up nearly 22 percent of international students in the United States. In 2011, an estimated 158,000 Chinese students enrolled in U.S. universities, making China the leading country for sending youth to study abroad for the second consecutive year.

Ko sees this national trend at a local level. When his church was founded in the 1980s, he estimates there were fewer than 200 Chinese students in Columbia, most of them graduate students from Taiwan. During the 1990s, that number grew to more than 600 Chinese students, more coming for undergraduate studies and from the mainland.

By the mid-2000s, Columbia's Chinese population had diversified to include undergraduate students,

graduate students, international scholars and visiting professors and their family members, most from mainland China.

The Columbia Chinese population in 2010 [was more than 1,800](#). To accommodate this growing, diverse population, the church has assembled children, youth and elderly adult worship groups.

The pastor cites three main factors that lead Chinese students to the nondenominational Christian church: They are a long way from home and need spiritual guidance; there are more resources about Christianity here than in China; and separation from their families allows them the liberty and time to rethink their beliefs.

A strong devotion since childhood

Ko's desire to join the ministry began more than five decades ago and thousands of miles away in Hong Kong.

"Before I was 5, when people asked me what I would like to do when I grew up, I would always answer, 'I would like to be a preacher!'" he said. "I did not really know what exactly preachers did. I just knew they stood behind the podium and preached every Sunday."

At 6, Ko said he accepted Christ and began to attend church regularly.

"Since then, I knew that God was in my heart," he said.

Shortly afterward, he enrolled in a boarding school sponsored by an evangelical church in Hong Kong. While there, he volunteered to play piano for weekly services and eventually taught Sunday school to the younger children.

As graduation neared, he was looking for a place to extend his worship beyond Hong Kong.

Of the nearly 40 students in his graduating class, Ko was among a dozen who decided to come to the United States to continue biblical studies.

Bridging cultural barriers

In the summer of 1971, Ko arrived in Hutchinson, Kan., to complete a final year of high school at [Central Christian High School](#) and prepare for college in America. The transition was not easy, he said.

"The second day after arrival, a news reporter from [The Hutchinson News](#) came to interview me for a half-page story," he said. "They had probably never seen anyone so foreign there before."

He stayed with a host family for a year and began to adjust to American culture.

"It was a challenge but also fun," he said.

The year of English-language immersion was intense, but it didn't detract from his goal to become a pastor in this country. In 1972, he enrolled in [Calvary Bible College in Kansas City](#). He completed his bachelor's degree and continued to pursue a master's degree, both in biblical studies.

He would often visit a neighboring community college and teach fellow Chinese international students about Christianity. That led him to realize his passion for campus ministries.

After receiving his first master's degree in 1979, he would eventually earn a master of divinity degree in 1993 from [Calvary Theological Seminary](#) on the same campus.

"I stuck with it because I could keep learning," he said.

During these 13 years, Ko began serving as a full-time minister to other campus ministries and soon became the director of the Christian Witness Center, founded in 1980.

Over the years, the center has expanded and now serves more than 50 campus Bible study groups in Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi and Iowa.

Still, Ko did not stop looking for a new church to call his permanent home.

Laying the framework for a growing congregation

The Chinese Christian Church was still in its infancy when Ko got involved.

It began as a fellowship group under Albert and Grace Sun. They had moved to Columbia in 1974 to work as professors at MU. To get acquainted with other Chinese Christians in the area, they started holding worship meetings at their home.

The Friday gatherings were extended to regular Sunday services. As membership grew, the Suns researched bigger locations for their services and called upon Ko to deliver sermons to the multiplying congregation.

Grace Sun remembers why she originally asked her friend to visit the fellowship group, a reason that holds true today.

"I think he has a good mind to care for us, and also he works for the Lord," she said. "He has a pure heart to do the job."

Ko, who was living in Kansas City, had met the Suns at a church retreat and said he gladly accepted the invitation to make the drive to Columbia. What began as a once-a-semester trip soon developed into a monthly, then weekly, routine.

He became interested in moving to Columbia permanently, and others in his church family encouraged him.

"They said to me, 'You're driving around too much. Why don't you just live here?'" he said. "And so I did."

In 1990, Ko moved to Columbia with his wife and two children. A year later, the Chinese Christian Church opened at its permanent location on Rock Quarry Road.

"I think he's a very good pastor for us," Grace Sun said. "He has a lot of visions, not only for our church on campus, but also the Midwest area."

Campus ministries still his calling

Years, miles and dozens of congregations later, Ko, 60, still reaches out to students.

"Ministering to the students is very rewarding," he said. "Seeing young people dedicating their life to serve

God full time in ministry is a blessing."

On an average Friday night, Ko can be found surrounded by the nearly 150 members at the evening worship service. Friday nights also include a community dinner when members can catch up over home-cooked dishes. Conversations in both English and Chinese echo through the halls.

When the services begin at 7 p.m., the sanctuary is nearly at capacity.

"We are thinking about adding another building," Ko said. "But it will take time."

With such plans afoot, Ko doesn't see himself slowing anytime soon.

"God has been leading me in this direction for a long time," he said.

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