Protestant church group's unwavering support for gay rights

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jwpark@koreatimes.co.kr

NCCK leader vows churches' role for social inclusion, peace

By Park Ji-won

Gay and lesbian rights are a thorny issue for churches all around the world. As can be expected from members of conservative circles, there are vocal critics of sexual minorities. Still, considering the sensitivity of the issue, it is no surprise that many Korean churches either remain silent or hesitant to make their stances about the issue public.
But a group of Korean churches have defied the norm and openly support gay and lesbian rights, saying sexual identity is a basic human right and thus claim they need to be respected.

The group at the center of public attention is the National Council of Churches in Korea, a coalition of Korea's oldest churches better known by the acronym NCCK.

Rev. Lee Hong-jung, general secretary of the NCCK, reiterated that there has been no change in the church group's position on gay and lesbian rights, although their stance has invited a slew of criticism from many Korean churches.

"When we see people in difficult situations, even though they had past criminal records, it is natural for us Christians to help them," he said during a recent Korea Times interview at his office in Seoul. "Of course, homosexuality is not a crime. What the NCCK is trying to say is that people's basic human rights should be respected including sexual identity. It is all about human rights."

Rev. Lee serves as the de facto representative of the coalition, participating in various international meetings including one for the World Council of Churches. The NCCK has been an active supporter of the proposed anti-discrimination act, which has yet to be introduced largely due to fierce opposition from conservative Christians.

He noted sexual minorities need to be dealt with in an ethical manner, but also from the perspective of God's love.
The NCCK has faced a barrage of criticism from other Korean churches for its pro-gay rights stance.

In 2014, the group presented the human rights award to Lim Tae-hoon, the founder and leader of the Center for Military Human Rights Korea and a gay rights activist. The NCCK also invited another gay rights activist Kim-Jho Gwang-soo, a filmmaker and screenwriter, to a forum to discuss gay and lesbian rights in 2016. The NCCK has been slammed for a series of pro-gay rights movements.

The NCCK's progressive stance, however, continued after Rev. Lee took office in 2017.

Lee began to openly address the need for an open discussion of the inclusion issue and his "overly liberal" stance sparked debate among Christians.

In a concrete move to seek to include more gay people in the Christian community, the NCCK is planning to publish a pastoral guidebook on gay
Christians in the first half of this year; an unprecedented move to officially document the existence of minorities and generate a spirit of inclusivity for those of all sexual identities.

Even though Lee is taking the lead to create an atmosphere in favor of sexual minorities, it hasn't been easy for the organization to pursue such a controversial agenda. Even inside the NCCK there are members with conservative attitudes opposed to the inclusion of gay Christians.

"The NCCK has been divided and facing protests against the inclusion of gay Christians both inside and outside of the community... Some protesters continued to hold street rallies in front of the NCCK headquarters."

Criticism from outside of the church and complaints from within, however, didn't stop Lee from exploring ways to include sexual minorities.

He said he realized that it is something his organization should not ignore amid growing consultations with the queer community within the church along with changes in other partner churches in Western and Asian countries that NCCK has close communication with.

Underlining that he is aware that Western churches are also suffering from division in the debate, especially on what to include in Canon law and its implementation, he added that "The most important theological question is that of whether those minorities were a group of people who were abandoned by God’s church. (We concluded that) they are minorities under God's pastoral world."

He cited John 13:34-35 of the Bible, saying, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

He added he will further discuss the details of the book with its partner churches in the Philippines in February and release it as soon as possible.

**Unification and peace movement**
Embracing sexual minorities is one of two policy focuses the NCCK has actively pursuing. Unification of the two Koreas has been the other focus.

The NCCK has been a symbol of pro-democracy and pro-peace groups since the 1980s when popular protests reached their peak with students and unionists taking to the streets.

The Protestant group is trying to create a breakthrough in the diplomatic standoff between Seoul and Pyongyang by expanding its official projects with its North Korean counterpart.

"We are in talks with other leaders of seven religious groups (of Korean Conference of Religion and Peace) to push for applying for individual tours to North Korea in a preemptive move (to boost peace on the Korean Peninsula)," Lee told reporters during a press conference in Seoul on Wednesday. He said the NCCK is also planning to visit the United States and Japan to hold international seminars on peace building in the regions.

His remarks came after President Moon Jae-in announced recently that the government is engaging in diplomacy with the North that aims, amongst other goals, to allow South Koreans to travel to North Korea in an effort to improve inter-Korean relations.

Meanwhile, Lee said that the NCCK is planning to join hands with its North Korean counterpart, or Korean Council of Religionists (KCR), and other civic groups here and in other countries to push for the declaration of the war between the two Koreas and the adoption of a peace treaty in July to boost the momentum for peace. The two Koreas are technically at war.

"We suggested the North's side (join our effort to declare the end of the war)... Some 300 people from about 10 South Korean civic organizations and 150 people from overseas will join the campaign. If South Koreans cannot enter Panmunjeom, only foreigners will get inside the area and take an action."
**What is the NCCK?**

Founded in 1924, the liberal Protestant group has been center stage in the pro-democracy movement throughout the country's turbulent history. Nine Christian churches joined the NCCK: the Presbyterian Church of Korea, the Korean Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, the Salvation Army in Korea, the Anglican Church of Korea, the Assemblies of God of Korea, the Korea Evangelical Church, the Orthodox Metropolis of Korea and the Lutheran Church in Korea. The NCCK is known for announcing so called "88 Declaration," the first declaration calling for unification on the Korean Peninsula made among civic organizations.