

Yunghee Koh



Yunghee was born in Jeju in South Korea in December 1968. Her father left home when Yunghee was only a couple of months old in order to find work in Japan, eventually running his own sushi restaurant in Tokyo, whilst her mother remained in Jeju, freediving for oysters as a traditional female island diver.

Yunghee was raised in Jeju with her older brother, and gained a BSc in Economics from Jeju National University in South Korea. She then went on to read for a Diploma in Computer Graphics Design in Japan Electronic College in Tokyo, to where she subsequently moved permanently.

Yunghee then made another move, to the UK in 1995 with her husband, Taeseok. She raised a family of two daughters, worked as a marketing negotiator and accounts clerk, gained an MA in Children's Literature and, subsequently, a Postgraduate Diploma in Education at Roehampton University. In 2009 she started a three-year Diploma in Ministerial Theology in Canterbury University.

She became a Reader [licensed lay minister] in 2012 at St James's Church, New Malden, and then moved to St Leonard's Church in Streatham in 2015

where she became an Ordinand. Yunghee read for a degree in Christian Ministry at Durham University and then joined St Mary's Church, Wimbledon in 2016. She continued to serve at St Mary's and was deaconed in 2017 and ordained priest in 2018. In December 2018 she assumed responsibility for St John the Baptist Church, Wimbledon.

(i) Your story

What were you doing 25 years ago?

I was in Japan...finishing a two-year computer graphics course in Tokyo. I was brought up in South Korea but after I graduated from university I read Economics...I was still hungry to continue learning and studying. I ended up moving to Japan...first to study Japanese language, which I became fluent in...and then computer graphics. It was an ideal move...my father was already living in Japan and, whilst I lived alone, it was nice knowing my dad was never too far away. Settling in Tokyo was relatively easy for me...I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by kind and generous people. I made a lot of great friends and worked part-time as a waitress which helped me get used to life in Tokyo.

How did ministry come about for you?

I was brought up in a Buddhist family. One day, at university, my friend...who was a devoted Christian and engaged to a man who was Buddhist...came to see me. She was struggling because she found the Buddhist culture difficult to follow...and was agonizing over whether or not it was right for her to go ahead with the marriage. She knew I was a Buddhist so she came to me asking for my opinion and what I really thought about the religious differences she was finding.

Whilst she was crying I just felt someone was holding her very tenderly. Even though there was no one there I felt she was surrounded by a certain beautiful love and I thought, 'maybe this is Christianity.' Even though I was not a Christian I experienced an overwhelming presence of God in that very place. I thought, 'if God really exists this is it, right here in front of me.'

I asked her to take me to her church and that was my first step into Christianity. After that I got baptised and when I was in Japan I met my husband who was an Evangelist. My mum hated this...she was so upset. My husband wanted to study Christianity in Europe so I came with him in 1995...with our five-month-old daughter. I thought of myself as the helper of my husband. Meanwhile, I had an opportunity to study for an MA in

Children's Literature at Roehampton and continued to satisfy my love for learning. We eventually moved to Raynes Park...there are so many Korean churches and Korean people in the area, but we decided to go an English Anglican church.

One Palm Sunday I was listening to the reading...Jesus is entering Jerusalem and the disciples are shouting and the Pharisees are saying, 'why don't you make them shut up?' And Jesus says, 'if they stop shouting then the stones will cry out.' And that made me think. If he is the creator...and if he can make the stones, which have no mouths, shout out about his glorious things...what am I doing here with my mouth...and doing nothing? And I thought, 'is this something that God is telling me?' But I thought...'I have my full-time job...my children are growing up...I am supporting my husband...I am Korean...my English is still lacking. How can I even think about it...it is so ridiculous?' And I just put the idea aside.

In 2007 my mother became very ill back in Korea with stomach cancer...and I felt that I needed to be back to Korea with her but I had responsibilities here...with family and work. It was a difficult time but my husband persuaded me. So I went back to Korea and spent six months with her. When she was in hospital I was able stay with her throughout the nights...I spent almost every night with her. And eventually she passed away.

On the way back on the plane I thought about the relationship my children had shared with my mum, and felt sad as they didn't know each other very well...simply because my children hadn't spent a lot of time with her. They hadn't had the opportunity with the thousands of miles that separated them. I felt very sorry.

Thinking about this made me suddenly question, what about God with me? I had known him for so long, or had said that I had known him for so long...but did I really know him? Like my mother and my children, who of course knew they were grandmother and grandchild to each other and loved each other, but they had never had an active relationship to cherish. I'd been saying I believe in God, and I love God, all this time...but what was my relationship with God truly like? All of this was going on while I was travelling back to England on the plane.

So when I came back I decided to become more involved with my faith, and went into Reader training, which I finished in 2012. Whilst I was training I thought, 'I am doing something here...but it doesn't feel I am taking the right path. It doesn't feel...enough.' So I spoke to my vicar who referred me to the DDO [Diocesan Director of Ordinands, someone employed by the

Diocese to guide people through the vocations process]...and in the end I was accepted.



On that Palm Sunday, God was definitely talking to me and asking me to preach his Gospel. You can preach as a Reader. But standing at the side of the altar as a Reader, and watching the priest celebrating...that made me really passionate about becoming a priest.



What lies at the core of your faith?

Love. At the very beginning I felt the love of God was holding my friend so tenderly...it's what drew me to the faith. With my mother passing away I really asked 'what will happen now...will all of the love I shared with her disappear?' I was reading the Bible and these words spoke to me: 'God is love and every love is in God.' I felt that if God is love then in the love I shared with mum, there would be God...so there must be God.

I really, really want that in every love that we share with one another...there is God...even though we might not know God properly.

I am especially reminded of love when celebrating a wedding ceremony: God gave love to the couple to start with...to learn how to love one another...to love their children. And that love goes into the family...and then out into the community...and into society.

So the core of my belief is the love that God has started within each of us.



Which Bible passage resonates with you?

Because I really want my ministry to be on love, I like the Corinthians 'love' chapter [1 Corinthians Chapter 13]. 'Love is...love is...love is...the gift of love'...the whole chapter. Christian faith is about living your life in love...and knowing that end, it is only love that remains.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an

adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

How do you spend your time outside ministry?

I like spending time with my husband and my family. I think it's important we actively make space for quality time with our loved ones...we're all so busy going about our individual lives. At the moment my younger daughter is in the middle of her A-levels... my elder daughter recently graduated and is working as a communications manager for a church.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years' time?

I would like to be a parish priest...leading a church...and helping elderly people relate to young people, and the other way around. I really think that there is a lot that could be gained for both generations if given the opportunity to mix. I would also like to embrace any opportunities to introduce the Korean community to the Anglican faith. Whilst there are many Korean Christians, they are mainly Presbyterian or follow the Pentecostal tradition. I think sharing traditions is always a positive thing, especially as it often encourages cultural integration.

(ii) Your ministry

How do you express the core of your faith in your ministry?

I believe that community lies at the core of faith...so as a community and church we need to be constantly seeking to love one another. We need to develop and maintain connections with each other. Unless you actively get to know someone you are going to find it hard to care for them and even begin to love them.



One Sunday I was preaching about the importance of community in the family service. I called all the children and their parents out to the front...and introduced each of them to the congregation. I did it because I knew that a lot of the congregation did not know the names of the children in the church. Sometimes the children just get grouped together as 'the children'...we don't consider them as active members of the congregation. But, of course, they are very important members of the church...as are any of the adults.

So I thought it would be really good to introduce each child to the congregation...so that everyone could begin to get to know individuals in the church beyond the people they already know, or sit next to in the pews.

How can we make one body in Christ when we do not even want to know who belongs to our body? This is how I would like to create a community...loving one another.

Which part of your ministry gives you the greatest fulfilment?

Meeting people...talking with them...hearing their thoughts and feelings. Getting to know their individual stories and getting to know them...for example through weddings, funerals and baptisms. These occasions are particularly important as many people who come through the doors are not regular church-goers, and it's one of the few times they come into contact with the church.

Sometimes it's joyful...a baptism for their first child or their wedding...celebrating their joyful happiness. Sometimes it's really painful...knowing their difficulties...being there for them in their hard times.

Through these times it's wonderful to witness that everyone... regular church-goer or not... is God's creation and that God is with them.



Which part of your ministry do you find most challenging?

When people meet me they know I am not English...they know that I am from an Asian country. Some find it awkward to talk with me because of my accent...my misunderstanding of culture.

I was organising a wedding...at the beginning the couple were hesitant about me taking their wedding service. I think it was because they felt I wouldn't be able to take their service properly. And once, whilst I was taking a funeral service, the son of the deceased came up to me during the service and tried to prevent me from delivering my talk and address. I was about to give my address and he said, 'Let's stand up and sing the hymn' and I said, 'No, please go and sit down...I would like to give my address and finish the service properly and give everybody what needs to be done.' I had to get him to sit down so I could carry on with the service.

So that's quite challenging...people judging me...that I am not the right person to be there. But I am not there as Yunghee...I am there as a minister doing God's work.

What's the difference you'd like your ministry to make in your community?

I want to make church a family. When you go to church you have so many different groups...and they are all individual and not connected...the young...the elderly...the flower-arranging group...a Bible study group.



I believe that church needs to bring children up as a family...and that's what I really want to do. I want to bring all age groups together and to work on activities together. I am planning to have a Passion play in the parish...I would like to involve the young children and the elderly...and for all the community to come together...starting in one church and ending with the resurrection in St Mary's, the mother church. And hopefully that will make connections between the age groups. Someone said this so ambitious...but there are many professional actors and actresses in St Mary's to get involved...and the choirs too!

Nowadays there are so many children who only have their immediate family around them...often the rest of their family live abroad...and children then only have the influence of their parents. There are also many single-

parented families...and so I think our modern society means that children have less opportunities for learning from different role-models. I think the church should be an environment where we really help nurture children... where the older generation can teach the younger generation... Children are able to learn from elders, even if they don't have their own grandparents around. As they say...'It takes a village to raise a child.'

(iii) Women clergy in the Church of England – your perspectives

Do you believe female clergy have changed the Church of England over the past 25 years? If so, how? Are there any distinctive gifts that women bring to ministry?

It has changed.

If you compare a church with a home...the mother's heart provides love and care. I think the Church has been missing some of this...even though men also look after people. So throughout the 25 years women priests have been able to look after people in different ways...with tenderness.

I think women bring strength in a sense of vulnerability. I have lots of vulnerability...the language barrier...the cultural difference. Traditionally, men look strong and 'can do'...so I think people have been led to believe that priests can do everything, and that they are different from normal people. But through a sense of vulnerability in a different way...an honest vulnerability that women can demonstrate with the many things women have to juggle, and the way we have been challenged...when you bring that out then people also see there is a human being. Priests are human beings too...with problems, difficulties and vulnerabilities...that we perhaps haven't seen until now.

With their vulnerability they still have faith in God...and bring communities together in churches as well as in society. And I think it serves as a good example for people to see how they are able to manage their situation and tackle challenges with their faith.

Are there any distinctive challenges that women face as clergy?

I don't think there are really clear challenges that are only gender-based. Regardless of whether we are male or female, we are human beings and we all have strengths and weaknesses...so we all have our own individual challenges. But what is important is that, as men or women, we should be honest about our struggles, and ask for support and help from others. The

Church is an assembly of God's people and one cannot run it on his or her own...but together with the Body of Christ. The biggest challenge that I believe we have to deal with is to understand who we are and where we are as the Church...and be a part in it...by encouraging and guiding people to the goal we set together as one Body.

Personally, I don't feel having a family has made it more difficult for me...but my children are grown up. It depends on how much your support you have, I suppose... and I'm lucky that my family are supportive and they seem proud of me.

Do you feel your parishioners see you as equal to your male counterparts?

I cannot definitely say 'Yes' or 'No' as there are other factors that can affect my relationships with my parishioners. So I am not only a female priest...but also a minority ethnic female priest. My accent is different and I have a different cultural background and that, alone, can sometimes create challenging barriers for some people. I do sometimes feel that people treat me differently to other clergy members who are English, whether they are male or female. But I can't say it is because I am Korean...or because I am female...or because I am both.

People may treat us differently...but that can be rather more character-related than because of our gender, as well as what we are involved in with most of our ministry work. Its normal that you typically get along with certain people more than others...that's just normal human relationships...based on personality and circumstance.

But generally? I don't know. Some people may think women have more limitations than men. They may still be with that idea that men can leave everything behind and concentrate on their work...but women cannot. If something happened to their children then women are expected to be with them...leaving their work behind. But those things have changed now...my husband and I share our responsibilities equally in our household.

Do you feel male clergy see you as equal?

Yes... our parish has four churches in our team and we have male and female clergy members. We all treat each other equally and respect one another...seeking and giving advice and support in our ministry works. Even outside of the parish I've always felt respected and equally treated.

Do you feel you have to prove yourself?

Yes...that's always a challenge. Not just to the parishioners but also to myself. Even though I am ordained as a priest there is still challenge in my vocation. I cannot be perfect...even writing a sermon can still be a challenge.



What advice would you give a woman thinking of entering ministry?

When I was exploring this journey, I encountered a fair bit of resistance. During this time, I would meet regularly with a retired priest and he was against women priests. When I said I wanted to explore my vocation he just said, 'No...women can't be priests.' That was in 2012.

I decided to meet him every week and talk with him...and we studied the Bible together...and discussed the nine national vocational criteria that I was reflecting on at that time. In the end he blessed me, 'I still don't believe in women priesthood but I bless you and your ministry...and I believe God has called you.' I think meeting with him...and talking with him...had helped us both to see God's calls for each of us in his work...and God opened our eyes to see that in one another's.

If God's calling...you can't resist it.



When I first felt a calling back in 2004 I said it's not possible for me...I don't speak English well...I don't understand the culture...there are so many barriers. But on the way back on the plane I realised that it could be possible with God's help. If God is calling I should be submitting to him. His nagging wouldn't leave me alone.

So if someone comes to me and says I feel called then I'd say, 'Explore it. You must.'

As told to Jim Grover

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