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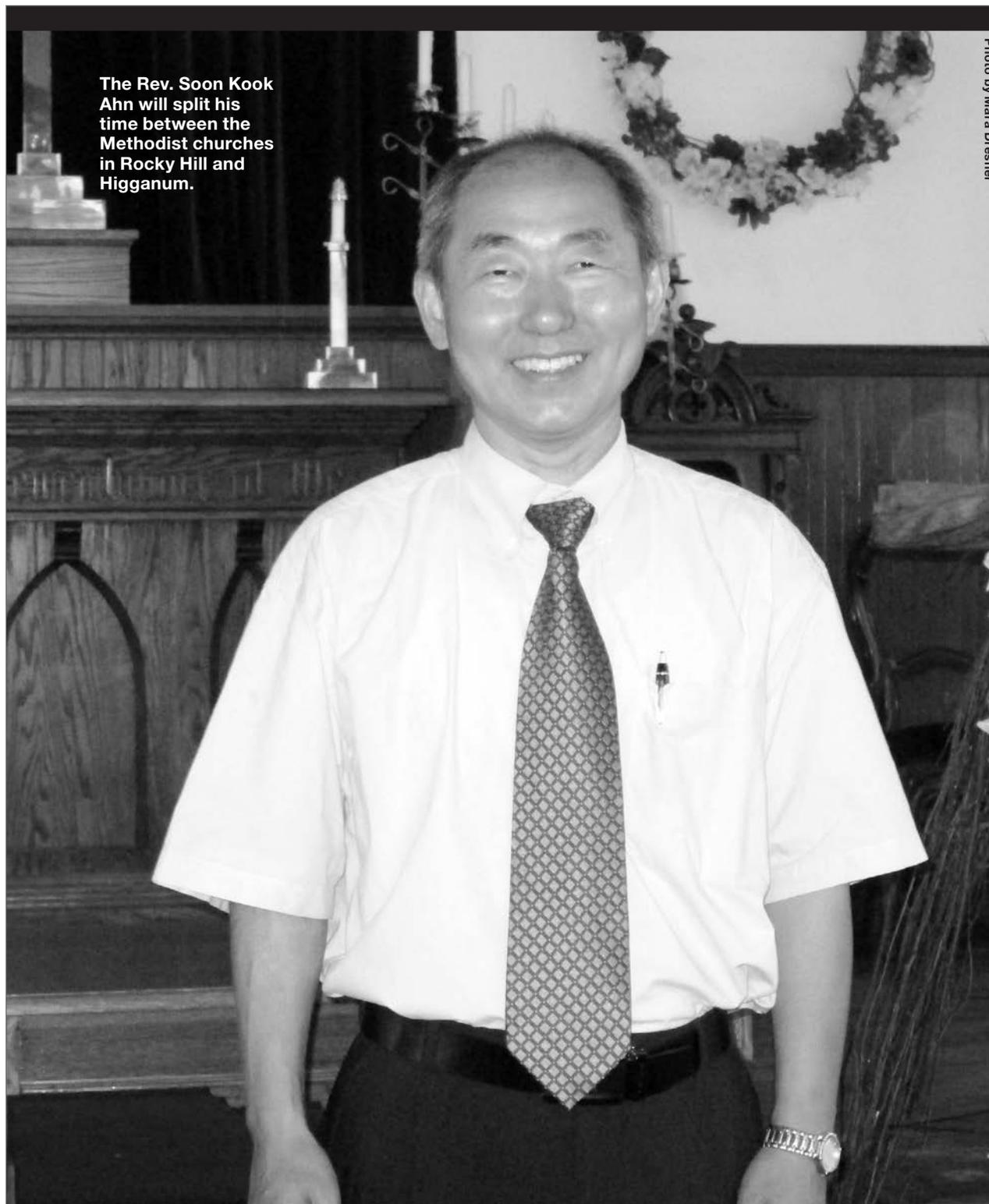
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The Rev. Soon Kook Ahn will split his time between the Methodist churches in Rocky Hill and Higganum.

Photo by Mara Dresner

From Seoul to Rocky Hill

New pastor takes the pulpit at Rocky Hill United Methodist Church

by Mara Dresner

Staff Writer

Born in Seoul in 1959, it seemed unlikely that the Rev. Soon Kook Ahn would pursue a career in the ministry. He was raised in a non-Christian family – his mother was a Buddhist and his father was a fervent follower of Confucianism.

Life was challenging for the family of the man who is now the pastor at the Rocky Hill

United Methodist Church.

“My father was an army officer in Korea and he had been appointed to be a one-star general as of June 1, 1961, yet a military coup broke out just two weeks before he became a general. He was forced to be discharged and was imprisoned for two and a half years,” Ahn said.

“After his release from the prison, my father could not get

a job for nearly 20 years because of the political reasons. My mother worked very hard to raise her six children. I learned this story in my high school,” he added.

“Suddenly, my heart was filled with anger, hatred and revenge against the people who hurt my family,” said Ahn, including the country’s president and prime minister.

While in high school,

he was selected to attend a Christian school founded by the Rev. Henry G. Appenzeller, a Methodist missionary from Lancaster, Penn. Appenzeller and his wife had gone to Korea in 1885 and the first thing they did was to build a church and open a school that was the first modernized school in that country.

The school's motto, from Matthew 20:26-27, was: "If you want to be great, you must be the servant of all the others. And if you want to be first, you must be the slave of the rest."

Ahn thrived in the school, participating in the mandatory weekly worship services and Bible classes.

"At that time I was sad and I was upset because of the political persecution. My heart was filled with anger, hatred, resentment. Somehow I had in my mind I will do some kind of revenge against them and I will kill myself," he said.

"When I began to attend church and believe in God, that melted away. I was full of joy. I was full of peace."

He especially enjoyed participat-

ing in a club called the Youth Emergency Service. Around Christmas, a group of students got together and went to various army camps, singing hymns and performing skits.

"It was for five or six days. It was like a small camp. During that camp, there was a Bible study, led by the teacher. It was a little bit of eye opening with that," Ahn said.

"I was introduced to the Bible and it was kind of fascinating to me. It led me into faith."

About a year later, at a youth group meeting one night, he had a revelatory experience.

"I don't know if I was in my body or not. I somehow stood up before my friends, maybe 10 friends, and acclaimed my faith, [saying] I believe in Jesus and accept him as my lord and savior. It was a transforming experience for me. After that, enormous peace and joy came in my mind," he recalled.

Ahn served in the South Korean army and earned a B.A. degree in philosophy from Konkuk University in Seoul. He decided that the minis-

try was his calling.

"I received a lot from God so I wanted to do something for God. As a teenager, I didn't have money. I didn't have much knowledge at all. I wanted to give my heart, my life to Jesus," he said.

"It was fascinating from the beginning even to now, 40 years past," said Ahn, who was appointed pastor in July.

His family was less than supportive.

"My senior year, I told them I wanted to be a minister and I wanted to go to seminary. They were so upset, so furious. They said, 'You're not our son anymore. Get out of our house.' I expected a lack of understanding, but it was shocking to me," he said.

"It took 15 years and they became Christians. One day I received a letter from my father. It was a doctrinal confession. It was a tearful moment."

Ahn first studied at the School of Theology at Claremont, Calif., then earned two degrees at the Union Theological Seminary

in New York.

He has served several churches in Connecticut, including Kensington United Methodist Church, New Haven Korean United Methodist Church, United Church of Westville and Hamden Plains United Methodist Church.

He will now split his time between the church in Rocky Hill and Higganum United Methodist Church. On Sundays, he conducts a 9 a.m. service in Higganum followed by an 11 a.m. service in Rocky Hill.

He will also have office hours twice a week in both locations. While he was appointed to the post by the church, it seems to be an easy transition.

"Without any hesitation, Pastor Ahn has just stepped into the middle of the fray. Everybody loves him. Everybody is so pleased with our new pastor. We feel a renewed spirit coming to the church now," said Janice Beaucar, church secretary and chairwoman of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee.

"We are very pleased with the pastor that God had chosen for us.



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He's literally stepped in as if he's always been here. We feel that we've known him for a long time. He's a perfect fit."

Beaucar has been involved with the Methodist church for 15 years and the Rocky Hill church for the past five.

"It's very welcoming. We love when new faces come in the door," said Beaucar.

She said there's always coffee after the service to allow people to have time to get to know one another. There are currently about 100 people who are part of the church.

"Basically we believe that there are two kinds of holiness: personal holiness and social holiness. We try to live with a distinction of holiness. Personally, we try to come closer to God. At the same time, we try to serve others. Those two are a balance in our pursuit in faith," Ahn said.

"We Methodists believe there's a means of grace in communion and worship and gathering and Bible studying. I love the sweetness of the grace, and also there are no

boundaries and no prejudice in grace."

He added that there are a number of examples of this, including his appointment to the church and its approach to Communion.

"We do not separate church members and non-church members or baptized and non-baptized.

"I was introduced to the Bible and it was kind of fascinating to me. It led me into faith."

—Rev. Soon Kook Ahn

Everyone is invited to come. When people take the Communion, they feel God's grace. For everyone, it is open. Our motto is open heart and open mind and open door," Ahn said.

While he is still getting to know his community, he does have a few goals.

"I do have a passion for a veterans' ministry. There's a growing

number of people from India living here. I want to include them in our ministry and our church," he said.

Inclusiveness isn't just a buzzword for him.

"I served my previous congregation for 12 years. When I compare beginning to end, there was a big shift in diversity," he said.

"In the beginning, it was mainly Caucasian. Now, it's a global congregation; it's so diverse. I feel it's one of the big strategies we need to take in order to make the church grow. We must be open to everybody because it's God's church," he added.

He promises that those who attend a service in his church will enjoy a musical experience.

"It's a singing church. I've been really impressed that church members can sing so well," said Ahn, who is already feeling right at home. "I feel that I've known people a long time."

Ahn and his wife Amy celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary last year. They have three sons: Justin, who graduated in May from New York University and is a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army; James, who is a graduate of Hamden High School and a first year midshipman at the United States Naval Academy; and Jeffrey, who will be a fifth-grader at Haddam-Killingworth Middle School in September.

The Rocky Hill United Methodist Church is located at 623 Old Main St. A service is held each Sunday at 11 a.m. Sunday school also starts at the same time and nursery care is available. **RHL**

For more information call the church office at 860-529-2442 or email rockyhillumc@gmail.com. The Rev. Soon Kook Ahn may be reached directly at 203-500-1119.

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