

## **Baby Boxes Past, Present and Future – Lee Jong Rak**

After rumor spread that Minister Lee Jong-rak, the founder of Jusarang (Love of the Lord) Community Church, had taken care of his seriously-challenged son well, a steady flow of babies abandoned by their parents due to their handicap were sent to the minister. On some days, babies were left in front of the gate; on others in the parking lot; and on others still in the payphone box in front of the church.

At 3am on one chilly spring day, a man called us. It was a call from a father who planned to leave his child in front of the church gate, asking to take care of the child.

Minister Lee Jong-rak flung the church door open and dashed out in haste. He was shocked to find a baby left in a cardboard box which once stored fish. A baby, who apparently had Down's syndrome, was shivering in the cold, wrapped by a blanket smelling of fish. Scattering stray cats who had been attracted by the fishy smell and had begun wandering around the cardboard box, Minister Lee felt a sense of relief, because had he arrived a little later, the baby could have been damaged by the cold and the cats.

After this incident, Minister Lee started his struggle to find "the way to protect babies' lives safely, even under tense circumstances which could result in them being abandoned by their parents." One day, he heard news of a Baby Box operated in the Czech Republic, which drove him to intensively study similar cases in developed countries.

Minister Lee became convinced that his mission entrusted by God was "to take care of abandoned children safely so that they can live." After continuous prayers and study, he installed and began running the first ever baby box in Korea in December, 2009.

When the baby box was initially installed, the number of babies left in it averaged just 20-30 a year. However, enforcement of the amended Adoption Special Law in August, 2012 brought about a dramatic change in the number of babies abandoned. This law obligates biological parents to register the birth of their child, which has driven parents who could not submit a birth registration for their child, such as unmarried teenage mothers and mothers giving birth as a result of extramarital relations, to leave their babies in the Baby Box.

Seventy nine babies were left in the Baby Box in 2012, 252 in 2013, 250 in 2014 and 213 in 2017. In this way, over 200 babies per year were placed in the Baby Box. Indeed, from December, 2009 to the end of December, 2017, the number of babies placed in protection via a Baby Box totaled 1,300.

Although some people have criticized Baby Boxes, saying that they encourage child abandonment, Jusarang (Love of the Lord) felt that the Baby Box project is a mission from God to save lives. Jusarang therefore stood tall in the face of criticism, while all the while striving to enhance their specialist skills.

The Baby Box should be the last resort for parents and should never be the first or the best option. Therefore, Jusarang (Love of the Lord) has strengthened its preemptive support system in order to encourage mothers not to leave their babies in the Baby Box. We operate a variety of child rearing support programs for single mothers, and have especially strengthened our consultation service so as to provide mothers with the opportunity to consider their and their baby's future before abandonment. Furthermore, we have judged the cause of the rapid increase in child abandonment cases to be caused by the need for birth registration under the Adoption Special Law, so we also drew up a special bill concerning anonymous delivery as a way to solve the newborn abandonment problem and submitted it to the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea.