

ARTICLES

Churches' Missional Engagement During the Pandemic and Afterwards in Korea¹

Bokyoung Park

Abstract

The paper describes new ways of missional engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic and afterwards in Korea. While Covid-19 is inflicting serious damage on the entire Korean society, the damage to the Protestant churches is serious. The local government's prohibition of 'in-person gathering' for worship resulted in the decrease of membership and endangered the unique paradigm of 'in-gathering'-centred ecclesiology in Korean Protestant churches.

The study tried to understand how local congregations coped with the changed situation in their missional engagement. Three congregations were used as case studies of how the local congregations responded to their missional tasks during the pandemic. With some preliminary assessments from these case studies, the paper suggests three ways of missional engagement of local congregation in Korea during the pandemic and even after the pandemic: 1) engaging personal fellowship using narratives, 2) performing a habitual ethical lifestyle, and 3) embracing the practice of hospitality.

Keywords: Missional engagement; Covid-19; South Korea; Local congregation; Storytelling; Ethical living; Hospitality

Introduction

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues and new variants are being discovered constantly, humanity has entered a prolonged pandemic. There is no question that Covid-19 is inflicting serious damage on the entire society. Not only is it posing serious risks to

1 This paper was originally published in Korean in *Theology of Mission* 65 (2022): 157–88. However, it has been revised to suit a global audience.

people's health, but due to continued social distancing working-class people are on the brink of bankruptcy, and a sense of despair is settling throughout the society.

Damage to ordinary Christians in Korea is also serious. The credibility of the Korean Protestant Church has fallen significantly during the pandemic. According to a survey, the credibility of the Korean Protestant Church dropped from 32% in the year 2020 to 21% in 2021 (Ministry Data Institute 2021: 3). Such a steep decline offers a glimpse into the Korean Protestant Church's fall in the perception of society. According to the survey, only 9% of non-Christians consider the Korean Protestant Church credible (Ministry Data Institute 2021: 3), and this phenomenon can be expected to have a negative impact on communicating the gospel in society. Besides, there is already widespread aversion to the church throughout Korean society. Due to media reports of church gatherings becoming Covid-19 super-spreading events, Protestant churches have been labelled as anti-social institutions.

As society increasingly regards Christianity in a negative light, internally, churches are seeing an accelerated loss of membership. How can the church carry out its task of communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ in a new way in this new context? How can we engage missionally in this time? To find the new way, this paper attempts to find the answer from local churches. Based on their actual response, the paper proposes a new way for missional engagement especially during the pandemic era, and even applicable to the time afterwards.

Korean society and churches during the pandemic

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the unchanging truth but the form containing that truth must be renewed for each generation. In this changed situation, we are called to discover new and more appropriate approaches to missional engagement for this generation. So what are the new factors that have descended on Korean society recently? Lee Mann-shik identified five general changes to Korean society (Lee 2021: 18–29). First is the generational imbalance due to low birthrate and rapid aging. As lifespans lengthen and the senior population increases to accelerate population aging, various factors are worsening the problem of low birthrate to result in generational imbalance. Second, with the improvement of women's status, new family structures – especially the single-person household – are appearing. Third, the transition to postmodern society is evident in relativistic views on truth and challenges to authority. Fourth, Lee identified the loss of *joie de vivre* as a characteristic of Korean society today. Severe competition and chronic fatigue are causing society-wide depression. Fifth, Korea is becoming multicultural due to the constant increase of immigration from various Asian countries. These characteristics existed

in Korean society before the pandemic, but the pandemic accelerated the changes already begun.

Among these factors, the rise of single-person households warrants special attention. This is forming a culture of aloneness and hastening the transition into the age of digital media (Ji 2020: 318–21). Among many causes behind the dawning age of digital media is the coming of age of the digital generation. They hold fundamentally different values from previous generations. The characteristics of the digital generation are identified as follows. First, as the internet is easily accessible, there is the equalization of knowledge, naturally resulting in anti-hierarchical relationships. The digital generation is anti-authoritarian and prefers to work in start-up companies that tend to be less authoritarian and encourage creative approaches. Second, the digital generation is emotionally sensitive, values self-expression and individual experience, and prioritizes the individual rather than the collective. Third, they value individual rights, while at the same time being interested in social issues that they encounter online. In a nutshell, they actively participate in various social issues and monitor society's moral standing (Nam 2020: 96–97).

In addition, the prolonged pandemic became another factor in the rapid emergence of the digital age. As the pandemic continued people spent more time alone. With social distancing, meetings were limited, and people quickly entered the digital space. As social distancing was prolonged in the pandemic, these phenomena intensified. The age of digital media has inescapably dawned on us.

The trend of finding information from algorithm-focused media is intensifying polarization by class and age. Bias according to individuals' ideological preconceptions is further isolating the people from other people who hold different ideas and is intensifying the information bubble with others who hold similar views, which results in deepening social polarization.

Furthermore, months of the Covid-19 pandemic is also causing depression throughout society. Due to the pandemic, opportunities for in-person encounters are minimized and everyone is forced into an "un-tact" lifestyle. This lifestyle is naturally intensifying anxiety and depression in the phenomenon of "Covid blues" (Jung 2021: 69). Loneliness had already been a feature of modern society, but prolonged social distancing has intensified the loneliness (Choi 2020; Jung 2021: 71). These are the situations the churches are facing in their surrounding world.

Then, what is the situation with the Korean Protestant Church in this age of pandemic? In the pandemic, loss of church membership is evident. Even before the pandemic,

Protestant churches suffered from a negative image due to media reporting on some problematic churches with their obsession with growth and extravagant building construction. The scandalous news of hereditary succession of mega-church leadership also brings them into social contempt with the public. The public news that reports about heretical groups of fanatic believers also brings negative images of churches. This negative image of the church became a major stumbling block in sharing the gospel with the public. In the meantime, smaller churches also suffered financially. New members were few and far between while existing members were leaving the church.

During the pandemic, Protestant church membership decreased even more. Jeong Jae-young predicts that in the pandemic the most visibly accelerating phenomena will be the increase of “un-churched believers” and the loss of church membership (Jung 2021: 72–73). Before the pandemic, there were more than 1.5 million “un-churched believers”, many of them deciding to leave after being disappointed by churches. Considering the unique characteristics of Korean Protestants, that is, confessing the Christian faith is identified with being a member of a local congregation, increasing the “un-churched believers” who adhere to Christian faith but refuse to be members of a local congregation, a new phenomenon in Korean Protestant churches.

In the Korean Protestant Church, the ecclesiology of the “in-gathering paradigm” emerged from its unique history. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Christians faced persecution and resistance in society. Conversion to Christianity meant detachment from traditional paganism. This separation from society coincided with a new sense of belonging to the local congregation. The local church provided space for communal fellowship and solidarity to provide emotional support. In addition, church programmes such as Bible study groups and spiritual training programmes for church members also heightened the “in-gathering” paradigm. As a result, loyalty to local congregations is very evident, and their identity as Christians is often associated with their regular attendance at Sunday worship services. The “in-gathering paradigm” was inevitable in such a social context (Han 2016: 17–18). Therefore, when the pandemic hit, the government prohibition against in-person gatherings for church services posed a crisis, even a threat, and was met with severe resistance by some conservative Christians. Among them, some had expressed their strongest protest, publicly criticizing the current administration’s social distancing policy. They called the policy a persecution that threatened their freedom of assembly. Unlike a few extreme conservative groups, many local churches proactively accepted the prohibition regulation of in-person gatherings. These groups considered the new situation to be an opportunity to overcome serious polarization

between church and society which had been a major side-effect of the “in-gathering” paradigm.

In sum, during the pandemic, the Korean Protestant Church had experienced serious decline and many committed Christians turned into “unchurched believers”. Public perception of the Korean Protestant Church is worsening due to negative images shown in media reporting of some extremist conservative churches that put up strong resistance to the social distancing policy. Due to regulations against and limitations to in-person gatherings for worship services, churches lost membership during the pandemic.

Missional engagement of local congregations during the pandemic

The pandemic has abruptly caused major changes in the Korean Protestant churches – changes nobody could have prepared for it in advance. The previous section gave an overview of changes to the Korean Protestant churches. This section more specifically explores how local churches have responded in their missional efforts. This is a field study of three specific local churches and their attempts to communicate the gospel during the pandemic. For this, I conducted these interviews from March to June 2021 at Dongil Presbyterian Church, Baegut Joeun Church and Onnuri Vision Church. These churches had a membership of 1000 to 2000, and all belong to the Presbyterian Church of Korea. All three churches are considered middle-sized churches with sufficient ministers to support the changed situation caused by the pandemic.

Dongil Presbyterian Church²

Dongil Presbyterian Church is typical in its indirect approach to missional engagement. The church successfully adjusted to local government’s prohibitions against gatherings thanks to their new programme of Family Worship that started three years ago. The church distributes a *365-Day Bible Verse Memorization, Meditation, and Home Worship* guide to all members both as booklets and through social media. Each family logs on through a link online to have Family Worship sessions. Along with this emphasis on worship in the family unit, Bible verse memorization was also encouraged for the congregants’ spiritual training.

2 The interview with Rev. Kim Hui-Hyun, the senior pastor of Dongil Presbyterian Church, was carried out on 11 March 2021.

Moreover, since church members were not allowed to gather, the church started a new ministry of distribution of church newsletters. Newsletters are sent out three times each week. *Scenes in Dongil Community* is about various events that happened in church in the past week. On Thursdays, *Dongil Mission Bulletin* and *Dongil Church School Bulletin* were sent out. The purpose of these newsletters is to continue delivering church-related information and to strengthen the members' sense of belonging even when they cannot attend in-person worship.

A new ministry that started in the pandemic was the Online Prayer Room ministry. The link to the Prayer Room is sent out to congregants every Monday through Kakao Talk (a Korean social media platform). Individuals can go online to join the Online Prayer Session. Each person may participate whenever they can, whether at home or in the office, by clicking onto the link and following through the prayers according to a preset sequence. The last part of the Online Prayer Session encourages participants to contribute their own prayer requests, which also functions as a satisfaction survey for this ministry.

Dongil Presbyterian Church also conducted several neighbourhood ministries. When Covid-19 cases were identified among church members, they proactively encouraged PCR testing for the whole congregation and followed hygiene requirements suggested by the local government. While some conservative churches' resistant and uncooperative attitude became scandalous to the public, this church tried to show a more positive image of the church to its neighbours by responding proactively on disease prevention. When there was a period of mask shortage, they distributed masks to the poor and to marginalized groups in the neighbourhood free of charge. The church especially prioritized mask distribution to foreign labour migrants who could not buy the masks without citizenship identification numbers. When local small businesses struggled with social distancing measures, the church began a campaign among congregants to buy things from these local businesses. They also explored other volunteer opportunities to deliver gifts to the marginalized in the local area. Moreover, special offerings were regularly sent to other churches that were suffering financially.

Baegot Joeun Church³

Baegot Joeun Church, located near the city of Incheon, is an extraordinary case of a local congregation that actively conducted an evangelistic campaign during the

3 See their homepage <http://thegoodchurch.co.kr/main/main.html>. The interview with Rev. Park Joseph was conducted on 13 May 2021 at his church. See also Shin Dong-ha 2020.

Covid-19 pandemic and even saw notable results. This church's outreach ministry is centred around Open Cell Group Gatherings. Open Cell Group Gatherings are an outreach strategy uniquely developed by this church. In these groups, non-Christians are invited to hear the gospel and commit to the faith. Unlike many churches in Korea, outreach ministry is not only the task of individual church members, but also of the cell group.

This is how Open Cell Groups operate. First, the groups are organized and started entirely by voluntary initiative of group leaders. New groups then emerge out of these existing groups, headed by leaders who have been trained and appointed by the original group. In this way, cell groups continue to divide and expand. When three or more cell groups form in this way, the original cell group leader is promoted to regional leadership, and he or she may take more responsibilities in ministering to cell groups. In this way, the lay leader's ministry influence also expands.

Outreach campaigns by cell groups are also the focal point of this church's outreach ministry. Each year the church organizes a ten-week outreach festival to invite non-Christians. During this period, new members are invited to the church. But the focus is not on bringing new members but encouraging existing church members to become passionate about sharing the gospel. The first five weeks are critical, when cell group members go through preparatory training on outreach ministry. Then each cell group considers and identifies potential converts, sets a numerical target for the group, and writes down the names of potential converts. Simply writing down the names of potential converts is enough to remind cell group members of the importance of outreach ministry. Sermons and Bible study lessons delivered in this period also encourage the church to be passionate about evangelistic outreach.

During the pandemic, however, in-person gatherings in cell groups became difficult. As the public image of the church got worse, a ten-week evangelistic outreach festival was almost an impossibility. After some consideration, the church decided to hold the festival in an alternate form while respecting social distancing regulations. Open Cell Group Gathering used to mean inviting non-Christians to the cell group leader's house, but with the regulation against private gatherings of five or more people, Open Cell Groups that used to involve ten to twenty people were further divided into more frequent sessions involving four or less people gathering in locations convenient to the invited non-Christian. The Evangelistic Outreach Festival of Open Cell Groups was organized and resulted in the commitment of a higher number of new converts than in previous years. When non-Christians who had been isolated by social distancing measures were invited to small groups, they were even more

willing to join the church than before. This proved that Open Cells for evangelistic outreach were an even more effective approach during the pandemic.

Onnuri Vision Church⁴

The city of Suwon, where Onnuri Vision Church is located, is a region where a comparatively younger population resides and works in various companies in the area. This means that the church had to respond to the pandemic faster than in other regions. The news of certain uncooperative churches spread rapidly through the media and among company employees. The perception of the church in this region turned so negative that some new Christians were afraid of even stepping foot in the church lest they get infected. The image of the church was negatively impacting Christians at their workplaces. Recognizing this, the church conducted two rounds of surveys among church members in April and August of 2020.

In the first round of surveys in April 2020 more than half of the church members absolutely preferred to hold services online. In the second survey at the end of August, almost all the members responded that the church should continue online services. Onnuri Vision Church could not ignore these results. The church members preferred online services mainly because of unspoken pressures at their workplace. They did not want to risk becoming Covid patients, forcing hundreds of co-workers to get tested and quarantined. They also wanted to protect their young children. Especially in the August survey, the church members expressed pride in their church's online services compared to some conservative churches widely criticized around that time for resisting government regulations. The younger church members were even more supportive of the church's decision to continue with online services.

Meanwhile the church shifted its ministry focus to prepare a greater variety of online services. First, they began bold remodeling of the sanctuary to make it more conducive to online services. To raise the level of satisfaction of the congregants, Sunday worship sessions that used to be held in four different time slots were divided among the head pastor and the assistant pastors to be uploaded online. This provided an opportunity for church members to experience different worship styles. The four different Sunday services are each produced in video format to be uploaded. There is a total of seven services each week, and each sermon is also uploaded, which means there are a lot more video clips uploaded online than in other churches that hold the same number of services. This is designed to provide a variety of options to church

4 See their homepage <http://www.onnurivision.org/>. The interview with Rev. Kim Dong-guk, the senior pastor was conducted on 19 May 2021 in his office.

members who participate in worship services at home. As a result, Onnuri Vision Church has more subscribers to its video platform than other churches of similar size.

Onnuri Vision Church is interested in reaching “unchurched believers”. The prolonged period of online worship services naturally produced non-committal Christians who skipped worship and eventually ended up as “unchurched believers”. But by the end of the pandemic at least some of them will return to the church community. Onnuri Vision Church is predicting a large-scale horizontal move of Christians from one church to another at this point. Unchurched believers will decide to settle at a church depending on whether the church has acted ethically during the pandemic. This means that constructing a positive perception of the church during the pandemic is critical, so Onnuri Vision is trying to be even more proactive in following social distancing regulations to be a model church in the local community and make for a positive perception. This is ultimately to attract “unchurched believers” to the church once in-person services resume.

*

Based on these interviews, I come to the conclusion that even though their attitudes toward the changed situation were different, there are a few common characteristics of how these local congregations responded to the changed situation in their missional engagement. They are as follows.

First, during the pandemic, many Korean Protestant churches generally focused on membership strengthening such as implementing the programmes for the spiritual growth of current members rather than reaching out to non-believers. Churches focused on devoting themselves to survival. The most proactive missional engagement that churches could offer was preventing church members from turning into “unchurched believers”. It is true that this is not direct engagement with non-believers, yet strengthening the faith of existing church members was also important missional engagement. Nominalization of the Christian faith has been one of the noticeable phenomena during and even before the pandemic. In light of this, it is meaningful enough to strengthen the existing church members. In the case of Dong-il Presbyterian Church, the weekly church newsletter has been an important source for the sharing of church members’ stories.

Second, the pandemic created a new perspective on their ecclesiology, and made these congregations accept the new ecclesial paradigm of dispersion. As mentioned earlier, the Korean Protestant Church historically developed a gathering-centred paradigm, but this became difficult churches were forced to shift to the new ecclesio-

logical paradigm of dispersion. In my observation and interviews, all these churches recognized the necessity of the ecclesial paradigm of dispersion. The sudden pandemic forced these churches to rethink the purpose of the church, and led to the transition that prepared these churches to become missional churches.

Third, most of the missional engagement by local congregations was by indirect approach. They served neighbours in need, distributed goods and helped small churches financially. In such ways, the local congregations attempted to show a positive image of Christians to the public. In Dong-Il Presbyterian Church, they switched from direct evangelism to more indirect evangelism by showing good works for the suffering neighbourhood, and such good works for suffering neighbours is only possible through this new ecclesial paradigm of dispersion.

Fourth, during the pandemic, missional engagement in local congregation to non-Christians was not entirely dismissed. As large-scale meetings were prohibited, small group gatherings were still possible. The case of Bae-gok Joemun Church is a unique case of this. This church was able to develop in new ways. Instead of inviting non-Christians directly to mass worship services, they were invited to small group sessions. In this case, they modified the existing campaign event to fit the new situation. The case shows that even when in-person gathering was restricted, churches found other ways to engage missionally in new ways.

Fifth, there was a clear increase in attention to “unchurched believers” for missional engagement. Many congregations are considering specific and unique ways to attract these people into church community during the pandemic and once the crisis is over. In the case of Onnuri Vision Church, their bold investment in online ministry is aimed to reach out to “unchurched believers” and non-believers. Their online programmes are designed not just for the existing church members, but also for “unchurched believers” who may decide to join.

Sixth, there was a clear increase in online services in many congregations. Due to the pandemic, many local congregations launched new online ministries and streamed their worship services. Churches began to offer various online Bible studies and produced various church-related contents. But in many cases, these are produced to support existing membership. In other cases, online worship services became new opportunities to participate in the worship services of other churches. As a result, it weakened the commitment of existing members to their home congregations.

Proposals for missional engagement during and after the pandemic

In the previous section, I described how local congregations handled the pandemic situation as they engaged in missional endeavour. Many congregations were not able to actively engage in any evangelistic endeavour during the pandemic, but that does not mean that they totally abandoned their missional outreach. Some are more direct in how they engage in evangelism, but some are more indirect as they seek to be meaningful neighbours as the local church.

In finding an appropriate way to encounter suffering neighbours, I propose three ways of missional engagement during and even after the pandemic. These approaches are suggested by the lessons derived from previous sections.

Missional engagement using narrative

In this time of deep pain and despair, we must pay attention to the power of narratives in communicating the gospel. Alister McGrath emphasizes the importance of narratives in apologetics (McGrath 2019: 7–8). He states that “God has shaped the human mind and imagination to be receptive to stories.” For McGrath, narrative approaches are not displacing but rather supplementing reasoned argumentation in apologetics. He states that mystery, in the proper sense of the term, refers not to something that is irrational, but to something that cannot be fully comprehended by reason (McGrath 2019: 8). The mystery of the gospel can be better communicated by narratives.

John Drane similarly states that “telling a story requires honesty to accept both our strength and weakness. When we show our weakness and vulnerability others are more willing to identify with us and hear our invitation to join us in following Christ” (Drane 1997: 67). Earlier on, David Bosch in his classic *Transforming Mission* wrote that the postmodern paradigm proved that rationality is not enough to tell the entire story of life, and therefore, it needs to be expanded. One way of expanding it is to recognize that language cannot be absolutely accurate, and that it is impossible to define neither scientific laws nor theological truths once and for all (Bosch 1991: 353). So, in articulating the nature of God, we can employ stories both oral and written. Therefore, the upsurge of interest especially in Third-World churches in narrative theology has become prominent. Today “theology as narrative” and other non-conceptual forms of theologizing have become more important. I also experienced how narratives can persuasively communicate the gospel especially during a time of suffering (Park 2021). When people are in deep suffering, the emotional dimension often stays front and centre. An intellectual approach to the gospel does not fully

engage the listener's imagination for empathy, but stories that share similar pains and interests can make people more open to the gospel.

Narratives are even more important for digital natives. Digital storytelling is a new form of narrative approach through digital medium (Y. W. Lee 2010: 13) and is receiving more attention due to heightened interest in virtual reality. In this virtual world, people experience new stories of self through their avatars. Some are concerned that the virtual world would create more isolation in people's lives. But in *Storytelling Animal*, Jonathan Gottschall argues that, if the migration of humanity to the virtual world is inevitable, we should rather utilize the virtual world for narrative (Gottschall 2013: 197). The virtual world is not a cause of isolation in modern life but rather a response to it. Gottschall further states that the virtual world is more authentically human than the real world in important ways. It provides us the sense of community, a feeling of competence, and a sense of being an important person whom people depend on (Gottschall 2013: 195–96).

Narratives are also useful to answer the existential questions and communicate the mystery of life more powerfully during a time of pain and suffering. During the pandemic, words such as "God", "prayer", and "death" rose as most searched terms globally, which shows people are asking existential questions especially during times of suffering (W. J. Kim 2021: 129).

In the case studies, I also found that narratives are powerful ways of sharing the gospel and appropriate tools for the missional engagement reaching non-believers and "unchurched believers". In these case studies, I highlighted that during the pandemic, many Korean Protestant churches had implemented various programmes for the spiritual growth of existing members. In the case of Dong-il Presbyterian Church, when the regular worship services were restricted or banned, the weekly newsletter prepared by the church has been the important source for the sharing of the stories of members. Here, the stories of the members are used in strengthening the friendship that had been distanced among church members. In Beagot Jo Eun Church the small group meetings use narratives to make a warm atmosphere for the newcomers. Once rapport was established, the religious and existential conversation can be expressed more comfortably. In this sense, the narratives can be used for encouraging a more welcoming and hospitable space. After all, narratives on existential topics such as the meaning of life based on a Christian worldview can open people to Christ more easily than ever before.

Forming a habitual ethical lifestyle

In the age of the pandemic and afterwards, missional engagement must be expressed through forming the habitus of an ethical lifestyle. As already proposed by many scholars, the ethical lifestyle of Christians is the key factor in spreading Christianity. According to Rodney Stark, the explosive growth of Christianity in the first century was the result of their ministry toward neighbours infected by disease and facing death. These early Christians demonstrated charity and love to their non-Christian friends (Ko, Hudson & Jao 2020). Similarly, Alan Kreider argues that the distinctively holy lifestyle of the pre-Christendom Christians was key to evangelism and church growth. Prior to Christendom there was no intention to make worship attractive to outsiders. Yet worship was all-important in the spread of the church. Its rites and practices were designed to reform the pagans who joined the church into distinctive people who lived in a way that individually and corporately looked like Jesus Christ. And these reformed people were attractive. Their freedom, their new practice of corporate life, and their behaviour toward non-Christians in this period was intriguing, inviting and question-posing (Kreider 1994: 10).

Ethical lifestyle continues to be a significant factor in missional engagement, and it became even meaningful in the time of pandemic and afterwards. However, I want to express the importance of their habitual dimension in practice. According to Suh Jung-Woon, the respected Korean missiologist and President Emeritus of Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary, a person's ethical lifestyle is the result of how one subconsciously behaves in everyday life (Suh 2021). Such ethical living is not something that can be practised through rationality, will-power or self-control. Rather it is something that subconsciously flows out of oneself. The gospel embedded in the subconscious is manifest outwardly and naturally in everyday situations, and such manifestation of the gospel through one's life in fact communicates the gospel. What Suh emphasizes here is the importance of deeply embedding Christian values in one's subconscious if one is to communicate the Christian gospel. In other words, it needs to be the habitual and natural.

Similarly, Michael Frost emphasizes the importance of habits in missional practice. According to Frost, missional habits are not strategic, but they are consequential (Frost 2016: 21). In other words, the gospel becomes attractive when the audience is surprised or intrigued by the exceptionally ethical life of Christians. As Christians live an extraordinary holy life to the point of making others curious, Christians may then point to the gospel as the answer. In other words, the simple way to show the gospel to the world is none other than to surprise them through the life of the Christian. When Christians' good deeds flow out of the unconscious and become habitual, only then is gospel communication possible. Therefore, missional engagement happens

through Christians' lifetime of self-discipline and acts of love. Here Frost's argument resonates with Suh's view. While such an approach cannot be expected to show the visible results of evangelistic endeavours immediately, in the long term they are decisive for missional engagement.

Embracing the practice of hospitality

Hospitality is essential in communicating the gospel in the pandemic. Whether in-person or online, in small groups or one-on-one settings, the essential aspect of fellowship is whether one has experienced hospitality. Donald McGavran's famous homogeneous unit principle also emphasizes the importance of a sense of belongingness in the process of the conversion: "people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers" (McGavran 1990: 163). Although McGavran's arguments apply mainly to ethnic and racial groups, his basic idea is that social detachment is often the real reason that unbelievers do not respond to the gospel. For the gospel recipients, friendship and a sense of acceptance is more important than the message itself. In this way, the sense of belonging and of being accepted is truly essential part of relationship. The affective dimensions, such as intimacy, belonging and solidarity, are prerequisite for gospel communication.

Recently the affective dimension is increasingly highlighted in gospel communication. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch introduce the idea of "whispering" to show the importance of emotional intimacy when meeting with people one wants to evangelize. Evangelism is to be seen as whispering to the soul of the other (Frost and Hirsch 2013: 126). The evangelism associated with militant and invasive ways needs to be revisited. We must rather approach others to whisper to their souls, listen to their inner desires and respect their humanity. Similarly, Ha Do-gyun also emphasizes the importance of small groups in evangelistic sharing. He values small groups as the halfway point for non-Christians to finally come to Christ. Small groups are "nurture groups" and safe spaces where non-Christians are contacted and nurtured in Christian faith (Ha 2020: 69-71). It is my understanding that if these small groups are truly to function as halfway points and communicate the gospel, they must be where enough hospitality is experienced for one to safely share one's vulnerability.

In section 2, I showed how the pandemic had intensified the sense of loneliness and isolation in the Korean society. When the isolation becomes so severe and prevalent, the experience of hospitality and a sense of intimacy can be even more crucial and valued in our missional engagement when isolation is common. As Frost and Hirsch remind us that most people are whispered into the kingdom slowly and gracefully (Frost and Hirsch 2013: 128), the experience of intimacy and safety in small groups is often key to non-Christians meeting Christ and even joining a faith community.

Non-Christians who first experience hospitality and feel entirely accepted into these small groups gradually become more open to the message that Christians want to share.

To summarize, I developed the interrelationship of three approaches in missional engagement as Figure 1 below.

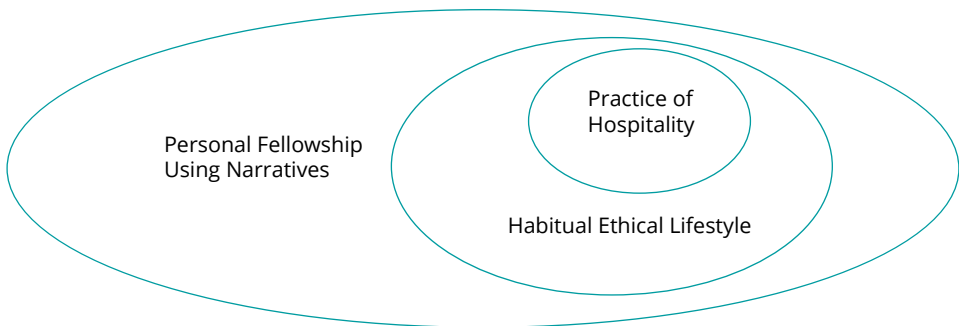


Figure 1 Three ways of missional engagement

The missional engagement usually starts with the storytelling of the messengers. The messengers' storytelling leads the recipients to encounter the gospel in a new and deeper way. Then the messengers' exemplary and ethical living witnesses to how the gospel can transform a person. The hospitality that is experienced by recipients integrates all these processes and opens their hearts to Christ. Sincere hospitality of the messenger enables the communication of Christ's love to the recipient. The three approaches do not progress mechanically one after the other, but they often overlap and echo each other.

Conclusion

As Covid-19 has swept the whole of Korean society for the last three years, we experienced fundamental changes and entered a totally new situation. The pandemic changed the way we connect not only in the society but with the whole creation. The despair and the feeling of powerlessness caused by disease opened a new space for longing for God. Yet the church in Korean could not respond to the invisible cry of the people.

This paper tries to locate where we are in this situation in our missional engagement, while at the same time attempting to provide better approaches to such a situation from the three cases studies. Then, the article proposes a new framework to the Korean protestant churches for missional engagement during and after the Covid-19

pandemic. The paper suggests three different approaches. First, we can present the gospel through personal fellowship using the narratives of the messenger. Second, a habitual ethical lifestyle as subconscious self-expression is credible evidence of the power of the gospel. Finally, embracing the practice of hospitality is to be initiated through hospitality.

It is true that these three types of missional engagement are applicable generally throughout history, yet it is even more applicable in this time of crisis. As the prolonged pandemic resulted in the isolation of individuals and the sense of belongingness is even more desired by many people, these approaches require more attention in our missional engagement. Especially where the church has lost its ethical and positive influence in the society, these approaches are even more meaningful. Finally, although I have not yet provided concrete and applicable suggestions for churches to utilize for their ministry, this topic will be discussed in a future paper.

Covid-19 brought a crisis in the church's missional engagement, but the gospel of Jesus Christ needs to be shared without stopping. If old tributaries are blocked, new waterways form. The message of the gospel will continue to shine through new people in new places and through new methods.

About the author

Rev. Bokyoung Park is professor of missiology at Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary, Seoul, Korea. She has been serving vice-president of IAMS from 2016 and, since 2022, she serves as the president of International Association for Mission Studies. She also founded the Korea IAMS Fellowship in 2020, for mentoring young scholars from the majority world to enhance their visibility in global theological scholarship. Contact: parkbokyoung718@gmail.com

References

- Bosch, David. 1991. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Choi In-su et al. 2020. "2020 트렌드 모니터" [2020 trend monitor]. Seoul: Secret House.
- Drane, John. 1997. *Faith in a Changing Culture*. London: Marshall Pickering.
- Frost, Michael. 2016. *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People*. Colorado Springs: NavPress.
- and Alan Hirsch. 2013. *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church*, revised and updated. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- Gottschall, Jonathan. 2013. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

- Ha Do-gyun. 2020. “코로나 19 이후, 뉴노멀시대의 복음전도” [Evangelism in the age of new normal after Covid-19]. *Sōng-kyōl-kyo-hoe-wa sin-hak* [Korean Evangelical Holiness Church and Theology] 44.
- Han Kook-Il. 2016. “선교적 교회의 이론과 실제” [A Theory and Practice of Missional Church]. Seoul, Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary Press.
- Ji Yong-geun. 2020. “통계로 보는 한국교회 상황” [Statistics on Korean church]; Presbyterian Church of Korea General Assembly, *재난시대를 극복하는 한국교회* [Korean Church that Overcomes the Age of Disaster]. Seoul: Kingdom Books.
- JungJae-young. 2021. “코로나19사태가 전도에 미친 영향과 대안 모색” [Impact of Covid-19 on evangelism and exploring solutions], *코로나-19와 포스트 코로나 시대의 전도* [Covid-19 and evangelism in the age of post Covid-19]. Seoul: Handl.
- Kim Woo-jun. “전도전략의 재구성” [Reconstructing evangelism strategy], edited by Lee Sang-hoon, *뉴노멀시대, 교회의 위대한 모험* [New normal age, the church's great adventure]. Seoul: Kyo-hoe-sōng-chang-yōn-ku-so.
- Ko, Stephen, Paul Hudson & Jennifer Jao. 2020. “Kingdom Opportunities for Bridging COVID-19 Disparities: A Multi-Dimensional Approach.” *Lausanne Global Analysis* 9 (6), <https://lausanne.org/lga-01/kingdom-opportunities-for-bridging-covid-19-disparities> (accessed 15 Dec. 2021).
- Kreider, Alan. 1994. “Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom” (The Laing Lecture 1994), https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol24/worship_kreider.pdf, accessed 9 Dec. 2021.
- Lee Mann-shik. 2012. “뉴노멀 (New Normal) 시대에 맞는 새로운 전도 방향- 교회의 사회봉사를 중심으로” [New direction for evangelism in the age of New Normal: Focusing on social services of the church], “코로나-19와 포스트 코로나 시대의 전도” [Covid-19 and Evangelism in Post-Covid Age]. Seoul: Handl.
- Lee Yong-wook. 2010. “온라인 게임 스토리텔링의 서사 시학” [Epic-ology of online game storytelling]. Seoul: Kül-nu-lim.
- McGavran, Donald. 1990. *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd edition revised and edited by C. Peter Wagner. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- McGrath, Alister E. 2019. *Narrative Apologetics: Sharing the Relevance, Joy and Wonder of the Christian Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- Ministry Data Institute. 2021. “Weekly Report, Numbers” 82, http://www.mhdata.or.kr/bbs/board.php?bo_table=koreadata&wr_id=133&page=3 (accessed 19 May 2022).
- Nam Sung-hyuk. 2020. “가상세계와 증강현실세계에 상주하는 디지털세대에 대한 전도가능성” [Evangelical potential for the digital generation that resides in virtual world and artificial reality]. *Gospel and Mission* 51: 89-120.
- Park Bokyoung. 2021. “Missional Hospitality Towards Healing: A Narrative Approach in Missiology.” *Ecclesial Future* 2 (2): 11-30.
- Shin Dong-ha, “소그룹 전도로 열방구원, 부천노회 좋은 교회” [Salvation for all nations through small group evangelism. Bucheon's Joeun Church]. *PCK World*, 18 February 2020, in <http://m.pckworld.com/article.php?aid=8406520407> (accessed 26 Aug. 2021).
- Suh Jung-Woon. 2021. “선교와 봉사” [Mission and Service]. From special lecture at Spring Retreat of Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary, 18 March 2021.