

## ARTICLES

# Small Missional Church as an Alternative in the Period of Church Decline in Korea

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### Abstract

This article examines the causes and circumstances of the decline of Korean churches since the 2000s. After briefly sketching the history and critical events of the growth of the Korean church, it pays attention to one of the leading reasons people leave the church and a reason that the Korean church has lost its reliability in the view of much of Korean society. After that, the author introduces two phenomena in the process of the slow growth and decline of the Korean church: the phenomenon of “believing without belonging” and the increase in numbers of bi-vocational ministers. This is a time when the missional church has begun to emerge as a new type of church, different from the traditional church, and at the same time non-institutional churches have emerged as a missional approach to believing without belonging. Furthermore, the author argues that the small missional church is a helpful alternative and required paradigm in the context of the decline of the Korean church by using several case studies, including shared worship space, bi-vocational ministry, and local missional church.

Keywords: Korean church; Decline; Missional ecclesiology; Small missional church; Shared worship space

### Introduction

It is well-known that the Korean church experienced revival and growth in a short period of time in the mid to late twentieth century. However, it is not well known that Korean church attendance has since declined due to low growth. The Korean church began showing a trend of decline in the 2000s, and this trend is still in progress. This paper briefly describes the history of the growth of the Korean church and then discusses the new direction that is now being demanded. It explores the causes and circumstances of the decline of Korean churches since the 2000s. It pays particular attention to two issues: the phenomenon of believing without belonging and the

mass production of bi-vocational ministers. In addition, this article proposes that the small missional church is a newly required paradigm in the context of the decline of the Korean church.

The author speaks of a “small” missional church because he agrees with Deuk-Hoon Park that it is time to de-large it. Park says that the goal of enlarging the church was influenced by capitalism, and he highlights small churches because he views the ‘aspiration to be big’ and greed are the main culprits in destroying churches (Park 2017: 167–68). In addition to Park’s claim, megachurches are bound to have pastoral limitations. The megachurch pastor cannot know all the members’ names, the spiritual care through the pastor cannot be performed appropriately and the reality of the community as a body in which members communicate with each other is inevitably lacking. On the other hand, a small church can be preferred not simply for its small size but as a church that more ably emphasizes the role of community in the church. Therefore, the author will share an example of a small church that seeks communality, communicates with and serves the local community and is performing a ministry that is unique in a Korean context.

## **The context of the Korean church**

### **From rise to slow growth and decline**

After the Korean War (1950–53), Korea became one of the poorest countries in the world. But through industrialization in the 1970s and 1980s it developed to achieve what has come to be known as the “miracle of the Han River”. The 1970s and 1980s were an era of industrialization and urbanization, but also a time of population explosion. The explosive growth of the Korean church can be viewed as a matter of course given the population growth rate in Korea. This period was also a time of reconstruction after the war. People flocked to the city for a better life, and it was a time when the evangelism movement was active, including on university campuses. When someone planted a church, people started to flock to it. There was a time when you could rely on gathering a number of believers if you planted a church in an urbanized area, for example, in a place where apartments were built. Rev. David Young-Gi Cho’s Full Gospel Church, which is known worldwide, has also grown by delivering healing and hope for success, such as the Threefold Blessing, Fivefold Gospel and Fourth Dimension Spirituality (Lee 2022). In 1993, 23 of the world’s 50 largest churches were situated in Korea (Kungminilbo 1993).

Among the causes of growth during this period, the church growth movement of each denomination played an important part. For example, GAPCK (The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Korea, or “Hapdong”) launched the

“10,000 church planting movement” as a 10-year plan in 1975, and after five years the number of churches had increased by 13.2% and the number of members by 17.4% (Kim 2002: 131). This period was also a time when the inter-denominational evangelism movement and evangelical campus mission developed. These ministries include Campus Crusade for Christ and the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (a member of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students). During this time of church growth, large-scale evangelism rallies took place. As a representative example, 2.6 million people participated in the Billy Graham evangelism rally that was held for four days in 1973. 37,000 people were converted. In EXPLO74, which was hosted by CCC in 1974, 6.65 million people participated, and 272,000 people were converted (S.-H. Lee 1995: 34–35).

However, the growth of the Korean church began to slow as industrialization and urbanization were completed. The decline is also related to the small growth in population and the phenomenon of de-religiosity that is evident more broadly in society. Hee-Song Yang presents five events that occurred in 2007 as indicators of slower growth of the Korean church (Yang 2012: 41–53). Among these, the dismissal of irregular workers in E-Land, the abduction of the Afghan mission team, and making an elder president are the three major events in the early 2000s when Korean society in general grew increasingly negative in their perception of the Korean church.

In the case of E-Land’s layoff of non-regular workers, a company that emphasized its identity as a Christian company could not differentiate itself from other companies. In 2007, new legislation was passed to protect non-regular workers. The content was that workers who had worked as non-regular workers for two years should be converted to regular workers. However, E-land, which claimed to be a Christian company, fired most of its non-regular workers before the law was enforced. This did not match people’s general expectations of Christian companies, and it was an event that became a big social issue.

It was thought that if a Christian became president, politics would be different from before, or at least politics would not be hostile to Christianity. As a result, President Lee Myung-bak, an elder of the Presbyterian Church, was elected. However, socially, it seemed that the church was openly engaged in political activities to pursue its own interests. Among these events, the most prominent event was the abduction of a Korean short-term mission team in Afghanistan. The incident shocked the whole nation as the mission team was kidnapped during an outreach in Afghanistan while ignoring the government’s travel ban notice. Due to this incident, Korean society began to recognize that there was a problem with the aggressive mission of the Korean church, and the Korean church became a target of criticism.

The Korean church led the independence movement during the Japanese colonial period (1910–45), participated in democratization (1960–87), and continues today to work for the poor. Citizens had a positive impression of Christianity because there were many people in the Korean church who acted in socially responsible ways. However, due to several incidents, the social perception of the Korean church has turned increasingly negative. The media has begun to cover other adverse events within the church. As various issues with pastors' non-transparent financial dealings, sexual immorality and the privatization of church as family inheritance have come to light, society has tended to view the church in an increasingly negative light.

## Changes in the Korean church ecosystem in the early 2000s

### *The increase of "believing without belonging"*

The phenomenon of believing without belonging began to appear more prominently in the context of the events mentioned above. Believing without belonging refers to a Christian who claims to be a Christian but does not attend services on Sunday and does not belong to a Christian community. This phenomenon has led to the rise of the so-called "Canaan Saints" in Korea. The word "Canaan" is a wordplay that reverses the Korean word Ga-na-an (Canaan) to An-na-ga (not going).

According to a survey by the Korean National Association of Christian Pastors and Ji&Com Research conducted in 2017, the population of believing without belonging was already 23%. This more than doubled from 10.5% in 2012 (Lim 2017). At one time during the Covid-19 period, almost all Christians were unable to attend church and worship due to the government's ban on gatherings. However, even after the restrictions were loosened, offline attendance was only about 50% of what it was prior to the pandemic. Currently, Korean churches are interested in how many will return. Many pastors judge that they have reached a situation where they have no choice but to continue the online ministry that started during the Covid-19 period.

According to the survey mentioned above, 42.8% of the respondents left the church for personal reasons such as a life of faith that is not bound by norms (30.3%) and lack of time (5.7%). Church-related problems like dissatisfaction with the pastor (24.3%) and dissatisfaction with church members (19.1%) made up 43.4% (Korean National Association of Christian Pastors). These de-churched individuals maintain personal religiosity but do not belong to an institutional church. Instead, they mainly practice their faith in their personal life. However, non-institutional churches were also established by the pastors with a missional heart toward them. Jaeyoung Jung has found three things such nearby established, non-institutional churches have in common. First, there is often a small number of people gathered to have personal fellowship and share leadership in a communal environment. Second, there is a tendency to

gather in a relaxing and comfortable environment on Sunday afternoons and hold worship services. There is no other meeting besides Sunday worship. Third, there is typically time to talk about the sermon after worship (Jung 2015: 17–18).

As a result of a series of events, the credibility of the Korean church has declined sharply. In the most recent example during the Covid-19 pandemic, society has criticized some church gatherings as superspreading events. Korean society has been questioning the public function of the Christian religion, while Christianity has become more privatized as some churches acted against the social climate when they should have fulfilled their citizenship duties. During the time of Covid-19 that started at the end of 2019, this kind of appearance was shown to the public without filtering. Since the beginning of 2020, there have been cases in which Covid-19 spreads through people who gather at church on Sundays to practise their faith. The government restricted gatherings, but some churches with fundamentalist tendencies strongly resisted this, and even continued offline worship despite community protests. According to a survey by Ji&Com Research conducted in March 2022, 31.8% of Korean society saw the Korean church as credible in 2020, 20.9% in 2021, and 18.1% in 2022 (Kangjuhwua, Changch'angil and Ch'oegiyŏng, 2022).

### *Rapid increase in bi-vocational ministers: imbalance in the supply and demand of pastors*

There are a limited number of churches, and the number of church members is decreasing. Yet the number of pastors is increasing, which means that pastors who cannot find a ministry site must start planting churches. This is because the supply and demand have not been properly controlled. The reason is that the Korean church did not take the reduction in personnel seriously, and another is related to the financial resources for running seminaries. As of 2015, the number of pastors in Korea's Protestant churches reached 98,305 (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism 2018: 108–16). There are nearly 400 seminaries in Korea – 57 seminaries accredited by the Ministry of Education and 300 unaccredited – and 7,000 pastoral candidates are produced from these seminaries every year.

In cases where existing churches provide support for new church planting, the new church may grow to become stable. However, a more common way to plant is for pastors or a few households to start a church on their own. In this case, the pastor earns a living through means other than pastoral work. In Korea, many are in bi-vocational ministry not because of a double calling but to sustain their livelihood. In a survey of 904 pastors in 2016, 66.7% of respondents were living below the minimum cost of living for a family of four, and 73.9% responded positively when asked about bi-vocational ministry. They answered that they were employed bi-vocationally

because they had to take responsibility for their livelihood, while only 20.4% offered theological reasons for their bi-vocational lifestyle (Cho 2016: 245–48).

## Rise of the missional church

### Missional church

Alongside the events in the early 2000s that impacted the church's social standing, Korean missiologists also started to hold active discussions about the missional church at the same period. According to Kanghee Han, it has been 20 years since the discourse of missional church was introduced to domestic missiology discourse and to the field of ministry (K. H. Han 2022: 6). For local church pastors, the missional church idea became a breakthrough alternative in church ministry. The missional church discussion also provided a tool to interpret the model of missional churches in Korea that pre-existed these discussions. When discussions about missional church took place, the idea of café church was one of the first that arose.

In 2016, the *Kukminilbo*, a newspaper with a Christian background, published a special article titled "An Alternative to Small Churches: Talking About 10 Years of Café Churches." From this, it can be inferred that café churches were established in Korea before 2006 (Kim Ayeong 2016). A café can be a point of contact that allows the church to meet nearby residents, and it can also function as a space for various events like worship services and cultural events. Other forms have emerged, including library churches, concert hall churches and bookstore churches. Pastors have taken on the roles of baristas, librarians and bookstore owners, naturally taking on dual roles.

### Non-institutional churches

As mentioned earlier, the category of believing without belonging includes people who have been disappointed by the institutional church. New churches are now being formed for them. Sociologist Jae-young Jung refers to these churches as "non-institutional churches" and names the growing number of non-institutional churches as "Continuous Challenges" (Jung, 2022). In a survey of 227 non-institutional church members, 124 (54.6%) said they belonged to a church with pastors, and 103 (45.4%) said they attended a church consisting only of lay people without pastors (Jung 2022: 42). The survey data suggests that believers who are disappointed with pastors prefer a horizontal church without pastors.

In terms of thinking about the church, members of institutional churches and members of non-institutional churches had very different thoughts. Members of non-institutional churches do not place much importance on matters that have traditionally been considered important elements of the church's composition (e.g.,

pastors, sermons, sacraments, service on Sundays, chapel), taking an especially passive stance on the role of pastors (Jung 2022: 75).

Jung suggests that the Korean church must overcome these problems by moving in the following directions (Jung 2022: 174–245):

- Restoration of the essence of faith: As the church becomes institutionalized, it tends to move away from its essence and weakens its original spirit.
- Towards a community: The church should ideally emphasize discipleship and community together. In the meantime, however, discipleship has been more emphasized, so community needs to be restored.
- Improvement of communication structure: The current church needs to improve its structure because many people cannot have their voices heard due to vertical communication.
- Improvement of the fiscal structure: This step emphasizes transparency in fiscal management and should be used where necessary.
- Restoration of church publicity: The church must take on a public role without becoming private.
- Social participation based on publicity: The public nature of the church should eventually lead to social participation.
- Ministries through small group communities: When gathered as small communities, each community has different characteristics and can work in different areas.
- Village community movement as an expansion of the community: Social participation changes the community to which the church belongs.
- Preparation for change: This is to grasp and prepare for the flow of society and the church.

Jae-young Jung's detailed proposal is appropriate in the context of the Korean church. Jung's proposal is not directed at non-institutional churches, but at institutional churches. He expects churches to break away from the current negative aspect and show a more ideal pattern in the practice of faith.

## **Small missional churches as an alternative in the period of decline**

Thus far, this paper has examined the growth of Korean churches, the loss of social trust, factors such as believing without belonging, and the active discussion and practice of missional churches during this time. The author argues that the current situation of the Korean church demands a paradigm shift. The church must break

away from the growth and enlargement of the past. Therefore, I would like to argue that the small missional church provides a viable alternative in the current Korean context.

### What is a small missional church?

The idea that a larger church must have received greater blessings is not biblical but based on materialism. The church needs to remember the teaching that “each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function” (Rom. 12:4, NIV). Members can be interpreted as individuals, but if we look at the whole Korean church as one large body, we can see that different sized churches can play different roles. A human body has two arms and ten fingers and toes, and each serves a different function. As one body in Christ, the church has the same mission. But different sizes of churches can be understood to have different functions. There are many examples of large churches that have grown through a revival. However, many churches become unhealthy if their only goal is quantitative growth. In addition, as mentioned above, the Korean church is declining. The church needs to recognize the need for degrowth and focus instead on the essence of ministry. In addition, this paradigm shift is not a choice but a requirement of the times, society and the environment.

A small missional church results in several reorientations in the organizational aspect of the church. First, a small missional church does not intend to be large. Ideally, the size of a church should be given as the result of practicing faith rather than intentionally through marketing. Many evils arise when the intention to increase the number of members is the first and only goal of a church. When the church grows naturally, it can also choose to split and maintain its scale in smaller units. Second, a small missional church focuses on the essence of the gospel. A missional church recognizes and practises mission as the essence of the church. The questions that fellow pastors often ask in the field of ministry are “Does the church revive if you do that?” and “Does the church grow if you change to that system?” Whether a small church or a large church, if growth is the criterion for judging ministry, it will eventually be buried in growthism. For this reason, small missional churches must break away from growthism and practise the gospel in response to the Bible and the needs of the times.

Third, a small missional church avoids complex structures and has a simple system. Complex structures slow movement, and a simple decision-making structure can enable quick response. Fourth, a small missional church cooperates with other missional churches. These churches are challenged by a shortage of human resources. In many cases the pastor is the sole leader or two or three people work



in a team. Therefore, churches with the same orientation can form partnerships to help each other.

## Advantages of a small missional church

### *Characterization*

A small missional church can respond directly to specific community issues such as caring for those who believe without belonging, participating in social issues like creation care, environmental efforts, peace activities, and human rights.

### *Flexibility*

Due to globalization, pandemics are likely to occur again in the future. The likelihood of future pandemics increases the need for small communities with organizational flexibility. A small missional church has a relatively simple crisis management structure. It can be flexible about on-offline conversion and is relatively free of government restrictions on the number of people gathering in a pandemic. It also has the advantage of providing individualized spiritual care online.

### *Toward maturity*

Although the Korean church has a history of more than 100 years, it can remain in some ways immature due to its egocentrism, conformism, secularism and historical irresponsibility (O-K. Lee 2020: 103–32). The Korean church is being asked to mature from the inside out. A small missional church is an alternative form of church community that is suitable to move the Korean church toward maturity as expected and required by society.

### *Mission in partnership*

Fourth, the small missional church is a church that works together with other communities. Small churches, where a single pastor or a few pastors work in a team, are inevitably short of human resources. Churches with the same orientation can thus come together and cooperate to coexist.

## Examples of small missional churches

In Korea, many such small missional churches are currently emerging. One new form is through sharing worship space. Space sharing is becoming common place in the general society, and worship space is also being shared by more churches. The following are cases of sharing worship spaces in the Korean church.

### *Café Underwood (missional church & shared worship space)*

Café Underwood is located adjacent to the campus of Yonsei University with all the attendant cultural and economic entities that go into supporting a large university.

This café was started and operated by Campus Crusade for Christ with the support of an entrepreneur. Then, in February 2020, two pastors planning a Chinese student-immigrant ministry were commissioned to manage the café. As a missional café church, Café Underwood operates a free counselling room for international students and immigrants from Chinese-speaking countries. A pastor who majored in psychology and pastoral counselling conducts the counseling. Counselling is professional and does not evangelize during counseling, but it can lead to evangelical conversation outside of counselling through relationships. In addition, a pastor with a professional barista licence is making use of the café's characteristics to open a Chinese coffee class and contact people in a situation where there are few opportunities to learn about coffee in Chinese.

While running a café and doing campus mission, they considered ways to use the café space in missional ways. They saw that newly planted churches have difficulty finding space for worship and often do not have enough money to pay rent. The pastors therefore networked to provide gathering spaces for four churches that meet during different time slots. The churches are free to use the video and sound equipment in the café. They also share items such as a pulpit, a piano and a donation box. Furthermore, they are considering ways in which they can collaborate. It is worth mentioning that the one-year-old church planted in this space recently decided to rent their own space and start a shared worship space to serve other churches. This church became the first fruit of Café Underwood's pioneering church incubation work.

### *Co-Worship Station (shared worship space)*

Co-Worship Station is a shared church platform launched by Gimpo Myungsung Church to help small churches. They sold the previous church building, bought a new building for a shared chapel space, and established Assist Mission as a missionary organization to operate the space. The Co-Worship Station started in one location but has now grown to four. Assist Mission provides a location and takes responsibility for overall church administration, such as building management, video and sound equipment, and multimedia support personnel. These provisions provide a stable ministry setting. In particular, for the first year the monthly rent and management fee is only about USD100. Pastors who share this space and its equipment are likewise seeking for the partnership in ministry, so they have started to hold early morning prayers in union. Café Underwood and Assist Mission's Co-Worship Station function as both a platform and an incubator.

### *Seoro Books and Seoro Church (bi-vocational ministry)*

Seoro Books and Seoro Church started in February 2020 when Covid-19 started. The pastor of this church serves simultaneously as the pastor and the head of the

publishing company. He chose the publishing business as a means of making a living and as his mission. So he opened a publishing house in Paju BookCity, a district created for the publishing business in Paju City. As a Christian publishing house, this publisher publishes alternative books for the Korean church, mainly producing books on theology, history and missions. Since the pastor is a PhD candidate and researcher, he is also researching representative theologians of the Korean church, making YouTube videos of criticism, and writing articles that can promote a healthy church.

Moreover, they started their church in the publishing office on Sundays and planned weekday services for people who work in the area. As the situation of Covid-19 became severe, the government issued an administrative order to ban church gatherings. This church soon switched to an online church and started worshipping via Zoom. The congregation has existed longer as an online church than it has as an offline church. This church is interested in social issues. Members visit places that have become known for social problems, most being where tragic events have occurred. For example, they went to Gangjeong Village, where the seashore was destroyed to build a naval base. They observed the site and tried to understand God's heart there. They also went to the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ), the site of the split between South and North Korea, and prayed into the pain of division and hopes for reunification. They also occasionally worship in solidarity with other small missional churches and encourage each other. They are now planning to have united worship for the families of the Itaewon Halloween crush victims in order to comfort the bereaved and also to participate in social pain.

### *Gongmyong Church (local missional church)*

Gongmyong (Resonance) Church was started by two pastors who were missionaries serving in Britain and China. This church runs a bookstore during the week in a small city called Yangpyeong. This bookstore mainly aims to meet young couples in their 30s and 40s who have children. The parents are interested in their children's education, but their children have nowhere to go after school. So, this bookstore is not just a place to sell books, but a platform for culture, conversation and learning.

The pastors and their wives used their knowledge to start English storybook reading groups, embroidery classes, Chinese character classes, Photoshop lectures, and book discussion groups. They accurately grasped the cultural needs of the region and became pastors of the village by thinking of the customers they met at the bookstore as "weekday saints". Thirty or forty people connected in this way worship at the bookstore on Sundays. One pastor also introduces his pastoral work and ministry academically as a steering committee member of the Family, Church &

Village Research Institute. The pastor introduces various cases of village ministry and provides consulting for a local church willing to switch to a local missional church.

### Shared worship space as a new trend of the Korean church

Shared worship spaces are being recognized as a solution and a new trend for the Korean church. In the Presbyterian Church of Korea, there was a recommendation on it at the General Assembly level, and presbyteries are starting to establish shared worship spaces. In other countries, it is common to share space with other churches and even other religions. However, Korean churches are not used to sharing their spaces with other churches. Through this, we can see that the Korean church has not felt the need to borrow the space of other churches while experiencing revival and growth and that the Korean church has not been accustomed to having an open attitude toward others and partnership. The individual-churchism of the Korean church is very strong (Yang 2003).

Sharing a place of worship has significant implications. In Korea, there are more churches than convenience stores (Chang 2020). Therefore, in the general perception of Korean society, the church is also a group competing for market share. The shared worship space will show society that several churches share one space and cooperate with each other, so the church will be recognized as a group characterized by sharing rather than as a selfish and competitive group. In an age of sharing rather than private ownership, sharing a place of worship is good news for small churches struggling with planting, financing and responses to the pandemic. In addition, small missional churches that share a space of worship can complement each other's weaknesses and maximize their strengths by forming partnerships. However, it is also necessary to reflect more deeply on why the place of worship should be shared (Han 2021: 166–67).

### Conclusion

The author is pastor of a local church intending to become a missional church. He author also teaches pastoral candidates at the seminary. As a local church pastor, he feels a sense of crisis as he looks at the decline of the Korean church; he thinks the Korean church should not continue to go with the existing paradigm but should change. Bi-vocational ministers have been introduced because of declining numbers of Korean churches and the imbalance in the supply and demand of pastors. The situation is not good, but the pastoral resources are plentiful. The author hopes that if a small missional church, rather than a growth-oriented church, is planted through them, the church will be able to establish itself as a new hope.

Megachurches that have been growing for a long time continue to exist as landmarks. However, churches starting anew are no longer in an age or environment in which they can imagine growing into megachurches. In addition, the Korean church must take on social responsibility both internally and externally while maturing for the benefit of the public. Church membership in Korea will continue to rapidly decrease alongside the population decline. Furthermore, the number of the bi-vocational ministers is increasing. The small missional church is a necessary trend in this situation. The Korean church must enter society and be reborn as a small missional church that goes and makes disciples.

## About the author

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