

## EDITORIAL

# June 2023 Special Issue: Current Missional Church Perspectives in South Korea

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This special issue came into being as a result of a conversation with Nigel Rooms, one of the editors of this journal, during the 15th IAMS conference in Sydney in 2022. In Sydney, there were several Korean scholars who presented their papers, and many of them were in the Christian Communities in Mission Study Group track. Taken together they showed the strong interest that Korean scholars have in missional ecclesiology. Seeing such increasing interest on this subject from Korean scholars, Nigel approached us and enquired whether we, as the leaders of Korea IAMS Fellowship, might be willing to edit a special Korean edition of *Ecclesial Futures*. Without any hesitation, we accepted this challenge, hoping that we could contribute to the sharing different voices within the academic discourse which is missional ecclesiology. Thus, the collective journey to produce this issue had begun. Over the course of this journey, there were also moments of discouragement and disappointment where we might have given up this attempt. Going through the processes of writing and translating, as well as the peer-review process, we realized it is not an easy task. But by God's special encouragement and the work of diligent scholarship, we finally reached the moment of publication. We are thankful to Nigel Rooms for his persistent encouragement to complete this special issue.

It has been about 20 years since missional ecclesiology was introduced into Korean missiological discussion, practice and scholarship. After a few years of the initial introductory stage during the early 2000s, Korean scholars quickly developed their unique missional ecclesiology from a Korean perspective. Korean missional ecclesiology was birthed from the realization that the Korean church is situated in a very different context from the Western world. Missional ecclesiology arose in the West from the acute realization that the gospel needs to interact missionally with a highly secularized post-Christian culture, Korean missional ecclesiology emerged from a totally different situation, especially in its relationship with surrounding cultures.

In the pre-Christianized culture of modern Korean society, Korean Protestant churches were segregated from their wider society for a variety of reasons. One of them is the theological stronghold of a dualistic worldview that creates such segregation. Another reason comes from the contextual factor in which Korean churches are located. Being a minority in society during the early period of Korean Christianity, the church had to struggle for its own survival. As a result, a strong sense of Christian identity was often identified with a sense of belonging over against the wider majority. Furthermore, due to the rapid modernization and urbanization of Korea, people often suffered from rootlessness and social dislocation, and the local church was able to provide identity, community and therefore, this same sense of belonging. In developing Korean missional ecclesiology, Kook-Il Han has described this unique centripetal and attractional approach in Korean churches as the paradigm of “Noah’s ark” where the church provides safety from the wider world and which soon became the undergirding paradigm of Korean Protestant churches. There are positive sides to “Noah’s ark”, such as the strong commitment of church members to the local church as well as a strong sense of identity, as we have noted above. In the case of Korean Christians, the communal sense of belonging was often manifested most clearly in important moments within members’ lives. For example, on occasions of new births, weddings and funerals in the family, the local churches became the main support system of the communal Korean lifestyle. When unique contextual factors coincided with more overtly theological approaches, the paradigm of Noah’s ark also produced a sense of exclusion as a side effect. For this reason, while the Christians in Korean churches have strong commitments to their local church, the segregation of faith and lifestyle is apparent. In this situation, Korean Christianity needs a fresh view of missional ecclesiology that is different from the way in which Western churches need a new missional ecclesial approach. Understanding the context, missional ecclesiology should be manifested differently according to the situations in which believers live.

From the turn of the twenty-first century, while more research on Korean missional ecclesiology has developed in academic circles, there was also a booming of the missional church movement in Korean Protestant churches at a more popular and practice-based level. Numerous books on missional churches were produced for local pastors during the last decade in Korea. Among them are publications by the first generation of scholars of the Korean missional movement, including Kook-Il Han, Hu-Chun Lee, Hyung-Geun Choi, Dong-Kyu Choi, Seuk-Jae Jun, Byung-Bae Hwang and others. However, since many of these publications were written in Korean; they are not available to international scholars. There are only a few articles published in English, but they are rather scattered in various journals. We believe that this project is one of the first major issues in which Korean missional ecclesiology has been dealt

with extensively in a single academic journal. We think this is only the beginning, and there will be more publications on Korean missional ecclesiology in the future.

In this issue, Seung-Hyun (Nathan) Chung proposes to reflect on missional ecclesiology starting from the theology of creation. Chung carefully investigates the missional church movement in Korea during the last two decades. Reviewing the current discussion about *missio Dei* in Korea and applying the creation theology of Jürgen Moltmann. Chung argues that the missional ecclesiology in Korea should include the theology of creation by using the cases of Kong3al Community and *Ilbeot* Church located in Gang-hwa Island as examples.

Sung-Hyuk Nam deals with missional ecclesiology from digital mission discourse. He argues, while online churches are prevalent in Korea, there is insufficient understanding of ways to meet the younger generation of non-believers in the metaverse. Since online churches generally operate in the analog paradigm, there is a massive gap between the metaverse and the younger generation in the digital paradigm. Critical contextualization is still necessary in approaching the metaverse as a digital mission field. Nam proposes that Korean churches need to understand the metaverse as a space of mission and coexistence.

Bokyoung Park searches for new ways of missional engagement during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic and afterwards in Korea. She surveyed three congregations as case studies of how local congregations responded to their missional tasks during the pandemic. With some preliminary assessments from these case studies, she suggests three ways of missional engagement through the local congregation in Korea, that is, to engage in personal fellowship using narratives, to perform a habitual ethical lifestyle, and to embrace the practice of hospitality.

Bright Myeong-Seok Lee argues that the decline in social trust in the Korean Protestant church is a significant social issue that requires attention and action. In his paper, Lee examines that one of the factors of decline may be found in the previous dominant method of discipleship training. By using a case study of Suwonsung Church that demonstrates the effectiveness of its discipleship training and its consequent impact on social trust, Lee suggests missional discipleship as a way to overcome church decline. He recommends discipleship which seeks to create a more engaging and inclusive environment that inspires the church to lead and participate in community service.

Seonyi Lee examines the Nasom Community for Mongolian Migrants as a model for missional church in Korea. Analyzing the situation of Mongolian migrants in South Korea, she reviews the missionary vision and missionary strategies of Nasom

Community and how they are implemented in practice. She argues that Nasom Community exhibits the missionary potential of the Korean church for Asia mission.

Hyeong-Kyoon Kim explores how Korean immigrant churches in Aotearoa New Zealand can be balanced in their view between missions (plural) and Mission (singular). Employing interviews and qualitative methodology, Kim concludes that missional understanding can be a trigger to interacting between visible belonging as missions and invisible belonging as Mission through three missional concepts: the purposed, progressed and experienced aspects of mission itself. He also suggests practical ways that Korean churches in Aotearoa New Zealand can balance missions and Mission by following these three missional aspects.

An-Wei Tan argues small missional churches are a helpful alternative in overcoming the problem of the current decline in Korean Protestant churches – especially the much larger ones. As a bi-vocational minister who started Café Underwood and ministers with Chinese students in Korea, Tan examines how Korean Protestant churches faced the new phenomenon of “believing without belonging” and the increase of bi-vocational ministers in general. To respond to this situation, Tan argues that the small missional church provides a helpful alternative to the decline of Korean Protestant churches.

In this issue, many of the contributors are emerging scholars, taking their rightful place in the global scholarship of missiology represented in this journal. The Korea IAMS Fellowship assisted in editorial help for these articles. As the leaders of Korea IAMS Fellowship, we are thankful to God that we were able to give them an opportunity to widen their scholarly opportunities through this assistance. Moreover, in this issue, we tried to provide concrete cases of local churches with an analytical view of Korean missional ecclesiology so that these articles showcase how Korean missional ecclesiology has been implemented in local churches. In Korean Protestantism, the vitality of the local churches and the strong commitment of Christians to their churches are notably famous. For this reason, most of the writings are field-oriented approaches, and we have avoided being purely theoretical in our discussion of missional ecclesiology. We hope that this will give readers more opportunities to catch a glimpse of the Korean missional church movement.

Two small editorial notes need to be made. The first concern is that throughout the issue, the word “Korea” is meant to be limited to South Korea. All articles deal with the situation of South Korean churches. The second is that the whole study deals with Protestant churches in Korea. Therefore, “Korean churches” refers to the Protestant churches in this issue. It is also important to note that some of writings have

already been published in Korean and have been translated, peer reviewed and revised to be available to English-language international scholarship.

In closing, we want to acknowledge that the last twenty years of struggle by Korean missiologists to formulate a missional ecclesiology fitting the Korean soil has resulted in a strong missional church movement in Korea. This issue is a small achievement in the larger journey of constructing a contextualization of missional ecclesiology that fits the Korean context. In this issue, it is true that the missional church movement has crossed over various denominations in Korea, including Methodists as well as Holiness church traditions. All contributors to this issue come from Protestant churches and mainly from the Presbyterian denomination. We hope that academic inquiries related to missional ecclesiology as well as the ministerial formation of missional ecclesiology continue to develop in the Korean context as well as to communicate with the rest of the world.

### **A note of thanks from the Co-editor, Nigel Rooms**

It has been a joy to see this project come to birth, especially the growth in confidence that the contributors have achieved in working and publishing in English, the (hegemonic) need for which, I recognize, does unhelpfully, for emerging scholars from places like Korea, restrict their reach and development. Bokyoung and Seonyi deserve a big round of applause from our international readers for keeping going when things were, understandably difficult. I want to personally thank them here for their hard and committed work to bring this issue into being. The issue as a whole, I trust, stands as an important contribution to missional ecclesiology from our sisters and brothers in South Korean churches and their diaspora.

### **About the authors**

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