

COVID-19: Treatment of Clusters in Protestant Churches and the Shincheonji Church in South Korea. A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT: The treatment of the COVID-19 epidemic by the state of South Korea with regard to religious groups has revealed a strong bias to the detriment of the Shincheonji Church, a new rapidly expanding religious movement, and a more conciliatory treatment of Protestant churches. Shincheonji was met with stigmatization, deceptive and destructive rumors, demands of lists of all members and properties, unfounded suspicions, threats, fiscal harassment, prosecutions, spurious charges, and arrests and imprisonment of several leaders, including the founder. Excessive tolerance and impunity were shown towards several Protestant churches. This paper provides concrete facts and evidence highlighting the discriminatory treatment of Shincheonji, and analyzes the religious and socio-political dynamics underpinning the harassment of this new religious movement.

KEYWORDS: Shincheonji, Religion and COVID-19, Protestant Churches in South Korea, Lee Man Hee, Jeon Kwang-hoon, Sarang Jaecil Church, Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun.

Introduction

Article 11 of South Korea’s Constitution forbids any form of discrimination on account of religion, and states that “no privileged caste shall be recognized or ever established in any form.” However, a White Paper released by the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) and Human Rights without Frontiers (HRWF) on July 24, 2020, titled *COVID-19: Scapegoating Shincheonji in South Korea* (Introvigne et al. 2020b) highlights various instances when this constitutional principle has been violated. One of them is the discriminatory treatment of a new religious movement, the Shincheonji Church (hereafter Shincheonji), in comparison to mainline Protestant Churches.

Shincheonji, which self-identifies as Christian, has been accused of the acceleration and expansion of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Korea by the media, state and city authorities, politicians, and fundamentalist Protestant Churches. This allegation surfaced when a so-called super-spreader, Patient 31, was identified as a member of Shincheonji in Daegu, a city of about 2.5 million inhabitants. CESNUR and HRWF published an initial White Paper in March 2020, titled *Shincheonji and Coronavirus in South Korea: Sorting Fact from Fiction* (Introvigne et al. 2020a), which systematically debunked myths concerning the moral and legal responsibility of that patient and her Church. This paper found that the reaction of the South Korean authorities was disproportionate, which included measures such as: closing all places of worship for Shincheonji, interrogating the 89-year old Shincheonji founder and leader for four hours before he collapsed, arresting several of the movement's leaders in July 2020, dissolving its legal corporations, confiscating and destroying property, carrying out a nation-wide tax audit of Shincheonji and its local branches, financially crippling the movement through multi-billion civil suits, and, finally, putting in pretrial detention Shincheonji's founder and leader after an extensive interrogation on the night of 31 July. Surprisingly, one person who has not been subjected to criminal proceedings is Patient 31, which confirms that she did not commit any crime.

On the other hand, numerous Protestant churches have disregarded government restrictions related to freedom of worship and assembly. However, they were not treated as harshly as Shincheonji. This paper will analyze the treatment of Protestant churches that refused to abide by the government's health restrictions, as compared to Shincheonji.

It is noteworthy that COVID-19 appeared in these churches about two months before the legislative elections in South Korea, which were scheduled for April 15. This political context played an important role in the government's dealings with Shincheonji, as well as the refusal by a number of Protestant churches to comply with restrictions regarding freedom of worship and assembly.

First, this paper will provide a short overview of proactive measures taken by several major religious organizations. This research demonstrates that Shincheonji was at the forefront of prevention efforts.

A Short Timeline of Proactive and Reactive Initiatives

25 and 28 January: Shincheonji issued orders forbidding members who had recently arrived from China to South Korea from participating in religious services (Introvigne et al. 2020a, 19: see *ibidem* for information about Shincheonji included in this timeline).

18 February: Shincheonji leaders ordered all of their centers in Daegu to close. They also recommended that all members avoid private gatherings and meetings, refrain from meeting each other socially, self-quarantine, and be tested for COVID-19 if symptoms appeared.

Later that same day, orders were issued by Shincheonji to close all its churches and mission centers throughout South Korea. Simultaneously, President Moon held a cabinet meeting and reiterated the need to return to normal daily lives (Office of the President 2020).

22 February: Shincheonji services abroad were also suspended.

25 February: The Jogye Order, the largest Buddhist movement in Korea, announced the suspension of services at its temples for a month (*Korea JoongAng Daily* 2020a).

26 February: All Shincheonji meetings, activities, or gatherings in all countries outside of South Korea also ceased.

26 February: The Catholic Archdiocese of Seoul announced that all 232 of its churches in Seoul, attended by some 1.52 million Christians, would cancel masses from February 26 until March 10 to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. This was the first cancellation of Catholic services there in 189 years. The religious services of the Myeongdong Cathedral were also to be suspended, but the main hall would remain open for visitors from 10am to 7pm (Kwak, Lee, and Kim 2020).

After Shincheonji ordered all congregations and centers to stop gatherings and meetings on February 18, local governments issued separate administrative orders at a provincial level on different dates, which imposed restrictions on religious gatherings for a period of two weeks. However, Shincheonji facilities were ordered to shut down for an indefinite period, and have remained closed to this day. For example, the closure order dated February 21 that the Shincheonji

headquarters in Gwacheon received from the local government failed to mention a date for the end of the “Temporary Closure of the Facilities of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 Epidemic in Daegu into the Community” (see Annex 1 and 2).

At the end of February, most Korean Churches, *but not all*, suspended Sunday services and instead held them online. What happened next was predictable.

The Grace River Church

On March 1 and 8, the Grace River Church, a small Protestant Church in Seongnam, Gyeonggi Province, held Sunday services despite calls for caution.

On 16 March, 46 members of this church tested positive for COVID-19, making it the second largest cluster in the Seoul area (*Korea JoongAng Daily* 2020b).

No prosecution was initiated against the leaders of this Protestant community, no penalties were imposed, members were not scapegoated by the media, and the church was not closed by the authorities.

The Case of Pastor Jeon Kwang-hoon, a Political Opponent to President Moon

On February 24, a populist pastor of the well-known conservative Sarang Jaecil Church in northern Seoul, Jeon Kwang-hoon, was arrested and jailed for violating city ordinances banning mass rallies. However, his sentencing was not solely due to this breach of the COVID-19 ban on religious gatherings. He was arrested for being involved in a series of pre-election campaigns, which violates the national Public Official Election Act. Every week, he held a rally calling for “A Pan-National Center to Fight for President Moon Jae-In’s Resignation,” and appealing for support for a particular political party (Kang 2020).

The South Korean authorities were quick to neutralize this political opponent to President Moon and his administration.

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun Steps In

On March 21, Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun issued an administrative order calling for the suspension of mass religious gatherings, entertainment and indoor sports activities for 15 days, from March 22 to April 5—which, according to the Prime Minister, was a “critical period” to contain the coronavirus. He warned that “stern legal action” would be taken against churches violating the quarantine guidelines, including social distancing during small scale services, and checking congregants’ temperature (Shim 2020).

“[Such meetings] are actions that threaten not only the individuals partaking in them but also the safety of our entire community,” Chung said. “Now is a time of emergency akin to a state of war, so executive orders should not be regarded lightly as a bluff” (Shim 2020).

However, while mass gatherings were prohibited, Chung left room for smaller scale religious meetings. Hundreds of Protestant churches across Korea used this opportunity to hold their Sunday services, without always following the official health guidelines. As there was no obligation to declare such meetings and thus no systematic oversight, impunity prevailed.

The Case of the Sarang Jaeil Church

In the “absence” of its pastor, the Sarang Jaeil Church held a Sunday service on March 22 to criticize the Moon Jae-in administration. Over 100 municipal officials and 400 policemen were deployed to the premises to monitor the situation. Some members of the church squabbled with the police, as they tried to carry hundreds of plastic chairs from a truck into the church.

“The service held today is an undeniable violation of the administrative order that the city government has imposed on the Sarang Jaeil Church. [...] We will strictly impose penalties,” a Seoul city official said (*Yonhap News Agency* 2020a).

Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon (1956–2020), a member of President Moon’s Democratic Party who later committed suicide for unrelated reasons, called the church’s actions “intolerable” at a press briefing on March 23, and issued an order banning the church from holding any gatherings or services until April 5.

“The case of the Sarang Jaeil Church constitutes an action that seriously threatens the safety of the community and threatens the [health] goals of the government and the people,” Park said. “The extreme measures we have taken with regard to the Sarang Jaeil Church have nothing to do with freedom of religion, and I’m certain religious leaders will understand” (Shim 2020).

South Korea pledged to take legal action against several Protestant churches for violating the government’s guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Prime Minister said after this incident. He added that all members violating the order could face a penalty of up to 3 million Korean won (approximately \$2,500 or EUR 2140) (*Yonhap News Agency* 2020a).

At the time of this writing, however, the status of the proceedings against the Sarang Jaeil Church and its pastor was still unknown.

Other Protestant Churches

Other Protestant churches also held their usual weekend services, with some attempting to adhere to the health guidelines.

The Yonsei Central Church in Guro district limited access to registered members, and disinfected all members and vehicles entering church premises. Worshippers were asked to write down their names and contact details on a visitors’ list, and to keep their distance from one another during the service (*Yonhap News Agency* 2020a).

On March 25, it was discovered that at least 28 people had been infected with COVID-19 in the Protestant Manmin Central Church in Guro District, Western Seoul. Numerous people that they were in contact with, including relatives and acquaintances, then tested positive. The church had mainly offered online streaming for services since March 6, but officials believed that an infected person might have spread the disease when several workers and church members convened earlier to discuss the filming of services. The Seoul Metropolitan Government closed and disinfected the church, and assigned 40 officials to conduct contact tracing to block further spread (Namgung and Lee 2020).

No prosecution was initiated against the leaders of this community, and the church was not closed indefinitely.

Second Wave of Outbreaks in Protestant Churches: Wangsung Church, Seoul

After the effects of the two-week administrative order for the period from March 22 to April 5 ended, Protestant churches resumed their Sunday services, and small gatherings on weekdays. Three months later, an increasing number of new infections had cropped up in Protestant churches in Seoul and its adjacent cities (*Yonhap News Agency* 2020a).

At the end of June, the *Yonhap News Agency* and *Dong-A Daily* investigated the worsening trend within Protestant congregations. On 27 June, *Yonhap* published updates and statistics (Shin 2020), reporting that 22 members of the Wangsung Church, Gwanak-gu, Seoul, had tested positive as of that day, according to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) and the City of Seoul.

The first confirmed patient from this church was a 31-year-old female residing in Seowon-dong, who tested positive on June 24. The following day, seven members were confirmed to have contracted the virus, and six more were confirmed on the 26.

Out of these first 14 members to test positive, three took part in choir practice on June 18, and seven joined the church's retreat in Daebudo Island, Ansan City, on June 19 and 20. One attended the church service on June 21, and the final member was at all the events listed above.

It is estimated that around 1,700 members attended the service on June 21, so the total number of confirmed patients may have risen since then.

The KCDC is assuming that the virus spread during choir practice or the retreat. It is still unknown whether the church members wore masks during these events.

The authorities explained that the Wangsung Church followed guidelines for services such as people logging information upon arrival, placing hand sanitizers on site, maintaining distance between seats, etc. However, it is highly likely that churchgoers did not continue these measures at small-scale events, and that this led to the virus spreading.

Just a month before, in May, staff members of "pioneer churches" in the metropolitan area visited different churches for revival meetings every day. They sang hymns and said prayers without wearing masks at these meetings, which

resulted in over 70% of the participants contracting the virus.

The reason why church congregations are quick breeding grounds for COVID-19 is that activities such as Bible studies, singing, and sharing meals involve the spread of droplets that carry COVID-19. Also, oftentimes it is the same participants having repeating contacts through these gatherings, which increases the risk of contracting the virus.

Jung Eun-kyeong, the Director of the KCDC, said, “Recently, COVID-19 clusters are tied to religious activities such as church retreats, so we ask for special caution on weekends.” She emphasized that,

If offline services are inevitable, minimize the number of congregants, and restrict activities where droplets can be dispersed such as having meals, singing, and especially joining choir activities.

Other Churches

As of 27 June, *Yonhap News Agency* found that the following churches had this number of members who had tested positive for COVID-19:

Manmin Central Church in Guro-gu, Seoul: 41 confirmed patients.

Dongan Church in Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul: 28 confirmed patients.

Campus Crusade for Christ in Jongno-gu, Seoul: 7 confirmed patients.

Additionally, infections linked to Protestant churches emerged outside of Seoul. A few examples are:

Grace River Church in Seongnam, Gyeonggi Province: 67 confirmed patients.

Water of Life Church in Bucheon city, Gyeonggi Province: 50 confirmed patients.

Newly established churches in metropolitan areas, in Gyeonggi Province (which includes 28 cities around Seoul): 25 confirmed patients.

Meetings of pastors in Gunpo and Anyang, Gyeonggi Province: 22 confirmed patients.

Newly established churches in metropolitan areas in Incheon: 57 confirmed patients.

Jesus Malsseum Silcheon Church in Incheon city, Gyeonggi province: 5 confirmed patients.

Two days later, on June 29, *Dong-A Daily* published complementary and updated statistics (*Dong-A Daily News* 2020):

Wangsung Church in Gwanak-gu, Seoul: 27 cases.

Dongan Church in Dongdaemun District, Seoul: 28 cases.

Lord Glory Church in Anyang, Gyeonggi Province: 38 cases.

Joongang Baptist Church in Suwon, Gyeonggi Province: three new cases occurred, and public health authorities said 717 people have been identified as close contacts.

Onchun Church in Busan Metropolitan city, Gyeongnam province: 39 cases.

Metropolitan Area Pioneering Church Meeting in Seoul: 37 cases.

No sanctions were ever enlisted against these churches nor their pastors. They were never asked to provide lists of all their members and attendees of religious services, unlike Shincheonji.

Facing a second wave of infections in Protestant churches, the health authorities hesitated about the measures they should take. They finally opted for a ban on small gatherings and meetings in churches. On July 8, they announced that Protestant churches would have to suspend their Bible classes, choir practices, and lunch services from July 10. They would also have to use QR-codes on entry logs to keep records of worshippers participating in services. Congregations would also be prohibited from singing and praying loudly.

The United Christian Churches of Korea (UCCK), one of the biggest associations of Protestant Churches in South Korea, immediately reacted with a press release demanding that the government lift the ban.

Another Protestant group, the Communion of Churches in Korea (CCIK), also opposed the government's decision. "We cannot accept the measures as they labeled the whole Protestant community a hotbed for the virus spread," the CCIK said (*Yonhap News Agency* 2020b). Ironically, this perceived scapegoating is exactly the treatment that Shincheonji had endured for months and that was actively supported by Protestant churches.

Conclusions

Throughout the pandemic, South Korean authorities have dealt with the Protestant churches, very carefully while adopting a completely opposite attitude towards Shincheonji. Tolerance and impunity were shown to Protestant churches, but Shincheonji was met with stigmatization, deceptive and destructive rumors, demands of lists of all members and properties, unfounded suspicions, threats, fiscal harassment, prosecutions, spurious charges, and arrests and imprisonment of several leaders including the founder. This disproportionate and discriminatory treatment seems incomprehensible at first sight, but is unsurprising once some religious and socio-political dynamics are brought to light.

The first reason for this prosecution is that there has been a war waged for years by fundamentalist Protestant churches against Shincheonji. With its around 250,000 members in South Korea, Shincheonji has been a fast-growing religious movement at the expense of the mainstream Protestant churches. Under the guise of fighting against “heresies,” they have been desperately trying to recover and retain their followers. For almost twenty years, they have organized the kidnapping, confinement, and coercive de-conversion of thousands of their members who converted to Shincheonji, a practice that is illegal in South Korea but has been tolerated by the authorities (Fautré 2020).

The second reason is political. The fundamentalist Protestant churches are politically conservative, aligning closely with the parties opposed to President Moon. The weight of the Protestant voting block during elections in South Korea is significant. While campaigning for the legislative elections in the spring, fundamentalist Protestant groups instrumentalized the COVID-19 crisis by accusing Shincheonji of deliberately spreading the virus in South Korea. They organized a public petition asking for the ban of Shincheonji and pressed local prosecutors to charge the 89-year-old leader of the Church, Chairman Lee, with homicide by “willful negligence.” During the election campaign, the opposition accused President Moon of serious negligence and failures in his management of the COVID-19 crisis. The reaction of the governmental coalition was to place the blame on Shincheonji, which coincided with the interests of the Protestant churches.

Now that the parliamentary election is over, the fundamentalist Protestant churches see a unique opportunity to destroy Shincheonji, which has always been their objective. The COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to sow hostility against Shincheonji, capitalize on other vested interests, and get one step closer to the final solution of their problem.

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Annex 1

Fax from Gyeonggi Provincial Government to Shincheonji, February 21, 2020 (original).

2020-02-21 11:42

From: 03180084179 To: 025026426

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새로운 경기, 긍정적인 세상



경 기 도



수신 신천지예수교회 과천본산

(경유)

제목 (긴급) 대구 코로나19 유행 관련 지역사회 확산 차단을 위한 교회시설 일시폐쇄 등 협조 요청

1. 귀 교회의 무궁한 발전을 기원합니다.
2. 코로나19 유행과 관련, 경기도내 귀 교회 소속 신자 분들 중 일부가 확진자가 발생한 대구 집회에 참석하는 등 감염병 전파 우려가 있어 감염병 유행을 차단하고자 행정절차법 제49조에 따라 아래사항을 행정지도하오니 적극 이행(협조)하여 주시기 바랍니다.
 - 가. 귀 교회 소속 예배당 및 관련시설 전체 일시폐쇄
 - 나. 일체의 집회 및 봉사활동 중단 및 기 실시한 집회 및 봉사활동 내역 제출
 - 다. 대구집회 참석자 명단 제출, 보건소 신고 및 검사, 자가격리 조치
 - 라. 유증상자 전수조사를 위한 경기도내 전체 신자 명단 제출
 - ※ 일시폐쇄는 소독 등을 통한 전파 차단 조치이며, 신자 명단 등은 유증상자 발생 시 역학조사 및 무료 검사 등을 위해 요구하는 것임.
 - 마. 제출방법 : 지체없이 경기도청 감염병관리과 이메일(gg0065@gg.go.kr) 송부
3. 경기도는 이번 대구지역 코로나19 집단발생에 따른 경기도내 감염병 유행 차단을 위해 귀 교회와 적극 협의할 용의가 있으며 보건환경연구원 및 관할 보건소 등을 통하여 유증상자 무료검사, 시설 폐쇄, 소독 등의 조치를 지원할 계획입니다.
4. 아울러, 상기 행정지도사항 불이행 시 감염병 전파 차단을 위해 부득이 압수수색 및 강제 폐쇄 등의 조치를 취할 계획임을 알려드립니다.

붙임 신도명단 서식 2부. 끝.

Annex 2

Fax from Gyeonggi Provincial Government to Shincheonji, February 21, 2020 (translation).



Brand New Gyeonggi, Fair World
Gyeonggi-do



To: Gwacheon Headquarters of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus
(Via)

Title: (URGENT) Request for Cooperation with the Temporary Closure of the Facilities of Shincheonji Church of Jesus to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 Epidemic in Daegu into the Community.

1. We hope your church to continue to develop and thrive.
 2. Regarding COVID-19 epidemic, since some of your congregation members in Gyeonggi-do may have been at a risk of spreading this infectious disease by attending the religious assemblies in Daegu, where many confirmed cases are identified, the following administrative guidance is provided in accordance with Article 49 of the Administrative Procedures Act, and therefore please actively follow (cooperate with) the guidance to prevent the spread of COVID-19 epidemic into our community.
 - a. To temporarily close all of chapels and related facilities of your church;
 - b. To stop all religious assemblies and service activities and submit the details of the previous assemblies and service activities;
 - c. To submit the list of your congregation members who attended the religious assemblies in Daegu; to report these congregation members to the public health centers and have them get COVID-19 tests; to have them enter self-isolation;
 - d. To submit a complete list of your congregation members in Gyeonggi-do to conduct a thorough investigation of symptomatic individuals.
- ※ Temporary closure of the facilities is intended to disinfect to prevent the spread of the infectious disease, and submission of the list of the

congregation members is required to identify symptomatic individuals to conduct epidemiological investigations and free examinations.

e. How to Submit: Email to the Infectious Diseases Management Section (gg0065@gg.go.kr) of the Gyeonggi Provincial Government without delay.

3. Gyeonggi-do is willing to actively consult with your church to prevent the spread of the infectious disease into Gyeonggi-do from the mass outbreak of COVID-19 in Daegu. Especially, we plan to support measures such as free examination of symptomatic individuals, closure of facilities, and disinfection, with the help of the Research Institutes of Public Health and Environment and the respective public health centers.

4. In addition, in the event of non-compliance with the above administrative guidance, we inform that we plan to take measures such as seizure and search and forced closure to prevent the spread of the infectious disease.

Attachment.

Two copies of the forms for the lists of the congregation members.

EOD.