



# Religious Space for Young People: *What Megachurch Means for Millennials in South Korea*

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## Abstract

*Despite much media and public criticism of megachurches, the strong preference of young adults for megachurches over small churches warrants further research. This study explores how megachurches have become an appealing religious space for young evangelical Protestants in South Korea by closely observing women adherents' narratives. Drawing on in-depth interviews with millennial laypersons in South Korea, the findings of the study suggest that megachurch is a place to integrate youth culture through contemporary worship service and the recognition of transnational lifestyles and is perceived as shielding young people from hierarchical local culture, offering a room of privacy and enacting an egalitarian elder leadership. By focusing on how megachurches transition to meet the needs of changing religious consumers, such as millennials, this study suggests that the church's efforts to recognize young millennials' quest for individual autonomy and freedom was perceived positively compared with small local churches. Overall, this study offers a contextual meaning of the megachurch as a space where young people feel relatively free from an age-based hierarchy and collective culture but are actively recognized for their own secular youth culture to create sacred beliefs.*

**Keywords:** Evangelical Protestantism, megachurch, millennials, women, young adults, South Korea

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## Introduction

With much media and public criticism of megachurches, scholars have attempted to explain the reasons megachurches are so often associated with such negative images (S. Kim 2017; Han 2015). Problems associated with megachurches include a materialistic image manifested by the despotism or moral improbity of Protestant leaders (e.g., the inheritance of a church by the pastor's son), embezzlement and financial corruption, ethics scandals, overzealous fund-raising and expansion projects, their bureaucratic operations, and the depersonalized indifference of their lay relationships (K. Kim 2007; S. Kim 2017; Han 2015). The proliferation of the neoliberal market economy has been considered as the broad background to these problems, as it has resulted in religious organizations' materialistic orientations, inter-church competition, church growth theology, and a quantitative growth model (S. Kim 2007). Despite such dire criticisms, some media discourses suggest that young people prefer attending megachurches over small local churches (Lee 2015). Why then do young people prefer attending megachurches? This study aims to respond to this question by an examination of both religious organization and generational shifts in Korea.

Although scholarly documentation on megachurch has shed light on the growth and decline of megachurches in Korea, largely highlighting the economic and materialistic interests of church leaders, knowledge of the changing desires and needs of lay members, especially young millennial believers, remains limited. Some clear characteristics of millennials include their valuing of individual autonomy, freedom, and self-efficacy, and an antipathy to authoritarian communication and hierarchy. Young millennials feel uncomfortable with the hierarchical organizational culture of corporations, aspire to have a subjective happiness and wellbeing with individualized forms of hobbies rather than collective leisure, and appreciate work-life balance over career success (Y. Kim 2019). This tendency of cherishing one's individual time and space may manifest itself in their pursuit of megachurches, where the large congregation size can shield one from tight social interactions and obligations. Given this characteristic of the millennial generation, it is worth investigating how megachurches respond

to young adult believers offering services and encouraging youth-friendly culture.

Megachurches in Korea provide useful opportunities for exploring this question due to the country's sizeable Christian population, the presence of megachurches, and the rapid generational shift. Christianity in Korea in 2015 accounts for roughly 27.6 percent of the population, including Protestantism (9,676,000, or 19.7%) and Catholicism (3,890,000, or 7.9%) (KOSTAT 2016). One notable feature of Christianity in Korea is the presence of several megachurches, including the Yoido Full Gospel Church, Somang Church, Sarang Church, and Youngnak Church. Korea has been home to five of the world's 20 largest congregations, including the world's largest Assembly of God, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist congregations. However, the country's rapid generational shift is also observable in various portions of its Christian population. The declining number of religious adherents is more pronounced among the younger generation given that religious believers in their 20s in 2015 declined by 12.8 percent compared to 2005, and those in their 10s in 2015 declined by 12.5 percent compared to 2005 (KOSTAT 2016). This declining pattern of young religious affiliates has been reported by the news media. For instance, there has been reporting that young Koreans are less likely to attend a Christian church and so become deinstitutionalized young believers, or so-called Canaan believers, to refer to believers with no religious attendance (Lee 2015; Noh 2018).

Despite the declining number of young believers, media discourses show that young people may prefer megachurches. There has been a horizontal move of young people from mid- and small-scale churches to megachurches (Lee 2015). Sung-gun Kim (2017) suggested various reasons megachurch attendants switched from other churches, such as residential relocation, dissatisfaction with the senior pastor and his sermons, worship style, music, and various programs. Kim (2017), however, does not highlight why megachurches have attracted the interest of young people in particular. Considering the rise of new religious consumers, such as young millennials in Korea, this study focuses on the fact that megachurches may transition to satisfy the needs of millennials and investigates how and why young Korean adults are more attracted to megachurches than small-scale churches. Rather

than taking a top-down approach that examines organizational structure and leadership change, this study aims to interpret the reasons young adults perceive positively the services and subculture of megachurches. Using interviews with thirty native middle-class Korean women who are mostly millennials, this study explores the nuanced backgrounds behind young women believers' preference for megachurches and how megachurches have been conceived in the eyes of young millennial adherents.

### **Theorizing Megachurch as a Site for Young People in Korea**

The explosive growth of megachurches in Korea has drawn extensive academic attention, resulting in scholarly attempts to understand the macro and micro factors of this rapid growth and development. Of the 50 largest megachurches in the world, 23 are in Korea. For example, the Yoido Full-Gospel Church (YFGC) began in a slum area with five members in 1958, but by 1997, the membership had escalated to 709,000 (Chung 2014, 328). The growth of Korean churches, especially megachurches, originates with several macro and micro factors within the broader context of the structural transformations of industrialization, modernization, and urbanization. The process of rapid industrialization and economic development since the 1960s engendered occupational and residential shifts, mass migration from rural to urban areas, subsequent psychological tensions and loss of a sense of community among urbanites, perceptions of relative deprivation, and social displacement (Chung 2014). Mass migration created ghetto areas around cities, and individuals were left rootless with the segmentation of the traditional family structure and values, experiencing a sense of isolation and longing for communal support. Given this situation, churches promoted evangelical activities and church planting in urban areas, making people consider church as place to soothe psychological tensions and insecurities and eventually resulting in the growth of Protestant megachurches (Chung 2014).

Church leadership, organizational structure, services, and programs have been considered some of the significant factors in the growth of Korean

megachurches. Megachurches were led by charismatic leaders, including the founder of YFGC, Pastor Yong-Gi Cho, who emphasized the theological promise of spiritual salvation, physical healing, material blessings, and prosperity in life here and now. Other crucial factors contributing to the success of megachurches include their market enterprise culture (e.g., 'bigger is best' syndrome), efficient bureaucratic system, and use of technology, including closed-circuit television services, internet broadcasting stations, and satellite services (Chung 2014, 329). Also, small-cell groups that minimize alienation in large congregations and specialized ministries for young university students have been deemed as carriers and contributors to church growth (Chung 2014).

Although studies on megachurches in Korea have largely explored macro social changes and the organizational strategies to meet the needs of increasing urbanites, scholars on megachurches in the West have focused on how megachurch rituals and meaning systems shifted to meet the rise of new religious consumers, namely, baby boomers (Ellingson 2009). Church leaders' use of secular spaces, including hotels, amusement parks, and corporate centers, reflects their efforts to approach unchurched boomers, and also their use of programs and services that combine familiar formats with contemporary pop rock and authentic theological messages highlight the subjective benefits of self-making (Loveland and Wheeler 2003; Sargeant 2000). A prosperity gospel, therapeutic messaging, and optimistic mentality served as psychological tools for baby boomers for success in the workplace, relationships, and other secular environments, helping them confront family conflict and the pressures of corporate work (Sargeant 2000; Ellingson 2009; Martí 2017).

This theory of market/cultural change has highlighted how megachurch leaders have shifted their services, rituals, and organizational structures to satisfy the needs of baby boomers, but there exist fewer studies of how megachurches cope with young millennials. Individualization theories under rapid globalization suggest that young adults increasingly demand their own identities along with a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy. The individual aspires to lead a life of one's own and tries to carve out an individualized self (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Church leaders can

grant this autonomy and individuality to young people through the implementation of several techniques. To understand how Korean megachurches offer settings to meet the needs of new religious consumers, especially young millennials in Seoul, some characteristics and cultural elements of megachurches need to be examined in light of the social, economic, and cultural tastes of young millennials.

First, research on megachurches has shown that megachurch services offer emotionally compelling music and a contemporary worship style (Kang 2014; Lindenbaum 2012; Martí 2017; K. Kim 2007). Megachurches acknowledge the sacred in ways that conform to young adults' artistic and contemporary cultural tastes, eschewing traditional church traditions. Consequently, megachurches provide exciting, joyful, and informal worship in which attendees experience the sacred (Ellingson 2009, 25). In Korean churches, contemporary church music is considered an important element that can serve as a channel to communicate with God with spiritual feeling and language. Accordingly, studies identified music as an important element in church worship service, perceiving it as essential in expressing the word of God beautifully (K. Kim 2007). Contemporary pop rock music can be especially important given that it can reduce mental hurdles for young people and easily bridge youth culture and religion. Using contemporary Christian music and the experience of the Holy Spirit, megachurches place high value on the authentic experience of the sacred, showing that they offer personal meaning, values, and guidance for young people. Media outlets also report that millennials prefer the authenticity and sacred quality of worship services presented through music (Kang 2014).

Second, the global presence of megachurch networks suggests that several branches and satellite campuses exist not only in Korea but in foreign countries, enabling transnational and global mission work and services for Korean immigrants. The sermons and services offered through online and broadcasting systems grant members easy access from anywhere—the home, urban centers, and other social settings. Given that the graphics and audios of the services still carry the conceptions of holiness, the divine, and spiritual life (K. Kim 2007), the broadcasting system whereby services with head pastors are held in many satellite campuses within the multisite church

allows members to spiritually overcome geographical and physical barriers and enables megachurches that have multisite branches to be represented as one (Lehto 2017). This transnational networking tendency is similar in other Asian megachurches, such as those in Singapore, which draw on transnational networks and global isomorphism, while also incorporating local features, such as folk culture and national politics (Chong 2015). Access to church services and programs through media technologies allows church members in and outside of Korea to imagine transnational communities and develop a sense of belonging even across national borders (Lehto 2017). By using media technologies, people imagine themselves as united despite spatial distance, cementing the notion of the nation and national belonging within individuals who have no *direct* relationship with one another (Lehto 2017). Moreover, megachurches recognize young people's lifestyles and their developmental passages, including traveling across countries for overseas study and work. Megachurches strongly affirm and encourage adherents' secular pursuit of dreams and goals, offering sacred meanings for overseas work, travel, and study. In this regard, though not directly concerning Korean churches, Terence Chong (2015) has shown how churches in Singapore have an egalitarian and inclusive appeal, offering a strong sense of agency, individuality, and freedom for forging one's own life path.

Third, many megachurches in Seoul have pursued sacred meaning and relationship with God through discipleship training to develop self-making and lay leadership, resulting in the overturn of social hierarchy. For instance, Sarang Church is known for its "discipleship training" (*jeja hullyeon*) program that is often characterized as stressing self-propagandizing, self-governing, and self-supporting missions, rather than overt evangelism (Harkness 2010). Megachurches' strategies of authenticating their organization and of pursuing sacred meaning serve to demonstrate their pure intentions of deepening one's relationship with God through a better understanding of God's words and through selflessly praying for others' health and volunteering for the church (S. Kim 2017). By selflessly dedicating themselves to God, megachurch attendees must transform and find new and genuine ways of serving God (S. Kim 2017). One unexpected

consequence of emphasizing the sacred relationship with God through discipleship training is the deemphasis of social hierarchy, such as age, so that in some megachurches, elders are more expected to participate in volunteer work (H. Kim 2008). This tendency of deemphasizing social hierarchy is similar to megachurches in the United States, where the strong anti-institutional and non-hierarchical methods of megachurches found appeal among baby boomers who were suspicious of organized religion with its hierarchical authority and inherited traditions (Ellingson 2009; Sargeant 2000).

Fourth, megachurches are places for shielding oneself from close interactions, while the large size of congregations allows religious seekers to appreciate a consumerist orientation to religion, disregarding denominational brand loyalty and commitment (Ellingson 2009). Shielding oneself from close interactions, young believers can maximize the advantages of megachurches as seeker believers, appreciating the anonymity of a large congregation. Young millennials in Korea are weary of complex, tight social relationships structured through meetings at workplace, school, and family relations, and limited private zones due to complex social ties make them prefer the individualized lifestyle. Some media discourses suggest that young millennials in Korea prefer solitary drinking, eating, and living (D. Kim 2020). Young millennials feel uncomfortable with the hierarchical organization culture of corporations, aspire to a subjective happiness and wellbeing with individualized forms of hobbies rather than collective leisure, and appreciate work-life balance over career success (Y. Kim 2019). This individual tendency to cherish one's time and space manifests itself in their pursuit of megachurches, where the large congregation size shields young people from intimate social interaction.

Focusing on young people's narratives of World Vision Church, where most attendants come from upper middle- or middle-class backgrounds, this study aims to investigate how some fraction of megachurches in Korea have been devoted to serving young people and to explain in what ways megachurches have appealed to young millennials in comparison to small-scale local churches, all while considering the additional nuance of the Asian context. My findings suggest that megachurches in Korea offer an affinity to



secular contemporary culture, recognition of transnational cosmopolitan lifestyles, the appreciation of privacy through anonymity, and egalitarian relationships with older adults. Young people deem megachurches as places where they can appreciate the religious capital and emotional resources necessary in their daily lives, while feeling free from the hierarchical system and collective responsibilities and can exhibit empowered selves through the institution's voluntary incorporation of secular, youth culture. As a space where individual young adults can feel recognized with a sense of autonomous self, free from an age-based hierarchy, the megachurch enables young people to navigate the meaning of true self, which is an individual one desocialized from Korean collective culture.

## **Data and Methods**

The population I draw on includes pious women congregants of a mainstream Christian organization, World Vision Church (Woldeu bijyeon gyohoe; WVC).<sup>1</sup> World Vision Church (est. 1986) is a leading, mainstream evangelical Protestant megachurch in Korea, affiliated with the Presbyterian Church of Korea, and has international congregations in Japan, the United States, and other countries that offer Sunday services for Koreans abroad. It has approximately 75,000 members in Korea and is recognized for its active ministries for youth, college students, foreigners, and ethnic minorities. The church offers many programs, seminars, and workshops for carrying out their ministries, representing the post-modern church.

From June to December 2015, I interviewed current and former members of Seoul-based World Vision Church. To understand how some megachurches in Korea smoothly respond to the shifting needs of the younger generation compared to small-scale local churches, my study targeted World Vision Church as it is a representative sample of urban megachurches serving Korea's young generation. I conducted the interviews in Korean or English. I recruited members from two specific Korean

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1. I use a pseudonym for the church.

ministries, “the Bridge community” (southern Seoul-Gangnam ministry) and “university student community” (eastern Seoul ministry). I selected the two ministries based on theoretical interest and personal access. As the Bridge community represents the transnational aspects of World Vision Church, I decided to attend their Sunday worship service and to also regularly participate in small group meetings with seven lay members. Second, I selected the university student ministry because I have formal and informal networks with the university student ministry. As a former member of the ministry, my position as an insider allowed me to access the site and build up rapport easily with the interview participants during data collection phase, but my position as a sociologist allowed me to maintain a balanced perspective in analyzing data. Although young adults’ pursuit of religious beliefs and sacred meaning should be carefully examined on their own terms, their interests in ministries recognizing individual autonomy, popular culture, and transnational networks show how they are also inhabiting a secular Korean society. The assumption regarding young adult believers that they are not only pursuing sacred meaning but also aspiring to secular interests is significant in making this study more balanced and concrete.

Members of the two ministries revealed various international and transnational experiences, which represent the emerging lifestyle of young Koreans. Many young Koreans, including evangelical women, are global sojourners who frequently move to foreign countries for international education, travel, and career experiences. An increasing number of young Koreans make long-stay travels, including working holidays in Western countries, and seek “global experiences” (Yoon 2014). This implies that young Korean adults are likely to experience egalitarian discourses and cherish those values.

My interviewees were mostly millennials born between 1981 and 1996, a generation that has encountered challenges in transitioning to adulthood, including job attainment, marriage, and so forth, due to the global economic recession. Given this millennial characteristic, their account of reasons for attending megachurches allows me to observe what sorts of meanings religion offers in terms of their transformation as adults. The socio-

demographic composition of the World Vision Church sample is relatively diverse, but the majority of its members belong to the middle class. Regarding self-reported class background, all of my participants, except for two people who answered “don’t know” and “working class,” reported belonging to the middle class. All the participants hold a bachelor’s degree or higher: 18 hold bachelor’s degrees, 11 have master’s degrees, and one has a doctoral degree. At the time of the interviews, my participants had various occupational backgrounds: 14 office workers, 5 teachers, 3 graduate students, 4 freelancers, 2 homemakers, and 2 small business owners. The average length of overall church attendance was 25 years and that of World Vision Church attendance was seven years.

## Findings

### *Using the Contemporary Worship Service as a Means of Addressing Youth Culture*

The contemporary worship services addressing and reflecting youth culture appeal to young people, symbolically and meaningfully reducing the clear boundary between secular and sacred society. The Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) and pastors’ messages were mostly deemed as well-connected to the real world. Interviewees felt that megachurches offered open, comfortable, familiar environments where young people are recognized with their own subculture through the presentation of contemporary music and other elements. The combination of secular rock and songs, lighting, and mood-enhancing images on a screen in a large auditorium are commonly found in megachurches. The use of multimedia and Hillsong music is considered as the performative materialization of the invisible God, inducing the imaginative participation of the individual embodiment of God (Goh 2008, 295). The stories of several women attending World Vision Church are similar in displaying the social significance of contemporary Christian music for the young generation, working to dilute the apparent boundary between the holy and the secular world.

Some women attendees mentioned how they appreciated the emotional and cultural affinities with contemporary music services, tones, and rhythms, and that this helped to welcome newcomers and seekers without making them feel isolated or estranged from the religious subculture. Contemporary worship services incorporating musical instruments such as drums, guitars, and a choir with visual aids have caught the attention of visitors, helping to ease feelings of tension and alienation. As Hyejin said, “The culture was casual, popular, and there were many entertainers. I do not think it was a burden to go anyway, and the barriers to entry were quite low.”<sup>2</sup> Another woman, Kyumin, said,

World Vision Church has always worshiped with all musical instruments as instruments of worship. It is not that worship is interrupted or disrupted, but when I praise, worship, and praise with a musical instrument, it feels good.<sup>3</sup>

Kyumin’s remark recognizing the incorporation of contemporary musical instruments and styles is in line with American suburban megachurches, where Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), popular music featuring evangelical Christian lyrics, empowers lay members to spiritualize everyday life (Lindenbaum 2012). The symbolic meaning of the contemporary worship style has been well documented, as it allows worshippers to feel close to and part of a rapidly changing secular society, rather than as distant from this worldly society in a sort of bubble. In other words, the church’s efforts to bridge and communicate with society outside of church is generally viewed positively, curtailing the sense of mental distance many young people may have.

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2. Hyejin (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, October 26, 2015. Hyejin (born 1981) is a single woman. As a freelance producer with MA in media studies, her family belongs to the middle class. She has been attending the World Vision Church for 2 years.
  3. Kyumin (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, October 14, 2015. Kyumin (born 1983) is a married woman with a child. As a designer with BA in design, her family belongs to the middle class. She has been attending the World Vision Church for 23 years and has served in various roles for the church.

The impression of the World Vision Church itself was as a rather enlightened church. There was this impression. The existing church in Korea actually has a lot of problems and corruption, but we seem to have recognized that something is different. It's not a political feeling, but it's a progressive one, or a lot of awareness to communicate with the world.... I think there was such an advantage.<sup>4</sup>

Jiyeon's case also resonated with other women's narratives in its distinguishing the World Vision Church from traditional orthodox churches, perceiving the progressive approach of the contemporary worship service, which allows the WVC to extend its own boundaries and better reach out to youth culture and young people in comparison to other small-scale Protestant churches. Often, their accounts speak of "something different," an "awakened church," or of "trying to communicate with the world." Minhee,<sup>5</sup> a computer designer, revealed a unique perspective that the WVC is more open to newcomers and seekers who are unfamiliar with evangelical teachings, language, and praying rituals, which highlights the megachurch's effort to reach out to a remote secular world. Kyumin paralleled the liberal, progressive culture of World Vision Church in contrast with the old-style, small churches where only silence dominates the entire worship. As Kyumin said,

Some churches emphasize being quiet when you worship and pray. Prayer needs to be conducted in a quiet environment. Up till now, I had heard about churches that emphasize such aspects, but there is no such thing...[in World Vision Church]. It is a sense of freedom that we can set free... it is a freedom, and a liberation where we do not feel restrained...

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4. Jiyeon (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, August 19, 2015. Jiyeon (born 1985) is a single woman. As a Chinese-language teacher with a BA in Chinese language education, her family belongs to the middle class. Besides attending the World Vision Church, she has volunteered for the church as a small group leader.
  5. Minhee (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, August 15, 2015. Minhee (born 1983) is a single woman. As an IT engineer with a BA in Computer Engineering, her family belongs to the middle class. She has been attending the World Vision Church for 10 years and has volunteered as a small group leader.

In many cases, silence during the Sunday service symbolically denotes that only a few people, such as pastors, elders, and older people, possess the power and authority to express their thoughts and views on the Bible, while the rest of the attendees need to demonstrate a mere submission to church leadership. Kyumin's account reflects how one significant characteristic of small-scale churches is silence, where only a few people can lead and talk during the worship service, whereas the contemporary music and worship services at the WVC invite active performances and singing by attendees. That is, in small churches, opportunities for lay members to voice their spirituality and personal thoughts are limited during the service, which symbolizes the asymmetrical power dynamic. In fact, many women's stories of transitioning to a megachurch are related to their discomfort in small-scale churches, where space for expressive culture is rarely allowed. The old-style service and sermons are equated with a solemn atmosphere of "silence." Several women mentioned silence as a major focus of the worship services of small churches from the beginning to the end of services.

You know the loud voice of a pastor and that sermon style...now pastors [in large churches] talk softly...in their tone...They bring many stories and examples and discuss political economies. Now we hear lots of stories and examples from real life. I do not know if that is a trend, but I have become more familiar with it.<sup>6</sup>

Semi is a typical case of one who transitioned from a small church to World Vision Church. In her comments, she continuously drew a stark contrast between the different styles of pastoral leadership and worship services between the two types of churches, and to her eyes the traditional style, which is full of teaching and direction in a solemn voice without any recognition of youth culture, did not appeal to her or touch her mind. In

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6. Semi (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, August 11, 2015. Semi (born 1983) is a married woman with one child. Owning a small business with a BA in fashion design, her family belongs to the middle class. She has been attending the World Vision Church for two years and has served as a small group leader in the church.

comparison to her experiences at World Vision Church, Semi told me she disliked attending a newly opened church in her neighborhood because of the overly inward, old-style worship disconnected from the rapidly changing world. In contrast, she stated that it was thrilling to worship in the different atmosphere (of WVC), remarking, “I really enjoyed the open environment...where everybody is welcomed.” Pastors in the World Vision Church, with a mild voice, offer more realistically sensible, useful examples including, “everyday challenges in the workplace and miscommunication among family members” which provides members with sound advice and moral guidance, in the form of “how to become a light in the tough world.”<sup>7</sup> WVC leadership endeavors to incorporate many preaching styles as long as they do not violate the rules of evangelism. As stated by Jinsun,

The greatest advantage of World Vision Church is that there are a lot of pastors in the church, so it seems that there is a wide variety of teachings and perspectives, but it seems to be a merit to hear a lot of sermons from various perspectives rather than absorbing one perspective. The church is not isolated. The church tries to transform and innovate in many ways.<sup>8</sup>

As revealed in Jinsun’s remarks, many interviewees not only discussed their views on World Vision Church, but compared the subtly different cultures of the megachurch and the small church. In a small-scale church, the format of Sunday worship is rigid, Bible study and praying rituals are structured, and there is little room for young people to feel comfortable, secure, and respected. Overall, the worship styles that reject the traditional Sunday worship format were perceived to signal the churches’ affinity with contemporary culture, being better connected to contemporary youth culture and secular society more broadly.

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7. Semi (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, August 11, 2015.

8. Jinsun (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, September 14, 2015. Jinsun (born 1981) is a married woman with two children. As a housewife with BA in piano, her family belongs to the middle class. She has been attending the World Vision Church for 10 years and has served as a Sunday school teacher in the church.

*Offering a Space for the Transnational Lives of Middle-class Koreans*

Another conspicuous feature of WVC that has special appeal to young people is that the church embraces the transnational lifestyle as a part of its legitimate culture, which is a means for the attendees not only of accumulating a cosmopolitan sense of belonging and social and cultural capital, but also of navigating the wider world. The incorporation of cosmopolitan lifestyles and identities within a megachurch is something that blurs the boundaries between secular youth culture and the sacred world. One distinctive stream of culture popular among Korean young adults is travel to foreign countries through overseas study, professional experience, and transnational friendship networks (J. Kim 2011). Their global aspirations are indeed linked to a dire need for individualistic culture: self-realization, freedom, personal autonomy, and respect for personal satisfaction. In particular, Korean female students identify studying abroad as an escape from the authoritarian, hierarchical academic structure in Korea (J. Kim 2011). Of course, class matters in the initiation and maintenance of cosmopolitan, transnational lifestyles, as it is the children of upper and middle-class families who decide to study abroad. Though middle-class youth's aspirations have also been revealed in the Singaporean church setting (Chong 2015), young people's desires for recognition of their lifestyles and freedom to express their self-identity has not been well captured in previous research.

However, these women's narratives reflect an aspect of expressing and displaying themselves as subjects of freely aspiring transnational lifestyles, rather than as instrumental intensions of class mobility or self-betterment strategies. World Vision Church has a separate ministry for young transnational migrants with several English-speaking ministries hosting many foreign residents, exchange students, and other Koreans speaking English. A clear example is the Bridge Community, one of the big youth groups in the World Vision Church, which has about 600 young Korean attendants every Sunday during 2015. Several women attending the community told me that the community places high value on openness, networking, and teamwork in order to exemplify the international culture of



the community. Many visitors come to the congregation because of its international atmosphere embracing various forms of Koreans, Korean Americans, and other travelers who move back and forth between Korea and other countries. Taemin, who studied abroad in San Diego during high school and university, visited this church through the invitation of friends. Naeyun, who used to work on Wall Street, decided to attend the community's services because she heard about the leadership of the pastor from her friends in Seoul.

Recognizing that their cosmopolitan life journey, going back and forth between Korea and other countries, and also feeling that their challenges and struggles as sojourners are well acknowledged, many young people felt the Bridge Community to be an adequate place for satisfying their spiritual hunger and a recognition of their international lifestyle. An affinity the World Vision Church shares with the cosmopolitan, global circulation of people, information, and goods appears in various aspects. One example is the fact that World Vision Church sends thousands of young short-time missionaries to foreign countries and retains overseas students and children of missionaries as regular members, so their sermon on *how to live with outsiders* is quite frequently deliberated upon, and is a popular topic for Sunday parishioners. A number of members worshiping in other English-speaking communities at WVC have experience with international travel, overseas education, and professional work in foreign countries, such as Canada, the US, and the UK. As Nahyun related,

In terms of "outsiders," there have been some [preachers] in World Vision Church as the church has many international students and children of missionaries. In a direction to accept and embrace them...always discussed was the episode of the Good Samaritan and [the agenda] was how to treat [outsiders]. I remember listening to those preachers several times.<sup>9</sup>

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9. Nahyun (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, September 17, 2015. Nahyun (born 1984) is a single woman. As a high school teacher with a BA in education, her family belongs to the middle class. She has been attending the World Vision Church for 10 years and has served as a service managing leader of the church.

Nahyun's story exemplifies the comments by the majority of women interviewees regarding how concerns about diversity and living with outsiders appear within the church. Minhee, a computer designer who has attended World Vision Church since her university years, explained that youth group pastors and members occasionally mention immigrants that they can encounter in their everyday lives in relation to "outsiders" in the Bible, denoting foreigners and newcomers. In fact, it is common to observe that Korean church leaders and pastors use the analogy of "outsiders" and "sojourners" in biblical scripture to highlight the importance of traveling culture that is engrained in the bible. For this reason, the ministry especially focuses on nurturing and caring for Korean believers traveling abroad for study, business, or other reasons. Given that a majority of members come from middle-class backgrounds, transnational lives are recognized, and the individuality, freedom, and autonomy of those young adults is legitimately acknowledged.

The analogy of sojourners and outsiders largely denotes the transnational movements of mobile young adults and professional workers attending the church. As a large-scale mega-church where the majority of members belong to the middle or upper-middle classes, many ministries, especially youth ministries and English-speaking ministries, focus on the expectations of skilled migrants or economically stable foreign residents such as Korean origin international students, children of missionaries, and skilled professional workers going abroad to Western countries. This suggests that megachurch leaders certainly recognize the market change and subsequent needs of young people, who make up important members of the contemporary religious market. By embracing and encouraging the lifestyle of middle-class university or young adults, the World Vision Church endeavors to offer a space that fits the value system of young women congregants .

#### *Providing Privacy through Anonymity as an Alternative to Gossiping Culture*

Another characteristic attracting young people to worship at World Vision Church is a certain degree of anonymity and privacy to be appreciated while

attending services, which is in contrast to what one usually finds in traditional Korean culture. The unique organizational form of the megachurch has attracted many young people because these youths are “more comfortable with bigness, more attracted to spectacle, or more drawn to a church in which they can choose to be anonymous, or in which they can choose between anonymity in a big crowd and intimacy in a small group” (Chaves 2006, 340–341). Megachurches are a new, innovative organizational form designed by religious entrepreneurs, perhaps those associated with the church growth movement, who were particularly attuned to post-1970 society and culture (Chaves 2006, 339). Megachurches, to include the Korean variety, have an organizational form that accommodates thousands of lay members, inducing a high degree of anonymity and alienation and weakened interpersonal bonds among parishioners (Dougherty and Whitehead 2011). While one sentiment regarding large congregational sizes can be negative, my research participants have indicated surprisingly positive views of the large congregational size.

A number of comparisons by the young women interviewees between the megachurch and small-scale churches demonstrate that the former serves as place where they can shield themselves from local gossip culture, with its flood of information, intimate attention, and mutual pressures. Issues in small-scale churches commonly reported by my interviewees included invasions of privacy and the leaking of personal information, to include past employment, marriage, educational successes, and family drama. The close social distance between members induced members to endure and partially participate in an environment where they had to attend worship services with young and older adults. Several women, who had attended small churches having a total of 50 to 60 members, felt that there was sparse room there for social distancing between people, which resulted in the circulation of gossip and rumor.

For example, Semi joined WVC because she liked its worship style, but in her comments she describes the social pressure she previously felt in a smaller church when group of members had intense and frequent interaction on a weekly basis.

You know, if the entire church members are only fifty or sixty people, there are uncomfortable things because everybody knows me too well... when we meet the same people all the time over the weekend.<sup>10</sup>

Semi continued to explain how there was little room for privacy and mutual respect in her previous small church. Usually, in a small-scale church, all families, the sons and daughters of elders, attend together, and people share private information such as who has married whom and what kinds of jobs young people have obtained, with ruthless comparisons and competition. As Hayoon explained, “I heard about other kids of elders from my mom...there is too much information about other people.”<sup>11</sup> Although these are not the main topics of conversations for all attendees, young people do not feel comfortable when they are forced to be subjects of these stories and gossip. If the size of a church is too small, members of the organization can be easily exposed to individual information about marital status, jobs, dating, and school life, which leads to the unintended consequences of brutal gossip about the most intimate aspects of the lifestyles of attendees.

After transitioning to a megachurch, people may suffer from transitional challenges, saying they at first feel estranged and isolated, and find it challenging to make trustworthy, longstanding friendships, but that they equally find some joy in some newfound anonymity. For instance, Boyoon,<sup>12</sup> a graduate student, cherished the anonymity and privacy of a large-scale megachurch. She moved from a small church, where the entire number of laypersons was only about a hundred. She introduced me to the word, “fog” (*angae*), indicating a group of Sunday Christians who merely attend services, avoiding extra volunteer work, Bible seminars, small groups,

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10. Semi (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, August 11, 2015.

11. Hayoon (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, October 26, 2015. Hayoon (born 1984) is a married woman with one child. As a news reporter with a BA in English language, her socioeconomic background is middle class. She has been attending the World Vision Church for 10 years.

12. Boyoon (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, August 17, 2015. Boyoon (born 1986) is a single woman. As a graduate student studying psychological therapy, her family's socioeconomic background is middle class. She has been attending the World Vision Church for five years.

and fellowships with other members. She recognized that a number of attendees are willing to become like “fog.” As Boyoon stated,

I called them “fog,” and I was like fog for about three months. Right after I was touched by a pastor’s sermon and he was so good at preaching, I decided to register as a regular member of the church and get involved in other activities.

Moving from a small church, Boyoon appreciated the new freedom, with other people not paying attention to her, and having a little free time on Sunday after a busy week. Yet, later on, as she found herself very satisfied and pleased with the sermons, she told me she voluntarily wanted to join the regular membership and mingle with other members. Majoring in music at university and studying music therapy in graduate school, she is deeply devoted to and interested in teaching children. Since joining of the World Vision Church as a regular member, she has served as a volunteer Sunday school teacher, a small group leader, and a volunteer for outreach programs. Boyoon’s case epitomizes the appeal of the anonymity and privacy offered by a large-scale megachurch to young people who pursue spiritual healing but also demand appropriate distance between individuals, shielding themselves from collective local culture. All of this is evidence of how the megachurch offers young people the potential to avoid, or liberate themselves from, localized culture. It is clear that a combination of small organizational size and the collective aspect of traditional Korean culture interacted in the small-scale church to create a subculture that unintentionally broadcast intimate details of its members’ lives. The immense pressure of sharing every aspect of mating and dating, family issues, and educational status, diminished individual freedom and anonymity, which resulted in young people’s preference for megachurches.

#### *Replacing Age-based Hierarchy with Egalitarian Servant Leadership*

A final characteristic of megachurches, especially World Vision Church, that attracts young people is the preservation of symbolic authenticity,

represented by voluntary elders, which is an appealing type of genuine leadership for young people, and one which contests traditional Korean cultural norms. Several women repeatedly highlighted the transformative evangelical subculture permeating the World Vision Church, which reinterprets the conventional Korean hierarchy based on a rigid age system. In Korea, social respect and status are highly dependent on age, something that is equally valid in religious institutions. Young women especially noted how they were touched by elders' selfless volunteer work, sweeping the streets in front of church buildings, carrying out meal preparations, parking services, and other chores. Performing cooking, cleaning, and paperwork, elders' submission to God and church authority have caught young people's attention, and they conceive elders as leaders who are equipped with the sense of Jesus's teaching of compassion, benevolence, tenderness, and sacrifice. Said Boyoon,

The World Vision Church is a church of love and it is built on that idea. It is famous as it has many campuses and branches in every region. Its elders and older adults are a little different.<sup>13</sup>

Boyoon's account reflects how the World Vision Church has utilized servant leadership as an alternative to the age-based hierarchical system. Traditionally, young people have believed that age-based hierarchy garners a culture where young people blindly obey older adults, especially pastors and male elders, and there is little room for young people to act following their genuine intentions or to express opinions at variance with older adults, resulting in the concealing of personal thoughts. An authority-based system and bureaucratic structure is one aspect of Korean society, and this applies as well to Korean churches, where the hierarchy-based system has boosted numerically rapid growth in membership over the century. Traditionally, this culture of intense hierarchy is regarded as threatening young people's autonomy and individuality.

However, unlike this one-dimensional image of religious institutions,

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13. Boyoon (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, August 17, 2015.

many women attending World Vision Church mentioned how there is little sense there of traditional authoritarian culture where only young people, especially women, are mobilized for various chores in the kitchen, Sunday school, and administrative work. Although women, who comprise over 60 percent of the laypersons, are encouraged and mobilized for volunteer activities and kitchen chores, they highly rated many elders' self-sacrificing voluntary services of a lower status, such as serving marginalized people. In particular, several women, who recently moved from small-scale churches to World Vision Church, asserted the uniquely liberal aspects of elder leadership, voluntarily stepping down from the higher position of sole decision making and volunteering for manual labor at church. A sense of comfort from seeing a parity in the types of volunteer work done by young and older adults, provide women with the respectful recognition that young and old people are located in similar positions and guaranteed similar rights and voices. Such accounts provide evidence of the megachurch's technique of ensuring a sense of individual recognition, by disrupting local hierarchy. Another woman, Kyumin, said, World Vision Church is not authoritative, because the elders clean the flower beds and people see their work." Kyumin continued to point out that, "I could be willing to respect old people represented by elders and pastors."<sup>14</sup> Kyumin has been attending the church her entire life, volunteering in numerous services including as a cell leader and outreach volunteer worker. Despite her devout faith, with several conflicts and a hierarchy in her workplace as a professional designer, she holistically evaluates churches, knowing how to emotionally detach herself from religious organizations. Jinsun also stated that she was always touched by the caring actions and spiritual leadership of the elders, noting that, "The elders pray for me and young people, which makes great models for us."<sup>15</sup>

In other words, her explanation displays that respect for authority is accepted only when young people fully agree on the quality of that authority from the bottom of their heart. The young generation places high value on egalitarianism and rationalism in evaluating who makes an adequate,

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14. Kyumin (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, October 14, 2015.

15. Jinsun (pseudonym), interview by author, Seoul, September 14, 2015.

respectful leader, and this notion is firmly rooted in the idea of personal autonomy. In young women's eyes, the World Vision Church does not request members' blind obedience to irrational leaders, emphasizing the rationality of authority. In their own language, many women evaluated these efforts of the church as transformative ones moving beyond the traditional order, hierarchy, and stability embedded in Korean culture.

## Conclusion

This study explores how ordinary Korean believers interpret their megachurch congregations as useful places for nurturing their faith and recognizing the self relative to small-scale churches. Using in-depth interviews with thirty native middle-class Korean women attending a megachurch in Seoul, South Korea, my findings suggest four rationales ordinary female lay members employ in explaining why megachurches are appealing places, providing a comparative opinion of small-scale churches and megachurches. Their accounts demonstrate that megachurches carry unique local meanings for young people so that the rise and success of megachurches cannot simply be explained by market change theory.

First, contemporary worship services function as a way of bridging young people's secular culture and spirituality, which symbolically means that religious institutions do not segregate, denounce, and devalue secular culture. Several women emphasized that contemporary musical instruments, sound systems, and other visual aids allow young people, including newcomers and spiritual seekers, to appreciate a sense of comfort, acceptance, and familiarity, without feeling isolated or estranged. This creates a comfortable, familiar atmosphere that helps them to recognize a sense of personal autonomy from their entry to the church. In addition, various youth ministries actively embrace the transnational lifestyles of middle-class Koreans, which are favored by young people. One characteristic of the megachurch that draws the attention of young people is that it attaches a positive image to the transnational lifestyle. Cosmopolitan lifestyles and identities constructed through overseas study, professional



experience, and transnational friendship networks are welcomed, positively portrayed, and encouraged as a part of attendees' common lives.

Another rationale is the positive view of the relative anonymity offered by the megachurch, a trait often portrayed as a weakness, as it offers a space for privacy and individuality and protecting young people from a harmful gossip culture. Young people's sense of comfort at the World Vision Church derives from the certain degree of anonymity and privacy they feel while attending the church. Young women compared this with their experiences in small churches, where everybody shares information about other members, garnering rumors and gossip. A final rationale expressed by young adults to explain their attraction to World Vision Church is the importance of egalitarian servant leadership, which is portrayed as respectful authority, replacing age-based hierarchy. Young people view the WVC as an authentic place, filled with people who make sacrifices voluntarily. Several women highlighted the transformative religious subculture that reinterprets the traditional age-based Korean hierarchy in churches. Young women especially noted that they were touched by elders' volunteer work, sweeping the streets in front of the church and cooking lunch, which symbolized their submission to God.

The study has several limitations, which call for future research. First, the paper takes only the perspectives of women, omitting men's approaches to megachurches. Focusing on women's views, my work endeavored to deliver the voice of the majority lay members, but it would be interesting to examine the varying opinions of men and women. Second, this paper may represent the views of women who already had favorable opinions of World Vision Church. One might question the selection bias of my samples, criticizing that participants are likely to show positive thoughts towards the church. However, after thoroughly observing the evidence of the interview data, I found the pattern of the women's portrayal of the megachurch in comparison to small-scale churches to be consistent. Finally, an instrumental dimension of reasons to attend megachurches can be fully integrated as a broad basis of reasons young people attend large-scale congregations. As noted in Chong (2015)'s work on Singapore, class mobility intensions, finding dating and marital mates, and expanding social networks for

practical reasons exist, but the presence of this interest goes beyond the scope of this paper that looks into young people's search for individuality and self-autonomy.

To understand how the patterns that this study finds are visible and valid among young people more generally, expanding the research by recruiting young people attending other churches will be critical. Additionally, one may ask about the scope of generalizability, that is, how broadly the findings of this research might be applied and to what scope the results of the research explain young people's preferences in religious organization. The outcome of this study may not be applicable to all young people attending all megachurches in Korea given that the paper only rests on data from individuals attending one organization. However, my original intention was to offer an analytical and theoretical insight where the audience can attempt conceptual generalizations, taking careful consideration of contexts. The findings of this study suggest that ordinary female lay members' attraction to megachurches is related to their appreciation of self-autonomy, freedom, and self-realization, in comparison to small-scale churches, which retain a strongly collective and hierarchical cultural element. Despite the limitations of the research, the study has theoretical and practical implications to our understanding of how megachurches are transitioning into new forms and structures in ways to satisfy the changing needs of young people, suggesting directions for church practitioners and experts for the operation of megachurches for the younger generation. Future research on other subgroups, including young male and minority young adult attendees of megachurches, will reveal more complex stories of young adults' attraction to the megachurch in Korea and offer in-depth and detailed suggestions for practitioners in the field.

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