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# The New Face of Large Congregations:
## *Creative Innovations in Four Megachurches in the Seoul Metropolitan Area**

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**Abstract**

*Seoul is currently the megachurch capital of the world, though with stagnating attendees. The stagnation is mainly due to mounting criticisms surrounding the inordinate amount of wealth possessed by the megachurches. Hence, the author decided to study four reputable megachurches in Seoul that are still thriving as stable congregations, while defying increasing accusations. About 743 survey questionnaires were collected and analyzed from these four megachurches. The results show that these churches came up with innovative ways that highlight their pure intentions in deepening their relationship with God by: (1) better understanding God's words (expository preaching based on Biblical literalism); (2) selflessly praying to God for others' health (healing ministry through intercessory prayers); (3) fulfilling God's message of promulgating the Gospel (slimming of the congregation while denying admission to switching members); and (4) striving to renounce worldly possessions and the desire for power (owning no church property and limiting the tenure for senior minister and elders). Their creative dedication to service reveals their purpose of pursuing God's kingdom and realizing his righteousness in the world, thusly proving that megachurches are not in fact merely corporate businesses or interest groups, but vital organizations that are capable of carrying out God's command on a grand scale.*

**Keywords:** megachurch, innovation, spirituality, tithing, religious market, expository preaching, religious switching, Biblical literalism

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## Introduction

Historically speaking, the unusual growth of South Korean churches after the Korean War (1950–1953) largely owes to hundreds of thousands of North Korean Christian refugees and to the Pentecostal movement initiated by David Yonggi Cho of the Yoido Full Gospel Church (YFGC) (S. Kim 2015, 128–129). Under the legacy of the church growth movement (McGavran 2005), in which the Gospels are *Americanized*, South Korea has been producing numerous megachurches since 1980.[1] As of 2014, the world's top five megachurches were in South Korea.[2] Seoul is currently the megachurch capital of the world, exemplified by YFGC, which is the biggest church in the world with 253,000 attendees as of 2017.

But Korean Protestant churches have recently witnessed the erosion of their public credence and legitimacy, with consistently declining attendees as a result. Despite South Korean Protestant churches' massive and wealthy appearance, the reality is that, with the exception of the largest middle-class megachurches, the majority are struggling financially, hardly able to support themselves. People who flock to South Korea's bourgeois megachurches, which are often criticized for being religious *chaebol*[3] (Korean conglomerates such as Samsung and Hyundai), are upwardly mobile and conservative in their political ideology (S. Kim 2017). Some megachurches, in fact, struggle today with several controversies, such as excessive "individual chur-

1. According to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research (hirr.harysem.edu), the term "megachurch" generally refers to any Protestant Christian congregation with a sustained average weekly attendance of 2,000 persons or more in its worship services, consisting all adults and children at all its worship locations. In South Korea, a megachurch usually denotes a Protestant church which has more than 10,000 adult attendees every Sunday worship service.
2. They are: YFGC (480,000, established in 1983), Onnuri Community Church (65,000, established in 1985), Pyungkang Cheil Presbyterian Church (60,000, established in 1964), Kwanglim Methodist Church (35,000, established in 1953), and SaRang Community Church (30,000, established in 1978) (Leadership Network, accessed November 10, 2014, www.leadnet.org).
3. *New York Times*, "In Pope's Trip to South Korea, Church Envisions Growth," August 14, 2014.

chism" and "privatization" (specifically, YFGC and SaRang Community Church) (S. Kim 2015, 134–135). In a nutshell, Korean Protestantism today struggles with controversy and decline and faces several challenges: (1) to overcome increasing conflict between conservatives and progressives in the church; (2) to rectify the problematic "growth without depth" (in John Stott's words); and (3) to correct the megachurch's image associated with such issues as criticisms of *sheep stealing*, polarization, hereditary transmission of pastors, sexual scandal among clergy, goal displacement, financial dishonesty, and privatization (S. Kim 2015, 133).

Do megachurches provide a better religious experience than smaller churches? According to a recent "mystery church shopper" report,[4] American megachurches, which are often aimed at the unchurched, fared better than microchurches (those with fewer than 80 attendees). Rodney Stark (2008, 48) concludes that megachurch members are far more likely to have religious and mystical experiences—half say they have "heard the voice of God." However, the problem with Korean megachurches is that they still target the already "churched," i.e., those who are switching churches. To explain why megachurches are still on the rise in South Korea despite the surge in criticism, we should focus on the new findings of a megachurch study carried out in the United States (Wellman et al. 2014), which proposes that big congregations are powerful purveyors of emotional religious experience. According to this study, people gravitate towards these churches mainly because they offer a wide variety of programs, alongside entertaining services with messages that the majority of the people feel comfortable with. Against the most common criticisms of megachurches, such as the issue of "religious authenticity" or "true religiosity" (Roberts 2011), Stewart M. Hoover (2000) has rightly shown that megachurches (whose prototype is the Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago) in fact generally have a better grasp on contemporary religious seeking than many critics assume, thereby being *spiritually true* in many ways.

4. Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "Mystery Shoppers Rate Church Size," *Christian Today*, June 27, 2014, http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2014/june/mystery-shoppers-rate-church-size-megachurch.html.

Given that big congregations not only make worship "intoxicating" (Wellman et al. 2014) but also provide a more "authentic" religiosity (Hoover 2000, 154), the future of Korean megachurches will largely depend on both the integrity of leadership (pastors and church leaders) and religious authenticity (true religiosity), among many other factors. Mark Chaves (2011) has summarized six trends in congregational life in the United States: looser connections between congregations and denominations, more computer technology, more informal worship, older congregants, more high-income and college educated congregants, and—what is perhaps the most important—more people concentrating in very large churches. "Taken together, these trends show that congregations are shaped by the same cultural, social, and economic pressures affecting American life and institutions more generally," says Chaves (2011, 13). What about large Korean congregations? Is something unique taking place at large congregations in terms of religious competition and creative innovation?

## Religious Competition and Creative Innovation

The present study will examine the proposition that competition and innovative efforts among religions and congregations lead to positive development and advancement in the spiritual sense. The Seoul metropolitan area, which has been the national economic and religious hub since the twentieth century with many religious movements and competition taking place, is ideal for this kind of research. With a population of about 24 million, nearly half of the total population of South Korea, the Seoul capital area hosts various religions, ranging from Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Buddhism to New Religious Movements such as Cheondogyo, Korea Soka Gakkai International (KSGI), Won Buddhism, and so forth. In particular, the Seoul metropolitan area is home to world-famous Christian megachurches, such as YFGC, Kwanglim (Burning Bush) Methodist Church, and the Onnuri (All Nations) Community Church. In addition to these formulaic religions, there exist a number of sects and religious cults. In short, regardless of their organizational size, some religions and congregations

across these traditions and movements have survived, while others have weakened or failed after several years of prospering within the social and cultural ecology of the Seoul metropolitan area.

The focus of this study is on religious competition and its relationship with innovation, as well as new and creative forms of worship, practice, and social organization in the megachurches in the Seoul area. Although the present study is based on the theory of rational choice/religious economy, it will take a more cultural approach in exploring the primary sources leading to religious creativity and innovation in the contemporary Korean context.

It is significant that there are more megachurches per capita in South Korea than in the United States, which leads to the question: why do South Koreans love megachurches even more than Americans do? In Warren Bird's view, the following factors make South Korea the ideal setting for megachurches: dense populations, social upheaval, economic boom and upward mobility, leveraging media, and meeting needs.[5] It is true that Korean megachurches as a whole tend to be apolitical and support the status quo. In the view of young progressives who are mostly concerned with the ever-widening income inequality, the middle-class megachurches that emphasize the *gospel of success,* rather than the *gospel of sacrifice*, have naturally succumbed to accommodating authoritarian regimes in the 1970s and 1980s, thereby (and ironically) achieving rapid numerical growth. Because of this, Protestant Christianity represented by the rise of megachurches is in a real sense viewed as controversial (S. Kim 2015, 134).

*The Economist*, in its special report on Korean Protestantism (November 1, 2007), noted that "South Korea illustrates three features of modern religion: competition, heat and choice."[6] According to this report, the people who have flocked to South Korea's megachurches are the upwardly mobile. Philip Jenkins, impressed by the enormous megachurches in South Korea, insisted that Christianity in East and South-East Asia (specifically,

5. Warren Bird, "Korea: Why So Many Megachurches?" *Outreach*, accessed July 27, 2015, http://www.outreachmagazine.com/features/11955-why-so-many-megachurches-in-korea.html.

6. *Economist*, "O Come All Ye Faithful," November 11, 2007, http://www.economist.com/node/10015239.

South Korea) is associated with "upward mobility, middle-class aspirations, and technological sophistication," saying: "What the Asian experience shows us, though, is that Christianity is flourishing magnificently in some of the world's wealthiest and most sophisticated regions. Far from being a vestige of superstition, this kind of religion looks eminently for a thriving globalized economy."[7]

My findings from the 2008 KGSS (Korean General Social Survey) confirm *The Economist*'s and Jenkin's views on the social significance of Korean megachurches. According to the 2008 KGSS, socioeconomic status (SES) is associated positively with beliefs about religious miracles in contemporary Korea (S. Kim 2016). In the 2008 KGSS, highly educated managerial/professional Koreans (35.3% of whom were conservative/evangelical Protestants) were more reportedly religious (and happier) than others in the country (S. Kim 2010, 144). And the majority of these Protestants belonged to megachurches in the Seoul metropolitan area.

Meanwhile, it is also true that religion has at times resisted novelty and innovation, though inconsistently. Over the last few decades, there has been a large body of scholarship and much effort dealing with the complex interfaces of science and religion (Yerxa 2016, 1). For example, historians of religion David Hempton and Hugh McLeod found that American Christians were on balance more innovative than their European counterparts, in a study carried out to see whether American Christians responded to the threat of secularization in more innovative ways than their European counterparts (Hempton and McLeod 2016, 140). *Religion and Innovation: Antagonists or Partners?* (Yerxa 2016) demonstrates that innovation is a useful concept in scholarly analysis. The original studies in that volume raise a number of questions that have considerable potential for further inquiry, such as: When does religious innovation tend to occur? What are the actual dynamics of the religion-innovation nexus?

The religious economy models (REM) led by rational choice theorists such as Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Laurence R. Iannaccone, rely on an

7 . Philip Jenkins, "Asian Tigers and Megachurches," accessed March 30, 2015, http://www.realclearreligon.org/articles/2012/09/11/asian_tigers_and_megachurches.html.

intellectual confidence in the rationality of human beings as religious actors. While REM regards the environment simply as a social condition, the religious-ecological approach pays more attention to a causal mechanism between religious actors and their environmental factors. The truly meaningful theoretical implication is that the meaning of competition between religious actors or between religious and non-religious actors becomes significantly different in an ecological system. After all, competing with other actors in an ecological system is dependent on nothing but one's ability to survive. In this respect, religious innovation is the most efficient strategy for survival, and no religious organization evolves without innovation. Evidently, it seems that religious ecology can explain the process of religious evolution through innovation more effectively than any other perspective.

The following shows the affinity between religious innovation and economic empowerment in the Indian context. Based on a field research in India, economist Rebecca Samuel Shah (2016) has contended that certain Christian theologies, churches, networks, and moral frameworks and practices often allow poor micro-entrepreneurs to make religious faith a powerful source of economic and social innovation. To support this claim, she hypothesized that certain form's of Christian faith can sometimes be an engine of palpable economic innovation and progress today. In her research, eight out of ten converts to Christianity engaged in regular voluntary religious contributions. This first of all shows the strong correlation between tithing and asset accumulation. Beside this, her research also tested the hypothesis that praying for one's neighbors at healing meetings (e.g., intercession) has an empowering impact on the participants (especially, female) as well as the community itself.

Researchers in general seem to agree that both acceptance and use of religious marketing and branding have increased in Western societies since the 1950s for *suppliers* of various religions (Einstein 2008; Twitchell 2005). What followed then were special marketing policies for every audience. It is clear that some religious organizations have been effective at marketing and branding and that this has helped them to grow considerably—good examples are megachurches (Usunier and Stolz 2014, 21).

## Data and Methods

Among around 20 megachurches in the Seoul metropolitan area as of 2015, I decided to explore four megachurches that are still currently growing and somewhat reputable: (1) Oryun Community Church (OCC), located in the Gangdong area; (2) Presbyterian Church of the Lord (PCL), located in the Gangnam (Songpa) area; (3) Bundang Woori Church (BWC), located in the suburban Bundang area; and (4) Kwangsung Presbyterian Church (KPC), located in the suburban Ilsan area. In terms of theology, although two (1 and 3) belong to Hapdong (Evangelical) and the other two (2 and 4) to Tonghap (Ecumenical) among four major Presbyterian denominations, these four megachurches altogether have a conservative theological orientation. For the four megachurches in the Seoul metropolitan area, as with the majority of American megachurches, denominational affiliation is an insignificant matter. Thus, all the four megachurches drop reference to its denomination from their Korean official name and literature, which makes them "functionally nondenominational" (Thumma 2006, 3).

This in-depth case study of four megachurches utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to observe religious competition and creative innovation in church leadership (senior/lead minister and elders), full-time staff members, religious teachings, switching, worship rituals/styles, church music, Bible study and cell groups, lay leadership training, education programs, church organizations and management, social support network, religious offerings and financial composition, IT (information technology), church facilities (café, dining, recreational sports, parking lots, etc.), and social outreach.

The author observed at least three to four worship services for each church and read through various church materials and pamphlets provided at the information desk of the sanctuaries and on their websites. While the author uses the surveys (20 questions) as the most important information source of his study, he combined the interviews from the focus group (staff members and lay persons) meetings to provide a more comprehensive picture of the creative innovations of the four megachurches under examination.

*Qualitative Data*

To understand the gist of the megachurch phenomenon in terms of religious competition and creative innovation, focus groups are particularly useful for identifying and capturing emotional group dynamics. The focus group also allowed for a larger array of individuals to be interviewed, which is important given the large size of megachurches (Wellman et al. 2014, 655). The author admits that some participants at his focus groups avoided discussing somewhat sensitive or embarrassing topics or opinions, thereby resulting in a somewhat positive bias towards their congregation. So, the comments of these participants were included in this article with care.

A total of 42 interviews were conducted in focus groups (24 females, 18 males). Each interview lasted approximately one and half or two hours, during which time respondents answered questions about how they came to the church, whether they switched from another church, if so, then why, how they became involved in their church, whether they had experienced spiritual growth in their church, if so, then in what ways, and what they think about their church's unique identity or brand and the relationship between church size and spiritual growth, as well as their expectations for their church.

*Quantitative Data*

At each of the four churches, surveys were distributed by assistant ministers to everyone aged 20 and older at all services during a given weekend. The average response rate is not revealed since the congregations in general were not too familiar with surveys of this kind. Although the author uses the focus groups as my complementary source of data, the large-N survey (total sample size: 743) is crucial because it provides sociodemographic data regarding the overall attendee population in these megachurches. It quantifies data about what initially attracted individuals to the megachurches as well as whether they switched or not, and it asks questions about tithing, born-again experiences, church attendance, outreach, spirituality, etc.

The average megachurch attendee is female, married, middle-class, and has a college/university education. While females comprise a disproportionately large share of the author's survey respondents (i.e., roughly 65%), this is in fact a slightly lower percentage than overall female representation in Korean Protestant churches (about 70%–75%), yet higher than female representation among American megachurch attendees (about 60%) (Thumma and Bird 2009).

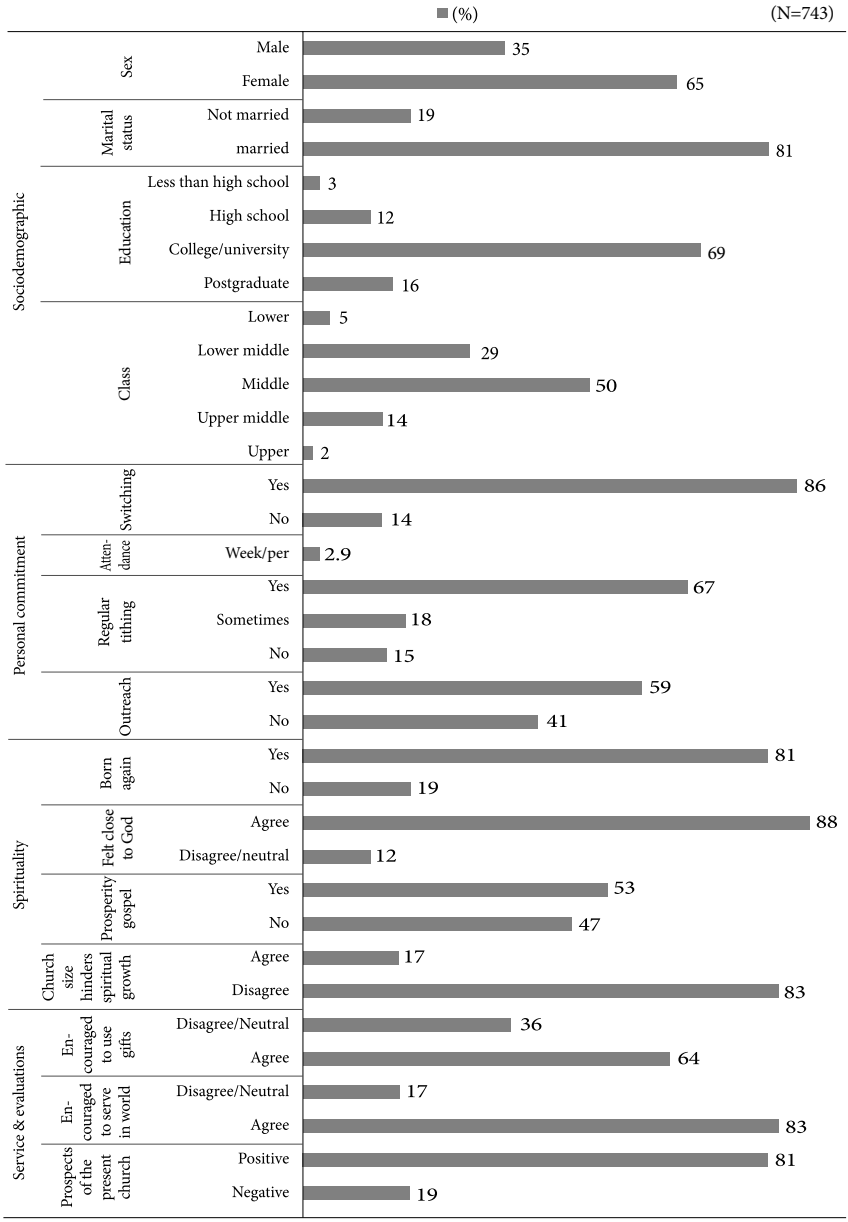
Table 1 presents the key characteristics of the four megachurches (OCC, PCL, BWC, and KPC) of this study. Based on the 743 survey questionnaires, Table 2 provides descriptive statistics of the attendees of these megachurches taken as a whole. Table 3 then provides descriptive statistics broken down for each of the four megachurches. The author combined the qualitative findings and these statistics to draw out the discussions and conclusion of this research.

**Table 1.** Key Characteristics of the Four Megachurches

| | OCC (www.oryun.org) | PCL (pcltv.org) | BWC (www.woorichurch.org) | KPC (www.kwangsung.org) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Founding year | 1989 | 1988 | 2002 | 1997 |
| Founder | Rev. Eun-Ho Kim | Rev. Jaechul Lee | Rev. Chansoo Lee | Rev. Sungjin Cheong |
| Present senior minister | Rev. Eun-Ho Kim | Rev. Wonho Park | Rev. Chansoo Lee | Rev. Sungjin Cheong |
| Regular attendance size | 11,000 | 10,000 | 12,000 | 10,000 |
| Location | Gangdong (Gangnam) | Songpa (Gangnam) | Bundang (suburban) | Ilsan (suburban) |
| Denomination | Presbyterian (Hapdong) | Presbyterian (Tonghap) | Presbyterian (Hapdong) | Presbyterian (Tonghap) |
| Theology | Evangelical (pentecostal) | Ecumenical (moderate) | Evangelical (fundamentalist) | Ecumenical (conservative) |

*Source*: Author.

**Table 2**. Descriptive Statistics of the Four Megachurches




*Source*: Author.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics of OCC, PCL, BWC, and KPC

| Hierarchical classification | Type of variable | Response | OCC (N= 186) | PCL (N= 199) | BWC (N= 176) | KPC (N= 182) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Socio-demographic | Sex | Male | 25 | 30 | 58 | 26 |
| | | Female | 75 | 70 | 42 | 74 |
| | Marital status | Not married | 38 | 11 | 23 | 4 |
| | | Married | 62 | 89 | 77 | 96 |
| | Education | Less than high school | 3 | 2 | 1 | 8 |
| | | High school | 13 | 8 | 7 | 18 |
| | | College/university | 70 | 72 | 66 | 67 |
| | | Postgraduate | 14 | 18 | 26 | 7 |
| | Class | Lower | 6 | 6 | 1 | 7 |
| | | Lower middle | 21 | 27 | 29 | 41 |
| | | Middle | 58 | 48 | 51 | 40 |
| | | Upper middle | 12 | 16 | 18 | 12 |
| | | Upper | 3 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| Personal commitment | Switching | Yes | 86 | 85 | 88 | 85 |
| | | No | 14 | 15 | 12 | 15 |
| | Attendance | Week/per | 3.3 | 2.3 | 1.8 | 3.2 |
| | Regular tithing | Yes | 70 | 56 | 63 | 80 |
| | | Sometimes | 17 | 22 | 24 | 6 |
| | | No | 13 | 22 | 13 | 14 |
| | Outreach | Yes | 70 | 45 | 54 | 65 |
| | | No | 30 | 55 | 46 | 35 |
| Spirituality | Born again | Yes | 88 | 67 | 82 | 88 |
| | | No | 12 | 33 | 18 | 12 |
| | Felt close to God | Agree | 93 | 75 | 93 | 85 |
| | | Disagree/neutral | 7 | 25 | 7 | 15 |
| | Prosperity Gospel | Yes | 54 | 54 | 44 | 58 |
| | | No | 46 | 46 | 56 | 42 |
| | Church size hinders spiritual growth | Agree | 14 | 25 | 16 | 12 |
| | | Disagree | 86 | 75 | 84 | 88 |
| Service & evaluations | Encouraged to use gifts | Disagree/neutral | 38 | 57 | 36 | 11 |
| | | Agree | 62 | 43 | 64 | 89 |
| | Encouraged to serve in world | Disagree/neutral | 23 | 30 | 7 | 8 |
| | | Agree | 77 | 70 | 93 | 92 |
| | Prospects for the present church | Positive | 85 | 71 | 83 | 85 |
| | | Negative | 15 | 29 | 17 | 15 |

*Source*: Author.

## Findings and Discussions

### *Why Did They Join and Stay at a Megachurch?*

About 80% of interviewees at focus groups and 86% of the survey respondents were switchers from other churches (see Table 2). The top reason for religious switching was residential relocation (70–80%). The high level of population migration reflects Korean society, which has undergone compressed modernization and been highly competitive, mobile, and liquid since the 1960s. The second most common reason for switching was dissatisfaction or distress caused by the insincere or disqualified pastor of the former churches (20–30%). Respondents answered that the senior (lead) pastor and his sermons, worship style, music, and various programs were crucial in their decision to stay with their current church.

Pentecostal OCC's senior minister Kim Eun-Ho is known as an innovative spiritual entrepreneur and a charismatic energy star who made an unconventional decision to radically change his church worship style in 1994 just after visiting some "seeker churches" (Sargeant 2000) in the United States. In his thesis entitled, "The Renewal of Service and Church Growth—A Case Study of Oryun Community Church," Kim (2009) proposed that a biblically-founded renewal of church services can lead to church growth, highlighting his experience in his own church. On its twentieth anniversary in 2009, OCC carried out a special survey (n=4,596, answers=6,417) concerning why its congregants joined the church. By percentage, respondents replied: the spiritual power of the senior minister's message (46.5%), worship style (35.3%), good facilities (4.3%), training system (3.8%), good accessibility (2.9%), other (6.7%), and no reply (0.1%). A majority (about 82%) of attendees of OCC identified both "the spiritual power of the pastor's message" (Wellman et al. 2014, 667) and "the spirituality of the worship" (Sargeant 2000, 666) as contributing to their spiritual growth.

As most of the notable preachers, such as John MacArthur,[8] are Calvin-

8. MacArthur is the pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church, as well as an author, conference speaker, and president of The Master's University and Seminary.

istic in their theology, BWC's Lee Chansoo, a graduate of Chongshin Theological Seminary (conservative Presbyterian) in Seoul, is famous for his *expository preaching*, lifting up God's word and transforming the minds of his listeners. While *topical preaching* concentrates on a specific topic and references texts covering the topic, expository preaching details the meaning of a particular text or passage of Scripture. The latter is favored among those who believe that the Bible is the exact word of God and thus worthy of being presented in its purest essence. As opposed to expository preaching, *topical preaching*, which modifies the message to match the characteristics of the audience, fits the description of the seeker movement in America: according to Lee Strobel, who was a teaching pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, "The most effective messengers for seekers are those that address their felt needs" (quoted in Sargeant 2000, 77). Since an expository preacher believes that God's words provide a comprehensive diet for his sheep, the preacher does not need to guess the particular needs of his flock, but to present appropriate topics with diminished pandering.[9] Consequently, the preacher is forced to expound on passages that may not be so thoroughly examined or applied normally under a topical series.

Regarding the strength of the current church, several respondents of BWC described that during the 45-minute-long weekly expository preaching, Lee Chansoo gives Scripture the most authority over all other sources of religious understanding.[10] Thus, when the author attended BWC's Sunday worship (July 31, 2016), there was a short time before preaching for all of the attendees to recite a specifically given biblical verse loudly together as an important practice of the corporate service. A monthly booklet entitled, *Everyday Verses* (edited by church staff), was also freely available at the entrance desk of the church's service auditorium. These aspects suggest that even though there is no ritual of citing the Westminster Confession of Faith in the service (common in typical churches), evangelical and fundamentalist

9. Wikipedia, s.v. "Expository Preaching," accessed August 6, 2016, https://en/wikipedia.org/wiki/Expository_preaching.
10. On the role theology plays in the growth and decline of Canadian churches, see Haskell et al. (2016).

BWC (adhering to the Reformation teaching of Sola Scriptura) takes the position that "the Bible is God's inerrant word, and contains sufficient information for the Christian to understand their faith and how they should live their lives."[11] Regular exegesis to expository preaching from the pulpit at BWC suits the fact that congregants with a strong belief in personal experience want to understand how the passage relates to their everyday experiences.

In the meantime, concerning the renewed "experiential worship" (Rognlien 2005) in OCC, several interviewees of the focus groups pointed out that their "musical worship time," which utilized its massive screens with a series of common loud prayers, is more important than anything else. In the author's observation during one Friday late-night prayer meeting in October 2015, the nearly two-hour musical worship time with thousands of participants was an outward expression of praise and sharing of joy—a time for generating "collective effervescence" (Durkheim [1912] 1965; Wellman et al. 2014, 660) and experiencing a unity of "mind and body" as a vital element of the emotional experiences of attendees (Rognlien 2005, 21–22).

PCL's senior minister, Park Wonho, a former professor of Christian education at Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary (PUTS) in Seoul, successfully started the "12-Step Wednesday Night Bible Study" (WNBS) (available both online and offline) in 2007 from the perspective of the "Kingdom of God." Since then, the WNBS (in which the author participated in October 2015) is said to have become one of the most innovative aspects of PCL: every Wednesday-night prayer meeting attracts about 2,000 members (nearly one-third were male congregants), who were participating in a 12-week-long Bible study. Besides this, the Bible study video on WNBS's website usually receives several thousand views. The sheer number of participants (exceeding 2,000) and the large percentage of male attendees are simply staggering for a meeting of this kind by Korean Protestant standards. Moreover, light meals were provided for free in between sessions for those who had to eat. In the author's observation, despite physical hunger, people at

11. Wikipedia, s.v. "Expository Preaching," accessed August 6, 2016, https://en/wikipedia.org/wiki/Expository_preaching.

WNBS as a whole looked remarkably contented with the profound teachings of the Bible from their qualified senior minister. Thus, when asked why they stayed at the church, many interviewees mentioned the intellectual caliber of the pastor's systematic teachings, which they said largely contributed to their spiritual growth.

As opposed to the expository preaching by three (OCC, BWC, and PCL) senior ministers, KPC's charismatic senior minister, Cheong Sungjin, usually gives a clear-cut and interesting *topical preaching*, while effectively using the large overhead screens displaying relevant biblical passages, video clips, newspaper articles, dictionary entries, internet sources, and more. In the author's participation at the Sunday service (August 7, 2016), Cheong gave a sermon on the topic of "reproach or rebuke," using Proverbs 9:7–12. And although his preaching (30 minutes) was much shorter than Lee Chansoo's (45 minutes), it was better put together overall with clearer messages and more relevant materials, thereby better addressing the needs of his flock and empowering them. In addition to this, when asked why they remained at the church, several survey respondents pointed out the power of intercession or intercessory prayer for the sick congregants at the daily late-night (9 p.m.) prayer meetings from Monday to Saturday. In the "August Intercessory Prayer" (a free monthly leaflet published in 2016 by KPC for intercession), roughly 70 names of church members, including their severe illnesses, were listed at the subsection of "prayer for the patients" under the section of prayer for healing. This kind of charitable praying for one's neighbors (congregants) enhances the well-being of each person and the community as a whole (Shah 2016, 187).

*What Is the Unique Identity of Their Congregation?*

Most of the interviewees easily described "their mission in terms of a distinctive visionary identity or purpose" (Thumma 2006, 6). Firstly, in the case of OCC, about 70% of interviewees answered that the unique identity of their church is the "Daniel *se ire gidohoe*" (DSIG, the Thirty-Day Daniel Prayer Meetings) (started by Kim Eun-Ho in 1998) held every November. This annually-held DSIG is said to invite several hundred local churches in the

country as well as various brother churches in foreign countries. Regarding the 2015 DSIG, the author was informed that more than 800 local churches in the country and 20 churches from 11 foreign countries participated. The theme of DSIG changes annually, but its goal is usually "to make a difference in individual lives, in the local community, and in the world" (Thumma 2006, 18) by empowering people through lively worship, spiritual praise, and praying out loud.

Secondly, in the case of PCL, between 60% and 70% of the interviewees and a few assistant ministers highlighted the unique identity of their church, namely that the church owns neither the church building nor its property. Instead, all church services are held in the auditorium in Chungshin Girl's High School. Moreover, respondents unanimously highlighted that PCL was known for the fixed tenure of its senior minister and elders: ten years and six years, respectively, with one person limited to a single term. PCL's no-church-property policy and its limited tenure of senior minister and elders from the beginning could be regarded as an example of innovative practice to overcome the thorny issue of hereditary transmission of pastors and the privatization of large congregations.

Thirdly, in the case of BWC, the majority of respondents of the survey stressed what they call *ilman seongdo pasong undong* (ISPU, the Sending Movement of 10,000 Believers), inspired by the so-called "Missional Church" (with its Apostolic Ecclesiology) for the purpose of overcoming the negativity surrounding the megachurch phenomenon. For the pursuit of an authentic Missional Church, BWC has thus far owned no building and has been renting Songlim High School auditorium since its inception in 2002. Besides the ISPU, BWC made a public declaration in 2012 as it celebrated its tenth anniversary, that it would no longer accept religious switchers to its congregation. Since then it welcomes only authentic newcomers (new Christians) and emphasizes the marginalized people and evangelism. Considering that Korean Protestantism is still under the legacy of the church growth movement (S. Kim 2015), this movement of downsizing is itself a creative innovation propelled by its prominent leader, Lee Chansoo. Given the stagnant trend of megachurch attendance in recent years in South Korea, BWC should be noted for its unusual practice of *slimming down*.

Finally, in the case of KPC, about 70% of the survey respondents and a few assistant ministers claimed that their church is known for its radical church reforms and emphasis on lay members' voluntary roles in terms of social ministry serving the local community. The assistant minister in charge of administration told me that KPC allocates 50% of its finances to helping the poor and funding social ministry. KPC recently established the Jangteo Co-op (consumer cooperative) for helping both the the disabled and *saeteomin* (newly settled refugees from North Korea). Also, the majority of the respondents have highlighted that KPC, as a layman-centered congregation, was an exemplary church that respects practical thinking, financial transparency, and a democratic process in decision making. What is particularly noteworthy is that KPC has various effective programs for local society: the Alpha Program, the Happy Welfare Foundation (a US$ two million project), an eco-friendly market event, annual scholarship donation, sports ministry, etc. One of the key characteristics of KPC is the sincere care it provides for small-sized local congregations that struggle with financial deficits caused by the decline in congregants. As of 2016, KPC had established 16 new churches over the past 18 years. According to an assistant minister, KPC recently and for the first time held a democratic vote in the congregation in order to find a proper minister among several dozen candidates for a newly established church. Considering that Korean society is still largely hierarchical and governed by seniority under the Confucian tradition, Cheong Sungjin's recent decision to allow his congregants to choose the right candidate among his several assistant ministers is by itself unprecedented and innovative. At the moment, given the potential danger often accompanied by pastoral succession in megachurches, Cheong Sungjin, a symbolic leader of radical reform in Korean Protestantism, is thinking about carrying out an experiment that will divide his current large congregation into several smaller ones before his promised abdication (at the age of 65, five years sooner than the usual practice) within four years.[12]

12. One male member of KPC in his 50s whom the author met on Sunday (August 7, 2016) at the church co-op told me that, despite a strenuous effort by the senior minister, the majority of congregants were still "unsettled" on his plan of dividing KPC into four new congregations.

*Do They Agree with the Assertion that Church Size Hinders Spiritual Growth?*

Regarding some Christian leaders' criticisms that, "Megachurches water down the faith," Scott Thumma and David Travis (2007, 92) argue that one must discern between what a church looks like and what a church actually does in a believer's heart: "In contrast to detractors, our view is that these churches actually call many believers to higher levels of commitment and, once committed, to a serious life of faith." In this context, it is not surprising that the survey respondents of 12 megachurches in the United States reported high levels of spirituality in connection with the megachurch (Wellman et al. 2014). Roughly 63% of respondents agreed with the statement: "When I last felt close to God, it was in connection to this church," and 76% agreed that their spiritual needs are being met by attending their megachurch. Also, it is not surprising that roughly 80% of the survey respondents *disagreed* with the statement, "Worshipping at a large church *hinders* my spiritual growth" (Wellman et al. 2014, 667).

The author found a *similar* result from surveying four megachurches in the Seoul metropolitan area (see Table 2). About 88% of respondents agreed with the question: "Have you ever felt closer to God since you came to your current church?" Moreover, about 83% of the survey respondents *disagreed* with the statement: "Church size hinders spiritual growth." Among all the respondents in the four megachurches examined, it is noteworthy that those in PCL (see Table 3) showed the lowest percentage of those who agreed with the above two statements: roughly 75% responded positively to the question: "Have you ever felt closer to God since you joined your current church?" and roughly 75% *disagreed* with the statement: "Church size hinders spiritual growth." From this, we can propose that there is a positive correlation between "the experience of feeling closer to God" and "the collective effervescence of the large-scale worship services." It is also interesting to note that OCC and BWC (both are theologically evangelical and renowned for their emotive worships) show relatively higher figures in "the experience of feeling closer to God" than PCL and KPC (see Table 3) (both are ecumenical and have traditional worships). A recent study (Well-

man et al. 2014) argues that worship is the second most influential factor following the senior minister in congregants' decision to stay at their current church. In this respect, it could be argued that both OCC and BWC, which strongly refute the claim that "Megachurches water down the faith," provide strong support for the importance of relevant/emotive worship for the success of a megachurch.

*How Much Do They Commit Personally in Religious Practices and Beliefs?*

The Megachurches Today 2005 survey in the United States asked about the practices and beliefs of the congregation. Over three quarters (78%) of the megachurches said they stressed tithing and sacrificial giving (Thumma and Travis 2007, 100). When compared with congregations of all sizes in the 2005 Faith Communities Today study, the percentage of megachurches emphasizing tithing or sacrificial giving *was remarkably* higher than that of faith communities of all sizes: 47% versus 39% (Thumma and Travis 2007, 100–101). Why do megachurches stress tithing and sacrificial giving more than conventional congregations? Does greater emphasis on born-again-experience, participation, and involvement in the spiritual maturity of congregants consequently lead to a successful megachurch?

Analyses of the US 1998 General Social Survey data show that those who believe in a literal view of the Bible (literalists) give more money (a mean of 5% of their income) than both those who view the Bible (packed full of teachings about generosity, self-sacrifice, tithing, stewardship, and so on) as God's inspired word that must not be read *literally* (non-literalists) (who give a mean of 2.7% of their income) or as an ancient book of fables (skeptics) (a mean of 1.8% of their income), even though they have lower incomes (Smith and Emerson 2008, 267n29). American Christians who profess to believe that the Bible's teachings can be read literally tend to give away more money, suggesting the possibility that a more pointed understanding of teachings on money might encourage more generous giving (Smith and Emerson 2008, 267n29). However, to understand factors that increase giving, beside the view of the Bible per se, other things should be considered: "congregational organizational process or the larger underlying

personal faith commitments of the survey respondents" (Smith and Emerson 2008, 267n29). In summary, there is a tentative association between the life-directing authority that readers attribute to the Bible and levels of tithing or sacrificial financial giving (as the norm of Christian stewardship).

In the present survey of four Korean megachurches, the majority (roughly 67%) of the respondents said "yes" to the question: "Do you tithe on a regular, consistent basis?" while 18% answered "sometimes" and 15% "no" (see Table 2). This reflects, first of all, the well-known fact that a legacy of American Biblical literalism exists in evangelical and fundamentalist Korean Protestantism (Martin 1990, 154–155). Among the four megachurches, it was PCL that showed the lowest percentage of agreement (56%) to the question of regular tithing (see Table 3). When compared with the other three congregations (OCC, BWC, and KPC), PCL is a relatively less conservative (or somewhat liberal) mainline congregation, in the sense that its current senior minister often wants to know what modern research (especially in psychology) has to say regarding the authenticity of the passage of the Biblical text. From this, we could say that there is an association between biblical literalism (a belief in Biblical inerrancy) and regular tithing. However, to understand that the highest agreement to the question of regular tithing exists not in evangelical OCC (70%) or BWC (63%) but in ecumenical KPC (80%), we need to consider the factor of congregational organizational process: at KPC, being committed to regular tithing is regarded as one of the most important qualifications for selection as an elder and ordination as a senior deacon.

From the findings of the present survey, there seems to be an association between regular tithing and born-again experience: the higher the percentage of those who confess that they were born again, the higher the percentage of regular tithing. When compared with the other three megachurches (OCC, BWC, and KPC), the low level (56%) of regular tithing at PCL seems to be correlated to its low level of "born again experience" (67%) (see Table 3). Some studies (e.g., Shah 2016) show that the faith in regular tithing sometimes drives the congregants to change the way they spend their money and mature spiritually, thus molding them to be more generous in contributing to their congregation.

In addition to the high level (67%) of regular tithing, another distinctive trait of the four reputable Korean megachurches of this study is their high participation and involvement: 2.9 times attendance per week and 59% of outreach during the month preceding the survey (see Table 2). In the author's observation, all four megachurches seem to "direct their energies on those persons who are active participants and who choose to be highly involved" (Thumma 2006, 11). PCL, for instance, checks the attendance of all participants at WNBS every week. Those who miss three classes during the 12 weeks are dropped from the class. The message of evangelical megachurch sermons, often inspirational, motivational, and well delivered, empowers members with life-directing authority that readers (congregants) attribute to the Bible. The author's observation is that all the three senior ministers of OCC, PCL, and BWC (except that of KPC) showed deep concern in professing God's wishes rather than what people wanted to hear, consequently preferring *expository preaching* to *topical preaching*. These ministers' scriptural expositions that focus on maturing their congregations spiritually require extra time and energy in preparation, and are thus more likely to be heard in large evangelical congregations than in small or medium-sized non-evangelical ones. So, among several factors, we could say that this aspect of expository preaching in some megachurches contributes to "religious concentration" (Chaves 2011, 65), despite the criticisms of the large congregations within the Korean religious market.

## Conclusion

In the 1990s, the world saw the simultaneous appearance of what we call megacities and megachurches. As the population gathered in urban areas, megachurches emerged where there were massive congregations. For instance, megachurches in South Korea (especially in Seoul) have grown in number, size, and popularity in recent years. An exploration of this religious reality provides a global insight into the function of religion in today's urbanized world and the role and power of religious organizations for individuals in a mass society (Thumma and Bird 2015, 2331).

In this context, the author raised the following question in the introduction of this article: "Is something unique taking place in these large congregations in terms of religious competition and creative innovation?" The survey findings for four megachurches support *The Economist*'s claim that the people who have flocked to South Korea's megachurches are the upwardly mobile (see Table 2): roughly 50% of respondents identified themselves as middle class, 14% as upper middle class, and 2% as upper class. In addition, substantial evidence in contemporary Korean society disagrees with the opinion that low SES individuals tend to have more positive views on religion than do high SES groups (S. Kim 2010). The relationship between "high SES' and "high religiosity" in Korea can be understood in part by the association between SES and divine involvement (e.g., regular tithing and church attendance), which is contingent upon "Biblical literalism" (Schieman 2010, 43). Put simply, low and high SES individuals share *similar* levels of divine involvement when they interpret the Bible *literally*. Thus, besides the fact that large congregations provide better religious experience through spiritual preaching, effective worship, and various programs than smaller congregations, *expository preaching* (rather than *topical preaching*) based on Biblical literalism or the theology of fundamentalism could be one of the remarkable and innovative traits of successful Korean megachurches.

There are additional reasons that explain the popularity of megachurches among Koreans. First, megachurches usually hide their traditional denominations to become functionally nondenominational in a volatile cultural environment, but still display their religious products and services under their branded name as a *community church*. In James Twitchell's words, "Protestantism (exemplified by megachurches) is experiencing the same brand shifts that occur when Sam's Club or Costco comes to town" (2005, 81). The so-called *herd mentality* (revealed among people in shopping malls) is at the heart of Korean megachurches.

Second, the majority of senior pastors of megachurches are *charismatic energy stars* or *spiritual entrepreneurs* (e.g., David Cho of YFGC and Kim Eun-Ho of OCC) who are often capable of empowering people who, in turn, idolize their pastors under the ethos of *personality cult*, which springs

from indigenous *spiritism*. In his previous study, this author argued that, "Experiences lead to belief in spiritual forces, not vice versa" (S. Kim 2007, 157). The author's personal observations confirm that the most important factor in the extraordinary growth of *pentecostalized* South Korean Protestantism lies in its *healing ministry* through intercessory prayers and spiritual exorcism (or spiritual warfare). Recent Gallup Korea poll results found nearly 30% of Korean Protestants attesting to some sort of religious experiences in their lives. This high percentage contrasts markedly with 5% for Buddhists and 14% for Roman Catholics (Gallup Korea 2004, 72–75). Regular intercessory prayers for sick members of the church in all four large congregations (OCC, PLC, BWC, and KPC) demonstrate the church members' love for their neighbor as well as their commitment to community. In this respect, *intercession* led by prominent worship leaders can be a unique trait in a healthy megachurch.

Third, David Martin (1990, 143) has dubbed the Korean Protestant scene "a spiritual enterprise culture." The economic miracle achieved by the consolidation of Korean conglomerates, *chaebol* (e.g., Samsung and Hyundai), is parallel to the organization and demographic miracle attained by the religious *chaebol* of YFGC (Brouwer et al. 1996, 17). In present-day South Korea, the products of Samsung and Hyundai are exemplars of "technological sophistication" (in Jenkins' words). These two large companies are also one of the most desired destinations for young job-seekers in the country. Given that Korean megachurches resemble the famous Korean conglomerates, the megachurches can be called "religious *chaebol*." Being a member of these big congregations (especially those located in the famous middle-class Gangnam area of Seoul) denotes a person's prestige and symbolizes their upward mobility, as shown in the well-known case of Lee Myung-bak, the former president of South Korea, who was an elder of Somang Presbyterian Church.

In the midst of public distrust of Korean evangelical Protestantism (especially megachurches) in terms of their perceived lack of interest in the issue of social justice, some megachurches that still fare well in society have found new ways to demonstrate their pure intentions in deepening their relationship with God by better understanding God's words (expository

preaching on the basis of Biblical literalism), selflessly praying for others' health (healing ministry through intercessory prayers), fulfilling God's message of promulgating the Gospel (slimming the congregation while denying admission to switching members), and striving to renounce worldly possessions and desires to power (owning no church property and introducing limited tenure of senior ministers and elders). The prevailing message of these methods directly answers society's criticisms regarding the wealth of megachurches. The megachurch attendees' dedication to selfless God-seeking shows the world that megachurches are not in fact corporate businesses or interest groups, but vital organizations that can effectively find new and genuine ways to serve God on a grand scale.

The author discovered that when it comes to whether a church is growing or declining in an increasingly secular society such as contemporary South Korea, what congregants believe—and especially what clergy believes—matters. The author's findings support a recent study (Haskell et al. 2016) showing Canadian churches that are theologically conservative in their beliefs and have an innovative worship approach are more likely to see growth. The commitment to evangelism drawn from conservative theology led growing churches to *innovate*, from music style to ministry. To conclude, this present study on four growing Korean megachurches also demonstrates that the particular form of religious outlook (e.g., a Biblical literalism) is a relevant factor in its own right, which is not to be reduced to other variables.

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