Public Trust Lost and a Sign of Retroflexion: The Socio-Political Ecology of the Korean Church during the COVID–19 Pandemic

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic is not the first case where a critical disease has impacted the quality of human life and the global

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1. Since this is initial research on COVID-19 and the Korean Church, some sources are based on official reports published by the health authority (KCDC: Korea
economy. The most fatal pandemic was the medieval Black Death (or Bubonic Plague) (1343–1353), which most likely originated in Central Asia or East Asia and killed 75–200 million people in Eurasia and North Africa, peaking in Europe.\(^2\) During the time of John Calvin (1545), “religious dissidents were blamed for an outbreak of the plague.”\(^3\) Early modern Europe (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) experienced the social phenomenon of persecution, whereby Protestants in Catholic nations and Catholics in Protestant nations were executed due to “plague-spreading.”\(^4\) More recently, the Spanish flu lasted from the spring of 1918 to the early summer of 1919, killing between seventeen and one hundred million people and infecting five hundred million (a third of the world’s population at that time).\(^5\) The development of bio-technology in the twenty-first century was unable to protect humans from the transnational spread of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which originated in cave-dwelling horseshoe bats in China’s Yunnan Province in 2003 (916 deaths), and MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome), which originated in camels in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula (858 deaths).\(^6\)

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2. See John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague and Death in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Abington: Routledge, 2010); Barbara Bramanti et al., “Plague: A Disease Which Changed the Path of Human Civilization,” *Advances in Experimental Medicine and Biology* 918 (2016): 1–26; Hyeoncheol Moon, “A Study on the Improvement of Response System for the Disaster of Infectious Diseases Abroad- In the Context of the Act on the Prevention and Management of Infectious Diseases, the Focus on the Regulations for Response,” *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 11, no. 1 (2020): 155–70.

3. Massimo Introvigne et al., “Shincheonji and the COVID-19 Epidemic: Sorting Fact from Fiction,” *Journal of CESNUR* 4, no. 3 (2020): 71.

4. Ibid., 70–71.

5. Milorad Radusin, “The Spanish Flu – Part II: the Second and Third Wave,” *Vojnosanitetski Pregled: Military-medical and Pharmaceutical Review* 69, no. 10 (2012): 917–27.

6. For the details on SARS, see Robin McKie, “Scientists Trace 2002 SARS Virus to Colony of Cave-Dwelling Bats in China,” *The Guardian*, December 10, 2017, last modified on July 21, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/10/sars-virus-bats-china-severe-acute-respiratory-syndrome; Yixuan Wang et al., “Unique Epidemiological and Clinical Features of the Emerging 2019 Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia (COVID-19) Implicate Special Control Measures,” *Journal of Medical Virology* 92 (2020): 568–76; Kyoo-Man Ha, “The Role of Religious Beliefs and Institutions in Disaster Management: a Case Study,” *Religions* 6 (2015): 1314–29. For the details on MERS, see Alimuddin Zumla, David S. Hui,
practitioners during this time were prohibited from embarking on the customary pilgrimage to the sacred site of Mecca's al-Haram Mosque. Avian Influenza (AI) threatened the safety of modern life in 2017–2018, while African Swine Fever (ASF) became highly contagious throughout 2018–2019. These contemporary viruses or bacterial diseases have been typically generated from the irregular movement of wild animals.7

The world’s religious organizations have often been powerless and without any proper countermeasures to defend against the proliferation of such pandemic outbreaks. However, the situation was different for the early Korean Church. The people of the Korean peninsula experienced the appearance and spread of foreign diseases but also witnessed how their society recovered through the efforts of Christian medical workers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When Protestantism arrived on the peninsula, the royal authority of the Joseon dynasty was interested in observing the work of Western missionaries in Seoul and regional areas.8 For example, cholera, which first appeared in 1882, returned via foreign soldiers of the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). When this disease spread to Seoul, superstitious beliefs were commonplace; however, the Confucian government appointed Oliver R. Avison (1860–1956) to oversee the prevention of epidemics. Avison and his team set out to build and operate educational shelters around the capital city to counteract the pervasive idea that the disease had something to do with spirits. His efforts succeeded in just two weeks in 1895.9

When leprosy broke out, James N. Mackenzie (1865–1956) established medical facilities in the Busan and Gyeongnam regions. Leprosy (or Hansen’s disease), one of the oldest diseases, was

and Stanley Perlman, “Middle East Respiratory Syndrome,” Lancet 386 (2015): 995–1007; Na-yeong Jin, “Semantic Network Analysis of Domestic and Overseas Media Coverage Regarding Korea MERS,” Journal of Communication Science 18, no. 2 (2018): 222–62; Peter J. M. Openshaw, “COVID-19: Lessons from SARS and MERS,” European Journal of Immunology 50 (2020): 308–11; Ha, “The Role of Religious Beliefs and Institutions in Disaster Management: a Case Study,” 1314–29.
7. Hyeoncheol Moon, “A Study on the Improvement of Response System for the Disaster of Infectious Diseases Abroad,” 158–60.
8. Ha, “The Role of Religious Beliefs and Institutions in Disaster Management: a Case Study,” 1319–21.
9. The 1946 cholera outbreak was the last classical outbreak in Korea. The El Tor cholera replaced classical cholera worldwide in the 1960s. There were eleven cholera epidemics in Korea between 1963 and 2001. Except for two patients in 2002, all other cases originated in foreign countries until 2016. See Yang Soo Kim, “Cholera Outbreaks in Korea after the Liberation in 1945: Clinical and Epidemiological Characteristics,” Infect Chemother 51 (2019): 427–34; see also In-Sok Yeo, “Severance Hospital: Bringing Modern Medicine to Korea,” Yonsei Medical Journal 56, no. 3 (2015): 593–97.
known in colonial Korea as a “disease of the soul” and “punishment from heaven.”

Mackenzie reported that there were about ten thousand sufferers, seven thousand of whom lived in the South Gyeongsang Province. The traditional religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and shamanism had not systematically looked after lepers or sought treatments for leprosy. Thus, the treatment modalities of the Scottish-Australian expert were even implemented by the Empire of Japan (1910s–1945) as official policies on tropical disease in East and Southeast Asia.

Shincheonji on the Surface of COVID–19

There has been no further direct or indirect public involvement of either foreign missionaries or local Protestant churches for any disease prevention measure in the history of contemporary Korea. Rather, the transmission of the coronavirus disease from China (December 2019) pushed the Korean Church and its leaders into the maelstrom of bio-environmental terrorism and state observation. The first coronavirus patient was identified on January 20, 2020 as a Chinese woman from Wuhan, the epicenter of the virus outbreak. Seven months later, on August 26, 2020, the collected data showed that Korea had 18,265 confirmed cases, 312 deaths, 14,368 people released from isolation (released from quarantine) and 3,585 people still in isolation. To determine these

10. Sang-Dong Lee, “Leprosy the Disease of the Soul in the Western Europe between the Eleventh and Fourteenth Centuries,” The Historical Journal 27 (2015): 325–47.
11. James N. Mackenzie, “Leper Work in Fusan,” in Korea Mission Field (Seoul, Korea: Federal Council of Evangelical Missions in Korea, April 1921).
12. Hyunsook Lee argues that infectious diseases were imported into ancient and medieval Korea through the introduction of Buddhism, along with various infectious diseases transmitted into Japan by Korean Buddhists. See Hyunsook Lee, “Disease, Healing, and Religion: Medicine of Buddhism in Ancient Korea,” Korean Thought and Culture (2005): 141–80.
13. Sang Pil Son, “A Missiological Exploration of Australian Missionary James Noble Mackenzie’s Ministry to Lepers in South Korea,” Verbum Eccles (Online) 38, no. 1 (2017), last modified on May 10, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i1.1759.
14. This means that current Christian hospitals, including Severance Hospital and regional Protestant hospitals, do not work on public health measures per se, but rather play more on private or domestic disease prevention.
15. Kang Jae Yoon, “Diseases and Public Health Medicine through the Coronavirus 19,” Health and Social Welfare Issue & Focus 377 (2020): 1–11; “COVID-19 Outbreak: South Korea records Around 900 Cases, Strengthens Containment Measures,” Asian News International, February 25, 2020.
numbers, the government performed 1,849,506 tests, which had an average positive rate of 1.0 percent.\textsuperscript{16}

The coronavirus disease was first regularized in the middle of South Korea; thus, the regional breakdown of confirmed cases was 57.4 percent in Daegu, 11.5 percent in Gyeongsangbuk-do, and 31.1 percent in other regions. Figure 1 demonstrates the breakdown of cluster outbreaks, 43.43 percent of which were related to Shincheonji, a cultic Christian religion. Additionally, 24.59 percent of cases were sporadic cases including other churches, hospitals, and aged care centers, 11.04 percent were imported cases, 10.31 percent were linked to contacts of confirmed cases, 9.31 percent were other (unidentified) cases, and 1.32 percent were linked to imported cases. Among the confirmed cases on June 1, 2020, 92.24 percent involved seniors. More specifically, 48.06 percent of cases involved people over eighty years old, 29.84 percent involved people aged between seventy and seventy-nine and 14.34 percent involved people between sixty and sixty-nine.\textsuperscript{17} The majority of patients, as in China, were from vulnerable populations, i.e., long-term patients of mental

\textbf{Figure 1.} Breakdown of Cluster Outbreaks. This figure is from the official website of the Korean government, KCDC (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention), last modified on June 12, 2020, http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en/bdBoardList.do.

\textsuperscript{16} It was initially seen as a very bad case, but the nation recovered well. See "Coronavirus Disease-19, Republic of Korea," Central Disaster Management Headquarters, last modified on July 9, 2020, http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en/.

\textsuperscript{17} The central and regional Korean governments provided financial assistance for elderly people, unemployed young adults, families, and small, middle, and large businesses to protect the national economy. See "Coronavirus Disease-19, Republic of Korea"; Local Finance Association, “Regional Governments Depended Well Against COVID-19,” \textit{Local Finance} 2020, no. 1 (March 2020): 76–83; Eugene...
hospitals and aged care centers, as well as patients with underlying cardiovascular disorders or diabetes.18

According to Figure 1, there was no concrete record of confirmed cases from traditional East Asian religious organizations. However, Shincheonji—“Shincheonji, Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (SCJ, 신천지, 新天地)—received worldwide attention for its fast spread of the virus. A sixty-one-year-old female Shincheonji member became the thirty-first confirmed case, believed to have been infected by fellow members from Wuhan (February 18, 2020). When she attended the local church service in Daegu, the number of the confirmed cases increased rapidly from 30 people (February 17, 2020) to 602 people (23 February 2020).19 Subsequently, it was found that eighty-eight Chinese Shincheonji members arrived in South Korea on December 1, 2019, and a large number of Chinese students visited Daegu before the thirty-first confirmed patient was hospitalized.20

The Daegu branch of the Christian New Religious Movement (NRM) was suspected as a coronavirus hotspot not only by the media but also by the Korean Minister of Health and Chief Prosecutor. Without knowing their mystic style and teaching, Jung Eun-Kyeong, Director of the Korea Centers for Disease Control, stated that the Shincheonji Church was not exposed only once but had

Yeo and Seonga Kim, “Contents and Tasks of the Emergence Support for the COVID-19,” Health and Social Welfare Issue & Focus 382 (2020): 1–12.
18. The Korean government’s medical and economic responses to the outbreak were among the most successful cases (including Taiwan and New Zealand) in the world, despite Joon Bum Park’s criticism that the government’s three public organizations (Korea Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [KCDC], regional governments, and medical institutions) were not operated efficiently at the beginning of the pandemic. An additional complaint centered around the lack of support for disabled communities, particularly the deaf community. See Young Jung Shin, “‘Toward One Health & Welfare’: Health and Welfare in the Covid-19 Pandemic,” Health and Social Welfare Review 40, no. 1 (2020): 5–10; Eu Mung, “China’s Social Security Response to COVID19 - Focusing on Social Insurance and Social Assistance Policies,” Global Social Security Review 12 (2020): 107–14; Joon Bum Park, “Policy Platform: the Coronavirus Disease 19 and Health Policy,” The KAPS 60 (2020): 8–11; Chungweon Oh, “A Study on the Spatiality of Sign Language in Perspective of Deaf Geography - In the Case of Corona 19 as Social Disaster Geographic Information,” Geographical Journal of Korea 54, no. 1 (2020): 13–24; Hyoung-sub Shin, Jae-pil Park, and Sung-joong Kim, Disaster and Church: Ministerial and Educational Introspection for COVID-19 and Afterward (Seoul: Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary Press, 2020), 58–70.
19. Nam Soon Kim, “Present and its Tasks of Coronavirus 19,” Health and Social Welfare Issue & Focus 373 (March 2020): 4–13; Mi Ae Oh and Jin A Jeon, “An Analysis on the SNS Big Data of COVID-19,” Health and Social Welfare Issue & Focus 376 (2020): 3–7; Massimo Introvigne et al., “Shincheonji and the COVID-19 Epidemic: Sorting Fact from Fiction,” 70–86.
20. Ibid.
many services as well as various small group meetings through which the positive rate was very high (30 percent). The announcement was shocking for the ordinary Korean people, but there was no useful interaction or communication between the health authority and Shincheonji Church at that time. Meanwhile, the first and sixth deaths due to the outbreak occurred at the Cheongdo Daenam hospital (청도대남병원: which belongs to the Presbyterian Church) during this period. The older brother of the Shincheonji Church’s founder had been previously admitted to the hospital and eventually passed away on January 31, 2020. This raised even more suspicion because many of the NRM members would have visited the country town of Cheongdo (청도) for the pre-funeral, funeral, and post-funeral memorial services over a period of three days: January 30–February 1. The Korean people and the world heard reports regarding facts and assumptions about the Christian NRM for two weeks (24 February–8 March). Sangwook Byun also mentioned the possibility of the Shincheonji gathering in Cheongdo, which is the hometown of eighty-eight-year-old Man Hee Lee (李萬熙), whose childhood house is recognized as a sacred site and preserved as part of a memorial park.21

Thus, the Shincheonji Church inadvertently emerged at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis as a target of social criticism. However, the people of Korea were still unfamiliar with their religious identity (in terms of theology, evangelism, and worship), although it had been negatively evaluated among the traditional denominations of Korean Protestantism, which included around one hundred different Presbyterian factions, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostal, Evangelical Independents, etc.22 The Shincheonji Church is often perceived as a secretive cult, but the theological figure does not mean anything to outsiders (non-Christian religious organizations) due to the Shincheonji Church’s external appearance, which is similar to that of traditional Protestant groups. The church’s founder, Man Hee Lee, was born in 1931 and previously involved in two prophetic communities before launching his own post-millennial movement with the belief that “[they] will

21. Sangwook Byun, “Brother of Man Hee Lee died … a List of 178 People Contributed,” Global News, May 27, 2020, last modified on June 2, 2020, http://www.globanews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=29622.
22. Josh Berlinger, “How One Man’s Epiphany on a Seoul Mountain in 1955 Laid the Foundation for Many Religious Sects in South Korea,” CNN, March 6, 2020, last modified on April 3, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/06/asia/religious-movements-south-korea-intl-hnk/index.html.
soon enter a kingdom of peace that will last for 1,000 years.”

Lee, who was not properly educated under colonial circumstances, participated in the Olive Tree movement (1.5 million followers) of Tae-seon Park (朴泰善, 1915–1990) for ten years (1957–67). Lee became disappointed by Park’s assertion that he himself was God incarnated and higher than Jesus, leading Man Hee Lee to join the Tabernacle Temple movement (Jangmakseongjeon) of Jas Yul Yoo (柳在烈, 1949–). However, when Yoo was arrested for fraud and Pyeong Ho Oh took over the leadership of the Tabernacle Temple movement, Lee independently started the Shincheonji (“New Heaven and New Earth”) movement in Gwacheon (near Seoul) on March 14, 1984. The new movement was based on an apocalyptic interpretation of the biblical book of Revelation. Members seem to have originated “from a Protestant matrix, which is far away from a certain Catholic mysticism of suffering and its unorthodox excesses.” Unlike Tae-seon Park, Lee did not instruct his followers that he is God, instead identifying himself as “the Promised Pastor (약속의 목자)” or “the Teacher (선생님)” — in other words, the only one who could deliver the Word of God. Lee’s existence was defined as the fulfillment of the prophecies of the New Testament.

Once the government suspiciously began investigating the church in relation to its confirmed COVID-19 cases, the actual size of the religion—which was formerly unknown to the public—was revealed to be 311,732. The religion’s 128 church branches were divided into two categories based on membership: official members (212,324) and students (“pre-members”: 66,127). There were 266,500 local members and 35,232 overseas members (in twenty-nine nations and fifty-seven churches). The members’ territorial division was formed in the concept of the Jewish

23. Rosita Šorytė, “Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light: Shincheonji as a Global Social Actor and Its Enemies,” Journal of CESNUS 4, no. 3 (2020): 31.
24. Massimo Introvigne, “Shincheonji: An Introduction,” Journal of CESNUS 4, no. 3 (2020): 3–6.
25. David W. Kim, “South Korea Must Tame Christian Cults or Worsen Coronavirus Spread: New Religious Movements are Potent Force within Country,” Nikkei Asian Review, March 3, 2020, last modified on March 24, 2020, https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/South-Korea-must-tame-Christian-cults-or-worsen-coronavirus-spread.
26. Massimo Introvigne et al., “Shincheonji and the COVID-19 Epidemic: Sorting Fact from Fiction,” 70–86.
27. Introvigne, “Shincheonji: An Introduction,” 10–12.
28. “Shincheonji, Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony,” last modified on May 28, 2020, https://namu.wiki/w/%EC%8B%A0%EC%B2%9C%EC%A7%80%EC%98%88%EC%88%98%EA%B5%90%20%EC%A6%9D%EA%B1%8B%EC%9E%A5%EB%A7%89%EC%84%B1%EC%A0%84.
“Twelve Tribes,” reflecting also the number of Jesus’s disciples. Each branch had the responsibility of enacting the church’s global mission, including the branch in Wuhan city, China, established in 2018. The possibility of a connection between Shincheonji members and the initial spread of the coronavirus was presumed by anti-Shincheonji critics—including the National Association of the Victims of Shincheonji Church (NAVSC) and the Christian Cult Counselling Association of Korea (CCCK)—as well as anti-Christian critics (including atheists).²⁹

Like Korean Protestants, Shincheonji members gather twice a week on Wednesdays and Sundays, following colonial (1920–40s) and 1960–70s worship styles. In what could appear as unhygienic to outsiders, members sit down on the floor in close proximity to each other instead of using chairs or pews in the church hall. They wear a uniform consisting of a white shirt, dark pants, and an identification badge around their necks.³⁰ In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the church’s worship environment was criticized because members’ sitting positions (of less than fifty centimeters apart from one another) could easily diffuse the new virus, especially given that some members would be unaware of their being infected. Introvigne, Fautrê, Šorytê, Amicarelli and Respinti examined the situation through the lens of similar cases across the world where religious minorities had been accused by the public and the state of spreading the virus through regular worship meetings and missionary work.³¹ For example, the French megachurch Porte Ouverte Chrétienne (Christian Open Door) organized an international event with three thousand people between February 17–21, 2020. Subsequently, the church was accused of having many local devotees who were infected, resulting in African participants then carrying the virus to their home countries. The Roman Catholic Neo-Catechumenate movement received similar accusations after holding retreats in Atena Lucanna and Sala Consilina, Italy from February 28 to March 4, 2020. Two people died (including a priest) and sixteen others were infected. However, this occurred before the Italian government restricted public gatherings on March 8. The Muslim

²⁹. Willy Fautrê, “Coercive Change of Religion in South Korea: The Case of the Shincheonji Church,” *Journal of CESNUR* 4, no.3 (2020): 35–56; Šorytê, “Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light: Shincheonji as a Global Social Actor and Its Enemies,” 24–6.
³⁰. David W. Kim and Won-il Bang, “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji: Three Dynamic Grassroots Groups in Contemporary Korean Christian NRM History,” *Religions* 10, no. 3 (2019): 212.
³¹. Massimo Introvigne et al., “Shincheonji and the COVID-19 Epidemic: Sorting Fact from Fiction,” 70–86.
missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat hosted a large meeting in Delhi in early March, and their missionaries were also condemned by the Chief Minister of the Indian State. At first, the Shincheonji church defended its spread of the virus as merely an accident, but the church’s reaction to the official requests of the government and health authority to provide a list and addresses for its members was insincere and inaccurate. The secret policy of the new religion did not even allow police and health authorities access to their organizational information for the purpose of investigation, which consequently caused the nationwide phenomenon of COVID-19. At the time, the neo-Christian religion demonstrated an anti-social character in applying its apocalyptic teachings. Furthermore, individual members were instructed to deny their affiliation with the church if they were asked questions at work. The non-cooperation of Man Hee Lee and his disciples (i.e., key leaders) resulted in political pressure by the regional government of Gyeonggi-do. Jaemyeong Lee, the governor of the province, visited the new religious founder at the residential palace, called the Palace of Peace (평화의 궁전), to discuss taking legal action against the headquarters of the movement. Lee eventually called a press conference on March 2, 2020 and admitted that they made mistakes with their initial reporting process. Although the church had previously reported six thousand cases of intolerance from outsiders, it was undeniable that its leaders’ poor communication skills contributed to the failure to control the spread of the virus in Korea. This, in turn, critically damaged the social reputation of the new religion and other Christian churches.

Prejudice Against the Korean Protestant Church

How did Shincheonji’s negative stereotype affect the sacred image of the broader Korean Protestant Church in digital society? Korea is well known as the last Asian country where Christianity arrived. Nonetheless, a record of the past three decades shows that Korea is home to twenty-three of the fifty largest Christian churches in the world. The Yoido Full Gospel Church (여의도순복음교회: 784,221 members) is the largest, followed by the Grace and Truth Church (은혜와진리교회: 127,426 members). Ironically, the leaders of these two Pentecostal churches—David Yonggi Cho and Yong

32. For more details on the narratives of global cases, see Massimo Introvigne et al., “Shincheonji and the COVID-19 Epidemic: Sorting Fact from Fiction,” 70–86.
33. Ibid., 78–81.
34. Ibid., 83–86.
Mook Cho—are brothers, although they once had a conflicted relationship. The Kumnam Methodist Church (금란감리교회: 91,622 members), Kwanglim Methodist Church (광림감리교회: 81,427 members), Incheon Soong-Eui Methodist Church (인천숭의감리교회: 81,427 members) and Incheon Juan Presbyterian Church (인천 주안장로교회: 72,246 members) also rank among the ten largest churches in the world.35

Kyoo-Man Ha proposed a theory on the social role of religion, which can be seen as both positive and negative. Ha has argued that “Religion plays a positive role when it encourages individuals or organisations to behave morally.”36 For instance, religious institutions tend to support disaster relief and recovery activities in their communities. In contrast, religion can have a negative social role when leaders or believers negatively “interpret scriptural phrases and politically shift the focus of mass media from disaster victims.”37 Where does the Korean Protestant Church stand on this continuum? The Korean government applied the Global Positioning System (GPS) to track the individual movement of citizens as a technological countermeasure for spreading COVID-19. In this regard, the global media responded with both criticism (i.e., Virginie Pradel of the French business magazine Les Echos) and compliments (i.e., the Spanish magazines of El Mundo and El Paso Inc).38 At the same time, the Protestant churches received negative attention due to their lack of a unified policy. As previously mentioned, non-practicing Korean people and social media are often unable recognize the difference between Protestant

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35. The Young Nak Presbyterian Church (55,423 members), Somang Presbyterian Church (44,227 members), Sungrak Baptist Church (30,000 members), and Hyesung Presbyterian Church (23,000 members) also ranked among the fifty largest churches in the world in 2008; Barnabas, “The Membership of Mega Churches and Its Practical Membership,” last modified on May 30, 2020, https://m.blog.naver.com/baanaba/60046275400.
36. Ha, “The Role of Religious Beliefs and Institutions in Disaster Management: a Case Study,” 1315.
37. Ibid., 1316.
38. For criticism, see Virginie Pradel, “Covid-19 et tracage: ne sacrifions pas nos libertés individuelles!,” Les Echos, April 6, 2020, last modified on May 21, 2020, https://www.lesechos.fr/idees-debats/cercle/opinion-covid-19-et-tracage-ne-sacrifions-pas-nos-libertes-individuelles-1192463. For compliments, see Massimo Percossi, “Por qué mueren menos personas en Corea del Sur que en Italia,” El Mundo, March 12, 2020, last modified on April 21, 2020, https://www.elmundo.es/ciencia-y-salud/salud/2020/03/12/5e69561bfc6c83b8058b47d0.html; “Asia Today: 39 New Cases in S. Korea; China defends record,” El Paso Inc, June 4, 2020, last modified on July 12, 2020, http://www.elpasoinc.com/news/ap_wire/business/asia-today-39-new-cases-in-s-korea-china-defends-record/article_cfe33d13-3724-5277-8217-385828a1ac07.html.
denominations and between Protestant denominations and neo-Christian religious groups. Along these lines, Ha once mentioned that “the role of religion in Korea has been largely unexamined.” Protestant churches hold several weekly services (daily early morning prayer meeting, Wednesday service, Friday service and Sunday service) and other regular meetings (cell-group meetings, youth meetings, Sunday school, etc.). In particular, small group meetings (like cell groups) of five to ten families (about ten to twenty people) living in the same neighborhood regularly meet for Bible study and fellowship in each others’ homes. The internal and external activities of the church became a disadvantage during the COVID-19 pandemic and also led to hostile social discrimination. In contrast, other religious groups—including Buddhist Orders, Catholic churches and non-Christian new religions (such as Won Buddhism, Daejonggyo, Daesoon Jinrihoe and Cheondo-gyo)—usually hold fewer weekly or monthly meetings.

More specifically, the Korean Protestant Church, including the Presbyterian (Yejang Hap-Dong (합동), Tong-Hap (통합) and Koshin (고신)), Pentecostal, Baptist, Methodist and Anglican churches, became involved in a socio-political conflict with the government due to the campaign of social distancing. Based on Lifeway Research, most of the American churches (99 percent) held normal services on the first Sunday of March; however, 93 percent of churches held online services on the last Sunday of that month. The Barna research group predicted that Easter services would follow the same pattern. Ultimately, 58 percent of pastors prepared online services while only 2 percent held Easter services at church. Likewise, all Korean religious groups voluntarily

39. Ha, “The Role of Religious Beliefs and Institutions in Disaster Management: a Case Study,” 1314–29.
40. The Korean Presbyterian Church has been divided into two factions since the 1950s due to the colonial issue of Shinto worship: liberal Kijang (The Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, 韓國基督教會長老會: 284,000 in 2016) and conservative Yejang (The General Assembly of Presbyterian Church in Korea, 大韓基督敎會長老會). The Yejang faction was also separated into many groups including Hap-Dong (합동: 2.65 million in 2018), Tong-Hap (통합: 2.55 million in 2018), Baek Seok (백석: 1.5 million in 2018), and Koshin (고신: 423,000 in 2018).
41. Hairan Woo, “The World of the Pre-COVID-19 Will Never Come Back,” Re-reading Religious Culture, last modified April 14, 2020, http://kirc.or.kr/hermeneut/hermeneut_03.php?mode=view&tblname=BBS_21&page=4&seqid=953; “Most Churches Have Stopped Gathering, Few Plan to Meet on Easter,” Lifeway Research, April 2, 2020, last modified on June 24, 2020, https://lifewayresearch.com/2020/04/02/most-churches-have-stopped-gathering-few-plan-to-meet-on-easter/.
42. “Church Leaders Share Their Plans for (Digital) Easter 2020,” Barna, April 1, 2020, last modified on August 11, 2020, https://www.barna.com/research/digital-easter-2020/.
restricted their own activities. For example, the Korean Catholic Church stopped all mass services for the first time in its 236 years.\textsuperscript{43} The National Association of Korean Buddhism also closed the doors of its temples. None of these groups received significant criticism from the media. On the other hand, the Korean Protestant Church, which is often operated by individual denominations or sects, was not unified in its response. Out of 45,420 churches, 26,104 (57.5 percent) began holding online services on March 23, 2020.\textsuperscript{44} However, Easter was exceptional in that 34.5 percent of the megachurches (412) were still holding services in their major halls. These included, for instance, Sarang Church (Yejang Hap-Dong: 사랑의 교회), Onnuri Church (Yejang Tong-Hap: 은누리 교회) and Yonsei Central Baptist Church (연세중앙침례교회), even though 59.7 percent (246 churches) conducted their services online. Further, out of 6,400 churches in Seoul, 1,914 convened their services in large halls, while most churches across the world performed online services. Over 50 percent of Protestant churches (1,269 out of 2,075) in Chungbuk Province encouraged members to attend church for Easter.\textsuperscript{45}

The churches that remained open followed public regulations in terms of sterilization, disinfection, social distancing, and respiratory system protection. Nonetheless, the health authority still worried about them and visited local churches to provide supervision. The Korean government also suggested that churches refrain from organizing small group meetings or providing lunch after Sunday services—both of which are long-established traditions.\textsuperscript{46} Unfortunately, confirmed cases started to appear among members of local churches. The Oncheon Presbyterian Church (온천장로교회), for example, had thirty-eight confirmed cases in Busan. A minister of the Myungsung Presbyterian Church in Seoul

\textsuperscript{43} However, there is an opposite view that the Catholic Church did not have regular Mass until the 1830s. From 1784 until 1785, and again from 1801 until 1832, there were no priests in Korea, so there was no Mass. The persecutions after the 1830 also stopped holding Mass for a while.

\textsuperscript{44} Hyoung-sub Shin, Jae-pil Park, and Sung-joong Kim, \textit{Disaster and Church: Ministerial and Educational Introspection for the COVID-19 and Afterward} (in Korean) (Seoul: Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary Press, 2020), 101–5, last modified on October 14, 2020, http://www.goodnews1.com/news/news_view.asp?seq=97790; Hairan Woo, “The World of the Pre-COVID-19 Will Never Come Back,” \textit{Re-reading Religious Culture}, last modified on April 14, 2020, http://kirc.or.kr/hermeneut/hermeneut_03.php?module=view&tbname=BBS_21&page=4&seqid=953.

\textsuperscript{45} “Church Open for Easter ... Korean and American Churches conflict with the Government,” \textit{The Korea Economic Daily}, April 11, 2020.

\textsuperscript{46} “Church Open Its Doors ... Experts Say It Is Not Time,” News1, March 13, 2020, last modified on June 25, 2020, https://www.news1.kr/articles/?3871282.
(명성장로교회: 100,000 members) was confirmed as a coronavirus patient. As a result, all churches in Korea had to stop offering services on site. The churches’ stance against social distancing caused the government to change its attitude toward Protestant Christianity, which, unlike Catholic, Buddhist, and new religious groups, is diverse (10 million in 2017) and complicated in organization, lacking a united leadership. President Moon also stated that “if we manage Easter and the National Election well, we can change over the strict regulations of prevention into the casual method of life prevention (생활방역: modified norms).” Insofar as the Korean government often avoids direct interaction with religious organizations, including Protestant Christianity, President Moon’s statement was not intended for a particular Protestant group but was meant as a general promotion of prevention. The personal belief of Moon—as a Catholic devotee—may be also relevant for his religious compassion rather than criticism.

Moreover, the Korean Protestant Church (mainly megachurches) had been previously criticized over various controversial issues, such as the precedent of pastors’ sons ‘inheriting’ the church, and leaders’ corruption exhibited in their Ph.D. plagiarism. The media’s emphasis on the Korean Church’s campaigns against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning (LGBTIQ) community and Islamic refugees seeking asylum also led to harsh criticism from liberal citizens. Additionally, the elected president of the Christian Council of Korea (CCK), Rev. 47. The COVID-19 cases also increased due to the Korean government’s geopolitical policy, which still allowed foreigners—including Chinese people—to arrive in Korea. By June 12, 2020, the number of confirmed cases due to foreign travel (Asian, American, and European) and Korean nationals was 1,325. See “Coronavirus Disease-19, Republic of Korea,” Central Disaster Management Headquarters, last modified on June 1, 2020, http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en/.

48. The National Election Commission (NEC) proceeded with the national election of Members of the Parliament (MP) on April 15, 2020. Forty-three million citizens (including 170,000 Koreans living overseas) were invited to vote. Under a strict prevention plan, the election was successful and did not lead to a major outbreak of the virus. See Bruce Klingner, “South Korea Goes to the Polls despite COVID-19 Pandemic,” The Diplomat: Tokyo, April 10, 2020, last modified on September 2, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/south-korea-goes-to-the-polls-despite-covid-19-pandemic/. See also, “Church Open for Easter… Korean and American Churches Conflict with the Government.”

49. In this regard, the political orientation of Korean Protestant churches is generally divided into two perspectives. The Kijang faction is more accepting of Moon’s policies, including his social method for controlling the virus. The Yejang faction, which comprises the vast majority of Korea’s Protestants, has a history of opposition to progressive governments such as Moo-hyun Roh’s (2003–2008) and Jae-In Moon’s (2017–). In that way, it is possible to presume that the current government might concern itself with the liberal Kijang Christians, to stay away from large church gatherings in a broader concept.
Kwang-hoon Jeon—who led several national rallies (each featuring ten to thirty thousand protesters) during the period of social distancing to protest against cults, gender minorities, and abortion—was arrested by Seoul city officials on February 24, 2020.51 The main motto of those campaigns was connected to the social conflict between religious freedom and minority human rights, where the domain of the latter gradually extends to take over the original domain of the former. Jeon and his strongly conservative supporters had been levelling several charges against the Moon administration.

Moreover, on September 6, the Korean government disappointingly announced 1,162 confirmed patients from the Sarang Jeil Presbyterian Church (SJC, 사랑제일교회: 5,300 members) where Kwang-hoon Jeon serves as the senior minister. Unfortunately, many of those cases stemmed from church members’ participation in a political protest of approximately forty-seven thousand people against the current government, on the seventy-fifth Independent day (15 August). This protest, in turn, contributed significantly to Korea’s experience of the second wave of the pandemic in August 2020.52 The government’s friendly policies regarding North Korea aggravated conservative citizens, including many

50. Şorytê, “Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light: Shincheonji as a Global Social Actor and Its Enemies,” 24–6.
51. Ibid.
52. Due to the second wave of the pandemic, wherein Korea had between three and four hundred new infections per day, the government upgraded the level of prevention to the second stage. Accordingly, all Protestant churches were legally

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**Figure 2.** The Second Wave of the Pandemic in South Korea © Bloomberg, last modified on October 07, 2020, bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-08/seoul-to-restrict-restaurants-and-cafes-stem-virus-resurgence.
Christian organizations who criticized Moon as a North Korean agent. Here, one can presume that Jeon’s fundamentalist theology and his defiance of the health authorities are typical of the arrogant attitude of Protestant church leaders towards the general public and current liberal government. As a result, despite the voices of other church leaders to counter-balance the political attitude of Jeon and his people, society externally started to exhibit an aggressive attitude towards the Korean Protestant Church. Many religious hospitals (Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Won Buddhist, and Daesoon) contributed both to enhancing the role of religious communities and treating COVID-19, which distinguishes them from groups like Shincheonji. Yet, the Korean Church induced socio-political panic and was seen as an unreliable and hostile organization.\[53\]

Other Korean Protestant Churches’ Countermeasures for the Post–COVID–19 Era

Some churches, on the other hand, strived for retroflexion in order to recover their public trust or respect. Various methods of alternative services were suggested by local churches in Korea. The Onnuri Church (온누리교회), Seoul City Church (서울시티교회), Seoul Full Gospel Church (서울순복음교회), and Daejeon Jongmun Church (대전중문교회) implemented the so-called Drive-in-Service, where members would remain in their cars in the parking lot while the minister preached through a radio channel from a visible place where all members could see him/her.\[54\] The Grace Dream Church (은혜드림교회) in Gimcheon city (in the southern-central region of South Korea) adopted the concept of a Drive Through Communion.\[55\] Registered members who were baptized were able to receive the sacred cup and bread symbolizing the blood and body of Jesus as they drove through the church grounds.

Starting in the middle of May 2020, local churches began welcoming members back in a limited way, encouraging members to prohibited from hosting any form of on-site service from August 23, 2020 on, which was stricter than the situation of the first outbreak in February 2020.\[53\] The third pandemic wave that occurred at the end of 2020 was less related with churches, but with vulnerable people in aged care centers and prisons, while the emergence of the highly infectious COVID-19 variant from the UK was reported in Korea on December 22. This article does not explore the details of Korea's third wave (November 2021–January 2021) as it is still going on at the time of its writing.\[54\] Woo, “The World of the pre-COVID-19 Will Never Come Back.” \[55\] Ibid.
wear masks and practice social distancing (i.e., leaving a two-meter gap between one another when sitting). The on-site service first opened up to adult members (comprising 20–30 percent of the members at the beginning), while vulnerable populations (the elderly, children, pregnant women, and people with underlying disease) were still encouraged to stay at home for the online services. Individual churches set out to check members’ temperatures and disinfect their hands, as well as the whole church building, prior to services.

The number of church services was increased to safely accommodate those returning adult members under the social distancing policy. QR codes and SNS messages were used to identify membership. Despite these precautions, a few churches still continued to have confirmed cases. For example, 131 cases were confirmed at local churches in the Chungnam Province; infected people included both pastors and members. Therefore, most churches did not allow newcomers, in order to reduce the possibility of infection.

Given these circumstances, how could churches re-ignite their growth and/or outreach after the COVID-19 pandemic? The 2020 survey of the Christian Ethics Movement of Korea (CEMK) on the credibility of the Protestant Churches indicated that 31.8 percent

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56. “After Sunday Service, 190 Members were Confirmed,” The Segye Times, April 1, 2020.
of Koreans trust Korean churches, where 63.9 percent do not. The distrust rate of the church increased from 51.2 percent in 2017.\textsuperscript{57}

The CEMK commented on the future of Korean churches, stating that external churchism, which pursues and promotes materialism, will decline. It is also possible that churches’ finances will decrease. Rural churches might face this reality before urban and megachurches. Doohyun Kim, director of the 21st Century Church Growth Institute, assumed that 30 percent of the Korean churches would face financial difficulties in late 2020.\textsuperscript{58} However, while the leaders of the Korean Protestant Church across denominations bring forth practical solutions to overcome this pandemic situation, the devotional attitude of Korean Christians toward tithing (generally 70–90 percent of church members) and general offerings (mission, social aid, thanksgiving, and special events) would make the rest of the church last at least two to three years. The financial stability is seen in the fact that Korean churches have sent the second-most missionaries (approximately twenty thousand full-time Christian workers) in the world after the United States.

\textit{Kookmin Ilbo}, a national Christian newspaper, once reported that “COVID-19 brought the church into the world of a super-connectivity through online media.”\textsuperscript{59} If this is the case for all churches in Korea, local Christian communities should focus on the individual value and intimacy that they can foster among their members.\textsuperscript{60} In terms of a “re-church planting campaign (다시 교회 세움 운동)”, the \textit{untact} ministry (=no-contact ministry)—where pastors do not engage with members in person—was suggested as a practical option. Online meetings likely need to replace the traditional style of in-person visitation and counseling, even though such a phenomenon tends to cause more unused space in churches. The \textit{World View}, published by the Christian Worldview Studies Association of Korea (CWSAK), reported that Sunday services will be replaced either by online services or by cell (house) group services, but the Korean Protestant Church is not satisfied with the supposition.\textsuperscript{61} Rather, they are preparing to keep the

\textsuperscript{57} It seems that this credibility issue may reflect the current problems of Protestant churches in the eyes of the general public. See the Christian Ethics Movement of Korea (CEMK), “the Credibility of the Protestant Churches in 2020,” last modified on November 10, 2020, file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/2020_%ED 95%9C%EA%B5%AD%EB5%90%ED%9A%8C%EC%8B%A0%EB%A2%B0%EB%8F%84 %EC%A1%B0%EC%82%AC_%EC%9E%90%EB%A3%8C%EC%A7%91%EC%B5%9C%EC% A2%85.pdf

\textsuperscript{58} “Recovering of Worship Environment is Priority … Let the Korean Church declare a D-Day,” \textit{Kookmin Ilbo}, May 12, 2020.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{60} “The External Churchism will Decline but Internal Connectivity Will Be Focused,” \textit{Kookmin Ilbo}, May 11, 2020.
regular patterns of meetings and fellowship in the post-COVID-19 era, viewing the pandemic as a catastrophe but not the end of the world.

Furthermore, local Christians of different denominations have indicated their willingness to cooperate toward a win-win situation or coexistence. The motto, “Instead of saying ‘what can the church do?’ let us ask ‘what can we do together?’” has encouraged local church leaders. They have also been inspired by the idea that “a time of crisis is a moment of opportunity.” The Protestant churches, which are divided into different denominations and orders, have started to incorporate the concept of Úisasot’ong (意思疏通, human communication). This concept has been explained within the context of an amicable relationship to achieve common benefits, whether those relationships are personal, organizational, or national.

More practically, Rev. Dr. Kang Suk So (소강석), President of the Yejang Hap-Dong faction (the largest denomination in the Korean Protestant Church with 2.65 million members, 11,758 churches, 37,983 ministers, and 2,557 missionaries [101 nations] in 2018), promoted a “D-day” (Day of Normalization) where all churches in the nation would choose a particular Sunday for all Christians to attend church together. He expects that 70–80 percent of church members would return to their churches through the interdenominational campaign of Úisasot’ong. A survey demonstrated that 85 percent of Korean Christians believe that attending church on Sunday is a natural duty of their religious life. The senior minister of the Sae Eden Church (새에덴교회: twenty

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61. “World View,” Christian Worldview Studies Association of Korea (CWSAK), last modified on May 30, 2020, https://www.worldview.or.kr/library/series/worldview.
62. Shin, Park, and Kim, Disaster and Church: Ministerial and Educational Introspection for the COVID-19 and Afterward, 230.
63. “The External Churchism will Decline but Internal Connectivity Will Be Focused.”
64. In terms of preparing for D-day, So suggested a couple of ideas: (1) reformatting the service style; (2) preparing inspirational messages (heart-to-heart); (3) establishing expectations for returning to church; (4) encouraging connections between members; (5) encouraging connections between the church and its members; (6) organizing special prayer meetings; (7) sending postcards of greetings; and (8) welcoming members as if they belong to a royal family. See Kang Suk So, Future of the Post-COVID-19 Korean Church (Seoul: Qumran Press, 2020), 122–46; “Masks and Social Distance… Sunday Service was Perfect for Prevention,” Kookmin Ilbo, May 11, 2020; “Countermeasure of the Korean Church… Let us Prepare the Sunday in May,” Mission Life, April 27, 2020.
65. “Recovering of Worship Environment is Priority… Let the Korean Church declare a D-Day”; “Asking the Way of the Korean Church for the post-COVID-19 Era,” PCK Newspaper, May 12, 2020.
thousand members) also suggested the establishment of a control tower of united Korean churches (including Tong-Hap [2.55 million in 2018], Baek Seok [1.5 million in 2018] and Koshin [423,000 in 2018]) to improve their public image in secular society. The harmonious practice can offer an initial solution to the current crisis of the Protestant churches. Adopting local culture and media was considered as a way of communicating with the government and social organizations. An emphasis has also been placed on reacting systematically against biased groups (including anti-Christians) that purposely deceive individual Christians and churches to achieve their politico-ideological goals.66

Establishing a Christian YouTube ecosystem was also proposed as part of the Korean churches’ extensive countermeasures. Voluntary dedication is another practice through which its reputation can be recovered, just as with its previous involvement in the “MT Hebei Spirit Oil Spill” (허베이 스피리트호 유류유출사고: 2007) and “Sinking of MV Sewol” (세월호침몰: 2014) incidents.67 Thus, other Korean Protestant churches have proposed the new launch of a “re-church planting campaign (다시 교회세움운동)” for the post-COVID-19 era.68 These practices do not aim to establish a traditional new church but to replace the church’s methodological pattern of faith to adapt to the virtual generation of digital society in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

In the last two decades, the global community has experienced the transnational spread of unique viruses caused by wide movements of animals and humans. The socio-economic crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic likewise affected most nations. Among them, the outbreak in South Korea was closely related to Christian organizations, which generally have many weekly services and meetings. The first impact (February–March 2020) was fueled by the negligence of a Shincheonji member. Although the new religious group was not a part of the traditional Protestant churches, 66. “Recovering of Worship Environment is Priority… Let the Korean Church declare a D-Day.”
67. Many Christians, whether belonging to local churches as groups or individuals, volunteered during these two national incidents. Their sacrificial commitment was often more visual than the action of other religious organizations.
68. So, Future of the Post-COVID-19 Korean Church, 221–46; “Will the Korean Church Recover after the COVID-19?” Mission Life, May 12, 2020; “Countermeasure of the Korean Church… Let us prepare the Sunday in May,” Mission Life, April 27, 2020.
their false report in response to the Korean government’s request caused a loss of public trust and imperiled the future survival of the Korean Protestant Church, which also pushed keeping on-site services (on Sundays and Wednesdays) under the discontented supervision of the local government. The fact that ordinary people and health authorities could not distinguish Shincheonji’s cultic pattern of rituals from orthodox Christian churches was another problem that increased secular prejudice in the process of applying emergency prevention procedures. The Protestant Church, then, became the public scapegoat insofar as it was blamed as the primary spreader of the fatal disease.

When the second wave (August–September 2020) of the pandemic came to Korea, Korean society and media again suspected that the participation of the Sarang Jeil Church (SJC, 사랑제일교회, a mega-conservative Presbyterian community; 4,066 followers) in an anti-government protest (ten thousand to thirty thousand protesters) might have accelerated the resurgence of COVID-19 nationwide. As a result, both Christian leaders (Man Hee Lee, founder of Shincheonji, and Kwang-hoon Jeon, SJC senior minister) were accused over the charge of the virus proliferation. Jeon, who was one of the main organizers of the Independence Day rally, was even known to have been infected and hospitalized. Nonetheless, these social patterns of infection imply that the Korean Protestant Church was unfortunate in its contribution to spreading the disease, given that COVID-19 outbreaks can happen at any time, in any place, and to any person—including prime ministers and national leaders. The first outbreak was an accident by a member of the new religion, while the leadership (like Jeon’s) of conservative Christians was blamed for the second wave.

This article has demonstrated that some Protestant churches, in terms of a socio-cultural retroflexion, have tried to introduce the countermeasure of “re-church planting” (다시교회세움) for the post-COVID-19 era. Under such unprecedented circumstances, they believe that the practices of the untact ministry (= no-contact ministry) should be adopted by each local church through online media. They encouraged the principle of Ûisasot’ong, by which they can establish a network of communication among

69. Including UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson; the EU’s Chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnie; French Culture Minister Franck Riester; the Leader of the Italian Democratic Party Nicola Zingaretti; Polish General Jarosaw Mika; Germany’s General Commander of Branches of the Armed Forces Friedrich Merz; Spanish Deputy Prime Minister Carmen Calvo and Equality Minister Irene Montero; the wife of the Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez; Princess Maria Teresa of Spain; Prince Albert II of Monaco; Australian Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton; and the wife of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.
churches, leaders, and members. The interdenominational suggestion of a “D-day” (Day of Normalization) represented a nationwide campaign to motivate individual followers when legally permitted. The cooperative ideas of a national management, united communication with the government, protection policy against anti-Christian groups, and social aid, were seen as the experimental model of grassroots churches across the world that must engage in a process of social recovery, particularly in Europe and America.