

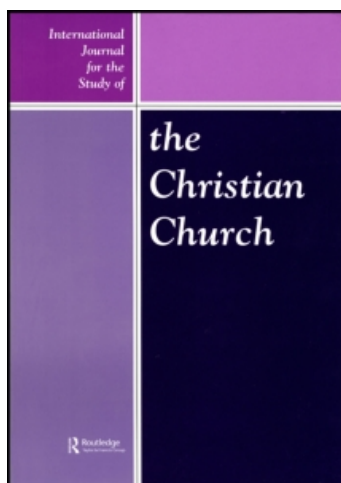
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‘Serving Two Masters’: Protestant Churches in Korea and Money

Gil-Soo Han, Joy J. Han and Andrew Eungi Kim

Materialism or religio-economic entrepreneurship has been a primary impetus for the explosive growth of Protestant churches in Korea, especially since the 1960s, when rapid industrialisation began to propel Korean society into tremendous economic prosperity. However, since the early 1990s, there has been stagnation, even decline. The primary aim of this article is to identify the most pressing problems facing the Korean Protestant churches and show how these problems have begun to render them less vibrant and possibly to bring about decline in their membership. More specifically, the article identifies how materialism, having deeply penetrated Korean Christianity, led it first to grow and then decline; thus robbing it of its requisite or intrinsic organisational characteristics – being the light and salt of the world.

Keywords: Korean Protestant churches; materialism; religio-economic entrepreneurship; church growth; church decline; over-supply of clergy; church individualism

Introduction

One of the curiosities about South Korea that has been most frequently noted outside the country for the past two decades is the explosive growth of the Korean Protestant churches. Many inquiring church-goers are well aware of the Yeouido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, which is the largest congregation in the world with more than half a million members, and of the prevalence of other such mega churches in South Korea. What many of them are not aware of is the extent to which Korean Christianity has been influenced by materialism, inter-church competition and neoliberal market ideology, the philosophy which upholds the free market as the ideal model for the contemporary globalising capitalist economy.¹ The Korean churches’ explosive growth since the 1960s has been remarkable, as shown in Table 1. According to the World Christian Database, there are 139 Protestant denominations in Korea² and all except 13 denominations have significantly grown for three decades since 1970, with growth rates ranging from 0.57% to 77.62%. However, churches began to stagnate in the mid-1980s and have been declining in

¹Foltz, ‘The Religion of the Market’.

²The WCD incorporates the core data from the *World Christian Encyclopaedia* (WCE) and *World Christian Trends* (WCT) – <http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org>; Ministry of Culture and Tourism suggests 170 denominations.

Table 1. Number of Christians in Korea for selected years.

Year	1960	1970	1980	1985	1991	1995	2005 ³
No. of Christians	623,072	3,192,621	7,180,627	6,489,282	8,070,540	8,760,336	8,616,438

Source: Compiled from multiple sources by Noh.⁴

membership since the mid-1990s.⁵ This downward trend was clearly pronounced in the Korean government's 2005 Population Census data.⁶

One of the possible reasons for the recent decline in the Korean Protestant churches is that they have attempted the 'impossible' task of serving two masters – God and money.⁷ The failure of this attempt is deduced from the public reputation of Protestant Christianity in Korea, which has reached the all-time low of its century-long presence. Indeed, a survey regarding perceptions of Korea's Protestant churches found that both Protestant church-goers and the rest of the Korean population agree in perceiving a preoccupation with: quantitative growth; too many denominations and a lack of co-operation amongst churches; church individualism; and the churches' inability to provide their members with practical support and guidance for everyday life. Protestant church-goers further expressed the view that clergy are greedy and self-centred.⁸ Korean media reports have covered the 'public' problems of Korean Christianity on numerous occasions, and there have been some theological and social scientific reflections with reference to Korean Christianity's pursuit of materialism.⁹

Korean Christianity's pursuit of materialism is partly due to strong fundamentalist¹⁰ and shamanistic beliefs.¹¹ More importantly in the context of this article, nearly all, that is up to 95%, of Protestants in Korea are evangelical in their beliefs.¹²

³National Statistical Office, *Ingumit Jutaeok Chongjosa* [National census].

⁴Noh, 'Hanguk Gidokgyo Sindosu Byeonhwa' [A study of the change in the number of Christians and a non-growth of Christianity in Korea], 121–2.

⁵Noh, *Hanguk Gaesinyo Sahoehak* [A sociology of Korean Protestantism], 17. NB This article uses throughout the 'Revised Romanization of Korean', which is the current and official Korean language romanisation system in South Korea. At the time of writing, there is debate over which system might be most appropriate.

⁶S.-J. Kim, *Hanguk Gyohoeui Ilgopgaji Joeak* [The seven sins of the Korean church], 8.

⁷Matt. 6.24; Latouche, 'The Golden Calf is the Conqueror of God'.

⁸Han Mi Jun, *Hanguk Gaesinyoin-ui Gyohoehwaldong* [A survey report of activities and beliefs of Korean Protestant church-goers], 71.

⁹Nonetheless, Korean Christianity has achieved not only quantitative growth in the last few decades but also qualitative growth by concertedly attending to disenfranchised groups of society, sending large numbers of missionaries overseas and providing church-goers with well-informed, quality instruction in how to be 'the light and salt of the world'. It is not known exactly what proportion of Korean churches is included in such instances of positive qualitative development. *Gukmin Ilbo*, 'Hanguk, Seongyosa Pasong Segye 3wi' [Korea, third in the world for the number of missionaries sent]; Korea World Missions Association, '2008 Seongyosa Pasong Hyeonhwang' [Facts and figures of dispatched missionaries in 2008].

¹⁰Appraising fundamentalism *per se* is beyond the scope of this article, which seeks, rather, to discuss the socio-economic consequences of the so-called fundamentalism that has been practiced in Korea.

¹¹W.S. Han, 'Hangukgyohoe-ui Yangjeok Seongjang' [Quantitative growth of the Korean church and the values of Korean Christians]; Jang, *Shamanism in Korean Christianity*.

¹²T. Lee, 'Beleaguered Success'. Lee also provides other studies on this figure and debate.

Bearing this in mind, unless stated otherwise, we specifically focus here, on evangelical Protestant churches or *Bogeujuuija*, thus covering most Korean Protestant Christians. This article is a case study of the influence of global capitalism and neoliberalism on them,¹³ and its purpose is to bring together and illustrate the depth of the problems of Korean Christianity mired in its handling of money.¹⁴

Past studies of the growth and decline of the Korean church

Many scholars attempted to explain the remarkable growth of the Korean churches, particularly in the 1980s, when the phenomenon had become apparent. Wan-Sang Han¹⁵ pointed out that the fundamentalist aspect of Korean Christianity differentiated ‘pure’ from ‘impure’ and ‘orthodox’ from ‘heterodox’, leading to church splits, though also to further separate growth.¹⁶ In one of the most pertinent studies on the topic in the 1980s, Byong-Suh Kim¹⁷ took into consideration such issues as industrialisation and urbanisation, social instability and political insecurity as well as ‘the motivational aspect of the individual converts’. B. Kim contended that Koreans suffered from instability and stress, or anomie caused by the intense wave of industrialisation and growth-oriented economic policy, and that the church offered them a haven in their quest for certainty on matters of ultimate concern, self-identity, and the social meaning of reality.¹⁸ Church-goers who maintain their indigenous belief systems such as shamanistic fetishism, have been inclined to seek blessings in material wealth, good health, and other forms of personal and financial well-being.¹⁹ Some clergy have stressed and offered a better life ‘here and now’, not merely in the ‘hereafter’ – the so-called prosperity gospel. B. Kim’s²⁰ findings are important insights that contribute to the understanding of church growth, in that he looks for explanatory factors in Korean society as well as within the churches and at their nexus. Although Ill-Soo Kim²¹ and others rightly identified schism as a factor contributing to eventual church growth, their explanations were less than comprehensive.²² Part of the reason may be that it was only in the 1990s that the negative consequences of the over-supply of Protestant clergy in Korea became apparent; the crucial ‘supply’ dimension of church growth was not fully considered in their studies. Supply/demand congruence theory will be further addressed below.

¹³Comaroff and Comaroff, ‘Millennial Capitalism’.

¹⁴Questioning the underside of the so-called ‘success of Korean Christianity’ may sound like a novel question to non-Korean readers, but has been a familiar task in Korea for the past two decades. The studies dealing with this in the West include Han, *Social Sources of Church Growth*; T. Lee, ‘Beleagued Success’; B. Kim, ‘Modernization and Korean Protestant Religiosity’.

¹⁵W.S. Han, ‘Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Yangjeok Seongjang’ [Quantitative growth of the Korean church and the values of Korean Christians].

¹⁶Yi, ‘Hanguk Gyohoeui Bunyeol’ [The schism of the Korean church and its historical origins].

¹⁷B. Kim, ‘The Explosive Growth of the Korean Church Today’, 62.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 69, 71.

¹⁹Cf. Grayson, ‘Ch’udo Yebae’.

²⁰B. Kim, ‘The Explosive Growth of the Korean Church Today’, 62.

²¹I. Kim, ‘Organizational Patterns of Korean-American Methodist Churches’.

²²B. Kim, ‘Hanguk Gyohoe Hyeonsang-ui Sahoehakjeok Ihae’ [A sociological understanding of the Korean church phenomenon]; Barret, *World Christianity Encyclopedia*; Chang, ‘Gyopa Bunyeolsang Jeongmal Antakkawayo’ [Heart-wrenching denominational splits].

Since the mid-1990s, the phenomenon of Korean church growth has prompted many more studies.²³ An insightful and analytical study by Chi-Jun Noh is noteworthy.²⁴ A highly useful insight of this research is its demonstration of how the selfsame central factors that contributed to growth have consequently contributed to decline as well. Noh has traced the growth of Korean churches by examining three central factors of recent decades: the structural transformation of Korean society through industrialisation; the close affinity between Christianity and modernity; and individual congregational pursuit into expansionism.²⁵ To elaborate Noh's findings in more detail: first, the process of rapid industrialisation and economic development since the 1960s has engendered occupational and residential shifts, e.g., mass migration from rural to urban areas.²⁶ This process has necessarily caused psychological tensions, perceptions of relative deprivation, social displacement. The church has been a refuge for a large number of people. However, continued industrialisation and rapid changes in Korean society have also gradually equipped the Korean population with the ability to adjust to these psychological tensions and insecurities. Further, Koreans have evidently begun to reap the fruits of economic development, increasingly focusing on their leisure, entertainment and consumption, especially since the success of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Church has become less significant in people's lives than it previously was.²⁷

Second, since Korean independence from Japan in 1945, Korea's agenda of anti-communism, economic development and westernisation have been strongly modernist. Korean Christianity was known to be closely aligned to modernism or modernity in its approach toward modern science, education and technology. This alliance has been an influential factor in leading people to church. However, since the 1980s, a series of new trends have emerged in Korean society, such as anti-Americanism, a rejection of the ideology defined during the Cold War; and the reappraisal and acceptance of 'old' Korean traditions as well as of prevalent secular values, which tend to stand in opposition to modernism and Christianity in Korea.²⁸

Third, the Korean churches have been characterised by expansionism, strongly underpinned by 'church-individualism'.²⁹ Expansion-oriented policies were

²³About a dozen books have been published on this topic – one of the most recent being G.-S. Yi, *Daehyeong Gyohoega Manghaeya* [Mega churches must perish for the Korean church to live]; also S.-J. Kim, *Hanguk Kyohoeui Ilgogaji Joeak* [The seven sins of the Korean church]; S.-S. Yi, *Churakhaneum Hanguk Gyohoe* [The falling Korean churches]. However, most of these books are written for popular interest although they contain some useful insights on the 'real' problems of the churches.

²⁴Noh, 'Hanguk Gidokgyo Sindosu Byeonhwa' [A study of the change in the number of Christians and a non-growth of Christianity in Korea]. Similar findings have been demonstrated by J.-S. Kim, 'Hanguk Gaesinyo Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study on the church-individualism and growth]; Lee, 'Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Seongjanggwa geu Dunhwa' [A sociological study on the factors for church growth and decline].

²⁵Noh, 'Hanguk Gidokgyo Sindosu Byeonhwa' [A study of the change in the number of Christians and a non-growth of Christianity in Korea].

²⁶Baker, 'Sibling Rivalry', 299; A. Kim, 'The Rise of Protestantism'.

²⁷Noh, 'Hanguk Gidokgyo Sindosu Byeonhwa' [A study of the change in the number of Christians and a non-growth of Christianity in Korea], 147; cf. Han, *Social Sources of Church Growth*; Han, 'Rapid Industrialization, the Birth of Religio-economic Entrepreneurship'.

²⁸Noh, 'Hanguk Gidokgyo Sindosu Byeonhwa' [A study of the change in the number of Christians and a non-growth of Christianity in Korea], 147.

²⁹C. Noh notes that church-individualism is an approach or policy whereby an individual congregation sets its own goals and undertakes its own missions; and invests human and

legitimised not only by the churches' economic subsistence, but also by evangelism and church growth theology.³⁰ However, this continuing trend brought about the infiltration of secular motives, and a decline in the 'quality' of church-goers. A further expression of self-destructive expansionism was evident until the 1970s and 1980s, when church-individualism was a catalyst for growth through the accommodation of those who suffered from social displacement and relative deprivation. However, when this was vigorously pursued, the churches became demographically concentrated and effectively exclusive, losing public and social support as a consequence. These tendencies provided the Korean public and existing church-goers with little incentive to maintain church association.³¹

Another significantly plausible suggestion has been posited by Cheol Yi.³² Still working within the general parameters of supply and demand theory, Yi introduces the role of supply and emphasises it in explaining church growth and decline. Yi³³ points out that most studies of church growth have sought answers from Korean society's political, economic, social and cultural changes and have suggested that the resulting tension and relative deprivation led Korean people to *demand* religious needs. Yi³⁴ is not convinced by this *demand* approach and argues that the limit of its explanatory power corresponds with contemporary debate over the demise of the so-called secularisation thesis.³⁵ Instead, Yi suggests that it is rather the *supply* side that should be identified as a significant source of the growth and decline of religion.³⁶ Essentially, Yi's suggestion is that recent church decline can be examined through rational choice theory, i.e., that which Christianity *supplies* has become problematic in meeting the needs of the public or potential church-goers. Yi goes on to suggest that the over-supply of clergy or hyper-competition among them, and consumers' possible development of resentment towards the church have been problematic. The church's preoccupation with consumers' preferences and expectations may have blemished the principles of Christian teaching, in turn leading some 'potential customers' to turn away from Christianity.³⁷ Moreover, the emergence of functional alternatives such as new leisure activities and the New Age Movement has meant a relatively weaker position for Christianity in Korean society.³⁸

These studies are insightful, as they clearly situate church as a social institution in the broader context of rapidly changing Korean society. However, while these studies of the Korean church remain convincing and share much in common in their explanations with the findings of Han's study, most studies of the Korean churches

material resources in order to maintain and expand the individual congregation as an organisation, see Noh, 'Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study of church-individualism in Korean Christianity], 81.

³⁰Pak, 'Gyohoe Seongjang Mueosi Munjeinga?' [Church growth theology, what is wrong with it?], 19–21.

³¹Noh, 'Hanguk Gidokgyo Sindosu Byeonhwa' [A study of the change in the number of Christians and a non-growth of Christianity in Korea], 148.

³²C. Yi, 'Sesokhwa Irongwa Gyohoe Seongjang' [Secularisation thesis and church growth].

³³Ibid., 66.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Swatos, Jr and Christiano, 'Secularisation Theory'; Secularisation thesis still offers much insight in analysing Protestant churches in the context of the Korean society and it may be premature to declare the demise of the secularisation thesis.

³⁶C. Yi, 'Sesokhwa Irongwa Gyohoe Seongjang' [Secularisation thesis and church growth], 66.

³⁷Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*.

³⁸C. Yi, 'Sesokhwa Irongwa Gyohoe Seongjang' [Secularisation thesis and church growth], 66.

are yet to be further theorised. As implied above, the two most important concepts in understanding church growth and decline in Korea are the theories of 'supply and demand' and 'religio-economic entrepreneurship'.³⁹ These two concepts not only explain church growth and decline since the 1960s but also illuminate why the Korean churches have been preoccupied with materialism and how they have experienced massive support from the public and then, more recently, resentment and animosity. The sections which follow here will expand on these two concepts and then move on to elaborate on several ways in which Korean churches have been struggling in serving two masters, i.e., Christian principles and money.

Supply/demand congruence theory

Supply/demand congruence theory derives from a market metaphor in which the concept of the 'market' requires one to bear in mind 'the pool of potential church-goers available to a congregation'.⁴⁰ Unlike other church growth theories which focus on 'local or national institutional factors' or 'local or national contextual factors',⁴¹ the supply/demand congruence theory more fully considers the interaction between internal and external factors. Currie et al.⁴² have noted that 'it can be argued that a church's very existence is the product of demand for it, however unconsciously and incoherently expressed, by a part of a population'. While an understanding of church growth/decline is not to be sought exhaustively in supply/demand factors, we shall show that these are of central importance in explaining the Korean churches. The increase in demand for the existence of a church, irrespective of whether the demand is from church-goers or from non-church-goers, leads churches to supply more services or results through the establishment of new churches. This is essentially what Kim⁴³ and Noh⁴⁴ have argued. Bodycomb⁴⁵ contends that a high degree of supply/demand congruence (i.e., when both supply and demand are high) brings about church growth and a high degree of incongruence produces stability or decline. However, as is the case with the economic supply/demand principle, demand may be manipulated by controlling supply. For example, when there is an adequate supply of clergy to meet new demand, and they establish churches and provide appropriate services or functions, there will be church growth.⁴⁶ According to Currie et al.,⁴⁷

in so far as church-membership growth can be attributed to a supply-and-demand relationship, in which membership facilities are supplied by a church and demanded by a recruitable population, the external constituency probably acts on the church to produce demand-induced supply, while the church probably acts upon the internal constituency to produce supply-induced demand.

³⁹Han, *Social Sources of Church Growth*.

⁴⁰Olson, 'Church Friendships', 432.

⁴¹Hoge and Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline*.

⁴²Currie, Gilbert, and Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers*, 119.

⁴³B. Kim, 'The Explosive Growth of the Korean Church Today'.

⁴⁴Noh, 'Hanguk Gidokgyo Sindosu Byeonhwa' [A study of the change in the number of Christians and a non-growth of Christianity in Korea].

⁴⁵Bodycomb, 'Quo Vadis, Ecclesia?', 206.

⁴⁶Han, *Social Sources of Church Growth*, 32-3.

⁴⁷Currie, Gilbert, and Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers*, 7.

A remarkable feature of Korean churches is the over-supply of church ministers, which arises for complex social, cultural and historical reasons, including a high education fever, the Confucian tradition of respect for authority figures, a close alliance between modern education and theological colleges, and the existence of numerous denominations within Korean Christianity.⁴⁸ As of 2005, for example, there were 170 denominations, 60,785 churches, and 124,310 pastors.⁴⁹ Since the 1960s, the establishment of nearly all of Korea's individual congregations has been aggressively driven by an over-supply of ministers. Theological colleges have often admitted students who failed to enter the non-theological institutions of their choice.⁵⁰ Most of these students have been in their early 20s with little non-educational life experience, and some of them have chosen theological training not necessarily out of a sense of mission. They are well aware, however, that to be a member of the clergy in Korea is to be rewarded with some economic and social status. Furthermore, in Korean society, students' future is often directed by their parents rather than by themselves. Some Christian parents strongly urge one or two of their sons to undertake theological training and become church ministers. These theological graduates have established churches and have been able to recruit members from other established churches or through conversion. This has been achieved largely through the hard work of the minister and laity involved.

Wuthnow aptly points out that when studying the growth of a religious group one should consider both the demand and supply sides.⁵¹ An increase in church membership is not only the result of successful recruitment of newcomers and of an increasing demand from the mass of people, but also the result of establishing new churches and of recruiting more members into existing churches. However, the supply/demand congruence approach has remained largely in the form of a theoretical assumption, without being utilised in detail in empirical study, the main exceptions being the work by Currie et al.⁵² and the more recent work by Han.⁵³ In this article, the significance of *supply* in terms of the growth and decline of the church will be further clarified. The supply/demand congruence theory is about understanding the supply of, and demand for, functions undertaken by the churches. The supply side is particularly driven by 'religio-economic entrepreneurship' which we shall outline in the following section.⁵⁴

Religio-economic entrepreneurship

Religio-economic activity is a combination of religious and economic activities undertaken by professional clergy and members of a church. Religion and money have always been essential dimensions of any religion, including Christianity, from time immemorial. The term 'religious entrepreneurship' has been used by Dearman in her study of the Korean immigrant churches in the United States, where she argues that 'the fact that [a] high percentage of the churches were established by

⁴⁸See Han, *Social Sources of Church Growth*, for further details.

⁴⁹Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2005 *Munhwa Jeongchaek Baekseo* [2005 White paper for cultural policy].

⁵⁰Clark, *Christianity in Modern Korea*, 27.

⁵¹Wuthnow, *Meaning and Moral Order*, 62.

⁵²Currie, Gilbert, and Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers*.

⁵³Han, *Social Sources of Church Growth*.

⁵⁴Much of these ideas have been developed in an earlier work, *Ibid*.

ministers demonstrates the high level of religious entrepreneurship among the immigrant ministers'.⁵⁵ Regrettably, Dearman has not developed this important idea any further.

It has been a tradition of many churches to meet the clergy's financial requirements by levying a portion from the laity's income (tithing). Among the clergy, religious aspirations often combine with non-religious, financial or ownership aspirations.⁵⁶ Turner notes that Weber's view of religion involves the assumption that 'there is an exchange relationship [both economic and religious] between the virtuosi and the mass' (added). Thus, the clergy serves the 'mass' and the 'mass' contributes various forms of payment to the clergy who do not, therefore, have to make a living in the marketplace.⁵⁷

Of course, the clergy's ministerial service is not necessarily religious only, but can also be social, political or aesthetic, as the church is essentially a social organisation with a function of religious dimension. Luhmann⁵⁸ suggests that because the church employs functionaries such as clergy and administrators, it can be regarded as an organisation in which a market situation nonetheless prevails between the functionaries and members.⁵⁹ Sometimes, the clergy may feel that the standard of living possible with their income and their social status is insufficient. Accordingly, not many people may regard the profession of clergy as an attractive career. In other cases clergy may be well paid or have considerable prestige and the competition to enter this profession may heighten. The extent to which the occupation of clergy is seen as prestigious or not varies from one society to another and from one era to another. In other words, it largely depends on the socio-economic, cultural and historical backgrounds of each society. What is proposed here is that the birth of religio-economic entrepreneurship depends upon the social settings of each society.

Some theological graduates may be impelled to involve themselves in church ministry to make a living, despite their ambition to follow a different career, because the specialisation of theological training makes it minimally relevant for other careers. Whether or not this actually does apply and whether or not a theological graduate would be easily absorbed into occupations other than religious or theological sectors depends upon the social contexts of each society. The concept of religio-economic entrepreneurship shares some of the characteristics of modern marketing promoted since the 1950s. This is because, apart from the usual meaning of 'marketing' which conjures up selling, influencing and persuading, the core of this concept of marketing is to serve and satisfy the needs of the customer,⁶⁰ just as meeting the needs of church-goers is an important task of the religio-economic entrepreneur. 'The Entrepreneur Model' of cult innovation in the article, 'Three Models of Cult Formation',⁶¹ sheds some light on religio-economic entrepreneurship. Members of cults are usually keen to recruit people in order to sustain their organisation. Door-to-door visits or friendship networks are often used for this purpose. However, the entrepreneurial model seeks the origin of cult formation or

⁵⁵Dearman, 'Structure and Function of Religion', 175; Levitt, 'Marketing Myopia', 45–6.

⁵⁶Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion*, 353.

⁵⁷Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, 90.

⁵⁸Cited in Thung, 'Organising Religion', 152.

⁵⁹Also see Iannaccone, 'Sacrifice and Stigma'.

⁶⁰Kotler and Levy, 'Broadening the Concept of Marketing', 15; Levitt, 'Marketing Myopia', 45–6.

⁶¹Stark and Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*, 178–88.

growth by looking primarily at the business or entrepreneurial aspects of cults, thus neglecting or under-estimating the religious aspects of the groups. The perspective of religio-economic entrepreneurship, as initially proposed by Han,⁶² seeks to avoid this by taking into account both the religious and the business/financial aspects of churches.⁶³

Wilken⁶⁴ suggests that it is possible to delineate types of entrepreneurship other than economic entrepreneurship. What type of entrepreneurship is involved would be determined by the factors that are combined in the process and by the consequences that are achieved. He indicates, for example, that

Political entrepreneurship will involve the combination of *political* factors of production, whatever they may be, and the achievement of political consequences. Economic entrepreneurship involves the combination of *economic* factors of production – land, labor, capital, and technology – and economic consequences, usually the production of goods and services. (Original italics)

It is proposed here that the religio-economic entrepreneur:

- (1) contributes to, and is influenced by, the supply of and demand for religious services;
- (2) apart from offering religious services and being rewarded for this, can also be engaged in various social services and activities as the necessity occurs;
- (3) regards the religious organization as the main site where she or he works;
- (4) seeks social status, financial power and security in addition to religious rewards; and
- (5) ideally considers both the religious and economic aspects in his or her ministry as equally important, although in actuality the balance between these two aspects may vary.

As noted, the concept of religio-economic entrepreneurship appreciates equally both the religious and economic dimensions of a religious organisation. Nonetheless, the Korean churches' preoccupation with materialism or the economic dimension has strongly characterised a significant proportion of what they do, and how they do it.⁶⁵ Furthermore, there have been many other theological research findings on the religiosity of Korean Christianity. For this reason, the rest of the article will be devoted to the economic dimension or materialism of Korean churches, explicating several prevalent tendencies and issues often raised by the popular media and in studies by scholars, namely, church-individualism, growth-oriented church policy, inheriting and selling churches, and the quality of clergy.

Church-individualism and 'inward looking' tendencies

Church-individualism (*Gaegyohoejuui*) refers to 'an approach or policy whereby an individual congregation sets its own goals and undertakes its own missions; and invests human and material resources in order to maintain and expand the individual congregation as an organisation'.⁶⁶ A survey has found that 46.2% of church-goers in Korea wish their offerings to be primarily used within individual churches, while

⁶²Han, *Social Sources of Church Growth*.

⁶³Despite this effort to recognise equally these two different dimensions of religion and economy, the majority of the Korean church seems to have been preoccupied by 'economy' in the last few decades.

⁶⁴Wilken, *Entrepreneurship*, 59.

⁶⁵W. Lee, *Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Hyeonsilgwa Jeonmang* [The Korean church: its reality today and prospect].

⁶⁶Noh, 'Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study of church-individualism], 81.

20.2% suggest the money be used ‘outside their churches’, for example, for orphanages and elderly care, and 26.4% suggest financial support for churches in rural areas.⁶⁷ In his analysis of the yearly financial reports of 154 churches, Noh⁶⁸ found that 82.4% of their funds were used to meet needs within respective individual congregations. Noh⁶⁹ contends that the use of human resources is predominantly for the sake of ‘within’ and that this is a key reason for the poor resourcing of many inter-church or inter-denominational Christian organisations established for the sake of the common good, such as the 60-year-old Korean National Christian Council (KNCC), the Christian Publishing House, the Korean Bible Society, Korean Christian Broadcasting and the Christian Education Council. Such organisations have often been supported by foreign Christian organisations. Even within a major denomination, there are serious problems of communicating between the denominational head office and its individual congregations, because priority is given to individual churches rather than to the denomination as a body which encompasses its numerous members. These characteristics of the Korean churches demonstrate church-individualism.⁷⁰

There are many social and historical factors which account for church-individualism in Korea. First, in 1893, the first Conference of the Missionaries Council in Korea adopted ten operating principles for Korean Protestant churches, on the basis of the Nevius Mission Plan. This plan injected an independent nature into Korean Christianity throughout its history. The central aim of the plan was to lead churches in the mission field to be ‘independent, self-reliant, and aggressive native churches’, which was the 7th principle adopted.⁷¹ The nascent Korean church with very little human and material resources available had no alternative but to adopt the principle.

Second, several studies have found that Korean Christianity tends to be overly conservative, individualistic, apocalyptic, and this-worldly, seeking prosperity in this world due to socio-cultural reasons.⁷² These belief systems have isolated the churches from broader society; and church members have been largely centred around individual congregations, consequently facilitating church-individualism.⁷³ The isolation of the churches from the broader society was pursued by western missionaries in Korea in the early twentieth century: they vehemently sought the church growth through the recruitment of more members. The Korean churches were also categorically apolitical during the Japanese colonial period and have remained so ever since.⁷⁴ By comparison, Jae-Seong Kim has found that Korean Catholics’ concept of church generally refers to broader universal Catholicism,

⁶⁷J. Kim et al., *Hanguk Gyohoe Seongjanggwa Sinang* [A study of Korean church growth and faith], 176.

⁶⁸Noh, ‘Hanguk Gyohoe Jaejeong Gujo’ [A sociological study of the Korean church’s financial structure], 165.

⁶⁹Noh, ‘Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Gaegyohoe Juui’ [A study of church-individualism], 83.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹I. Kim, ‘Organizational Patterns of Korean-American Methodist Churches’.

⁷²Jeong, ‘Hanguk Gidokgyoin-ui Singwan’ [A reflection on the perception of the God of Korean Christians]; Suh, ‘Hanguk Geuriseudooin-ui Uisikgujo’ [Thought process of Korean Christians].

⁷³Noh, ‘Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Gaegyohoe Juui’ [A study of church-individualism], 87.

⁷⁴Noh, *Iljeha Hanguk Gidokgyo* [A study of Korean Christian national movement during the Japanese colonial period]; Jang, ‘Gunsa Jeongkkwongi Hangukgyohoe’ [The Korean church and government power during the military government].

whereas Korean Protestants' concept is often limited to their individual congregations.⁷⁵

Third, Christianity in Korea has been heavily influenced by an indigenised Confucianism, organised around the idea of filial piety ('respect for parents'), and this has led to Korean life being 'family-oriented', with a strong sense of in-group loyalty.⁷⁶ 'Family-like' relations and 'we feelings' amongst members within a congregation are strongly cultivated and can make each congregation exclusive to outsiders.⁷⁷ This tendency has seriously entrenched the already prevalent church-individualism whereby there is little cooperation, but rather competition amongst churches, regardless of whether they belong to the same denomination or not.⁷⁸ The prosperity or otherwise of a congregation is almost entirely its own responsibility, even in denominations which have a conciliar structure which extends beyond the local congregation.⁷⁹

Fourth, Protestant church polity is inherently different from that of Catholicism, for example. Presbyterian and Congregationalist types of polity are most prevalent in Korean Protestantism. The presidential term of each denominational council is a year or slightly longer, thus it is difficult to establish a strongly centralised organisation by any means. As a result, the denominational council fails to form a strong network of co-operation among member congregations; and the most important and practical decision-making powers lie with each individual church council consisting of the clergy and elders.⁸⁰ Conversely, ministers of congregations are frequently employed indefinitely. More importantly perhaps, the invitation and settlement of a minister is totally controlled by the individual congregation. This makes it difficult for any denominational council to discourage the church-individualism that continues to flourish. Chi-Jun Noh argues that church-individualism, buttressed by these underpinning reasons, has been further exacerbated by organisational survival mechanisms within individual congregations. Individual congregations, which co-operate little with their denominational councils, have been seeking ways to survive as organisations as well as meeting the desires and requests of their member-church-goers.⁸¹ Forming a close community, especially in the context of Confucian-influenced Korean society, the members of each congregation share 'we feelings' and 'role-feelings' in their mutually dependent

⁷⁵J. Kim, 'Hanguk Gaesingyo Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study on the church-individualism and growth], 83.

⁷⁶B. Kim, 'Hanguk Gyohoeui Jonggyoseong' [Religiosity and stratification within Korean Christianity – Protestantism], 126–8.

⁷⁷Yi, 'Hanguk Gyohoe Mokhoegujo' [Direction of the reformation of ministry structure in the Korean church]; Noh, 'Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study of church-individualism], 87.

⁷⁸Choe, 'Gaegyohoe Juui, Eunsau Nangbi' [Church-individualism, a waste of talents], 5; J. Kim, 'Hanguk Gaesingyo Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study on the church-individualism and growth], 2.

⁷⁹Han, 'Rapid Industrialization, the Birth of Religio-economic Entrepreneurship'.

⁸⁰J. Kim, 'Hanguk Gaesingyo Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study on the church-individualism and growth], 62; Choe, 'Gaegyohoe Juui, Eunsau Nangbi' [Church-individualism, a waste of talents]. This is not only a trend with Protestant churches in Korea, but elsewhere.; Noh, 'Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study of church-individualism], 90; Mehl, *The Sociology of Protestantism*, 155.

⁸¹Noh, 'Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study of church-individualism], 96.

relationships, working towards establishing a strong organisation by any and all means.⁸²

Finally, in addition to the social, cultural and historical backgrounds which have facilitated the birth of church-individualism, another influential and facilitating factor is the 'achievement- or success-orientation' strongly shared between clergy and laity. The growth or decline or size of a church determines a minister's power and status within and outside the church, their salary and superannuation, which accentuates the need to trail church-individualism and aim for a large membership.⁸³ Christian churches in modern Korea have established themselves as status groups not only for clergy but also for lay leaders. These individuals tend to develop a strong sense of ownership and they are highly committed to 'building up' and growing their congregation.⁸⁴

While it is true that there have been complex and dynamic interactions between the above mentioned factors, we observe that the single most important factor is the over-supply of theological graduates that has brought about church-individualism, contributing both to the growth and to the decline of the Korean churches and to the attraction of public criticism in recent years. The over-supply itself creates excessive competition, but the over-supply of poor quality ministers-to-be only exacerbates the competition.⁸⁵

We now turn to discussing a number of consequences of church-individualism – pursuit of church growth and the mega church, selling/inheriting a church and the quality of clergy.

Growth-oriented policy and church expansionism

Jae-Seong Kim has noted that, in terms of its growth, Korean Christianity began to stagnate as early as the mid-1980s and that although many churches close down every year,⁸⁶ large congregations and mega churches continue to grow.⁸⁷ Of the 50 biggest churches in the world, between 27 and 35 of them are located in Korea.⁸⁸ Indeed, church-individualism has been deeply implanted in all the activities in which the Korean churches are engaged. Chi-Jun Noh compares the growth rate of two different factions of the Korean Presbyterian Church in the 1970s. The Presbyterian

⁸²W.S. Han, 1982, 185, cited in Noh, 'Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study of church-individualism], 98.

⁸³J. Kim, 'Hanguk Gaesingyo Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study on the church-individualism and growth], 84.

⁸⁴Noh, 'Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study of church-individualism], 88. The strong sense of ownership among the clergy and lay leaders has also been a source of tension and consequent church schism, which then has been stimulating the increase in the number of congregations.

⁸⁵T. Lee, 'Beleaguered Success'.

⁸⁶*Sisa Jeoneol*, 'Gaesingyoneun Wae Hollo Soetoe Haneunga?' [Why does only Protestantism decline?].

⁸⁷J. Kim, 'Hanguk Gaesingyo Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study on the church-individualism and growth], 63; Noh, *Hangukui Gyohoe Jojik* [Church organisation in Korea], categorises the size of a church according to a number of church attendees on Sunday morning worship: small church under 100 attendees; small-to-medium 101–300; medium 301–700; and large 701–1,500, and mega more than 1,500.

⁸⁸*Segye Ilbo* 1993, cited in J. Kim, 'Hanguk Gaesingyo Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study on the church-individualism and growth], 61; Pak, 'Sindaewon Ipsi Yeolpung' [High education fever for theological graduate studies].

Church (*Tonghap* or 'United') recorded a 105% growth from 530,600 members in 1970 to 1,090,309 in 1979; whereas the Presbyterian Church (*Gidokgyo* or 'Christian') recorded only 9% growth from 194,794 to 212,044 for the same period. Noh points out that the former is a conservative church strongly pursuing church-individualism, whilst the latter maintains a much more progressive biblical doctrine and advocates the church's active participation in broader society.⁸⁹

Studies of church growth in Korea have pointed to a number of factors causing a large church to grow, e.g., a close alliance to the dictatorial military governments,⁹⁰ charismatic leadership, and a relatively weak sense of belonging to a presbytery or denominational council, thus leading to church-individualism that stimulates the pursuit of rampant church growth. Also, anonymity is enjoyed by the members of a large church and this may encourage some people to join a big church, which makes large churches grow larger.⁹¹ Undoubtedly, there are many and unique roles that a large church with a large annual budget can undertake within and outside the church, i.e., the tasks beyond the reach of the small or middle-sized church. A big church often has a variety of human talents and skills, which might enable an efficient disposal of religious, educational and social services. Moreover, the majority of Korean churches have set 'growth-oriented policy' as the cornerstone of their operations and they have uncritically embraced church growth and its consequences. This may have been a starting point to tip the balance between the importance of religiosity and money, sidelining the original or intrinsic responsibilities and values of the church and then gradually losing the public trust, which in turn stands against the spread of the 'good news'.

As a congregation grows, the church as an organisation becomes more complex and formalised. Then the next strategy to manage the organisation effectively is to bureaucratise the operation of the congregation.⁹² Bureaucracy often accompanies 'de-personalised' and indifferent human relations, which directly confront the principles of Christian human relations.⁹³ A big church buttressed by church-individualism is also prone to leave some individual talents undetected or 'buried' because of superficial relations between the clergy and the laity.⁹⁴ More problematic is to observe the methods and manner in which so many churches have achieved large-scale membership. For example, a church in Dongdaemun district in Seoul increased its youth group membership from 120 to 700 in three years, and to 1,500 in another two years. At the same time, the adult membership grew to 6,000. In the vacuum of notable population growth how was such a growth rate possible? The growth happened not through the attraction of new members, but through the poaching or horizontal movement of members from pre-existing small or middle-sized churches.⁹⁵ This is a reason why mega churches have continued to grow even

⁸⁹Noh, 'Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study of church-individualism], 96–7.

⁹⁰Jang, 'Gunsa Jeongkkwongi Hangukgyohoe' [The Korean church and government power during the military government], 128.

⁹¹Noh, 'Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study of church-individualism], 98.

⁹²S. Choe, "'S' gyohoe-e gwanhan yeongu' [A study on "S" church].

⁹³Noh, 'Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study of church-individualism], 99; B. Kim, 'Gyohoe Gongdongche' [A sociological understanding of the church community], 21–2.

⁹⁴H. Choe, 'Gaegyohoe Juui, Eunsauui Nangbi' [Church-individualism, a waste of talents].

⁹⁵Y. Kim, 'Jeolmeun Gidokgyoin-ui Daehyeonggyohoe Idong' [Joining a mega church among young church-goers], 5.

after the mid-1990s, which actually started to witness the gradual and overall stagnation of church growth.⁹⁶

A large budget is an obvious outcome of the growth of a church, and the individual church is in a position to disburse the budget as it desires. Although church-individualism has been adopted as a way to self-sustain, on account of the number of organisational, cultural and historical reasons noted earlier, most churches, once obtaining self-sustaining abilities, continue to embrace the principles of church-individualism and church growth.⁹⁷ The continuing growth of large and mega churches through poaching the members of smaller churches, leaves the latter impoverished in terms of their various capacities. This results in the further exacerbation of disparity between the salaries of ministers of congregations with large membership sizes and those of smaller congregations.⁹⁸ The large disparity in the financial capacity of different churches makes them contribute different membership fees to their presbyteries and denominational councils. It is inevitable that large churches enjoy relatively more power and status in decision-making processes within their presbyteries and denominational councils, and are in effect beyond any regulation by those entities. Unlike Catholic churches, no Korean Protestant denominational council has the power to impose a split on a mega church,⁹⁹ although Protestant churches are much more prone to split than are Catholic churches in Korea and other parts of the world.

The settlement period of the clergy in a Korean Protestant congregation differs from that in the Roman Catholic Church in general and in Protestant churches in most other parts of the world. A Catholic priest in Korea is limited to five years' service to a given congregation unless there are exceptional circumstances, a practice which may not limit a priest in any significant effort to grow his congregation. However, head ministers of Korean Protestant churches are generally expected to serve their congregations indefinitely except in the case of personal reasons for not doing so or serious misconduct.¹⁰⁰ In line with the principles of modernism or the rapid industrialisation of Korean society, the clergy demonstrate their leadership capacities by increasing the membership of the congregation and whether or not they can do it presents as a challenge at the time of appointment. Large or mega churches consistently appoint those with proven track records of successful religio-economic entrepreneurship. Thus smaller churches are used as training grounds for ministers with aspirations.

A study has found that young church-goers make horizontal moves to large or mega churches not because of residential relocation or geographical proximity, but because they perceive a better context or resources for personal spiritual training, and quality sermons.¹⁰¹ In comparison with smaller churches, these churches also

⁹⁶J. Kim, 'Hanguk Gaesingyo Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study on the church-individualism and growth], 2. Church growth in Korea during the 1960s and 1970s had much to do with industrialisation and rapid modernisation. However, these factors do not explain the emergence of mega churches through 'poaching'.

⁹⁷Ibid., 62.

⁹⁸Noh, 'Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study of church-individualism], 99.

⁹⁹J.-S. Kim, 'Hanguk Gaesingyo Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study on the church-individualism and growth], 63.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Y. Kim, 'Jeolmeun Gidokgyoin-ui Daehyeonggyohoe Idong' [Joining a mega church among young church-goers], 63-4.

provide their members with highly sophisticated ‘client’ management, educational services and generous resources for diverse training. The advantage and disadvantage of holding membership of a large church may be likened to those of a conglomerate employee. It is well-known that many church-goers in the countryside travel a few hours by car to attend their preferred churches in Seoul and that some even commute to their churches between Jeju Island and Seoul.¹⁰² Being a member of a mega church is perhaps like holding membership of a prestigious club.¹⁰³ A prestigious membership not only incurs a membership charge but enables demands for appropriate services from the club. Thus, the large church needs to allocate a significant portion of financial and human resources to meet the members’ wants and needs. In this respect, their broad interest may remain within the church rather than engage in outreach to the needy or in contributing to broader society – a vicious circle of church-individualism.

The wealth of the church, inheriting and selling the church

Church-goers’ tithes and offerings constitute the sole source of income for individual churches and are used to pay the salary of the clergy, maintain building facilities and the construction of new and better church buildings.¹⁰⁴ Clergy regularly emphasise the significance of generous offerings in the context of biblical principles. These financial contributions by church members are essential especially if the ethos of church-individualism is to be well sustained. According to a Gallup survey in 2004, 46.2% of Protestants tithed, compared to 15.3% of Catholics.¹⁰⁵ According to Chi-Jun Noh,¹⁰⁶ materialism within the church refers to the approach that prioritises quantitatively measurable achievements and pays continuing attention to extending it further. In order to sustain various activities to meet church-goers’ requirements the church needs to secure a good number of ‘faithful’ members to contribute a large amount of offerings in addition to regular tithes and other offerings. This has created a well-known suspicion that an excellent financial contributing capacity is essential for a person to aspire to lay leadership positions such as eldership.¹⁰⁷ Securing financial resources becomes even more important when a church needs to extend its existing buildings or plan to build a new church building. It was found that 44.2% of the churches had building construction expenses in 1982 and 61.4% in 1992.¹⁰⁸ It is perplexing to note that despite the stagnation of church growth since the mid-1990s, churches in Korea have an increasing number of building construction costs.¹⁰⁹ Noh points out that the stabilisation of church budgets and the wealth of the Korean churches have led many of them to prioritise their finances for new and better church

¹⁰²J. Kim, ‘Hanguk Gaesingyo Gaegyohoe Juui’ [A study on the church-individualism and growth], 68.

¹⁰³In the Korean community in Australia, one comes across those who are proud because they attended a mega church in Seoul in the past.

¹⁰⁴Jang, ‘Gunsu Jeongkkwongi Hangukgyohoe’ [The Korean church and government power during the military government], 125.

¹⁰⁵Gallup Korea, *Religion in Korea*, 81.

¹⁰⁶Noh, *Hanguk Gaesingyo Sahoehak* [A sociology of Korean Protestantism], 99.

¹⁰⁷W. Lee, ‘Hanguk Gyohoewa Mammoniyeum’ [Korean Christianity and mammonism], 35.

¹⁰⁸J. Kim, ‘Hanguk Gaesingyo Gaegyohoe Juui’ [A study on the church-individualism and growth].

¹⁰⁹Some scholars argue that the growth rate began to decline from the mid-1980s, e.g., S. Kim, ‘Rapid Modernisation and the Future of Korean Christianity’.

buildings, which were often far less urgent than helping out the needy and disenfranchised.¹¹⁰ Individual churches employ planned giving methods or impose a portion of the required budget for church building construction on the clergy, elders, deacons and laity, which identifies who contributes how much and consequently reproduces class and status within the church. It is also a common practice to invite a popular guest speaker and hold a spiritual revival conference, where the speaker is skilful in publicly imposing a pledge of planned giving upon the members.¹¹¹ Further, one condition of being a special speaker at a revivalist meeting is that the speaker and the host minister negotiate how the generated income will be divided between them.¹¹² Consequent reluctant acceptance of financial commitment causes disenchantment, domestic problems or quitting the church membership.¹¹³

The so-called 'prosperity gospel' has also settled well in Korean Christianity and is certainly a contributing factor for church-goers giving tithes and generous offerings.¹¹⁴ There is a large gulf between small and large churches in terms of budget, and what is indisputably clear is that large and mega churches are financially well-off and comfortable.¹¹⁵ The profession of the clergy of medium or large or mega churches has been one of the most highly paid jobs in the last few decades. A young such clergyman has also been one of the most sought-after potential marriage partners. Almost always, a head minister's salary far exceeds that of his¹¹⁶ junior clergy members within a church and the head minister also receives 'special' fringe benefits, including a luxury motor vehicle and a monthly expense account.¹¹⁷ In other words, the church has turned out to be a most valuable material resource for clergy, in contrast to their biblical task – the gathering of followers of Christ.

Here, what is occasionally reported is the inheritance of the church by the son of the senior minister of a church. A recent saga comes from a Methodist denomination, whose mega churches in Seoul include the Gwanglim Church, the Geumlan Church, and the Immanuel Church. All three have been headed by three brothers from the same family. The elder two had already bequeathed their senior pastorships to their own sons, and the third one also followed step in 2008.¹¹⁸ The senior pastorship of Incheon Sungui Methodist Church was also inherited by the son of the previous senior pastor, completing three generations of such leadership of the church in May 2008. This is the first instance in Korea of three consecutive

¹¹⁰Noh, *Hangukui Gyohoe Jojik* [Church Organisation in Korea], 257–8; S. Kim, 'Hanguk Gaesingyo Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study on the church-individualism and growth], 60.

¹¹¹Jang, 'Gunsu Jeongkkwongi Hangukgyohoe' [The Korean church and government power during the military government], 125.

¹¹²W. Lee, 'Hanguk Gyohoewa Mammonijeum' [Korean Christianity and mammonism], 38.

¹¹³J. Kim, 'Hanguk Gaesingyo Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study on the church-individualism and growth], 60–1.

¹¹⁴W. Lee, 'Hanguk Gyohoewa Mammonijeum' [Korean Christianity and mammonism].

¹¹⁵Jang, 'Gunsu Jeongkkwongi Hangukgyohoe' [The Korean church and government power during the military government].

¹¹⁶The number of female clergy, especially head ministers, in a large Korean church is negligible.

¹¹⁷Noh, 'Hanguk Gidokgyo Sindosu Byeonhwa' [A study of the change in the number of Christians and a non-growth of Christianity in Korea], 143.

¹¹⁸*NewsNJoy*, 'Seseup Samchongsareul Tansaeng Sikin Gamligyo-ui Suchi' [A shame to complete the inheritance of the pastorships of three churches to the sons of their senior pastors].

generations heading the same church. The immediate past head of the church inherited the church of 60 members in 1973 and the church has grown to be the biggest church in Incheon with 70,000 members today.

There are also some violent incidents around church inheritance. When the senior minister and founder of the reputable Seoul Chunghyeon Church, the Revd C. Kim, retired in 1980, the church appointed a new leader (the Revd C. Lee) based on his merit, but he was ousted after only four years. Another outsider, the Revd S. Shin, succeeded the Revd C. Lee, but was also removed in four years. Then, in 1997, the Revd S. Kim, the son of the foundation minister was appointed. In January 2000, he was beaten up by a group of 'scoundrels' in his own home and they threatened him, 'Thousands of members have left the church because of you. You must resign from your post immediately'.¹¹⁹

There are many rumours regarding which churches are planning succession to the sons of senior ministers. However, the typical procedure is as follows: appointment of the son as deputy head, denial of any inheritance plan, retirement of the senior pastor, and then smooth succession of the role to the son. These processes generally fit the way the ownership of business conglomerates is handed down from their founders to their sons and daughters in Korea. Chong-Rak Kim notes that this newly emerging practice is derived from the notion that it is the founding minister of a church, rather than God, who owns the church. Chong-Rak Kim also reports how this practice is viewed by some church-goers: 'The church is already an object of harsh criticism for its business-like practice, materialisation and secularisation. Now this practice of bequeathing a church to a son of the senior minister is a sign of giving up the intrinsic nature of the church.'¹²⁰ Public criticism over the practice must be unbearable, but more cases appear.

The Korean population and media were not critical of the practice of church inheritance in the 1970s or 1980s. Similar practice involving the Southern Baptist Convention in the United States did not attract the public's particular concern. However, it is now seen as quintessential to the misguided religio-economic entrepreneurship in Korean Christianity. This shift in public perception arises from further increased competition for the clerical profession, with more theological graduates, and advocacy of merit-based appointment rather than inheritance.¹²¹ Deok-Ho Oh contends that a key reason for the continuation of this practice is the involvement of economic interests. Were there no economic interests, passing the headship to the son of the head minister would not be a concern. Conversely, where there are economic interests, merit-based appointment of anybody other than the head minister's children is not problematic.¹²² The inheritance of a church by the pastor's son seems to happen almost exclusively in big or mega churches, where great economic gains as well as prestige can be obtained by those who assume ministerial headship. Even today, if the practice happens to a small church, it typically attracts minimal criticism. Big or mega

¹¹⁹C. Kim, 'Daehyeong Gyohoe Damimmoksa' [Critiques from inside and outside against the inheritance of mega churches].

¹²⁰Ibid.; W. Lee, *Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Hyeonsil* [The Korean church: its reality today and prospect].

¹²¹G. Kim, 'Gyohoe Seseup-e Gwanhayeo' [On the inheritance of the church].

¹²²Oh, *Gyohoe Juineun Sarami Anida* [A person does not own a church], 14; J. Kim, 'Hanguk Gaesinyo Gaegyohoe Juui' [A study on the church-individualism and growth], 73.

churches deal with budget amounts that are tens or hundreds of times bigger than those of smaller churches. In the culture of church-individualism, a foundation minister of a big or mega church tends to attribute its exponential growth to his own effort and struggle, thus, he regards the church as his own personal asset. In this vein, it is more than 'appropriate' for him to hand down the church to his children who are the only deserving persons to maintain his achievement and prevent his reputation from being tarnished.¹²³ However, in the prevailing culture of church-individualism, foundation ministers have considerable power and influence unlike the ones who have been appointed, even to a big or mega church. It is almost impossible to think of appointing a successor without taking into consideration the foundation minister's opinions. Gwang-Sik Kim argues that church leadership positions should not be limited to a group of privileged people on the basis of close networks, if the church is to carry out its original duties conscientiously, and that all the Korean churches should make it a matter of regulation that retiring ministers have to leave the church rather than remain and continue to influence the decision-making processes of the congregation.¹²⁴

'Selling a congregation' is another 'established' practice in Korean Christianity. When the head pastor of a church resigns he may collect a premium from the incoming head pastor. When a congregation advertises head pastorship an attached condition may be for the incoming pastor to write off the debt of the church on his arrival. In other cases, a minister may found a congregation and grow it to a certain stage before selling it for an 'appropriate' premium. Some Christian newspapers and magazines often carry the item, 'churches for sale'.

Quality of the clergy and the over-supply of clergy

As mentioned earlier, the specific Korean historical, economic and cultural background has produced an unusually high number of theological graduates or ministers-to-be, which has subsequently given birth to religio-economic entrepreneurship. Of the approximately 170 Protestant denominations, many have established theological colleges to produce future ministers. In the context of church-individualism, the majority of the colleges receive little financial support from their own denominational councils; they are poorly resourced and rely financially on the tuition fees their students pay. The student quota in each college is determined by a budgetary requirement that it meet its operating expenses; hence, the quota is greater than each denomination requires. The quality of training is as diverse as the number of training institutions; from international to low standards to a downright illegal situation, where institutions, such as unregistered seminaries, operate without recognition from the authorities. Theological graduates, including those from unregistered seminaries, often have little alternative professional choice: the industrial, government and educational sectors do not wish to employ them, because of the specialised nature of their training, and there are of course considerable numbers of other university graduates queuing for jobs in the non-theological sectors. Thus theological graduates inevitably pursue the clerical profession. However, with the scarcity of job openings, many ultimately found

¹²³J. Yi, 'Gaesingyowa Seongjangjuui Ideollogi' [Protestantism and ideology of growth], 74.

¹²⁴G. Kim, 'Gyohoe Seseup-e Gwanhayeo' [On the inheritance of the church], 215–18.

their own congregations.¹²⁵ Chi-Jun Noh cites a survey result that the number of church-goers increased by 10% between 1990 and 1995; but the number of churches increased by 62.6% (from 35,706 to 58,046) and the number of clergy by 68.9% (from 58,542 to 98,905).¹²⁶ In this context, the quality of the clergy has been of particular concern. In fact, frequent media reports on ministers' involvement in criminal activity have directly influenced the increasingly negative public perception of Korean Protestantism in recent years.¹²⁷ Denied any other opportunity, many have resorted to founding welfare institutions which qualify for government subsidies. Of those institutions charged with irregularities, many are operated by 'ordained' pastors, further damaging religion's poor public image.

There are many reasons why Korean Protestant churches have continued to attract public criticism: lack of contribution to broader society, inappropriate methods of evangelism, overemphasis on tithes and offerings, and preoccupation with church expansionism rather than the pursuit of truth and benevolence.¹²⁸ All these factors are centred on the clergy's excessive pursuit of religio-economic entrepreneurship: they have been willing to treat church attendees as though they were customers at a department store. This trend has determined their sermon content and how the church has served its members, e.g., prosperity-oriented preaching, church growth-oriented preaching.¹²⁹ In 1991, there were only 50 theological seminaries which were recognised by the Ministry of Education, producing only 1,500 graduates per year. Cheol-Su Pak reports that there are now more than 400 theological seminaries in Korea, producing about 7,000 graduates per year.¹³⁰ Occasional reviews of the quality of the training institutes have yielded few practical outcomes.¹³¹

¹²⁵Noh, 'Hanguk Gidokgyo Sindosu Byeonhwa' [A study of the change in the number of Christians and a non-growth of Christianity in Korea], 149; Han, *Social Sources of Church Growth*.

¹²⁶Cited in Noh, 'Hanguk Gidokgyo Sindosu Byeonhwa' [A study of the change in the number of Christians and a non-growth of Christianity in Korea], 149; *Keuriseuchyan Sinmun*, 'Hanguk Gyohoe Seongjang Geup Gamsok' [Rapid stagnation of the growth of the Korean church, but the increase of newly established congregations].

¹²⁷Similarly, at the time of economic hardship, significantly higher numbers of missionaries than usual were recruited and sent overseas, especially British colonies. The actions of many of them were not well received and were main causes of animosities developed against Christianity.

¹²⁸W. Lee, 'Hanguk Gyohoe-ui Seongjanggwa Geu Dunhwa' [A sociological study on the factors for church growth and decline in Korea]. It is often speculated that the decline of Protestant churches is a factor for the growth of Catholicism in Korea – 74.2% between 1996 and 2006. See Pak, 'Sindaewon Ipsi Yeolpung' [High education fever for theological graduate studies].

¹²⁹Kang, 'Hanguk Gyohoe Seolgyo' [The critical evaluation of the Korean pulpit from the perspective of Minjung theology].

¹³⁰Pak, 'Sindaewon Ipsi Yeolpung' [High education fever for theological graduate studies]. In 1992, the Korean Ministry of Education could not even find out the exact number of Theological Training Centres, but assumed that there were about 270 unregistered centres. *Gidok Sinbo*, '21gae Muinga Sinhakgyo Pyeswae' [21 unregistered theological seminaries ordered to close down by the Ministry of Education]. In contrast, Korean Catholicism maintains only seven theological seminaries, accepting 400–500 applicants per year, but producing only about 300 per year due to dropouts. Pak, 'Sindaewon Ipsi Yeolpung' [Higher education fever for theological graduate studies].

¹³¹*Chosun Ilbo*, cited in Song, 'Yeonjung Gihoek, Hanguk Gyohoe Jindan' [Theological training in Korea today].

The overall quality of theological graduates from unregistered theological seminaries seems to be a significant part of the rampant religio-economic entrepreneurship which facilitates the operation of churches almost as business organisations. Unregistered theological training institutes maintain sub-standard classrooms and libraries. Their instructors are generally employed on a sessional basis, and most of them have taken their higher degrees at unrecognised institutes. Unqualified instructors, sub-standard facilities, the disorganised operation of learning programmes, and impromptu teaching curricula, are bound to produce unqualified ministers.¹³² Unregistered centres often blindly argue for education 'only with the Bible', 'only according to the Bible', 'God's calling rather than intellectual ability'.¹³³ Yeong-Han Kim recognises the uniqueness of the quality required of theological graduates or ministers-to-be, but still argues that those who are trained in sub-standard and unregistered institutes are not only ill-qualified, but also carry no authority as spiritual leaders. According to the above statistics, roughly 75% of theological graduates belong to this category. According to a survey conducted in 1994, the postgraduate students of theology at the well-recognised Presbyterian Theological Seminary responded that the most serious problem that Korean Christianity has to overcome is the poor quality of clergy.¹³⁴

The Revd Cheol-Su Pak assumes that there were relatively more clergy concerned about justice, equality, freedom and human rights during the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s. Since the 1990s, however, Christian ministers have been 'socially blind' and have become the target of public criticism for openly flattering the government.¹³⁵ There is a severe lack of appropriate theological awareness among the clergy. Even theological students are preoccupied with church expansionism and are determined to achieve a membership of 1,000 to 2,000 in the individual congregations they wish to establish after their graduation.¹³⁶ This is why the fundamental quality of the clergy is often under question in the media, where they are often described as ill-informed about how the Korean churches can contribute to the common good of the nation and build cooperative relationships with other social institutions, including non-Christian groups. In their Sunday sermons, a number of leading Protestant ministers encouraged the members of their churches to offer blind support to the Christian candidate, Myeong-Bak Lee, in the December 2007 presidential election.¹³⁷ Some thoughtless ministers even threatened that those church-goers who did not support the Christian candidate were children of the devil and that their names would be removed from the Book of Life.¹³⁸ Many ministers might have expected that Korea under the leadership of a President with church eldership would become a 'Christian nation' overnight. Eighteen months after Myeong-Bak Lee's election, they seem to be rather disappointed with his

¹³² *Gukmin Ilbo*, 'Mujagyeok Moksa' [We must prevent the production of unqualified clergy], 28.

¹³³ Y. Kim, 'Gijo Gangyeon: Seongjang' [Keynote speech: a study of the factors for the decline of the Korean church and some ways to overcome it], 24.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 24–5.

¹³⁵ Yu, 'Gyogyo Jidojadeul Dalkomhan' [Christian leaders' sweetly serving authorities].

¹³⁶ Pak, 'Sindaewon Ipsi Yeolpung' [Higher education fever for theological graduate studies].

¹³⁷ J. Yi, 'Midieo Beop Tonggwadwiseo' [New media law should be passed].

¹³⁸ S. Yi, 'Yi Myeong-Bak Anjigeumyeon' [Your name will be removed from the Book of Life if you don't vote Myeong-Bak Lee].

inclinations towards neoliberal economic policy and his hard-line approach towards North Korea.¹³⁹

The laity's uncritical submission to the clergy's teaching is highly problematic. The Revd Un-Hyeong Jeong contends that Korean ministers and church-goers see the clergy as mediators or direct messengers standing between God and the church-goers, and that this belief may have come from Korean traditional shamanism. Jeong goes on to argue that morality and ethics are of little significance to 'shamanistic clergy'. The wishes and blessings amongst such clergy and their church members are often about the successful entry of members' children into university, profit from real estate speculations, quick recovery from diseases, and business prosperity.¹⁴⁰ Ministers with little sense of morality and ethics often seem to consider themselves above the national constitution or criminal laws.¹⁴¹ Many ministers with 'ill-formed' goals and principles in their roles seem to produce 'blind' church-goers. Jeong is pessimistic, lamenting that any chance of church-goers' awakening in the near future is somewhat remote. The Korean churches have lost their own characteristic as 'the salt' of the world and how will they recover their intrinsic taste?¹⁴² Below we identify the key steps which can redress the above. We also outline examples of churches and activities which demonstrate a strong bastion of salt and light which may yet lead to a revival.

Discussion and conclusions

In the contemporary world, money is an agent to make and remake individual social, economic and political relations, not only in everyday life but also within Korean church life.¹⁴³ The supply side expounded by supply/demand congruence theory has been driven by religio-economic entrepreneurship and neoliberal market ideology. Korean Christianity has become a serious problem rather than a solution for Korean society and its issues. While the Korean churches are preoccupied with money and materialism, they hardly reflect upon their actions or rarely make constructive contributions to the society. There are many calls for church reformation and there are many complaints that there are no role models to emulate; not many have volunteered to change. The West achieved social and economic development in a few hundred years, whereas Korea took only a few decades.¹⁴⁴ The West took a few hundred years to have Christianity settled as a core part of its social systems and to reach its growth plateau, whereas Korea experienced similar processes of growth and stabilisation essentially in a few decades. Nonetheless, in comparison with their counterparts in the West, the Korean churches have a much stronger base from

¹³⁹S.-J. Kim, *Hanguk Gyohoeui Ilgopgaji Joek* [The seven sins of the Korean church], 10.

¹⁴⁰According to a survey undertaken by *Sisa Jeoneol* (a reliable weekly magazine of current affairs), Protestant clergy was ranked 25th out of 33 professions, below Catholic priests (11th) and Buddhist monks (18th); see Baek, 'Moksa, Jonggyoinjung Silloedo Kkoljji' [Protestant clergy the bottom of trustworthiness amongst priests in general]. Also for broader discussion of religions in Korea, see Grayson, *Korea: A Religious History*; Baker, *Korean Spirituality*.

¹⁴¹E.g., P. Yi, 'Yi Pil-Wan Kalleom – Kim Hong-Do' [Yi Pil-Wan column – Dropping a charge against the Revd Hong-Do Kim].

¹⁴²Matt. 5.13; Mark 9.50; Luke 14.34.

¹⁴³Cf. Roca, 'Dinheiro Vivo', 321; Bloch and Parry, *Money and the Morality of Exchange*; Hart, 'Heads or Tails? Two Sides of the Coin'; Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money*.

¹⁴⁴Chang, 'Compressed Modernity and Discontents'.

which to rebound and continue growth, including much deeper qualitative growth. The possibility of this may depend more on the churches themselves than on the broader context of Korean society, especially if the churches wish to avoid growth-oriented and materialistic tendencies.

Won-Gyu Lee notes that throughout the history of Christianity, when church members become wealthy, soon afterwards the church also becomes wealthy. Consequently, mammonism settles within it.¹⁴⁵ The Korean churches have been busy serving two masters, Jesus Christ and money, and have lost the appropriate order.¹⁴⁶ They seem today to be like a camel stuck in the eye of the needle.¹⁴⁷ Won-Gyu Lee's suggestion for overcoming their mammonism is for church-goers to labour diligently, save a portion for themselves and redistribute their wealth throughout the church. The richer the Korean churches become, the more they should give to their neighbours and contribute to the community and the world.¹⁴⁸ W. Lee warns that the Korean churches have two immediate tasks: repentance and reformation, which will herald the second Reformation of the Church.

Clearly, in the last two decades, there have been numerous calls for serious self-reflection on the part of the Korean churches and for related tasks to be carried out. However, the actual implementation of change remains to be done. The recent global economic crisis has seriously hit Korean society, further accelerating neoliberal and conservative ideological stances throughout every facet of Korean society. Economic development has offered the Korean population wealth, convenience and improved democracy in the last two decades in particular. Yet there are mounting issues and new problems to resolve as a result of rapid economic development. The gaps between the haves and have-nots are far greater today than they were in the past. With the inflow of many foreigners, Korean society has a serious task ahead to cultivate its own multiculturalism, and it remains to be seen how it will address this. So far, the treatment of foreign workers has been cause for disgust. The security of the Korean peninsula fifty years after the end of the Korean War is more uncertain than ever, following the breakdown of the six party talks. South Korea seems reluctant to prepare to meet the needs of its brothers and sisters in North Korea in the case of possible reunification.¹⁴⁹ Korean society requires churches willing to take ever more significant roles as the light and salt for a brighter future.¹⁵⁰ Yet, the churches are overly fixated on the principles of the secular world and history, when they should be serious about the practicalities of their every activity and commitment, as well as able to see such commitment in the greater context of the Kingdom of God. Such a transcendent perspective would enable the churches to be a significant part of human history, whilst faithfully carrying out their intrinsic duties.

¹⁴⁵Lee, 'Hanguk Gyohoewa Mammonijeum' [Korean Christianity and mammonism]; Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990*.

¹⁴⁶Matt. 6.24; Luke 16.13.

¹⁴⁷Matt. 19.24; Mark 10.25; Luke 18.25.

¹⁴⁸Lee, 'Hanguk Gyohoewa Mammonijeum' [Korean Christianity and mammonism], 42; Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 7.

¹⁴⁹Han and Kim, 'The Korean Christian Movement towards Reunification of the Two Koreas'; also see M. Yi, 'Korean Protestants and the Reunification Movement'; Min, 'The Division and Reunification of a Nation'.

¹⁵⁰Matt. 5.14.

Some refreshing exemplary churches and their leaders have already begun to pave the way forward in many different arenas. The Antioch Church in Jeonju is known as 'the tin church' for its humble church building structure. This church has strongly rejected the common concept of church expansionism. Eschewing wealthy urban neighbourhoods, many of which already have established churches, the Antioch Church has set up congregations in impoverished rural communities and fishing villages without churches. There is even a church for prostitutes, near the Jeonju train station, overseen by a female theological graduate. Many members' lives have been transformed. One hundred members, including head minister (the Revd Dong-Hwi Lee), his wife and other members of the Antioch Church have advocated or participated in the donation of organs and corpses for the betterment of others' lives and of medical research. Sixty per cent of the Antioch Church's income is spent on international mission efforts in the Third World. Several times a year, the church also arranges a clean-up of streets that are not easily accessible to the municipal street cleaners. These are just a few of its similar undertakings.¹⁵¹

The 100th Anniversary Memorial Church advocates absolute budgetary transparency, making figures available on its website, including the ministers' salaries, in which there are only minimal differences among the employed ministers. The church is vehemently opposed to the penetration of materialistic practices into the congregation or the use of the church for material gains. In this vein, the church restored and continues to maintain the Yanghwajin Foreign Missionary Cemetery, notably as a profit-free exercise. The Revd Jae-Cheol Lee, head minister of the church, volunteers his income tax as a Korean citizen when almost all ministers produce many reasons to avoid it and publicly resist the possible introduction of a bill for clergy to pay income tax.¹⁵² Dail Churches in some parts of the nation work in cooperation and are committed to helping out the severely underprivileged.

The history of Korean Christianity demonstrates the principles with which the Korean churches can overcome their present predicament. Some of the reasons Christianity was able to indigenise and settle at the turn of the twentieth century include the extent to which newly converted Christians embraced intrinsic and high values, according to biblical principles. The nobility broke down the class barrier between themselves and the under-classes both within the church and beyond. They willingly gave up the traditionally accepted practice of having concubines. Moreover, the 1907 Great Revival Movement was possible when the leaders of the Pyeongyang Church confessed their wrongdoings and consequently corrected them.¹⁵³ As just noted with a few examples, it is possible that there may be an undiscovered seven thousand leaders for reformation within Korean Christianity, whose knees have not bowed to materialism, whose mouths have not kissed it.¹⁵⁴ The revision of some problematic practices has commenced *within* some churches and others now have the chance to follow suit or to emulate learned insights to spearhead a radical

¹⁵¹D. Yi, *Ilmyeong Kkangtong Gyohoe* [A story of the so-called tin church].

¹⁵²*Keuriseuchyan Tudei* [Christian today], 'Guguk Gido, Naega Byeonhaji Aneumyeon Museun Soyong Inna?' [Prayer for the nation, what is the effect if I don't change?]. See also *Wikibaekkwwa*, 'Lee Jae-Cheol Wikibaekkwwa'.

¹⁵³Cf. Oak, 'Pyeongyang Daebuheung Undonggwa Kil Sun-Ju' [Spiritual seismic shifts among the Daoist-Christians in Pyongang: Kil Sun-Ju's Daoist-evangelical spirituality during the Great Revival Movement].

¹⁵⁴1 Kings 19.18.

reformation. True change and reformation within the church is certainly likely to overflow to broader Korean society and beyond.

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