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Shifting Disunity to Unity: Missional Ecclesiology and Grassroots Ecumenism in Korean Protestantism

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Abstract

After the Korean War in 1950, the Korean Presbyterian Church experienced a religious schism and sought to rebuild and grow quantitatively amidst its denominational competition. This development was based on an evangelical ecclesiology rooted in the Lausanne Covenant (1974), which emphasized evangelization and spiritual salvation. However, this ecclesiology clashed with the WCC's ecumenical ecclesiology, which stresses God's mission (Missio Dei) and humanization, triggering the ecclesiological polarization of the Korean Church. In the 21st century and the changed context of post-Christendom, the Korean Church faced the reality of rapid church decline and sought an alternative to traditional growth-oriented evangelical ecclesiology. That alternative converged on missional ecclesiology. This new ecclesiology not only reformed Korean Protestantism but also transformed the long-standing divisions of the evangelical and ecumenical churches into unity and became the theoretical foundation for grassroots movements in local churches. This research aims to shed light on how missional ecclesiology can overcome disunity and divisions in the Korean Church, bring ecumenical and evangelical churches into mutual solidarity, and strengthen grassroots ecumenism and cooperation at the local level.

Keywords

Missional Ecclesiology, Grassroots Ecumenism, Missio Dei, Korean Protestantism, Church Growth Movement, Maeul Ministry

1. Introduction: Missional Ecclesiology as a Framework for Church Unity

In the history of Korean Protestantism, the Shinto shrine worship, theological differences, and ecumenical membership were three of the most significant factors in the great church schism of the 1950s.[1] These factors induced the bifurcation of the church's evangelical and ecumenical movements in the 1960s and beyond and provoked the formation of hundreds of denominational splits to date. Numerous denominations have been involved in this history of division, including Methodist, Presbyterian, Holiness, Lutheran, Baptist, Full Gospel, and Anglican churches. Of these denominations, the Korean Presbyterian Church, which makes up 80% of the Protestant church, has been more engaged in division and conflict than any other denomination. Historically, the Presbyterian Church pursued a unified Presbyterianism until the Korean War, since the first Presbytery and General Assembly were established in 1907 and 1912 respectively. However, this single Church split by creating the Gosin Presbyterian Church (Gosin)

1 The Society of the History of Christianity in Korea, ed., *A History of Christianity in Korea since 1945* (Seoul: The Institute of the History of Christianity in Korea, 2017), 67.

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in 1952, the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) in 1953, and the Presbyterian Church of Korea (Tonghap and Hapdong) in 1959, and today there are 286 Korean Presbyterian churches.[2]

Ironically, however, Korean Protestantism has grown through division. The great schism in Korean churches in the 1950s paved the way for each denomination to grow and develop. In the 1970s, under the government-led economic growth and development program, Protestant pastors and theologians merged growth principles with church management and the gospel, and the denominational competition and rivalry generated a multiplication of local churches. Korean evangelical leaders, especially those who participated in the International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne in 1974, learned the strategies of the church growth and adapted them to Korea, leading church growth on a global scale. As a result, by 1984, the centenary of American missionary Horace N. Allen's arrival in Korea, Protestantism had reached seven million members and had become the dominant religion on the Korean religious landscape. However, this growth has come with its own set of side effects, including the emergence of new heretical sects such as the Unification Church and Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the erosion of public trust, and evangelical and ecumenical confrontations.

The National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) has been promoting denominational unity and dialogue to overcome excessive discordance in Korean Protestantism. However, while emphasizing unity among member churches in ecumenical groups, dialogue with evangelical and conservative ones has been relatively absent. In particular, the member churches of the NCCK have been unable to propose alternative policies and tasks to address the challenges of denominational divisions. This was evident at the 2013 Busan Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), where conservative Protestants became far more hostile to the ecclesiology and missiology of the ecumenical group.

Since mid-2010, however, there has been a shift in the relationship between these seemingly irreconcilable ecumenical and evangelical groups toward unity. This has occurred through a convergence of ecclesiologies, notably missional ecclesiology. The missional church movement is currently inspiring visible unity and reconciliation at the grassroots level between the ecumenical and evangelical groups within Korean Protestantism. New ecclesiological paradigms and discussions, especially those produced by the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN), have enabled a renewed ecumenical movement in the Korean church that has been mired in church growth theories and movements.[3] In other words, missional ecclesiology emerges as a framework for church unity, providing a strong theoretical and practical basis for communal diakonia across denominational lines.

This study aims to shed light on how missional ecclesiology can help overcome disagreements and divisions in the Korean Presbyterian Church, foster mutual solidarity among churches in

2 Byung-Cheol Koh, Don-Goo Kang and Hyun-Beom Cho, *The Current State of Religion in Korea* (Sejong: Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, 2018), 108-118.

3 See Michael W. Goheen, "The Missional Church: Ecclesiological Discussion in the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America," *Missiology* 30:4 (October 2002): 479-490.

ecumenical and evangelical groups, and strengthen the possibility of grassroots ecumenism at the local level. It draws missional ecclesiology in two ways: as a theoretical and theological concept that addresses the nature, structure, and function of the church, and as a practice that identifies the church's relationship to the world and mission. To this end, this research first examines the historical schism of the Korean Presbyterian Church after the Korean War and its merger between the church growth movement and evangelical churches after the 1974 Lausanne movement. Secondly, in a period dominated by growth-oriented thinking, it explores the conflict between evangelical and ecumenical ecclesiologies and investigates the changes in Korean Protestantism brought about by the conceptual emergence of holistic missions in the 1980s. Finally, it examines the context and process by which the Western missional ecclesiology took root in Korean soil and identifies how it is shaped into an effective discourse that is bringing unity to the longstanding divisions in Korean Protestantism.

2. Presbyterian Schism and Expansion After the Korean War: A Historical Review

The Great Schism in the Presbyterian Church in the 1950s

Between the liberation of Korea in 1945 and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the Korean Presbyterian Church had been forming a unified denomination free from Japanese interference through the church reconstruction movement. The movement was an attempt to reorganize churches that had been institutionally disbanded and to discipline Presbyterian leaders who had collaborated with the Japanese during the colonial period. In the process of this reorganization, the Gyeongnam Presbytery issued a five-point statement on September 20, 1945, as the principles for rebuilding the church, which included resignation and discipline for Christians who had shown anti-national and pro-Japanese attitudes.[4] The proposal, which included the censure of church leaders who visited shrines and the restoration of seminaries to train clergy, was met with great resistance from pro-Japanese Christians. Above all, they emphasized that repentance and punishment for shrine worship was a matter of personal decision and not something to be governed at the public level.[5] Gil-Chang Kim, a pro-Japanese advocate who served as the head of the Gyeongnam Presbytery during the Japanese occupation, organized a separate Gyeongnam Presbytery in March 1949, splitting the presbytery and marking the beginning of the separation in the Presbyterian Church.[6] In March 1951, the new Gyeongnam Presbytery was organized in a hegemonic struggle over church authority, and its pro-Japanese influence began to clash with the old Gyeongnam Presbytery. This conflict eventually resulted in the first Presbyterian schism in April 1952, when the 37th General Assembly of the Korean Presbyterian Church completely severed the old Gyeongnam Presbytery

4 Yang-Sun Kim, *Ten Years of Korean Christian Liberation* (Seoul: Religious Education Department, KPC, 1956), 45.

5 Ibid., 46.

6 Sang-Kyu Lee, *A History and Theology of the Korean Presbyterian Church Before and After the Liberation* (Seoul: The Institute of the History of Christianity in Korea, 2015), 231.

and its affiliated organizations. The Gosin, known as the so-called Gosin Faction, consisted of more than 350 churches and 60 pastors at the time.[7]

The second schism in 1953 resulted from a fundamentalist-modernist controversy that had been underlying in theological disharmony since the 1930s. In September 1938, the Presbyterian General Assembly indefinitely suspended education at Pyongyang Theological Seminary because of the Japanese compulsion to visit Shinto shrines. This lack of theological education was filled by the Joseon Theological Seminary, a liberal seminary that opened in 1940, with partial cooperation from Japanese authorities. In March 1939, a year before the seminary's founding, some of the Presbyterian leaders organized the "Preparatory Association for the Establishment of the Joseon Theological Seminary" and launched the seminary with a progressive theology that promoted theological autonomy and overcame missionary-dependent conservative theology. In April 1940, Chai-Choon Kim, who had studied theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, proclaimed the "Educational Philosophy of the Joseon Theological Seminary," which laid the groundwork for early Korean progressive theology.[8]

Kim criticized conservative theology for its emphasis on otherworldly and individualistic principles of faith and established a theology of historical engagement that emphasized the social nature and meaning of the gospel. These theological trends soon clashed with the orthodox conservatism of mainstream Korean Presbyterian theologians such as Hyung-Ryong Park, a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary. In April 1952, the 37th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church voted to dismiss Kim and repatriate William Scott, a Canadian missionary who sympathized with Kim's theology, to rid the denomination of such liberal theology. The General Assembly also began to split with the progressive group by deciding not to license graduates of the Joseon Theological Seminary. This provoked a second split in June 1954, when the PROK was formed, with 95,000 members in 540 churches, emphasizing freedom of faith and conscience and an ecumenical spirit.

The third schism arose primarily from disagreements and opposition over participation in the ecumenical movement. Since the founding of the WCC in Amsterdam in 1948, global churches have sought unity and harmony, promoting a progressive theology and missionary movement for building the kingdom of God. However, the conservative Presbyterian Church of Korea began to rebel against the theological and political components pursued by the WCC. Presbyterian pastor Gwan-Sik Kim who attended the Amsterdam assembly recommended that the Presbyterian Church join the WCC, and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church accepted the proposal, but some conservative Presbyterians problematized the WCC for its doctrinal problems and pro-communist attitudes.[9] Korean delegates to the second WCC General Assembly at Evanston held in 1954 were also divided, criticizing the WCC for its syncretism and pro-communism. The criticisms on the WCC became more persuasive and stronger within the

7 The Society of the History of Christianity in Korea, ed., *A History of Christianity in Korea*, 72.

8 Sung-Kyu Hwang, ed., *The Life and Theology of Changgong, Kim Chai Choon* (Osan: Hanshin University Press, 2005), 25-26.

9 The Society of the History of Christianity in Korea, ed., *A History of Christianity in Korea*, 76.

Presbyterian Church when conservative leaders founded the Korea Evangelical Fellowship in 1952 and then joined the World Evangelical Fellowship in 1955.[10] This ultimately resulted in the split between the Tonghap and Hapdong in 1959 and after the 1970s, to numerous divisions within the Hapdong consecutively.

The International Congress on World Evangelization and Korean Evangelicalism

The successive divisions in the Presbyterian Church were more optimistic than pessimistic in terms of church reconstruction and expansion. In October 1950, shortly after the outbreak of the Korean War, representatives of ecumenical organizations, including the WCC, the International Missionary Council and the Church World Service, met in New York to discuss relief in South Korea and decided to establish the Christian Relief Committee. This decision led churches in Canada, Australia, and Germany to become involved in emergency relief for war-affected, operated orphanages, war widow aid, housing rehabilitation, education, and community development, with the Board of Foreign Mission of Presbyterian Church in the USA raising approximately 1.8 million dollars from 1950 to 1954 for recovery.[11] This large-scale aid and material support from overseas organizations brought the Korean church to the attention of ordinary Koreans, not just as a religious institution but as a social relief organization.

Importantly, war relief supplies and funding provided the foundation for the growth of conservative Presbyterian churches that took a pro-American and pro-missionary stance. This financial base allowed for an influx of North Korean defectors and war refugees into churches and Christian organizations. The influx of Koreans into the church motivated the two major Presbyterian denominations, the Tonghap and Hapdong, to focus on the reconstruction movement, which owes its practical and theoretical foundation to the 1974 Lausanne Congress. At that time, Presbyterian leaders, especially PROK and some of PCK and NCCK, were interested in and adopted the socially participatory missions of the WCC as their own mission policies, but these trends were elite-centered and relatively minor parts of a denominational structure, which could not expand into a grassroots movement. Most Presbyterian denominations had a strong interest in church growth through competition among themselves as they went through the schismatic process. This interest soon materialized through the participation of Presbyterian leaders and theologians in the Lausanne Congress.

The Lausanne Covenant, issued at the First Lausanne Congress, emphasizes evangelization, including biblical authority, commitment to personal salvation, and the urgency of the evangelistic task, and states that evangelism takes precedence over social concerns in Christian mission.[12] This attitude was an attempt by global evangelicals to reposition the missionary place of the church as a reaction to the current emphasis on humanization and social responsibility conceptualized by the WCC Uppsala Assembly in 1968. In this theological shift, some 65 Korean

10 Ibid., 77.

11 Ibid., 50-53.

12 "The Lausanne Covenant," *International Review of Mission* 63:252 (October 1974): 570-576. See also Robert J. Schreiter, "From the Lausanne Covenant to the Cape Town Commitment: A Theological Assessment," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35:2 (April 2011): 88-89.

evangelical leaders who attended the first Lausanne Congress were deeply involved in the Lausanne movement through plenary sessions and subcommittee presentations. Of particular importance was the reality that the evangelization strategies of the American church growth school including C. Peter Wagner, Ralph D. Winter, and Donald A. McGavran who designed church movement concepts such as "unreached people" and the "homogeneous unit principle" have greatly influenced Korean evangelicals. The competitive and accelerating evangelization zeal of the Korean church required a systematic theory of church growth, and the strategies and plans of the church growth researchers in the Lausanne Congress were eagerly requested.

The explosive growth of the Korean church in the 1970s was also influenced by external factors including the rapid industrialization of Korean society. At the time, the government of Chung-Hee Park undertook to rebuild South Korean society after the Korean War by expanding the country's imports and exports through the Five-Year Economic and Social Development Plans. Rapid government-led industrialization and urbanization triggered an increase in South Korea's GNP, which rose from 83.00 dollars in 1961 to 1,160.00 dollars in 1978 and 1,696.00 dollars in 1981.[13] In response to these social changes, evangelical leaders emphasized the blessings of prosperity and capital, and the church became less concerned with social responsibilities, teaching an individualistic faith and salvation and prosperity in the spiritual life of every believer. Korean evangelicalism began to take shape through the affinity of the prosperity gospel with economic development, influencing the expansion of the church as the most urgent priority.

3. Deepening Schism: Evangelical-Ecumenical Divergence and Holistic Missions

Evangelization vs Humanization during the 1970s Dictatorship

An uncomfortable truth in the history of Korean Protestantism is that the church grew rapidly in the atmosphere of the injustices and human rights abuses of dictatorships. The mainstream churches that grew here were conservative and evangelical ones influenced by Lausanne's church growth movement, which advocated separation of church and state and depoliticization, and were hesitant to get involved in justice activities against dictatorships. To be sure, the Lausanne Covenant emphasizes the reciprocity of social concern as well as evangelism, calling for 'justice and reconciliation throughout human society' and 'the liberation of men from every kind of oppression,' but at least during the 1970s dictatorship, conservative-evangelicals were unable to translate the overall Lausanne messages into practice.[14] This strategy of evangelical depoliticization caused the overall growth of the evangelical Presbyterianism in a friendly relationship with the government while remaining compliant with the dictatorship, and its lack of social concern deepened the total disconnect with ecumenical groups which sought the anti-

13 Byong-Suh Kim, "The Explosive Growth of the Korean Church Today: A Sociological Analysis," *International Review of Mission* 74 (January 1985): 65; Eunsik Cho, "Korean Church Growth in 1970s: Its Factors and Problems," *The Asia Journal of Theology* 10:2 (1996): 350.

14 "The Lausanne Covenant," 571.

dictatorship and pro-democracy.

The 1970s was a great decade of rapid growth for the Korean church. Statistics showed that in 1960, Protestants numbered 623,072 out of a total population of 24,989,241; in 1970, 3,192,621 out of 31,435,252; and in 1980, 7,180,627 out of 37,406,815, an increase of more than 11 times in 20 years.[15] This growth was partly driven by new denominations, including Lutherans, Nazarenes, and Pentecostals, but most notably by mainline Presbyterian churches, such as the Tonghap and Hapdong, which represented the largest evangelical wings of Korean Protestantism. In addition, Fuller Seminary's church growth theory, which was embraced by evangelical denominations, offered a specific model of strategy, providing a platform for megachurches to emerge through lay leadership development. At the same time, evangelicals held crusades such as the Billy Graham Crusade in 1973, the Campus Crusade for Christ's EXPLO in 1974, and the National Evangelization Rally in 1977, which effectuated exponential Christian growth.[16] These mass rallies were accompanied by massive financial support and endorsements from the government.

However, there were also Presbyterian denominations that resisted Park's developmental dictatorship and tried to realize humanization through the Minjung (people) Mission. A representative is the PROK, which split in 1953 over its progressive theology and joined the WCC in 1960, embracing *Missio Dei* and humanizing mission as its policy, and became deeply involved in Korean politics based on this ecumenical theology. The NCCK also sought to address structural evils such as human rights oppression and labor issues under the military dictatorship. Many Christian leaders and students went into factories and slums to protest the government's dictatorship and experienced suffering in solidarity with laborers and the weak. These commitment to humanization germinated the struggle for democracy and human rights, and theologians such as Byung-Mu Ahn, Nam-Dong Seo, and Yong-Bok Kim sought to recreate Minjung as the subject of history and to represent Jesus Christ for Minjung amid suffering by inventing Minjung theology.[17]

This opposition of evangelization versus humanization in the 1970s can be seen to stem essentially from theological-missiological differences in ecclesiology. The evangelism-centered ecclesiology of the Lausanne Covenant and the ecumenical ecclesiology of *Missio Dei* were each operating in the concrete reality of a developing military dictatorship. The conservative-evangelical Presbyterian churches, which had gained huge numbers of adherents and material resources, often sought to undermine the ecumenical groups by equating their humanizing mission with communist projects, echoing the pro-communism rhetoric of the 1950s. This brought about an extreme split in the church movement between the evangelical and

15 The Society of the History of Christianity in Korea, ed., *A History of Christianity in Korea*, 98.

16 Eunsik Cho, "Korean Church Growth in 1970s: Its Factors and Problems," 348.

17 The systematization of Minjung theology developed into Minjung church movements of the 1980s. The Minjung church became a space to protect laborers from governmental repression, which contributed to the democratization of labor and the improvement of human rights. See Chong-Koo Lee, Jin-Kwan Kwon, and Chul Park, "The Korean Ecumenical Movement and Minjung Churches with Focus on the Guro Industrial Area in the 1980s," *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology* 23 (June 2015): 47-86.

ecumenical groups.

Failed Holistic Ecclesiology: *Mission and Evangelism - An Ecumenical Affirmation* and *Manila Manifesto*

In the 1970s, the Korean church witnessed a sharp confrontation between the ecumenical and evangelical movements, a confrontation that continues to this day. However, the 1980s saw a gradual theoretical integration of the ecumenical-evangelical elements at the global level, with the emergence of the concept of holistic mission, which seeks to balance evangelization and humanization. Of course, Korean Protestantism's attempts to apply this new mission to the church and to bridge the gap between existing church movements were tardy and often met with resistance, but new alternative movements began to form in response to criticism of the extremist church movements.

While mission as humanization has continued to be effective in the life of the ecumenical group, a changed missionary paradigm was called for that encompassed both evangelization and humanization. This was finally expressed by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC in a document of *Mission and Evangelism - An Ecumenical Affirmation* (EA), published in July 1982. In this document, the WCC reflected on the phenomenon of polarized church and mission, stating that 'there is a growing awareness among the churches today of the inextricable relationship between Christian unity and missionary calling, between ecumenism and evangelization.'[18] This accurately reflected the differences in missionary understanding and practice among the polarized churches in the 1970s. The WCC sought to find a balance between evangelization and humanization, arguing that 'churches are learning afresh through the poor of the earth to overcome the old dichotomies between evangelism and social action.'[19] Seung-Oh Ahn explained that 'the ecumenical theology came to have a paradigm to see mission as a whole, refusing to prioritize either the spirit or the body, the church or the world, humanity or the earth, individual salvation or social salvation.'[20]

When the EA was published, South Korea's ecumenical elites were limited in their ability to incorporate the document into the current of social Protestantism, especially since the NCCK had maintained an agenda of domestic democratization and peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula during Park's authoritative regime and the subsequent regime of Doo-Hwan Chun.[21] Under the new military regime of Doo-Hwan Chun, which came to power by force through the Coup d'état of December Twelfth, civilian-led reunification movements were inconceivable, and with the pro-democracy movement under pressure, it was not easy for the ecumenical group to balance the task of evangelization as a unifying factor. Rather, the

18 World Council of Churches, "Mission and Evangelism - An Ecumenical Affirmation," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7: 2 (April 1983): 65.

19 Ibid., 69.

20 Paul Seung-Oh An, "An Alternative Mission Paradigm for Healthy Church Growth," *Great Commission Research Journal* 10:2 (2019): 12.

21 Yun-Shik Chang, "The Progressive Christian Church and Democracy in South Korea," *Journal of Church and State* 40:2 (Spring 1998): 445-456.

ecumenical line of the PROK and Tonghap within the NCCK became more concerned with the issue of peace and justice on the Korean Peninsula than with the issue of evangelization, through their involvement in the Consultation on Peace and Justice in Northeast Asia in Tozanso in October 1984. This could hardly be considered a holistic mission in the eyes of the evangelical groups.

In this context, a holistic ecclesiology that should involve the church's social responsibility from an evangelical lens began to be generated in the evangelical Presbyterian Church. In a global context, the Second Lausanne Congress in Manila in 1989 issued a declaration known as the *Manila Manifesto*, which transformed the controversy of priority of evangelization over humanization and shared a holistic approach to mission and church. In particular, in Article 9 of the 21 Affirmations of the *Manila Manifesto* proves the evangelicals' resolute voice on social responsibility: 'We affirm that the proclamation of God's kingdom of justice and peace demands the denunciation of all injustice and oppression, both personal and structural; we will not shrink from this prophetic witness.'[22] This passage suggests that the Lausanne movement, too, echoed the ecumenical element of the Kingdom of God, expressing concern for the social responsibility of the church and the structural evils of the world.

The Manila Lausanne Congress paved the way for Korean participants to establish the Korean Lausanne Committee in 1989. This Committee sustained solidarity with the global evangelical bodies and the development of the Lausanne movement in Korea. However, within the conservative Presbyterians, there was a somewhat pessimistic view that the Manila Manifesto's emphasis on holistic mission and church's social role tilted toward ecumenical ecclesiology, intending that the evangelical group had adopted *Missio Dei* and JPIC, and that the terminology of the holistic mission itself had already been distorted from evangelical mission to ecumenical one. This reflects the conservatism of the Korean church, which still insists on evangelism as the highest priority of the church's existence. Despite the active participation of Korean delegates in the Lausanne movement, it has not spread widely on local soil. This is because the Korean Lausanne Committee was to some degree constrained by human and financial resources and, most importantly, because it did not provide a platform for younger generations to 'reach down to the local church' in terms of grassroots evangelicalism.[23]

While the global Christian landscape in the 1980s was characterized by a narrowing of mission and ecclesiology between the ecumenical and evangelical worlds, Korean Protestantism still seemed to be marked by the theological and ecclesiological rifts of the 1970s. This instigated a situation in which the ecumenical group's accelerating political involvement intensified the competition against evangelical-conservative Christians and cultivated the creation of conservative organizations such as the Christian Council of Korea in 1989.

22 "The Manila Manifesto," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13:4 (October 1989): 164.

23 Hyung-Keun Choi, "A Study of the Influences of the Lausanne Movement on the Korean Church," *ACTS Theological Journal* 46 (December 2020): 410.

4. From Disunity to Unity: Localizing Missional Ecclesiology

Missional Ecclesiology Bridging Ecumenism and Evangelism

Despite the rise of holistic theology, the ecumenical and evangelical branches of the Korean Presbyterian Church persisted into the late 20th century. In the meantime, the dominant ecclesiology of the Presbyterian Church was undoubtedly church growth theory that motivated megachurches to exert a strong influence on the life, worship, mission, and theological system of the church. However, since the 2000s, Korean Protestantism has been in rapid decline and faced a major crisis in church sustainability. The causes of this challenge can be broadly categorized into internal and external crises. The causes of the internal crisis include rapid de-churching, an increase in nominal Christians, a decline in the quantity and quality of church membership and the limitations of the church growth movement. External crises include the erosion of the church's credibility, society's negative perception of Christianity due to its exclusivist ecclesiology, and its lack of public presence. These crises are faced by both ecumenical and evangelical denominations, calling for a transformation in ecclesiology and missionary structures. Below are some statistics on the recent decline of major Presbyterian churches in Korea.[24]

Table 1. Korean Presbyterian Denominational Changes over the Years

Year/Denomination	Tonghap	Hapdong	Gosin	PROK
2012	2,810,000	2,994,000	481,000	297,000
2013	2,808,000	2,857,000	472,000	289,000
2014	2,810,000	2,721,000	461,000	284,000
2015	2,789,000	2,700,000	472,000	264,000
2016	2,730,000	2,764,000	473,000	240,000
2017	2,627,000	2,688,000	452,000	235,000
2018	2,554,000	2,656,000	423,000	231,000
2019	2,506,000	2,556,000	412,000	223,000
2020	2,392,000	2,382,000	401,000	215,000
2021	2,358,000	2,292,000	388,000	208,000
Compared to ten years ago	-452,000 (-16.1%)	-702,000 (-23.4%)	-93,000 (-19.3%)	-89,000 (-30%)

In the above statistics, firstly, Tonghap fell from 2,810,000 in 2012 to 2,358,000 in 2021, a decrease of about 452,000 members (-16.1%). Hapdong decreased by about 702,000 members (-23.4%) from 2,994,000 in 2012 to 2,292,000 in 2021. In addition to these mainline evangelical denominations, the steepest decline was pronounced in PROK, an ecumenically oriented denomination, which declined from 297,000 in 2012 to 208,000 in 2021, a drop of about 89,000 members (-30%).

This phenomenon of shrinking churches has stimulated church leaders and theologians, both evangelical and ecumenical, to search for an ecclesiology that can overcome this numerical and qualitative crisis. The solution has centered on missional ecclesiology and movements. Missional ecclesiology is a theological and practical concept that emphasizes the church's identity and purpose as fundamentally 'missional' and seeks to reintegrate church and mission

24 "Six major denominations see decline in membership for 10 years," *Newsnjoy*, accessed July 20, 2024, https://www.newsnjoy.or.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=304740.

in the post-Christendom era and attempts to articulate a radical representation of the church as a participant in God's mission in the world, rather than a traditional growth-oriented church. Already in the late 20th century, from Western missiologists Lesslie Newbigin, Darrell L. Guder, George R. Hunsberger, Alan J. Roxburgh, and Craig Van Gelder, a variety of contemporary missional church theorists have designed missional ecclesiology through various missional networks, including the GOCN.[25]

Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen summarizes the characteristics of missional ecclesiology and its practical networks as follows: '1) mission as *Missio Dei*, 2) church as a contrast community, 3) Western culture as a mission field, and 4) the breakdown of the old Christendom.'[26] To explain these four characteristics briefly, first, *Missio Dei* at the heart of missional ecclesiology is not a church-centered mission, but rather God's subjectivity in the world to embody His rule and Kingdom on earth. Second, the church is not a community that is absorbed into the values and logic of the world, but rather a community of called Christians who participate in God's work of transforming the world and history. Third, the new mission field is not Africa or Asia, but Western society, a neopagan society in the context of global Christianity. Fourth, the church is no longer the dominant influence as it was in Christendom, and it is challenged to express the gospel anew in a changing cultural context of value relativism, religious pluralism, and secularization.

Korean Protestantism faced similar cultural and religious challenges to those faced by Western churches. The rapid decline of the Korean church was ultimately attributed to the limitations of the existing growth-oriented ecclesiology and its practical paradigm. In this context, missional ecclesiology came to produce an alternative discussion to enliven the reality of Korean Protestantism. Missiological scholarship has focused on missional ecclesiology as a basis for reforming the Korean church for three reasons.[27] First, missional ecclesiology can overcome the drawbacks of the old church growth movement and provide fundamental answers to the questions of what the nature of the church is and how the church exists in the post-Christendom era. The second is that the decline of the Korean church results from the lack of public trust, so for the church's sustainability, it is necessary to realize the public truth and common good that missional ecclesiology seeks in the world.[28]

However, a third and more fundamental motive for the change was the problem of church unity. There was a realistic reason to convince that missional ecclesiology could contribute to restoring wholeness, unity, and harmony to the Presbyterian Church which had become overly

25 See Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2006), 127-147.

26 Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, "Missional Church: A Historical and Theological Analysis of An Ecclesiological Tradition," *International Review of Mission* 102:2 (November 2013): 259-261.

27 Kang-Hee Han, *Sustainable Church: Introducing Missional Ecclesiology and Practices* (Seoul: BOOKK, 2022), 8-9.

28 Following the presidential impeachment in Korean politics in December 2024, far-right Protestantism seems to be deepening confrontations in churches. From the perspective of missional ecclesiology, this extremism and division stems from a distortion of the nature of church that prioritizes political ideology over the mission and reign of God. A missional church can contribute to restore public life through social responsibility to the community, not through the politicization of religion.

fragmented in the post-1970 era, while it had expanded numerically through church divisions and competition. Missional ecclesiology emphasizes missional life, which is grounded in transformative discipleship and requires the integration of evangelism and social responsibility. Prior to missional ecclesiology, Korean Protestantism was sharply divided into conservative-evangelical and ecumenical groups, with a different understanding of mission as evangelism and social action respectively. Yet, the term 'missional' does not dichotomize these two, but rather identifies evangelization and social engagement as interconnected in a missional context. This holistic understanding of salvation and church was introduced to Korea in the 1980s through documents such as the EA and the *Manila Manifesto*, but it was never fully implemented. However, in the changed context, as the evangelical-ecumenical groups jointly accepted that the issue of unity is linked to the public credibility of the Korean church and the nature of church, a missional ecclesiology has emerged as an important rationale for the transformation from disunity to unity.

Missional Ecclesiology in Local Church and Maeul: Grassroots Ecumenism in Experiment

In Korea, missional ecclesiology has been incorporated at various levels, including the denomination, local churches, and Christian organizations. The Tonghap's 102nd General Assembly in 2017 materialized missional ecclesiology through the theme "Holy Church into the World Again" and made it a priority for the denomination, expressing it in a practical way through Village Ministry (*Maeul* Ministry). As the theme of the General Assembly suggests, the identity of the church in Korean society is not in the competitive expansion of the church itself or the growth-centrism that attracts people, but in scattering 'into the world' to build the Kingdom of God.[29] In addition, in 2019, the Church and Unity Committee of the NCCK announced the theme of the Ecumenical Mission Forum as "Reimagine the Korean Church! - Toward Diversity in Ecclesiastical Ecology" and shared several examples and possibilities of missional churches from various denominations. The Forum did not only deal with the ecumenical community. In evangelical denominations, academia, and mission organizations, missional ecclesiology has emerged as an important practical basis for church renewal of the existing church paradigm beyond specific denominations.[30]

The importance of missional ecclesiology can be identified in two main ways: One is localization, and the other is an ecumenical network or partnership orientation. Regarding localization, the wholistic ecclesiology common to the WCC and the Lausanne Congress between the 1980s and 1990s was not applicable in the Korean context. This period was still marked in a dualistic manner by the church growth theology of the mainline churches and the socially participatory theology of the minor churches in the 1970s, which subsequently limited the ability to balance evangelization and social responsibility. However, the visible decline

29 See Byung-Ohk Lee, "Toward a Korean Missional Church: A Dialogue between Missional Theology and Minjung Theology," *Korea Presbyterian Journal of Theology* 44:3 (October 2012): 273-294.

30 Han, *Sustainable Church*, 7-8.

of Korean churches in the 2000s turned their attention to an alternative approach to church sustainability, social credibility, and publicity, which was based on missional ecclesiology at the local level. In addition, the Korean government greatly expanded local village-building projects and called for the active participation of voluntary organizations such as religious groups in the public sector. These social changes guided the church to fulfill its social responsibilities in its specific environment.

In Korean Protestantism, therefore, a local expression of missional ecclesiology has emerged as Maeul Ministry. The Korean word 'Maeul' refers to village or neighborhood, which means a specific community or settlement consisting of a place of residence as well as living facilities such as government offices, schools, hospitals, and community facilities. Maeul primarily referred to a rural area, but today it also refers to a small community unit within a city or town. Local congregations have come to regard the village as the place where the Kingdom of God is being realized and have reaffirmed the identity and mission of the church in the village.[31] This is defined as Maeul Ministry and is sparking a grassroots church movement that is bridging the gap between evangelization and social responsibility.

In general, the key strategies of Maeul Ministry in Korea include 1) a focus on diakonia as an ecclesiological function, 2) evangelism through community service and social action, 3) strengthening networks and solidarity of local, ecumenical churches, 4) seeking both individual and communal prosperity, and 5) a movement from below to build thriving villages.[32] This missional ecclesiology, expressed through Maeul Ministry, emphasizes that the raison d'être and purpose of the church is God's mission in the world, and that mission must be done specifically in the village. The localization of the village reflects the two dimensions of mission stressed in missional ecclesiology: incarnational and apostolic.

Secondly and importantly, missional ecclesiology strengthens ecumenical networks and church-society partnerships within Protestant denominations. Traditional church growth theories have sought church sustainability through competition among denominations. While this growth-oriented approach seeks to develop churches by using patterns and traditional modalities that attract people, it fails to consider cooperation among churches of the denomination and local churches. It also often destroys church ecosystems, as megachurches gain an advantage over smaller churches through greater human and financial resources in a changing religious marketplace. Missional ecclesiology, however, encourages small church movements in local villages and strengthens networks between large and small churches, and between small and small churches. This phenomenon, which transcends denominations and church size, promotes unity among churches and contributes to the ecumenical movement and social credibility as well.

A recent phenomenon is that this form of unity extends beyond church-church relationships

31 An-Wei Tan, "Small Missional Church as an Alternative in the Period of Church Decline in Korea," *Ecclesial Futures* 4:1 (2023): 103.

32 "The Core Strategies of Village Ministry," accessed July 20, 2024, http://maul-church.net/ %eb%a7%88%ec%9d%84 %eb%aa%a9%ed%9a%8c-%ed%95%b5%ec%8b%ac%ec%a0%84%eb%9e%b5/.

to church-society partnerships. Since 2006, the Korean government has been promoting the Community Building Project to strengthen local governments and foster people's participatory interest in their villages. This activity was linked to self-governance where residents themselves solve local problems and improve their quality of life. This facilitated the development of public-private partnerships, which were collaborative initiatives between government and private spheres. This process encompasses plans to develop and implement public projects such as social services, and social infrastructure such as schools and hospitals, etc. This has motivated the church, which is considered a private sector, to get involved in village-building projects. More recently, churches have organized Christian cooperatives to revitalize their relationship with the government, making it possible to localize and expand ecumenical boundaries, as well as to become an alternative community linking church and society.

On June 25, 2024, the Korean Pastoral Data Institute released statistics from a survey of more than 500 Protestant pastors, including Presbyterians, about the pastoral application of missional ecclesiology and its potential for development. The statistics reported that 36% of respondents said missional churches are characterized by a religious community that collaborates with the villages, 26% responded with their spiritual salvation, and 18% with their social service and diakonia.[33] It suggests a shift in a viewpoint that highlights public engagement and localization of mission, not just personal, spiritual salvation. Furthermore, the expected outcome of applying missional church to their churches is the expansion of the Kingdom of God at 63%, restoring the credibility of the church at 24%, reviving and growing the church at 8%, and revitalizing the church at 4%. It reflects the public accountability of the church within the community at 87%.[34] These statistics demonstrate a transition from traditional church growth to a holistic ecclesiology that seeks to integrate evangelization and social engagement, although Korean Protestantism still needs more understanding and examples of missional ecclesiology.

Based on this theoretical framework, various churches have recently emerged that promote localization and ecumenism, or grassroots ecumenism. These churches are pursuing the concept of *Missio Dei*, strengthening unity and cooperation within their denominations and partnering with governments, social enterprises, and private sectors to solve local problems. For example, the PCK Tonghap Village Building Network, which strengthens Christian capacity for village building, was organized in 2016, and pastors and experts are exploring various ways of social engagement of the church, including urban and rural missions, multicultural missions, and social enterprise. Moreover, there is the Yeongdeungpo Urban Industrial Mission, which seeks to create an alternative economic system amidst the neoliberal wave to a life-sustaining civilization. In an extension of the cooperative movement, the Mission focuses on empowering industrial workers, providing economic support for the vulnerable, strengthening capacity through public-private partnerships, and creating sustainable development and ecological infrastructure. In addition to these networks, there are also examples of grassroots ecumenism

33 Korean Pastoral Data Institute, *Numbers* 245 (June 25, 2024): 5.

34 Ibid., 10.

being implemented by local churches. Village congregations are also connecting the concept of "Environmental, Social, and Governance" as an alternative paradigm for social sustainability with a missional framework.[35] This includes environmental issues, social care, and service programs to overcome the climate crisis, and governance concerns to improve democratic structures and communication within the church and attempts to reinterpret the missional church in their own context. It seems clear that the practice of missional ecclesiology is an important engine for moving the church from division to unity.

5. Conclusion: Missional Ecclesiology and Prospects for Unity

Since the Great Schism of the 1950s, the Presbyterian church has experienced more extreme divisions over issues surrounding colonial experiences, conservative-liberal theological differences, and membership in the WCC. In the 1970s, the church growth trend was embraced by Korean Protestantism, resulting in quantitative expansion along with exponential economic development. By prioritizing personal salvation, church growth theory helped Korean Protestants accelerate evangelization and gain influence from societies. However, with their sharp division, some conservative-evangelical churches went hand in hand with political powers and, except for a few progressive Protestant groups, failed to fulfill their social responsibilities. The ecumenical groups developed the Christian democratization movement, the peace reunification movement, and the ecological movement, but they were unsuccessful in bridging the church division due to ecclesiological differences with evangelical groups. Under these circumstances, missional ecclesiology and its practices have materialized tangible possibilities for bringing together divided ecclesiologies and practice types.

Missional ecclesiology offers two prospects for the Korean ecumenical impetus. One is the possibility of visible unity of the church at the local level. So far, both the ecumenical-evangelical groups have been dominated by elite denominational or top leadership. However, missional ecclesiology and its practices are revitalizing the sustainability of wider ecumenism by sparking grassroots ecumenism from below. The other is strengthening ecumenical solidarity and networking within local communities. The Korean church has been denominationally centered, and divisions within Presbyterian churches have prevented vibrant interchurch solidarity. However, Maeul Ministry, a practical expression of missional ecclesiology, is enhancing mission partnerships by sharing resources among various local churches in the same community. It is expected to recover public credibility by fostering not only solidarity among faith communities but also relationships with public institutions and other private sectors.

In conclusion, missional ecclesiology relativizes theological differences among denominations, reaffirming the ecclesial nature as missional communities and enabling ecumenical solidarity for the common good. The missional church overcomes egocentric ecclesiology and redefines itself as world-centered, aiming for on-the-ground engagement for justice and peace in *oikoumene*,

35 Kang-Hee Han, "Church's Sustainability and Its Transformation into Missional Structure in the ESG Era," *Mission and Theology* 61 (October 2023): 428-434.

thus strengthening the communication between the church and the world as well as the inter-church collaborations.

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