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Towards a Radically Inclusive Korean American Church: Narratives of the Dechurched Millennials and Social Justice

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Towards a Radically Inclusive Korean American Church:

Narratives of the Dechurched Millennials and Social Justice

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents the theological narratives of six Korean American millennials[1] who grew up in the Northeastern United States. Participants of the study identify themselves as having grown up in church, only to become disillusioned with Korean American Christian churches. Some consider themselves no longer Christian; others have left both the Korean American and Korean immigrant churches to attend other Christian churches. This paper is divided into two parts: first, a review of studies on millennials and second generation Korean Americans in terms of their religious affiliation and involvement. It argues that there is a gap in scholarship on dechurched Korean American millennials, whose voices are hidden by scholarship that studies Asian American evangelicals. The study provides a particular snapshot of the experiences of Korean American millennials who leave the Korean American church and offer an account of why. The second part of the section analyzes the theological narratives, noting intersections and common themes that have shaped their church experience and motivations to leave. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the themes that arise in the theological narratives of the dechurched millennials, especially how it affects our construction of Korean American theology and ecclesiology for the 21st Century.

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[1] I follow the Pew Research Center's definition of millennials as "those born after 1980 and the first generation to come of age in the new millennium." The 2014 Pew Forum Report defines millennials as between the age of 18-33.

Examining recent studies on the religious affiliation of millennials and second-generation Korean Americans reveal disparities that must be re-examined. Based on currently available research, it is difficult to exactly ascertain retention rates of Korean American millennials for both monoethnic Korean American immigrant churches and second-generation Korean American churches. According to Pew Forum Report 2014,[2] 36 percent of millennials between 18-24 are religiously unaffiliated while 34 percent of millennials between 25-33 are religiously unaffiliated. Fewer than six in ten millennials are Christian. In an earlier 2012 report, the Pew found that around 23 percent[3] of Korean Americans are unaffiliated, while 71 percent are Christian.[4] While it appears that Korean Americans as a whole fare better than the national average of 18 percent[5] of U.S. adults comprising the religious "nones," there are reasons to suspect that this does not reflect the religious affiliation of Korean American millennials. Karen J. Chai cites that "a study of New York City Korean Americans found that only 5 percent of second-generation Korean Americans remain in the church after college."[6] Dae Young Kim "found that 65 percent still identify themselves as either Protestant or Catholic. Of those who belong to a church, 61 percent attend a Korean church."[7] This is closer to the average that we've seen for millennial U.S. adults. Of course, these two studies

[2] See "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

[3] "The Rise of Asian Americans," Pew Research Center, http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/.

[4] See Pyong Gap Min and Sou Hyun Jang, "The Diversity of Asian Immigrants' Participation in Religious Institutions in the United States," *Sociology of Religion 76, no* 3 (2015): 253-74. This relates to the overrepresentation of Christians among Korean immigrants. "Korean Protestant immigrants have experienced a remarkable increase, while Korean Buddhist immigrants have undergone a phenomenal reduction in the United States mainly because many Korean Buddhists and atheists had converted to Protestantism in the United States before they changed their status to permanent residents (Hurh and Kim 1990; Min 2010:52–53). They convert to Protestantism mainly because Protestant churches provide many services not available in Buddhist temples," (262). Such migration trends lead to overrepresentation of Christianity among Korean American adults and households, including the second-generation.

[5] "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center.

[6] Karen J. Chai, "Beyond 'Strictness' to Distinctiveness: Generational Transition in Korean Protestant Churches," in *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore*, ed. Ho-Youn Kwon et. al. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2001), 157.

[7] Ibid., 158.

looked at Generation-X[8] Korean Americans rather than millennials. David K. Yoo's study of the English Ministry at LAKUMC also does not isolate millennials.[9] Further study examining Korean American millennials' religious affiliation is needed to see whether the numbers remain unchanged from previous generation Korean Americans.[10]

In 1996, Helen Lee coined the term "silent exodus" to describe the phenomenon of second generation Asian Americans leaving monoethnic immigrant churches. This announcement was met with several studies on Asian American Christians. Peter T. Cha conducted a study that examined the ethnic identity formation and spiritual identification of second-generation Korean Americans.[11] However, Cha "decided not to interview those Korean Americans who no longer identify themselves as Christians" [12] because he is "interested in studying the cultural and social dimensions of the Korean American church experience, not the spiritual or theological ones."[13] This omission seems connected with Edward T. Chang's observation that there is an "absence of critical studies of Korean American churches."[14] Chang argues that studies "focused on formal doctrinal

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[8] I follow Pew Research Center's definition of Generation X as those "in age from 34-49" in 2014. A difficulty with dividing Korean Americans based on U.S. generation markers is that 1) studies on second-generation Korean American church retention after college were done in the late 1990s/early 2000s, but 2) parents of millennials can be from both the older end of Generation X and younger end of the baby boomer generation.

[9] See David K. Yoo, "A Usable Past? Reflections on Generational Change in Korean American Protestantism" in *Religion and Spirituality in Korean America*, ed. David K. Yoo and Ruth H. Chung (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 193-215. "Core and long-term lay leaders are largely those who are in their late thirties and their forties with children.... baby boomer(s)…accompanied by a younger group of those who might be termed Generation Xers," (209-210). Yoo writes on Asian American religious history, not Asian American millennials.

[10] I am aware that in her 2010 monograph, Sharon Kim states that "about two thirds of 1.5 and second-generation Korean American Protestant adults have preserved their childhood religion," (54). This would place Korean American millennials on par with the Pew's findings on religious affiliation of millennials. However, as I have noted previously, it is difficult to figure second-generation Korean Americans neatly by generation, as undoubtedly the statistic cited by Kim would include Korean Americans from both the younger Gen-X and older millennial category.

[11] See Peter T. Cha, "Ethnic Identity Formation and Participation in Immigrant Churches: Second-Generation Korean American Experiences," in *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore*, ed. Ho-Youn Kwon et. al. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2001), 141-210.

[12] Ibid., 142.

[13] Ibid.

[14] See Edward T. Chang, "Diaspora Koreans in the United States: An Introduction" in *Korean Diaspora: Central Asia, Northeast Asia, and North America*, ed. Hesung Chun Koh (New Haven, CT: East Rock Institute, 2008).

definitions of ministry or on the pastoral work of Korean American clergy; they have not been concerned with a social-scientific examination of the roles and functions of ethnic churches in the larger social context,"[15] pointing to an unwillingness on scholars of Korean American Christianity to critique Korean immigrant and Korean American churches. Chang's worries are substantiated by recent scholarship by Asian American scholars like Sharon Kim and Russell Jeung, whose work tends to examine Asian American evangelicalism as a phenomenon and analyzes it social-scientifically rather than critique it from a theological perspective.[16] Korean American Christianity has been critiqued by the second-generation strictly on ethnic/cultural lines rather than theological. Jerry Z. Park cites Pyong Gap Min and Dae Y. Kim's 2005 study on criticism of Korean immigrant churches.

> Many second-generation Korean Americans in New York City participate in near exclusive worship gatherings of same-ethnic and same-age peers, with little interaction from the immigrant generation. They argue that little ethnic identity is cultivated in the context of second generation religious-ethnic communities.[17]

But it is important also to note that this distancing from Korean culture has not fostered a general critique of the doctrine, ecclesiology or subculture in Korean American churches that millennial "nones" in my study have identified as deal-breakers for them. Sharon Kim and Russell Jeung's work both note that second generation Asian American churches adopt a consumer-oriented Christianity[18] that accommodates lifestyle affinities and

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[15] Ibid., U3.

[16] See Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own: Second-Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

[17] Jerry Z. Park, "Racial Insularity and Ethnic Faith: The Emerging Korean American Religious Elite," in *Sustaining Faith Traditions: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion among the Latino and Asian American Second Generation* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 139.

[18] "Church members view themselves as consumers and churches as providers…Without any commitments to a particular church community, second-generation Korean Americans will quickly move from one church to the other…[S]econd-generation Korean Americans chose their churches on the basis of which church would provide them with the best "benefit package." The topics of church hopping and church shopping are talked about very

aesthetic tastes. Second-generation churches are influenced by U.S. evangelical theology and subculture.

This study isolates the theological narratives of dechurched second-generation Korean American millennials. A brief review of studies on millennials and church reveal several themes to frame the results of our study. First is a high disparity between the percentage of millennials who identify as Christian and those who actually participate in church. "As few as one in four attend church weekly. Nearly two-thirds never attend religious services."[19] A recent study places one-third of millennials as religious "nones."[20] A second trend is that the exit from religion has affected white millennials more than people of color. "[Millennials] are moving away from the religions in which they were raised at unprecedented rates, although this phenomenon is mostly occurring mostly among White millennials, particularly in the Catholic faith."[21] Consider the Southern Baptists, a predominantly white Protestant denomination. "Eighty percent of Southern Baptist churches had baptized one or zero adults between the ages of 18 and 34 in 2012."[22]

A third trend is a depreciated understanding of organized religion. This is related to the institution's failure to address social issues. "Many college-age students coming to view organized religion as 'strongly morally judgmental without accepting responsibility to accept truly 'religious' missions, like helping the poor and socially disenfranchised.'"[23] These failures also included sex abuse scandals, embezzlement and money mismanagement. "Sixty-four percent described Christianity as 'anti-gay,' 62 percent described it as 'judgmental,' and 58 percent said it was 'hypocritical.'"[24] The homophobic stance of the church, inadequately

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matter-of-factly and casually by the second generation. There seems to be no hesitation, guilt, or shame over a lack of commitment to a particular church." Kim, *A Faith of Our Own,* 97.

[19] Sam S. Rainer, III, "Next generation needs: leading millennials requires exercising a different type of authority," *Leadership Journal 32 no 3* (2011), 49.

[20] Sarah E. Jones, "The religious right's next generation? as America's cultural landscape shifts, a new flock of far-right millennials pushes for mixing church and state," *Church & State*, vol. 69, no. 1 (2016), 10.

[21] Jamaal Abdul-Alim, "The millennial view: today's 18-to-29-year olds grapple with ideas of race, politics and religion in new study," *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* (2012), 8.

[22] Jones, "The religious right's next generation?" 10.

[23] Abdul-Alim, "The millennial view," 8.

[24] Ibid.

addressing antiblack violence, appears in second-generation Korean American churches as well.

> In a special-themed issue of *KoreaAm Journal*, "Born Again…Gay," the relationship between the Korean church and sexuality was explored. According to an informal survey conducted by the journal, where seventy-four of the one hundred surveyed were Christian, 62 percent believed that homosexuality is a choice and 61 percent stated homosexuals could choose to become heterosexual (Rhee 2006). Without a doubt, Christianity is the primary lens through which second-generation Korean Americans view homosexuality.[25]

I estimate that dechurched Korean American millennials may also have left the Korean American church in part due to disagreeing with the church's stance on homosexuality as well as racism. It is on this hypothesis that I have designed my study to explore the dechurched Korean American millennial's understanding of Christianity in relation to social issues. To this end, I turn now to methodological considerations used for this particular project.

Methodology

Now, I received approval for my research project from the Claremont School of Theology Institutional Review Board on January 19, 2016. Interviews were conducted over a two-month period, solicited through referrals received by word of mouth. I contacted friends, colleagues and peers with general information about the project to forward it to those in their networks suitable to participate in the study. Because this study utilizes chain referral sampling and a small sample size, there is a limited generalizability of the conclusions drawn. Further studies of dechurched Korean American millennials will be necessary to better understand this demographic. To prevent breach of privacy, I did not disclose the names of those who elected to participate in this study to those who gave referrals. This article strictly adheres to nondisclosure of personally identifiable information by anonymizing each participant and assigning of pseudonyms.

[25] Kim, *A Faith of Our Own*, 128-29.

I conducted six one-on-one interviews for a duration between 60 to 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted online through Skype. Interviewees were notified by writing in advance of the interview that the interview will be recorded, and given release forms for permission to record. Each interview began with confirmation from the interviewee to permit interview recording. A set of prewritten questions was used for the purpose of the interview, with spontaneous follow-up questions to clarify the interviewee's responses. Questions centered around the reasons why the participants decided to leave the Korean church, and what factors have contributed to the participants' decision to not return to a Korean church as of yet. The questions also asked participants about their understanding of social justice, their commitment to that understanding, and the relation of church to social justice. Prewritten questions include:

1) Tell me about how church became a part of your life growing up.
2) Think back to when you first began questioning the importance of Church in your life. Could you share with me that experience?
3) Tell me more about these disconnects. What were some of the things that were tugging at you against what your Church taught, believed, practiced?
4) Could you tell me what social issues are of importance to you today?
5) Tell me how you made the decision to leave the Korean church.
6) What role does spirituality have in your life after leaving the Church?

Following the interviews, I transcribed each recording. The interviews were compiled and analyzed qualitatively. I use narrative analysis[26] to identify key themes that are shared in common by all interviewees. These themes allow us to deconstruct aspects of Korean American Christianity were aversive or reprehensible to participants. Aggregating these themes allows us to reconstruct a theological narrative of dechurched Korean American millennials. By understanding the theo-logic of the dechurched, I propose

[26] See Ruthellen Jo, "Narrative Research: Constructing, Deconstructing and Reconstructing Story," in *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research, and Intuitive Inquiry* (New York: Guilford Press, 2011), 224-42.

steps that can be taken towards reconstructing the Korean American church into one that is radically inclusive, committed to justice and avoids hypocrisy that millennials find off-putting in institutional religions.

Biographical Profile

There were six participants in this study. Four participants are male and two are female. In terms of age, three are in their early 20s, one is in their late 20s, and two are in their early 30s. Four participants grew up in New Jersey, one in New York City, and one in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. Two participants had a parent that was clergy, one had a relative that is clergy, and three did not have clergy parents/relatives. In terms of educational background, two participants graduated seminary, two graduated a four-year private liberal arts college, one graduated a four-year public college, and one attended some four-year private liberal arts college. Two participants have left the Korean immigrant/Korean American churches and currently attend a non-Korean church. Two participants do not attend church at all. One participant occasionally attends non-Korean churches. One participant attends a Korean immigrant church due to family obligations. He does not identify as a Christian or religious.

For five participants, their experience with conservative and evangelical Christian beliefs, practices and organizations influenced their decision to leave the Korean American church. The sixth participant, Lucas, did not cite conservative evangelical Christianity as influencing his decision to leave. However, he found churches that were seeker-sensitive and communally disengaged to be problematic. His current church engages and serves the local community. Sarah and Lucas are married to a white spouse. Mary is in an interracial relationship with a nonwhite partner. She and her partner are both atheist but their families adhere to different religions.[27]

Narratives and Themes

Transcribing and analyzing the interviews has revealed six reoccurring themes that played a role in interviewees' transitioning out of the Korean

[27] Mary's parents are clergy in a mainline Protestant church. Her partner's family is Muslim.

American church. The first is difficulties arising from a church's inflexibility when it came to theological doctrines. There was a disconnect between the experiences and spiritual journeys of the participants and the doctrines that churches taught, leading to interpersonal conflicts and disillusionment. A second theme is the church's inadequate handling or denial of mental health issues. This theme was related to a broader East Asian stigmatization of mental health issues, seen as shameful, and an unwillingness to provide adequate care for those with emotional trauma and other mental illnesses. Some religious practices were seen as remedies for symptoms, but ultimately education to mental health issues and access to resources for treatment were not provided.

Third, the church's ambiguous stance on women's leadership in both Korean immigrant congregations and second generation churches was seen as problematic. Separation of labor based on gender roles, rooted in East Asian sexism and Confucian patrilineal family structures, created a glass ceiling in which women were discouraged or unsupported from becoming ordained senior pastors. Fourth, the insularity of Korean American religious communities on racial/class lines and a lack of social and political engagement also emerged in all participants. This led to the fifth theme, a critique on dysfunctional church structures. Lastly, despite rejection of the institutional church, many participants still view spirituality as an important part of their lives, whether or not actively engaged in individual or corporate spiritual practice.[28]

Doctrinal Inflexibility

There Doctrinal inflexibility has been a common reason why many participants abandoned Christianity or Korean churches. As an agnostic who occasionally visits local, predominantly white mainline Protestant churches, John found that Korean American churches emphasized biblical inerrancy in ways that prevented them from being socially engaged and transformative. When asked what prevents the church from spaces to discuss and pursue justice, he answered:

[28] This agrees with Sarah E. Jones, who cites the Pew: "Seventy-five percent of nones identify themselves as 'nothing in particular' rather than atheist or agnostic. Many report that they still engage in spiritual practices like prayer." Jones, "The religious right's next generation?" 10.

> I think it comes down to biblical interpretation. Believing that this word is inerrant, and not reading it in the context in which it was written…back in biblical times there were never words to describe Queer or Trans or even anything else really…people are afraid, hesitant to challenge that and be open.

Many of his Korean American Christian counterparts whom he's engaged to discuss the question of justice, "ground their views on this so called inerrant text." Such commitments lead to a closed church that does not adequately address sexism, classism, racism, and queer phobia. John left Korean churches and Christianity because it does not do enough to condemn injustice.

George discovered that his ministers' and peers' commitment to conservative Christian doctrine made them incapable of acknowledging his doubts as a Christian. "Everyone is going to ask why at one point in their doubt. For me, it wasn't just once or twice or three or four times. It was a lot more than that." When George shared these doubts or other doubts related to his faith, he was met with little sympathy. "The response was very typical." Rather than truly empathizing with George in his doubting, he was met with: "I can't really help you, but I can show you verses in the Bible which have stories of people who are like you in your situation with them rather than finding an answer." George wanted to make sense of the suffering he saw around him, to have his experience to be heard and validated. Instead, he was given a Bible passage to read, asked to trust in God, and prayed for by others. "I just wanted someone else to hear what I have to say." But George's sharing of his struggles with faith was not heard. Instead, a generic response came from what he characterizes as an act of trying to show that he still had faith in God.

George's doubts are related to the problem of evil. He was taught by his parents and the Presbyterian church that when hardships or problems arise, it is because God willed it to teach human beings how to go beyond suffering. George was not satisfied with such an answer. "Why does my family have to suffer? Why does any other have to suffer so much just in order to say 'God is great. Amen?'" George found reliance on God through

petitioning for a miracle rather than working to prevent or mitigate the difficult times to be counterintuitive.

Thomas's struggle with the problem of evil and church doctrine led to disillusionment. He grew dissatisfied with organized Christianity in college as he wrestled with these questions.

> I grew up as a Presbyterian. As a Presbyterian, you are supposed to believe in limited election. I sort of rejected that out of hand completely, just because I thought it was a silly idea and that if only a couple people could be saved, then what would be the point of believing?...I was believing, emphasizing free will more than predestination. But in college, my thinking started changing, most dramatically my senior year…I had always taken a pessimistic worldview of human nature and the world. I started to think or started to view God's omnipotence and omni-essence as…if you could save these people, there's all this stuff going around, if He configured a world in such a way to optimize His glory, then this is his will?...So, the people who are dying I guess this is the will of God for His glory. So why does this not stop him from saving who he wants to save?

Thomas attempted to overcome this theological dilemma by accepting a universalist soteriology. But he does not consider himself saved. "I am an anti-nominalist at this point…emphasizing the extreme side of predestination…even though…I don't believe I am saved…I guess there is a part of me that cannot believe that Christ is God." Thomas's difficulty intellectually accepting the actual existence of Jesus and the validity of the resurrection and Jesus being God keep him from Christianity. He found that Korean American Christian communities are not safe places to question rigidly enforced theological doctrines. Thomas's involvement at a multiethnic, nondenominational evangelical church in his college pushed him further away from theologically conservative understandings of Christianity. There was no room at the table to understand God differently. Likewise, George was taught at church not to associate with non-Christians. In his understanding of Christianity, Christians should not associate with those outside of the church. The secular world is one of sin, which the Christian can only engage with by calling non-Christians not to sin. George

rejects Christianity in part because he does not want to uphold the sacred/secular distinction any longer, nor condemn non-Christians as essentially "sinful."

Mental Health

There Mary and Sarah both explicitly bring up the issue of mental health in the Korean American church as well as in Korean American culture in general. Mary refers to the emotional outbursts that occur in group prayer in first and second generation Korean churches. She is uncomfortable when people begin to cry or become emotional in this corporate ritual of prayer.

> This outward expression of crying or praying so expressively, this suffering thing that happens in Korean churches…the crying…it gets me to think too much about the psychology of things, it gets me thinking very technically of what's going on…and getting really frustrating that there's not enough mental health care.

Mary notes that there is a lack of understanding of mental health problems in Korean American communities. Turning to the church as spaces to work out these traumatic experiences and suffering may be making the problem worse.

Sarah also notes the need for acknowledging mental illness and the value of counseling. "Korean culture and…mental illness specifically…don't do well together. Koreans think it is a shameful thing." Mental and emotional maladies also surfaced as a result of Sarah's negative experience with Korean American Christians in college. The passive-aggressive communication style used by the group to let Sarah go from the praise team shows limited mental health awareness among second generation Korean American Christians. "If they can't address their own emotional stuff…it's going to probably affect or infect church life." I suggest that the passive-aggressive communication style, the emotional outbursts in worship, and internal strife within Korean churches already demonstrate how psychological issues have affected church life in adverse ways. Lucas also admits that Korean style communication is "a lot of back channel" and

"indirect communication" that leads to "people being annoyed, hurt, or angry."

John also recalls worship spaces for second generation Korean Americans becoming spaces for "very cathartic emotional experiences." In particular, he sees that submissiveness or conformity to Korean American church culture leads to many psychological effects.

> I think there are a lot of repressed emotions...because people are not allowed to or don't feel like they are able to express disagreement in these cultural settings or social interactive settings, where they feel like they have to fit the norm, whether they are feeling consciously or unconsciously in disagreement.

Inability for people to express dissent and pressure to conform and submit to authority figures enables the worship space to become a place to vent these frustrations. "The worship style is a form of emotional outburst or escape from internalized pressure." John also found leaving the Korean American church to be an emotionally debilitating experience. "The cost [for people leaving] would be a lot of emotional and psychological community…when you completely cut yourself out, it is really hard to find a new community…the cost is feeling isolated and feeling lost." John, in his search to ground himself in a new community after leaving the church, expressed that he had "a lot of internalized anxiety" when not emotionally connected with others. George's inability to be heard by members of the church in his season of doubting can also be read as the inability to find an empathetic, emotional care. He notes that the standard Christian response to doubt did not address his needs, and definitely did not "make me feel better."

Mary and Sarah both identified "saving face" as part of a mechanism in the Korean church that stigmatizes mental health needs and reifies submissiveness and conformity that John found problematic in Korean American church culture. After being jilted by the campus ministry, Sarah had difficulty sharing her disappointment of church in any depth. "My disappointment and not being able to share with others to an extent was due to I think the church's value on saving face even though that was not

what I thought I was doing." She saw that preserving appearances or saving face involved displaying a façade of wellness at the cost of hiding vulnerability, suffering and sharing one's emotions.

Mary defines saving face in terms of taking on a persona or façade in the Korean American church drama. "Saving face…[is] about the outward appearances you bring to church for other people." Mary recalls that doubt was taboo in Korean American churches. During and after her deconstruction of her Christian identity, Mary continued to take on the external role of church organist, Sunday School teacher without conflicting with her own beliefs for the sake of preserving a valuable aspect of the church experience of others.

Women's Leadership and Patriarchy

Sarah's experience of a lack of support during her ordination experience points towards a disturbing reality of an internalized misogyny and patriarchy that Korean American Christians must address going forward. She sees the lack of women lay and ordained leaders at Korean American churches as cultural as well as ecclesiological byproducts.

> My experience has been culturally like, for example the whole women thing. Women in ministry or women in leadership, that I think is a cultural byproduct of Korean Confucian influence, that whole kind of Asian dynamic, but I think is largely Korean. The patriarchal influence of our culture I think is a big problem. I would personally see more Korean women be supported in a leadership role in the church, which I still don't see from my experience.

Such observations are not new. A 1997 study of ethnic-minority PCUSA churches showed that Korean American churches disproportionately have fewer women ordained elders than other ethnic-minority churches.[29] Pyong Gap Min has also written on the severe underrepresentation of

[29] See Shin Kim and Kwang Chung Kim, "Korean Immigration Churches: Male Domination and Adaptive Strategy," in *Korean Diaspora: Central Asia, Northeast Asian and North America*, ed. Hesung Chun Koh et al. (New Haven, CT: East Rock Institute, 2008). "More than 90 percent of Korean elders (92%) [sic] are males, while only 8 percent are females. Among African Americans, 36 percent of elders are males, whereas 45 percent of Hispanic elders are males," (U58).

women leaders in Korean immigrant churches.[30] John has seen similar sexist as well as homophobic attitudes among second generation Korean Americans. "People [are] saying explicitly sexist and homophobic things. Saying like: [sic] women should be submissive, women cannot be in positions of authority in a church (whether it is the minister or what not), as well as the homophobic things." Thus, misogyny and patriarchy affect perception and support of women leaders in both Korean immigrant and second generation Korean American Christian contexts.

This lack of support has affected Sarah's relationship with God. The ordination issue as well as struggles with her family are understood as God being distant and uninvolved.

> I am not only a little bit distrustful for God…[but] more cynical about it…I just am less believing of God's involvement in my life right now…there are just things that I am just so angry at God about…those things have not been resolved.

While in seminary, Sarah considered becoming an ordained minister in her denomination. However, she found relatively no support for Korean American women seeking ordination in the Korean American churches she was affiliated with.

> Just realizing that there isn't a whole lot of support for me, as a Korean American woman who was on the track to get ordained. There wasn't anyone there that said I couldn't in the Korean churches I've been to and [sic] the Korean leaders. But, I had never seen Korean American female ministry modeled for me ever. It wasn't really until like maybe later. Again, there are few examples of that that I was not well acquainted with. But, I still have a problem with that. The fact that just by neglect, Korean American female ministry I saw didn't matter.

[30] See Pyong Gap Min, "Severe Underrepresentation of Women in Church Leadership in the Korean Immigrant Community in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47:2 (2008), 225-41. Only 2.3 percent of Korean immigrant churches in New York had a female head pastor. Ordained women who were not head pastors in New York were similarly low. "Only 21 women serve as associate or another additional category of pastors, accounting for less than 10 percent of all such nonsenior pastors," (237). This is despite the fact that less than 1/3 of Korean churches in New York are in denominations that officially do not ordain women.

> There was a message that said “doesn’t matter” or there really isn’t a place for that yet in the Korean church.”

It was not only a lack of Korean American women ministers who could mentor her, but also the disinterest of many Korean American Christians to the idea of women’s ordination that left a sour note in her mouth. This is in line with John’s observation that the Korean American church has failed to bring the “kingdom of God to this earth” by being committed to gender equality.

Mary provides an apt anecdote to discuss gender roles in the Korean immigrant church. The lunchroom table after Sunday service illustrates this reality.

> Everybody is sitting separately. The women are sitting together and the men are sitting together. And nobody really thinks much about it, and they think that is the old-school way. They are really comfortable with their gender and they really need that friendship to be able to feel open. And that’s where they are going to be open, with people their own gender.

The division of men and women goes beyond just friendship. At monoethnic immigrant churches, women perform domestic work such as work in the kitchen and cleaning. “Women aren’t really leaders so much. And if they are, they are seen much as a threat or violating norms.” Women who are outspoken or great leaders are not seen positively by church members. Women are often treated as vulnerable persons. “If you are widowed or divorced as a woman...that makes you as a vulnerable or special case person.” Men occupy more decision-making roles in the church. Mary states rigid social norms in the Korean church reflects their attitude towards women’s roles. “A Korean and Korean American and Christian system…has…gender norms. If you violate them you are ostracized.” Those who left Korean American churches find the tendency to exclude based on gender norms and deviation from other norms to be problematic.

Insularity and Community Engagement

All participants found insularity in both first and second generation Korean American churches to be problematic. John stated the excluding anyone based on racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender and sexuality perpetuates injustice. “Spreading or being complicit on these groups of people’s oppression: I don’t see it as bringing the Kingdom of God on earth.” The insider/outsider dynamic that defines many Korean American church outreach follows an outdated missional model that reifies the separation of the Korean American Christian community from other communities. This exclusion is not merely based on external realities, but also beliefs and internal processes. “There is a lot of social psychological conformity not only in the Korean American church but in Korean and Korean American communities…Any dissenting views or outliers are just excluded. Everyone just conforms to the normative way of thinking.”

Thomas found Korean American churches’ lack of real connection with the outside community a problem. “Seeing how insulated and isolated it was, that was when I thought this is not the church I imagined, I would have expected if I just read the bible and went to church.” When asked about what ways the church must change for the dechurched to consider church again, Thomas pointed to the need to be involved with those outside the church. “Even with a token, I would appreciate that, rather than an almost complete silence on issues outside of church itself. Finding ways to connect with the greater community that the church is a part of, that I think probably would have made me more receptive to staying within the church.” Silence is not acceptable; the church cannot remain aloof to its community and broader society.

Mary sees insularity a result of a cultural fear of outsiders, expressed in the disengagement with wider social problems.

> A lot of Korean American churches have problems engaging with the wider society. Maybe they want to go on their own religious tourism to other countries…what about the problems right in your own backyard with racism[31] and homelessness?

[31] Mary finds that the church indeed does have a role to play in addressing social problems such as racism. This is in tension with second-generation Korean American Christians in Southern California, who do not agree that the church ought to have a direct role in addressing this problem. “Interestingly, among those who did say that racism against Asians remains a problem today in the United States, the majority stated that it is not the church’s role

> They are in a bubble rather than really trying to engage their direct communities.

Cultural homogeneity also exacerbates in-group/out-group dynamic. "Koreans are really homogenous people. They really like their types…they really like categorizing people into finite things…this is an expectation for homogenous people, and one of fear of people being different."

While growing up, Mary met a woman who was perplexed to discover something new about Mary each time they met. This frustrated the woman, who remarked that Mary "was like an onion." This woman was used to being able to corner people by understanding them immediately. Mary did not conform to a particular type, set of interests or definitive features. This made the woman confused and uncomfortable. Mary postulates that this fear contributes to insularity. "It is so much safer and easier to demonize and say that that's wrong. I don't want to be around it because it will affect my soul to be around it, or it is going to affect my kids' souls, psyches, spiritualties, whatever, to be around it." Fear of difference leads to disengagement with wider society and people of different ethnicities, cultures or religious traditions.

Lucas's emphasis on finding a local church more representative of the local community demographics exemplifies an alternative neither the first nor second generation Korean American churches have been able to model. He concluded that it would be harder for his non-Korean wife to adjust into a predominantly Korean American second-generation church than it would be for him to adjust to a non-Korean church. A suggestion he made for the future of Korean American churches is to become less homogeneous. "When everyone has grown up, not exactly the same way but in the same environments, with parents with rather similar thinking and environments generally as well, it's not too surprising that we for the most part end up thinking a lot like each other." Such homogeneity leads to an inability to relate to Christians of other ethnic backgrounds, let alone people outside of church. It is in a non- homogenous, multiethnic local

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to speak out against this social problem. Rather, they believed that other institutions such as the media, politics, and education must carry the responsibility of solving the problems of racism." Kim, *A Faith of Our Own,* 66.

community that Lucas finds that the imperative to do good for the marginalized is possible.

George concretely identifies the result of insularity. An insular community neglects to embody the gospel in addressing the social issues of injustice, marginalization and oppression.

> If I go outside my block, outside my apartment right now, and I drive, there are more than 15, 20 churches around me. Why is there that many churches? And on top of that, there is this many churches, there are people outside that are starving in the city, and all these people going to church… where's the love? Where's all these people? All these people that go to church? What are they doing to help the community? Where are the actions?

George finds it shocking that as a dechurched person, he is unable to find signs of the Korean American churches working towards justice in his communities. He doesn't see the churches being compassionate and loving through actions. He only hears words and platitudes.

Problematic Church Institution/Ecclesiology

In addition to misogynistic leadership structures and insular church communities, participants highlighted other ways in which the church failed as an institution. For John, the church ought to be the site where the kingdom of God is incarnated by participating in works of justice. John states that his "social sense of justice or responsibility as a person in the society" led him to question what he perceived as Christian values he encountered in childhood. He recalls being taught to bring the "kingdom of God to this earth." Over time, he interpreted this to be "where there is justice across different social lines whether it be racial, ethnic socioeconomic, gender, sexuality." His understanding of bringing the kingdom of God to earth conflicted with the version that "people in positions of power in the church" taught or enforced.

> Specifically, when people say bringing the Kingdom of God looks like going out and creating disciples, basically converting

> people to Christianity[32], and that becoming the sole focus of any outreach work…you're not saving people by tackling these systematic issues that have oppressed them but you are just trying to save them in a spiritual sense.

John was dissatisfied with an evangelical, missional model for understanding the kingdom of God. Churches seeing "homosexuality or queerness as a sin" is antithetical to his sense of justice. When "church justice is seen more as an us versus them model," proselytizing or poverty tourism in the form of "international mission trips" become the normative mode of doing justice.

Similarly, Lucas critiques churches that merely seek to draw younger people by adopting seeker-sensitive models of church.[33] "We already have churches that are more like concerts[34]…there is so much focus on bringing young people in. But once they are in, what happens after that?" Churches must foster active faith by doing justice in the local community.

As a committed Christian, Lucas provides critical observations about Korean and Korean American churches as someone who has opted to relocate to a multiethnic, local church. One particular theme was the advantage of a local community church over a commuter model,[35] common for both first and second generation Korean churches. Lucas saw several

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[32] "The pastors and members of second-generation churches are ambivalent about their and their church's role in American politics; they see political involvement as peripheral and even digressive to their church's central mission." Kim, *A Faith of Our Own*, 131.

[33] Russell Jeung studied Grace Faith Church, an example of a seeker sensitive church that is geared more towards what he calls the unchurched. "They are *unchurched* and want a new type of spiritual experience, and they are *English-speaking* and uncomfortable in Chinese or Japanese language contexts. The unchurched are adults who either did not grow up in a Christian church or left their parents' churches." Jeung, *Faithful Generations*, 109.

[34] Lucas rejects seeker-sensitive churches such as Grace Faith Church, which aims to attract millennials through large scale worship productions. "Ministry designed for those who had given up on traditional churches—what they call the Silent Exodus, where a lot of Asian Americans are leaving their ethnic churches, seeking more of a contemporary worship environment." Jeung, *Faithful Generations,* 109.

[35] For commuter church verses community churches, see Jim Westgate, "The challenge of being a community church in a commuter society," in *Out of the strange silence: the challenge of being Christian in the 21st century*, ed. Brad Thiessen et al. (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2005), 151-68. I define commuter similarly to Omar McRoberts' and Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs' understanding of 'niche churches,' which has "members from all over the metropolitan areas…[that] commute at least fifteen minutes to get to the church." Tamelyn N. Tucker-Worgs, *The Black Megachurch: Theology, Gender, and the Politics of Public Engagement* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011). Commuter churches engage the local community surrounding the church building less than community churches.

limitations to the commuter model. For one, when the church served the local community, the dynamics became like outsiders coming into a community. “In a way, that’s not too different from a missions [sic] kind of setting.” Lucas’s current church has a minister committed to making church a space for serving the needs of the local community. Such a drive differentiates his current church from Korean American church experiences.

Secondly, unlike local churches, a commuter model inhibits spontaneous intimate gatherings that help forge stronger interpersonal relationships. Lucas sees that developing strong interpersonal relationships is key not only to develop a thriving community, but also to live an active faith. “The biggest challenge is stepping up and stepping out in faith. Even when they come from a church environment, it comes from a specific people, specific people I know.” Without the strong interpersonal relationships, Lucas sees that it is difficult to be challenged out of one’s comfort zone to embody faith outside the church walls the rest of the week.

A Persisting Valuing of Spirituality

Despite varying degrees of stepping away from Korean American churches and Christianity, participants still found some value in spirituality and religion. Mary understands religious identity as heritage rather than piety and describes herself as a “religious tourist.” To enrich her life and balance her mind/body, Mary practices yoga, works out and when invited attends non-Christian religious services. She sees church as “the community center that provided a social life for my family,” where she was introduced to Korean culture: “Church was where we did Saturday school, where I learned how to read and write Korean, and Korean culture. There was fan dancing, there was all kinds of Korean art too…Korean church was the place of Korean heritage.” Her Korean church experience was shaped by the expressions of Korean cultural heritage. For Mary, the religious and the cultural are intertwined. Thus, as a “religious tourist,” she continues to culturally enrich herself by attending and participating in rituals, services and embodied expressions other religions. However, she does not visit Korean American churches.

Thomas is in an opposite circumstance. After graduating college, he moved back to his parents' home. To please his parents, he attends a small Korean immigrant church. He finds no value in attending the services, or in the young adult group he occasionally sits with after lunch fellowship. John is not an active member to any particular church. In place of church, John is committed to social justice on campus, particularly on issues of racial, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic justice. He works with student organizations on-campus that address these issues and has been trying to find a community to which to belong after exiting the church.

After leaving church, George continues to hold onto parts of the worldview that he was taught at church. He still believes in a sense of higher power and finds that all religions have enough similarities that they have a common origin point. George does not have any religious or spiritual practices. He practices community by connecting with all his friends of the past, some of whom he became estranged with when they left the church and he avoided he was taught not to associate with secular people. George uses the term "secular" to refer to anything outside of Christianity or the church. One potential problem he foresees by committing to church again is:

> The entire phase of "oh I cannot hang out with you guys because you are secular." Or "I can't really talk to you guys, because God said if the body is causing a sin, you have to cut off the right hand instead of sinning with it" …I don't want to have to tell all my friends…you are sinning.

Thus, while holding the sacred/secular distinction that he was taught in church, George chooses to affiliate with those outside the church.

Lucas and Sarah are the only two that remain in a church. For Lucas, spirituality is faith-in-practice. His spiritual practice involves serving the local community and embodying faith outside of the church walls. This ethos permeates the church that he currently attends.

> I get the same sense [of enthusiasm] from a lot of the members of the congregation as well. We all want to do something, we all want to do something here, and we want to be God's church here. That has been good to actually be

> surround by that and have that kind of drive for it, excitement for it. Something I felt that was a little missing in my previous church experience.

In contrast, Sarah defines spirituality in terms of a relationship with God. "Right now spiritually I do feel disconnected from God…my spirituality has veered right now more towards distrust of God." She is ambivalent of the church community and does not have personal spiritual practices outside of the practices at church. But a desire to address the spiritual aspect of her life remains.

Conclusion

Given the experiences, thoughts and reflections presented, are we able to imagine a Korean American church that better addresses Korean Americans, particularly dechurched millennials? The primary concern is the church's insularity and lack of engagement with the wider community. Participants suggested various ways the church could address this problem. One is to address the mental health issues that are often ostracized or swept under the rug in Korean American churches because of a desire to save face. Another is to address patriarchy and gender hierarchy in the Korean American church that bars women from leadership roles or ordination through neglect or disinterest, as well as reifying gender roles.

John offers a vision of what the church would look like if it embodied its commitment to bring the kingdom of God to earth: "Make church the space where justice is advocated first again." How does this happen? John suggests that churches must resist reading scripture as inerrant and must instead be willing to develop new theological understanding that open and relational to persons of different identities and religious traditions. One of the greatest assets that church has that can be leveraged is the physical space. John suggests that the church building can be used as a space facilitating critical discussions of social issues and implementing justice.

> There aren't many spaces in society where this sort of discussion can happen. From my experience, it's only been on college campuses, because students on college campuses are more liberal minded than the rest of the country, but outside

> of college, spaces that provide discussion is limited to nonprofit organizations or like community centers. But I think the church can be a space where this kind of discussion can happen.

If the church does this rather than offer answers to all questions through a rigid dogma or enforce conformity to Korean American cultural values, John sees that the church can once again be a space for organizing justice movements. John's vision recalls the church's past function of providing space for organizing and focuses on contemporary issues such as gender and sexual identity. Ultimately, John thinks the church ought to be a collaborative space for organizers and a safe space where persons from all walks of life and identities can be welcome and included.

This open, welcoming space of deliberation and justice implementing must also become a space that consciously attempts to reconcile the differences of members within the church not through coerced conformity, but by embracing the manifold modes of individual identities, orientations and expressions. The otherness of the other, which is so easily demonized or erased by a dominant Korean Christian narrative, is preserved through its acknowledgement and deepening of interpersonal relationships. The church ought to become a more locally minded, organic community that facilitates the deepening of interpersonal relationships. Ultimately, a radically inclusive church becomes a space where faith can be embodied through the practice of Jesus's radical love in the giving of self for the sake of bringing about justice for the least of these. Korean American Christians can no longer ignore the call of those that have silently left their ranks. It is imperative to become agents of justice through conscious efforts of inclusivity, community engagement, empowerment of women, mental health counseling, and most importantly by taking a stance on social injustice through active service.

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thought and recovering religious, literary, and philosophical sources of decolonial embodiment and praxis.

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