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Conversion in Shincheonji

Edward A. Irons
Institute for Culture, Commerce and Religion
CESNUR Taiwan 2026

This essay focuses on the process of conversion in the Korean new religion Shincheonji. Based on interviews with current members, I focus on the process as it relates to the religious organization as well as each person's individual story.

Research Question

Why did practicing Christians in the religiously plural environment of Los Angeles come to redefine Shincheonji as a more adequate form of Christianity than the churches they were already attending?

A Problem of Classification

Sharon Kim (2010) classified Korean immigrant churches into three types: mono-ethnic churches, pan-ethnic churches, and multi-ethnic, multi-racial churches.

The first type is made up of recent immigrants. These were often led by pastors who had arrived in the new country as teenagers and thus were fully bi-cultural. These churches promoted home-country religious practices.

The second type, the pan-ethnic church, is led by pastors born in the new country. They often did not speak Korean fluently. They grew up seeing themselves as Asian Americans, not Korean Americans, so they naturally attracted other pan-Asian followers.

In the third type, the multi-ethnic and multi-racial, the pastors felt Korean churches have a special mission to reconcile racial tensions in American society. They work hard to attract people from all ethnic groups in society.

While Kim's thesis is interesting, I conclude after studying Shincheonji for some time that it does not fit into this categorization. It appears to be multi-ethnic, but follows strictly the organizational forms and practices laid down in the home country. It is best seen as a new religion expanding into a new territory — in this case greater Los Angeles.

Shincheonji: Background and Expansion

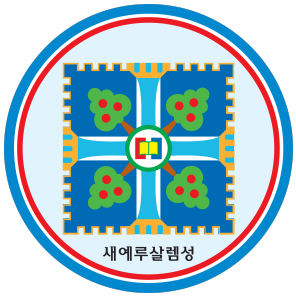
The church's formal name is the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony.



Lee Man-hee

Shincheonji 新天地 alone signifies a “new heaven and earth.” Lee Man-hee started Shincheonji in 1984.

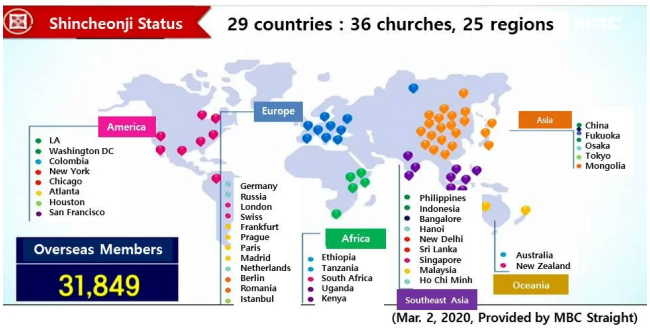
As of 2020 there were 317,000 registered members. There are now 204 Shincheonji churches in South Korea and over twenty other countries.



New Jerusalem emblem



The twelve tribes represented at a large gathering



International presence, 2020

Prior to 2020 the fast-growing area for Shincheonji was China, followed by the U.S. Since the COVID restrictions were put in place, growth in China has slowed.

Scale and Controversy



Large-scale Shincheonji graduation ceremony



News-page image from a Korean news organization.

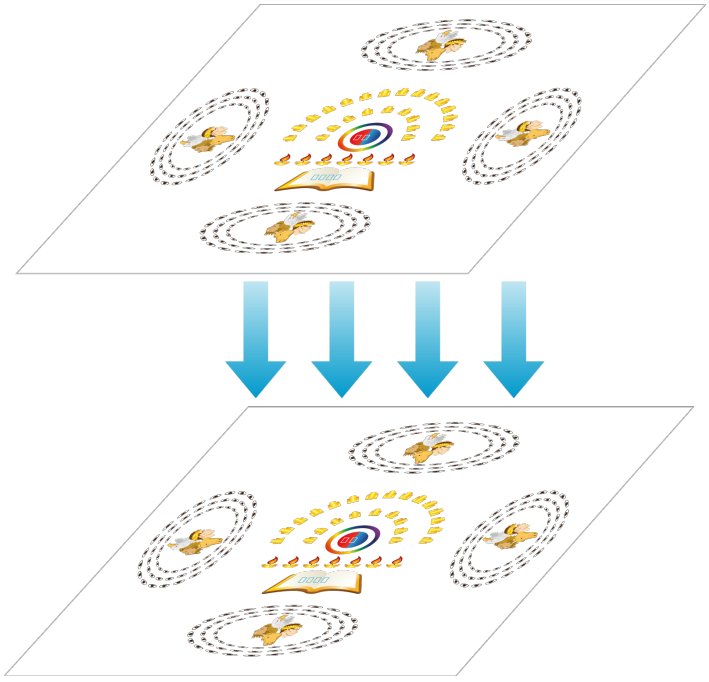
From the Start: Controversies

- Shincheonji has been plagued by controversy since its inception. In Korea the most prominent issues are brainwashing and deprogramming.
- Other controversies include "sheep stealing," coercive conversion, aggressive recruitment, COVID, and, most recently, exerting undue political influence.



"Sheep stealing?"

Organizational Structure: "As in Heaven …"



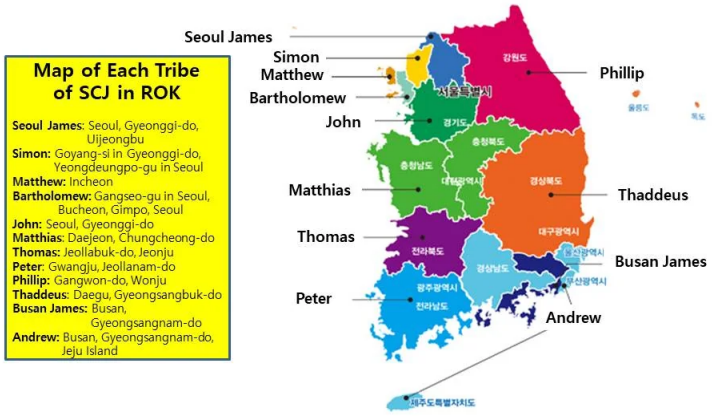
The heavenly pattern reproduced on earth

Shincheonji's organizational structure is unique. Lee Man-hee reported that he was taken to Heaven and observed how Heaven itself is structured. He was tasked with recreating that same structure on earth.

There are twelve tribes, each with its own name and color.



The twelve tribes in ceremonial form



Map of the twelve tribes in South Korea

Beyond the Tribes

In addition there is another structure, the four living creatures:

1. Men's Department | 남성부
2. Women's Department | 여성부
3. Seniors Department | 노인부
4. Young Adult Department | 청년부



Shincheonji in Los Angeles



John Tribe LA Church

Organizational Roles

The Chosen Prophet, Lee Man-hee, is the Chosen Prophet. Under him are the heads of the twelve tribes. In the LA branch these are the organizational roles:

- Head Instructor, LA Church
- Department Leads — 부장
- General Affairs / Administration — 총무
- Section/Division Manager — 과장
- Executive / Department Executive — 임원
- Regional Leader — 지역장
- Team Lead — 팀장
- Assistant Team Lead — 부팀장
- Small Group Leader / Group Leader — 구역장
- Assistant Small Group Leader — 부구역장

The Church Space



Main Hall



Main Hall, opposite view

Programs, Signage, and Organizational Churn

Regular Programs

- Tri-lingual
- Sports
- Family
- Going BACK to Center: Leaves



"Report, Communicate, and Ask"



Prominent signage



Promoting Center





A LA Zion entrance

Prominent Signage



Internal visual messaging at the LA church

Theoretical Perspectives: Conversion

There are many conversion theories. The most popular at this time is probably rational choice theory, closely associated with Rodney Stark and his collaborators. Most conversion theories spell out a conversion process.

Seven Stages — Lofland and Stark, 1963

- Tension: between the individual and some elements in their life
- Problem: "a general propensity to impose religious meaning on events"
- Seekership: defines him or herself as a religious seeker; hopping or "floundering" between different groups
- Turning Point: old habits and perspectives can be discarded and new ones taken on
- Cult Affective Bonds: with group members
- Extra-Cult Affective Bonds: not active or deep enough to deter conversion
- Intensive Interaction: efforts to gain total commitment by the fresh convert

Attribution Scheme

One useful concept in conversion theory is the idea of an attribution scheme that helps people explain their feelings and behaviors.

> *Feelings, behavior, and events that were previously inexplicable or accounted for by reference to a number of causal schemes are now interpreted from the standpoint of one pervasive scheme. Interpretive options are thus inhibited. Consequently, causal inferences remain constant despite variation in situations. There is neither equivocation nor negotiation with respect to the cause of the behavior or event under scrutiny. The cause is known beforehand.*
>
> Lang and Lang, 1961

Rational Choice Theory

Lee Jeong-eun (2015), writing on Shincheonji, applied rational choice theory. The study concluded that interviewees joined despite the high cost of membership, which included such things as full-time dedication to the organization and treating family and job as secondary.

Revised Research Question

> *How does Shincheonji manage to attract and keep members engaged?*

Immigration Theory

Immigrant theory was touched on earlier in the discussion of Sharon Kim's study. Another study of new immigrants found that:

- Immigration rarely results in changes to religious belief.
- After emigrating, Protestant immigrants tended to attend services more frequently.
- Overall participation in religion declined for all nationality groups.
- Nevertheless, 70% of the Korean respondents reported church attendance over 4 times a month, a very high rate.
- The study noted that Korean Christians are probably more likely to emigrate than other religious believers.

Douglas S. Massey and Monica Spinoza Higgins, 2011

Diversity Theory and the Los Angeles Context

A third theoretical approach focuses on the Los Angeles context. Los Angeles is famously diverse. This diversity is seen immediately in the Shincheonji branch in Fullerton. There you see people of all ages, ethnicities, and races sitting together and, crucially, studying the Bible together.

Wade Clark Roof, 2007

- The area never had a dominant religious establishment — the Catholic Church, while continuously present, was never socially dominant.
- LA has experienced constant waves of immigrants, leading to a culture of pluralism. Other peoples' beliefs and practices are widely respected.
- Especially since 1950 the society has been the center of an accelerated modernity. Fast-paced change and technological innovation are commonplace.
- Diversity is not just tolerated; it is taken for granted as a social good.
- This has led the people of LA to value ethnic distinctiveness as a good in itself.
- Roof calls this a culture of "rooted cosmopolitanism."



The Shincheonji congregation in Los Angeles

In my interviews I also found the Shincheonji congregation to be extremely diverse. It is 70% female. While the average age of interviewees was around 35, some ranged from 20 to over sixty. Most had been in Shincheonji over five years. Most of those interviewed held some kind of leadership role. And most were college-educated.

Becoming a Member



Informal Gatherings

- Shincheonji members meet potential new members in a variety of settings: at school, online, or in casual situations like shopping.
- A new member may then be invited to attend a gathering of music, prayer, or Bible study.

Informal gathering

Bible Study and Deep Understanding

Most of the interviewees described a process of getting to know Shincheonji through Bible study. In fact the desire to know more about the Bible was common to all interviewees. Almost all came from some sort of Christian background, and all felt that they could not find deep understanding of the Bible in their old congregations.

The organization is focused on this issue: helping people learn about the Bible. Bible learning in Shincheonji requires real study, and some who cannot commit the time necessary are not allowed to proceed. The focus on knowledge does not let up. Shincheonji members are constantly tested on their Biblical knowledge, and constantly attend review workshops.

Contextual Clues

- Shincheonji emphasizes one-on-one contact.
- There is no apparent strategy of promoting racial harmony through diversity — it simply happens.
- All wanted members express a desire for a deep understanding of the Bible.
- Organizational structure gives strong support.

Findings and Conclusion

Findings

Diversity theory offers the best explanation for Shincheonji's success and rapid growth in LA. The combination of Shincheonji's definitive teachings and firm structure combines successfully with the California sunshine and existing culture of tolerance in LA to enable rapid growth.

Final Thoughts on Multi-cultural LA

- LA certainly reflects a "new religious culturalism."
- LA is a "final frontier," a mixing point at the edge of the Pacific.
- Fluidity and social interactions across boundaries are everyday experiences.
- People in LA deal with diversity on a daily basis and as a result become aware of the cognitive and normative assumptions of their own religious traditions.
- LA has a unique "hyper-aware culture of tolerance."

