



# «The Truth Shall Set You Free»

## Coming Out Narratives and the Integration of Sexual Minorities in Light Church, Seoul, South Korea

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### Resumen

Corea del Sur se cita comúnmente como un ejemplo de un país que es más o menos culturalmente homogéneo. Sin embargo, en este artículo discuto el interculturalismo como un posible enfoque para abordar la diversidad étnica y sexual en un entorno religioso. A través de las narrativas de tres personas auto-identificadas como LGBTI, el análisis expone las experiencias de su participación en una congregación multiétnica negociando su etnicidad en la intersección de las fronteras culturales. La iglesia Light Church proporciona un ejemplo de cómo una congregación une las divisiones lingüísticas, culturales y étnicas. Además, explica cómo una organización religiosa étnicamente diversa se convirtió en un espacio inclusivo LGBTI y las estrategias específicas utilizadas para lograr la integración cultural.

**Palabras clave:** Interculturalismo, Comunidad LGBTI, Personas de la diversidad sexual, Iglesia Light Church, Iglesias Inclusivas, Corea del Sur.

### Resumo

A Coreia do Sul é comumente citada como um exemplo de país que é mais ou menos culturalmente homogêneo. No entanto, neste artigo, discuto a interculturalidade como uma abordagem potencial para lidar com a diversidade étnica e sexual em um ambiente religioso. Através das narrativas de três indivíduos LGBTI auto-identificados, a análise expõe as experiências de sua participação em uma congregação multiétnica negociando sua etnia na interseção das fronteiras culturais. A igreja Light Church fornece um exemplo de como uma congregação une as divisões lingüísticas, culturais e étnicas. Além disso, explica como uma organização religiosa etnicamente diversificada se tornou um espaço inclusivo LGBTI e as estratégias específicas usadas para alcançar a integração cultural.

**Palavras-chave:** Interculturalismo, Comunidade LGBTI, Pessoas da diversidade sexual, Igreja Light Church, Igrejas Inclusivas, Coreia del Sur.



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**Abstract**

South Korea is commonly cited as an example of a country which is more or less culturally homogeneous. However, in this article, I discuss interculturalism as a potential approach to deal with ethnic and sexual diversity in a religious environment. Through three narratives of LGBTI self-identified individuals, the analysis exposes the experiences of their participation in a multiethnic congregation negotiating their ethnicity at the intersection of cultural boundaries. Light Church provides an example of how a congregation bridges linguistic, cultural, and ethnic divisions. Additionally, it explains how an ethnically diverse religious organization became an LGBTI inclusive space and the specific strategies used for achieving cultural integration.

**Keywords:** Interculturalism, LGBTI community, Gender and sexually diverse individuals, Light Church, Inclusive Churches, South Korea.

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## Introduction

In many countries, there are few issues more sensitive or hotly debated than those of human rights of sexual minorities. Discussions generate resistance by religious fundamentalists in both popular and political arenas around the world. As Rhys H. Williams (1996) points out: «religion is powerful when it is grounded in the lives of its adherents, but the power of traditions and beliefs has, in turn, been a crucial shaping force on the contexts of those actors' lives» (p. 896). Although some countries have passed laws on behalf of human rights for the LGBTI community—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersexual—the debate generated reflects a dichotomy between what is natural or unnatural, what is moral or immoral, and what is a sin and what is not.

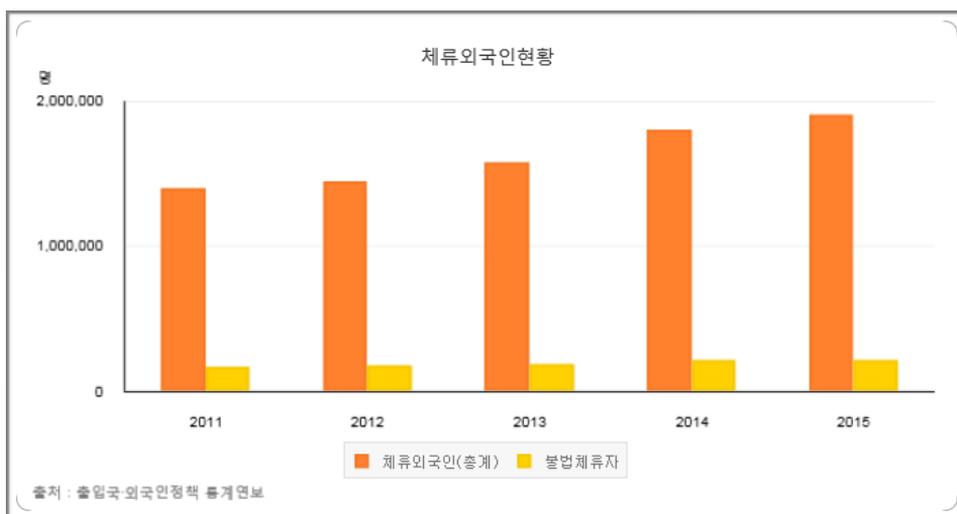
This article is not intended to confront progressive and conservative views or present a theological debate on the topic of homosexuality; instead, it offers an analysis of an integration model based on participant observations and interviews during fieldwork conducted at a multiethnic church throughout two years. Regardless of the popular opinion about the role and influence of sexual minorities in South Korea, the purpose of this case study is to show how a start-up religious congregation faces the conflict between some conservative Protestant churches, the South Korean government, and civil society.

According to the Ministry of Justice, the number of resident foreigners in South Korea topped the two million mark as of June 2016, accounting for 3.4% of the total population (see figure in the next page). Note that the tall bars reflect the total number of foreigners in Korea while the short bars represent the undocumented aliens staying in the country.

One of the absences in this type of statistics is the invisibilization of the LGBTI community. Aware of that challenge, Light Church grapples with the debate of integrating sexual minorities in their local community. That has been a challenge in a society where Protestant churches have historically been influenced by religious fundamentalism which generates strong resistance over the inclusion of the LGBTI community in civic, religious, and political



arenas. The literature dichotomizes between theologically conservative LGBTI-rejecting congregations to progressive LGBTI-affirming ones. However, Light Church complicates this dichotomy because this is a congregation that combines conservative values featuring an orthodox doctrine on sexual matters with an inclusive, egalitarian ethos that avoids culture, politics, and religious divisions.



Source: Statistics Korea (2017)

In this article, I examine various efforts made by Light Church to integrate this disenfranchised community. I first address the current situation of Korea as it faces the debate between conservative groups and the civil society to impact the government’s decision-making and its effects on equality for the LGBTI community. I show how social transformation has started and what implications this change contains. Next, through three life stories, I explain how Light Church uses the principles of interculturalism for integrating a church that is commonly rejected not only by religious congregations but by society at large. I do not claim that these three selected stories are representative of all LGBTI experiences in Korea; nor am I presenting these cases for statistical analysis. My primary interest in telling the rich and personalized life stories is to shed light on how dialogue and understanding at an individual level can begin to build bridges with a community that has been marginalized in many societies. Some might question the value of an approach that focuses on a start-up



church and its experience of a small group of people. However, as Oscar Lewis (1959) theorized about the culture of poverty by studying only five families, my purpose is to demonstrate a different model of understanding based on a religious congregation. Finally, I highlight the effects, benefits, and disadvantages inherent within these efforts which show the extraordinary challenge to forming a bridge with minorities who are conventionally considered outsiders.

## **Social Life and Conservative Protestant Churches in Korea**

George Yancey (1999: 300) explains that religious institutions can play a double role, promoting harmonious relations on the one hand, while reinforcing racial segregation on the other. In Korea, «conservative Protestant churches have emerged as an active force in the political arena» (Cho, 2014: 322) by providing its ability to make alliances with other conservative groups in regard to their «crusade» on anti-gay legislation as displayed recently in demonstrations (Park and Hwang, 2017). This section serves to understand how some conservative Protestant Churches influence the social life of the Korean sexual minority who seeks integration.<sup>1</sup>

Some years ago, I realized the level of ferocity conservative groups had against the LGBTI community when I came across an article in *The Korea Times* entitled, «Crusade on Gay Legislation» (Kim, 2013). As a part of my Ph.D. program, I studied the history of the medicalization of homosexuality in the world, and I could see the changes that this topic had incurred during the last few years. In Korea, both conservative and liberal ideas become a significant challenge in a society that historically, has fought in favor of liberation from foreign domination. In 2013, speaking to the local media, Rev. Hong Jae-chul, chairman of the Christian Council of Korea —hereinafter cited as «CCK»— had warned lawmakers about his staunch opposition towards introducing new anti-discrimination legislation supporting the equal rights for

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<sup>1</sup> Protestant churches are heterogeneous. Throughout this article, I refer mainly to conservative and fundamentalist churches in Korea.



sexual minorities because his organization considers criticizing a person's sexual orientation is a right. He pointed out:

We are already doing a petition campaign that is expected to be signed by 10 million. From mid-April, the phones at lawmakers' offices will be on fire. These anti-discrimination laws aren't cohesive with the Korean sentiment, and they have been convinced in a wrong way from the start (Kim, 2013).

These expressions and attitudes continue right up to the present, as the contemporary Korean notion holds that homosexuality causes disorder and disruption in the social order. The legislation against discrimination «seeks to outlaw discrimination in employment and other social interaction on the grounds of age, gender, race, disability, faith and, yes, sexual orientation» (Kim, 2013). The opposition towards rejecting a law that protects this specific minority is mainly due to the influence of conservative groups. These groups feel more comfortable with uniform social standards rather than embracing diversity. These observations led us to an intriguing question: How can Protestant churches offer resistance to the integration of sexual minorities when they decide to express their preferences in public? The consequences of this upheaval are directly related to biblical and theological interpretations, resistance to US cultural liberalism, and struggles for power (Shrake, 2009). Protestant churches have given a strong political rejection to the bill proposals that would have led to the LGBTI community in Korea to lawfully integrate into the society openly, without fear of discrimination.

A host of data reveals the impact of Christianity amid Korean society from the introduction of Protestantism with the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church and the Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1884 (Kim, 2001: 267). Since that time Protestantism in Korea has gone through various stages until reaching a growth rate which peaked sometime during the 1960s and 1970s. It gradually declined in the 1980s and finally dropped in the 1990s (Lee, 1999: 239). According to Lee (1999: 243-247), the growth of the Korean church was due to proactivity, passion and emotional appeal, high levels of doctrinal compromise, and ideology of church growth, among others. He



also explains the reasons for the decline in church growth during the 1990s: the development of alternative religions, the development of the leisure industry, changes in population structure, improvement in per-capita incomes, and the political stability that reduced anxiety and discontentment (Lee, 1999: 254-258). Regardless of these changes and fluctuations, theological conservatism remains the primary source for the strong opposition to the open integration of sexual minorities in public life. Korean conservatism is fostered by the religious fundamentalism characterized in the US Protestant churches. Fundamentalism is a conservative position that has its origin in a series of twelve pamphlets, written by evangelical churchmen and edited by Amzi Clarence Dixon, and later by his successors Louis Meyer and Reuben Archer Torrey. The pamphlets were entitled as *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* and published in the United States between 1910 and 1915 with the financial contribution of the brothers Lyman and Milton Steward (Marsden, 1982: 118) Although there are many overlapping definitions, a serviceable one by Bruce Lawrence runs as follows:

Fundamentalism is the affirmation of religious authority as holistic and absolute, admitting of neither criticism nor reduction; it is expressed through the collective demand that specific[...] dictates derived from scripture be publicly recognized and legally enforced[...]. The most consistent denominator is opposition to Enlightenment values (De Kadt, 2005:57).

In practice, churches that share conservative doctrinal position support «the inerrancy of the Bible, the Trinity, the virgin birth, and active evangelism» (Shrake, 2009: 148). Although as a pluralist society as far as religion concerned (Lee, 1999: 236), Korea's conservative churches have reached a united front in regard to some of the more significant biblical interpretations that are concerned with the changing needs of the society. Protestant churches are not a monolithic structure, but through the conservative CCK, they form the country's largest church lobby in Korea (Kim, 2013); thus, their rigid interpretations of the Bible can significantly influence legislation of public policies.



Joon-sik Choi et al. (2011) have documented the influence of US Christianity in the construction of Christianity in Korea. They explain how during the Japanese annexation, Christianity was etched in the minds of Koreans as the religion of the advanced and the West was understood as a place occupied by reasonable and warm-hearted people (Choi et al., 2011: 121). The rhetoric of Korean conservative groups combines traditional Christian fundamentalism and evangelical nationalism, resulting in a unity around Christianity (Cho, 2011: 308). Agreeing with Choi et al. (2011), Min-ha Cho (2011) states that the political alliance between Korea and the United States has firmed up the religious alliance between the fundamentalist movements. However, as previously stated, Protestant conservative groups have made biblical interpretations that may differ from some US churches. In the case of CCK, they have decided to stand against the practice of homosexuality similarly as the US conservative groups do. The CCK affirmed:

Korea should be a developed country without homosexuals. Korea should be a pure and clean vessel to receive God's words in order to become a new generation of Christ's bride that spreads the Gospel to the entire world and prepares for the second-coming of Jesus. It is God's calling for Korea... In order for Korea to be a developed country without homo sex, Christians must stay awake and pray. Christians must proclaim the holiness of God to protect our children from being contaminated by homo sex. Christians should join the spiritual battlefield (Cho, 2011: 307).

Cho (2011) argues that a mix of nationalism and anti-gay rhetoric expresses solidarity to the mobilization of people to reach political interest and keep conservative influence in the public arena. Additionally, this declaration shows how this conservative group views the «homo sex» with fear or as a threat to the ideal of becoming a perfect and «holy» country. The recent progress made in the field of civil rights for the LGBTI community in the US —mainly the legalization on same-sex-marriage— makes the Korean church consider US culture as liberal and a wrong model to follow with regard to gay rights issues. Hence, a backlash towards US liberalism and cultural resistance of Korean conservatives of the Protestant faith has become one of the main tools to express



opposition to any progress in the legislation on behalf of the protection of civil rights for the LGBTI community.

Lastly, another significant factor which offers resistance to the integration of sexual minorities is those found in the legal field. The case of anti-discrimination laws in the Korean judicial system became a noteworthy issue in the mass media following two events. On one side, the multiple public demonstrations of conservative Christian civic groups against the Anti-Discrimination Act in April 2013. On the other, the symbolic wedding of renowned gay Korean film director Kim Jho Gwang-soo and his long-term partner in Seoul on September 7, 2013 (Kim and Kim, 2013). According to Steven Borowiec (2014):

The ceremony carried no legal weight—same-sex unions are not recognized in South Korea—but the couple and their legal advisers are now moving forward with a legal challenge that they hope will put South Korea in the vanguard of same-sex equality in Asia.

Regarding the last three drafts of anti-discrimination laws submitted to the National Assembly written by the Democratic United Party and the Unified Progressive Party, the CCK's chairman states:

If anything goes wrong about the bills, submitted by Democratic United Party and Unified Progressive Party, we will launch an all-out Christianity movement against the anti-discrimination law. We will call for voter to not elect the lawmakers the next time. We will call for the political parties to be abolished (Kim, 2013).

The Democratic United Party lawmakers showed a subordination to conservative groups because the conservative alliances are capable of inducing a macro-mobilization to carry out its threats. The ferocity towards threatening political parties to be abolished is affirmed in the statement as these conservative groups see homosexuality as a danger to the society based on moral grounds. Nevertheless, it seems that these groups are looking for a legal license to marginalize a small community and it is evident that there is an uncivilized lack of understanding of the separation between religious beliefs and public policies. However, the 18<sup>th</sup>



Queer Cultural Festival, which is celebrated every summer within view of City Hall, is alternating the social landscape of Korea. In spite of its popularity, conservative Protestants have built a movement against this festival and everything related to the legal rights of the LGBTI community (Chyung and Park, 2017). However, liberty prevails as the government has guaranteed the operation of the festival and supports the increasing participation of civic organizations, foreign embassies, and commercial and private companies that support the Korean gay community.

If religious congregations possess influence in shaping values and ideologies of those who join them (Yancey, 1999), Light Church enhances its role as a bridging organization since there are different visions of how to apply the Christian ethics found Protestant churches, especially concerning sexual minorities, Light Church goes beyond socially confining boundaries to promote unity. To this end, Light Church works on behalf of understanding people because they purposefully embrace a role that is more integrating than it is divisive. The following section explains in practical terms how this Protestant church connects with sexual minorities and integrates them into the church community.

## **Light Church and Bridging Sexual Minorities**

Light Church seeks to foster outward interactions through its efforts and strategies to become a bridge between Koreans, foreigners, and the LGBTI community. The practices of social interactions inside the church community are not necessarily similar to encounters in the daily life of the outside world because integrating people of diverse ethnic heritages into a single group requires a new construction of social reality (Foucault, 1978). Following the perspective of Floras Müller (2012: 429), the meanings that people—or church-goers, in this case—reproduce or contest within a particular social context are constituted in and mediated by the discourses of the organization. This explanation about bridging the church and sexual minorities is based on the assumption that interculturalism is a process of development. Norma Tarrow (1992) is clear to affirm the interaction process needs to be addressed with a long-term vision:



Societies move sequentially through each of these various phases in the same way that a child sits, crawls, stands and walks. Just as one doesn't expect the child to run before standing and walking, it is unrealistic to expect societies to implement intercultural approaches if they have not yet adopted a cultural-pluralist perspective (p. 490).

The complexity of diversity nowadays has been discussed in the literature and makes a new paradigm necessary according to the development of societies. In the multicultural point of view narrowly aims towards building community cohesion, it is required to focus on «race» and ethnicity. Interculturalism, however, proposes building positive relations across *all* forms of difference, not only for race and ethnicity, but age, disability, sexual orientation, and nationality (Cantle, 2012: 89). Two elements arise from the last explanations: first, the long and on-going process of learning and applying interculturalism and second, the broad scope of inclusion that could be uncomfortable for some conservative sectors.

Light Church is a model of how intercultural principles can operate under certain circumstances in a religious realm. However, a topic as sensitive as the inclusion of sexual minorities in Protestant churches could generate rejection in these sectors (Yi et al., 2017). Interculturalism is not an imposition of changes; on the contrary, it is a learning process where people move sequentially through intercultural dialogue. The premise here is not to feel intimidated by the proximity of others, but to create and recreate meanings through an interpretation process during interaction with others. Conservative churches can explore other cultural minorities without changing their theological position. After all, every social unit changes according to their interpretations of reality and the interculturalism process takes time for being applied. Ted Cantle (2012: 174) explains that multicultural societies have been so preoccupied with the issue of race that they have failed to recognize the development of many forms of difference, particularly the emergence of faith and sexual orientation, within the public sphere. Using intercultural dynamics opens the door to relieving some tensions and conflict, as a necessary part of social change.



Light Church constructs the meaning of integration based on Christian social-ethnic codes which shape how people can think about their experience with «others,» but does not control the encounters that occur in everyday life or impose a way of thinking. On the contrary, they often rely on the opinions of certain clerics and theologians who command authority but always leave room for different interpretations in the Bible and its application to social diversity. As a religious organization, Light Church's principles are based on an approach to foster integration and provide a symbolic language that personifies what is meant to be a *family*. As a result, they tend to be more tolerant of dialogue that faces the challenges of new ideas and viewpoints than their conservative counterparts. They are not a monolithic construction, but recognize their disagreements and found common elements to foster unity.

Linda, for example, explains her position about LGBTI human rights, she recognizes she thinks differently from other Christians. She expresses her discontent about the conservative position in the Protestant church:

I think it is not necessary for Supreme Court judgment to follow the Bible. The law doesn't always have to follow the Bible. And I obviously believe, that as stated in the Bible, I think the marriage should be something that man and woman getting together by leaving their parents. I do believe that this is right. However, in reality, some people including LGBTI found their partner who will be together forever, and I think it is not right when LGBTI people go to hospital because their partner was hospitalized, but having no right at all. Since these people had experienced so many things, I think we should protect their rights (Interview, 2015).

She is theologically conservative, but in practice, she understands the effects of discriminations. This position is echoed in many of the members of Light Church, but not all. During the public «coming out» of one of the members that recognized himself as gay and a Christian, one young woman expressed: «I was surprised that [he] received a platform. I am still processing what happened» (Field notes, 2015). In one of the regular services, Pastor Samuel recognized his flaws as a person and encouraged people to reach a unified brotherhood. He said: «We are imperfect as the mud, but God wants to change our imperfections through



intimacy» (Field notes, 2015). He asked different questions related to how to make true intimacy between the members of the church and he concluded saying that, «Being transparent and showing us as ourselves implies to meet people beyond our differences» (Field notes, 2015). This openness encourages the members to recognize the values of the other persons mutually.

The position of Light Church about the inclusion of sexual minorities comes from Pastor Samuel's experience with diversity. In an informal conversation Pastor Samuel explained that —because one of his last jobs in his youth in the beauty shop business— he met people from diverse sexual orientations. Members see people not as individuals to save from the hell, but as human beings who need to feel included as a member of a *family*. Their principle of inclusion embraces not only ethnic minorities but people who have been judged by traditional churches. Juliette, a Korean-American who used to attend to a Korean church, described her participation in the community at Light Church:

[Light Church] is a pretty unique group of people. What I love of Light Church is that nobody is afraid of being real. Other churches say 'you should be real,' but they don't really accept as you are... judging you [if you do something wrong]. But with Light Church people, everybody is vulnerable... so I think I am safe [here] (Interview, 2015).

That is a common theme that emerged in other interviews as well; members feel free to share their everyday life without fears of being judged or criticized and create a new sense of community. Ricard Zapata-Barrero (2015) affirms that «Interculturalism is a way to produce something new» (p. 8) and Light Church creates cohesion that casts off power dynamics among nationals, foreigners and other minorities.

The pastor and church participants avoid debates over homosexuality, but warmly welcome sexual minorities to worship and, privately, they make their own opinions about the LGBTI community. Pastor Samuel affirmed: «If the LGBTI community believes in Jesus Christ [...] whether they are LGBTI or not, is not important to me. What is important to me is that they believe in Jesus Christ» (Interview, 2016). He finds common grounds in



order to avoid divisive enclaves. Light Church is a model that shows how far a congregation can take the notion of interculturalism and interaction, not only for transcending ethnic and linguistic differences but bridging one of the more sensitive topics for conservative groups in Korea and the world. For example, in June 2017, the General Assembly of Presbyterian Churches in Korea accused pastor Kim Bora of heresy because of her advocacy for sexual minorities (Lee, 2017).

How can the interest of Light Church participants to voluntarily integrate across divisive lines be explained? As mentioned before, studies in diversity (Marti, 2005, Edwards et al., 2013) show how multicultural congregations «elevate the importance of a superordinate identity that all attendees share over any subordinate identities of attendees» (Edwards et al., 2013: 219).<sup>2</sup> Light Church is a congregation affiliated with a conservative Baptist church in the USA that stresses congregants' unity in Christ. Pastor Samuel states that one of the greatest riches of Light Church is its diversity and he is aware of the social advantages or disadvantages associated with it. «I just really feel that the church is going to become one across nations,» said Pastor Samuel. He is convinced that in a diverse environment where it is potentially difficult to reach agreements, the church is the right place to show this unity-pursuing Christian character «codified in the Golden Rule, the Beatitudes, and the parable of the good Samaritan» (Wuthnow, 1990: 8). Essentially, unity and solidarity with the outcast take precedence over ethnic or social differences in the church.

Positions that potentially threaten the internal unity of the congregation is expressed in terms of members' own experiences, or symbolic interactionism. Making these sensitive issues personal and not an abstract issue has been Light Church's success as a multiethnic congregation. They personalize social issues and bring a human face to every struggle. When the members discuss sexual minorities, they think in terms of the *individual* in order to generate empathy, as opposed to an intangible idea. Mark

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<sup>2</sup> Marti (2008; 2009) calls it «ethnic transcendence.»



expresses this point clearly when he offers his point of view about the LGBTI community:

It is a controversial question. I think a lot of LGBT people and a lot of people that I have as friends. I have friends who consider themselves transgender and queer. The thing about them is that they have scars. Especially kind of ironically in the church that Christ is supposed to embody, so in a sense for me LGBT people, I have to say at the end of the day, I completely agree that homosexuality [is] against natural relations with others, whether men or women, he [the homosexual] is also against God's love. But, I would also highly emphasize that we are all sinners and you know, homosexual friends of mine and I are sinners. That makes me no better than him or her. What we have to realize is that especially church started to treat the homosexuals and the LGBTI community as a lower level, but I am encouraged by the fact that when Jesus saw a woman committing adultery, and he said that 'Neither I or any of them condemn' her (Interview, 2015).

An example representative of this position is the church's informal attendance at the 16<sup>th</sup> Queer Festival in Seoul, celebrated in June 2016 (Ock, 2016). Some Light Church members attended the parade to interact with the LGBTI community and sought to understand what was happening there, without prejudices. They had casual conversations with LGBTI people and gave them a new appreciation of the traditional Christian perspective. Their interpretation is not based only on rigid doctrines or religious rules, but in the experience of their attendance of the Queer Festival. Pastor Samuel perceives minorities—foreigners, migrants, refugees, gays, and lesbians—not as dangerous elements, but as human beings, because his perception is acquired through personal church experiences.

Unlike most churches in Korea, Light Church's pastor and some congregation members decided to attend the 16<sup>th</sup> Queer Festival to pass out free bottled water to the LGBTI community and to observe what a Queer Festival experience entailed. Most of the conservative churches «participate» in the festival with a protest outside of the boundaries of the festival. With banners, flyers and worship singing, they attempt to disturb the only celebration of the year where the LGBTI community can use the public space without fear



of discrimination. In this vein, Light Church participates as an active spectator, talking with the attendants. Scholars have interpreted these efforts as a bridging process that promotes a sense of civic responsibility.<sup>3</sup> For addressing large-scale social problems (Wuthnow, 2002), Light Church invited some of the LGBTI participants to visit the church. Several gay people attended the next worship service and the message presented was about love and reconciliation. The attendance to the 16<sup>th</sup> Queer Festival reflects the freedom of church members to discuss these sensitive issues and offer personal support, in spite of the controversy. On Light Church's Facebook page, some outsiders showed stern disagreement to Pastor Samuel's position and his attendance at the festival. However, despite the comments, he continues to argue that the most important practice is unity towards one another, beyond the rules or doctrinal interpretations; it is a priority over differences. The most important factor is identifying as and behaving like a member of Christ's family, not defining the sexual orientation of people.

The essential communal enterprise in Light Church is to figure out how to interpret and apply the family ethic and inclusion value among its members and beyond. The emphasis of the «feel safe with us» tenet that permeates the church, takes on another meaning when a homosexual discloses his or her sexual orientation. However, this does not mean it is something easy to understand for all Light Church members. Juliette is careful with her opinion about the LGBTI community. She says:

LGBTI people, that's their personality. I don't want to discriminate them. But I know what the Bible says [that] homosexuality is not from God. But that doesn't mean that we should hate the person. I still try to process in my head. I think that for a lot of people they don't understand either. I feel like people don't like gay people because they are afraid.

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<sup>3</sup> According to recent research; many Korean churches were not enough to encourage their believers to have a robust civil responsibility (Kim et al., 2015). If Korean Protestantism tries to actively play a bridging role for the integration of foreigners into the Korean society, it will be a good way not only for its original goal but also for the promotion of Korean evangelicals' citizenship through religious activities.



I think it is just fear. If you are really secure and confident, you don't really need to have a fear (Interview, 2015).

Over the course of three years (2015-2017), three different experiences with the «homosexual issue» has confirmed the character of the church: «We want to engage *all* nations,» said the pastor, «but to reach this goal the bottom line of discipleship and intimacy needs to be crossed» (Interview, 2016). Shifting from a theoretical intercultural paradigm towards practice my analysis recalls three attempts to apply the intercultural inclusion model. In that model, the line of intimacy was crossed safely and represents one of the highest levels of communal —inclusion— experience among the church members in order to secure a bridge between seemingly opposing positions. In intercultural terms, these examples represent the ongoing learning process and the intercultural purpose of overcoming the different points of view about sexual orientation. These efforts do not pose a change in theology or Christian principles because people in Light Church still think of homosexuality as a sin. However, they actively reflect on the intention of intercultural dialogue, one of the principles of interculturalism.

### ***Roger: «Coming out,» reception, and open dialogue***

One of the strategies of Light Church to embrace the differences between members is hosting an open, honest dialogue in formal and informal meetings where all people are recognized as learners, even the pastor, who accepts that he does not have all the answers, especially when it comes to theologically sensitive issues, such as homosexuality. After several conversations, the pastor told me that: «[I am] still on a journey, trying to find an answer, learning about it, getting known about it. The important thing is, I am ready for opening my ears, listen to every voice.» Pastor Samuel recognized that sometimes he does not know what he should do with regard to the topic of same-sex attraction. I could notice his struggle between traditional biblical principles and his experiences with homosexual people. It is as if the reality is telling him something other than his traditional beliefs. However, he is honest and maintains a conservative view of the topic, but he tries to



understand the reality of homosexuals without prejudices. He prefers to focus on integrating a person as a member of the family in Christ; the ideal of unity is his goal in word and practice.

In this vein, Pastor Samuel organized a discussion panel in November of 2015 called «All Nations Day!» in place of the typical formal Sunday sermon. It was an innovative approach for a much-needed discussion of social issues among his congregation composed of many foreigners and native Koreans. The panel members were people from six different countries, representatives of Europe, Asia, Africa, and the American continent. That Sunday, the church attendants looked vibrant as they anticipated what would happen during the discussion. Light Church welcomed the panel members warmly regardless of nationality, ethnicity, language, and sexual orientation. Forty-eight people attended representing the nations of Korea, Colombia, Germany, Canada, the Netherlands, Myanmar, Brazil, and the US. This diverse atmosphere was enriched with a worship service featuring rap music led by two males casually dressed. Light Church actively engaged these young men and requested that they stand in front among the other usual worshipers to praise God, using their preferred style.

Moreover, they sang exceptionally well and were immediately admired by the congregation members. One of the rap songs that were greatly esteemed among the worshipers featured a criticism on living a life based on pursuing money and elevated social status, instead of seeking Jesus. The song directly condemns hedonism and the consumer lifestyle in which the singular motivation and goal is economic gain and wealth. After the two unorthodox singers finished, we prayed for them, and the congregation turned to sing the usual worship songs. In his sermon, Pastor Samuel emphasized, that there is a «new language» for reaching the young generations and an opportunity to belong to the family of God in unity awaits. He said: «We love Myanmar! We love Nigeria!» He showed genuine consideration and a warm welcome for the people representing impoverished countries. The environment was energetic, and the people looked joyous. Additionally, Light Church provided a space for creative artists to display their energy and talent in the service as a celebration. Pastor Samuel frequently



gives to all, the opportunity to share their gifts which contribute to the praise of God.

When the panel discussion started, the six participants sat down in front of a small setting. Behind them, a big screen displayed their nationality and personal facts, such as likes, dislikes, and other exciting information. The format of the conference seemed more or less like a talk show where the pastor and his assistant asked the participants different questions about their experiences in Korea. Pastor Samuel said that, «He wants to [go and] preach to the nations, but now, with so many foreigners present in the congregation, nations come to the church» (Personal field notes). He asked the panelists about their nationalities and reasons for coming to Korea. As I listened, I felt that Pastor Samuel was proud to have foreigners in the church. He promotes diversity as he has a unique mix of traditionalism in his religious position and a progressive way in his leadership approach. His innovative ways are well-displayed in his personality, practical judgment, and his original speech, and prayers. Traditional pastors are typically identified by their pressed suits and good posture as they sit in front of the church. However, Pastor Samuel can be easily confused with a regular congregant. He dresses very casually as if he wanted to pass unnoticed.

Little by little, the panel conversation became more personal, and the questions grew more oriented to the role of the Korean church in the panelists' lives, their struggles living in Korea, their plans for the future, and critiques about their experiences as foreigners. Beyond expressing personal opinions or critiques, Pastor Samuel wanted to hear suggestions about how to bridge the gap between foreigners and Koreans in the Christian realm. This exercise of asking the opinions of foreigners is not usual in churches. Traditionally, everybody has to obey the pastor or leadership. However, to use the primetime of a Sunday worship service for listening to the opinion of six foreigners showed me how open Light Church could be.

Towards the end of the discussion, the pastor gave special attention to one of the male panelists, Roger. He asked him to tell the congregation about his particular struggles with the Protestant church. He answered: «I feel discriminated by churches because of



my sexual orientation in spite of that I have belonged to different Christian churches in my country and Korea.» With tears in his eyes, he opened his heart to disclose his identity and faced his fears of being rejected by the church. He continued:

I want to be clear that I am Christian, I was baptized in water in my youth, I was baptized in the Holy Spirit, and I used to speak tongues [a regular practice in Pentecostal churches]. I am familiar with Christianity because I grow up in a conservative Christian family, and all my life I shared practices that all Christians do (Field notes, 2015).

Then, he explained his experience in the 2015 16<sup>th</sup> Queer Festival in Seoul:

When I attended the gay parade in Seoul, in City Hall, I realized what happened. To go to the gay parade, I needed to cross the street, and for the first time, I felt I was afraid of Christians. Everyone was shouting with big banners that say, “We want a holy Korea,” “Fagots get out of here.” Crossing the street, I enjoyed the time with my gay Korean friends, inside the square [gay parade zone]. It was amazing to me to see thousands of policeman around of us, protecting us from Christians [and] to prevent disturbances. I was with my friends, and I heard outside from the gay parade area the Christians praying to the Lord with songs that I used to sing when I was a child (Field notes, 2015).

In recounting his impressions about the conservative groups that showed banners with homophobic messages around the festival, further stated:

Inside the gay parade, I was listening to Madonna [and] I was listening to Amazing Grace outside [a famous Christian song], and I would like to sing Amazing Grace with my Christian brothers and sisters, but I realized I couldn't because if I move to the Christian area they immediately will reject me, condemn and discriminate me. So, after this moment, I was thinking a lot about this because seriously, it was the first time I felt afraid of Christians. When I crossed the street, it was so hard for me to think something terrible could happen to me (Field notes, 2015).



Some days after the 16<sup>th</sup> Queer Festival, Roger visited the prayer meeting and asked to talk with Pastor Samuel. Roger expressed his relief freely to speak openly with a Christian pastor about his fears and feelings. He said:

I talked to Samuel, and he invited me to the pray time one Saturday night, and he prayed for me and asked me, “Roger, pray aloud and forgive the people who hurt you...” [After praying] I had healed, this kind of anger against the Christian church [disappeared]. Now I feel relieved; I don’t want to be invisible; this is who I am (Field notes, 2015).

At the end of the discussion panel, Pastor Samuel asked the congregation to pray for the international panel, and most of the people reacted by embracing Roger, not condemning him. Either from the social or religious perspective, the people looked like moderate, tolerant, and understanding Christians. Light Church is one of the very few religious congregations in Seoul that accepts an openly gay man as part of their church family without judgment or discrimination. This open and respectful dialogue shows how Light Church is a place where everyone can listen to all kinds of topics no matter how sensitive the issues might be.

According to Cantle (2012: 143), the intercultural dialogue helps to challenge «otherness» in a spirit of openness, utilizing processes of interaction, foster empathy with others but not necessarily results in changes in the general relations. As mentioned above, Light Church has not changed its theology about homosexuality as a sin but rather than negotiate by theological positions they show efforts to understand and support the standpoint on sexual minorities in human terms creating a bridge between the gaps of these two positions.

### *Kimberly: Reorientation and affinity with the church*

Light Church wants to be represented by a radical love, inclusiveness, and non-judgmental attitudes in order to encourage deep relationships based on Christian ethics. It is a place that desires for people to feel what a family is like genuinely or *should be*. Without expectations of rewards, they consistently welcome all



as an essential practice. In my conversations with Pastor Samuel, he frequently asked me about my research project and encouraged me to ask him questions. Usually, I answered him by describing how swamped I was with my classes and projects, but he prayed for me several times. He never pushed me to attend every worship service, and he told me that it was not necessary to become an active member to gather information for my research. From experience at his church, I realized people could express their weaknesses without fear of being judged and moreover, Pastor Samuel did not expect the same forms of commitment from every member. In a multiethnic church with a floating foreigner population, the leadership is not interested in exercising authority, but in forming bonds featuring family-community centered values.

It was in this openhearted atmosphere that Kimberly, a girl in her mid-20s from the US, disclosed her sexual orientation to the church. In July 2017, she shared her testimony about choosing to leave her homosexual lifestyle because she realized Jesus' love was better than anything the world had to offer. She said that, «I realized Christ was the only thing to fill me. I found my purpose in life as a missionary; Jesus gives me a purpose, love and a future.» Before she shared her testimony, she recognized that homosexuality is a controversial topic, but she was determined to talk about her new life in Christ. Kimberly considers to have lived her life in three stages: first, without a relationship with Christ; second, trying to find love through relationships with other girls, but only experiencing disillusionment; and lastly, as a homosexual Christian for a while, but realizing she could not reconcile having a sincere relationship with God as a practicing lesbian, she chose to be single. «In His mercy, God gave me a choice, and I chose Jesus.» Kimberly offered. After experiencing the hardship of rejecting herself and unsuccessfully trying to change her lifestyle by her strength, she met an ex-homosexual couple that ministered to her, and she experienced the Holy Spirit's leading toward her present journey to love Jesus and herself. Pastor Samuel thanked her for becoming a member of Light Church and for sharing her experience of healing. The clear message to all was simply, «If you know someone from the LGBT community, the best way is to love them as yourself and then God is going to call them,» she concluded.



It is notable that she never used the typical arguments of conservative groups condemning and judging the LGBTI community. She offered instruction from a Bible passage found in 2 Corinthians 5.13-14:

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again (NIV).

She wanted to live her life for Jesus and be a missionary to share the Christian gospel. People enjoyed her testimony and welcomed her in the same way as they had David and Roger. Once more, Light Church demonstrated its most significant effort to be a family under the same Christian-ethic principle where a bond of love and acceptance promotes unity. The story of this ex-lesbian girl was recorded and uploaded in the church Facebook site. She received positive feedback: «Yeah girl, strut that freedom!! You are one of the most amazing people I've ever known, and I love seeing the presence of God move so powerfully in your life!»; «Yeeaaaah!!! It makes me so happy! Go God!!!»; «You are so beautiful, seriously so amazing. Thank u for sharing this»; and «I'm so humbled by your honesty and applaud your courage in sharing your love for Christ! Thanks for sharing~ you are simply beautiful.»

### *David: Honesty, commitment, and inclusion*

In June 2016 the newspaper announced the details of the 17<sup>th</sup> Queer Cultural Festival in Seoul. The City Hall area was the place where thousands of people gathered to celebrate diversity. According to *The Korea Times*, 50,000 people and several companies, embassies, small business along with human rights and civic organizations participated during that one day, supporting the LGBTI community (Kim, 2016). Pastor Samuel decided to attend the controversial festival with some members of the church. One of them, David, drew my attention because of his unique experience with same-sex-attraction issues. In early 2015, during one of my first visits to Light Church, I realized that Pastor Samuel encourages lay member participation in the church's operations. Any question on activities is welcomed, and creativity is valued in



order to cross social boundaries and carries out the multiple functions of the church.

During a Sunday service, a married couple shared their life journey as Christians and their wish to serve in the church. At the time, the church had barely been established as an entity; in fact, I could go to the only count about twenty regular attendees. The woman shared her experiences as a missionary abroad and her husband, David, opened his deeper feelings and thoughts. He confessed in front of the church; he is a same-sex-attraction person who loves his wife and his children. His family is one of the three Light Church founder families. It was necessary for him to be honest with the church from the very beginning. At the end of the worship service, the congregation prayed for the couple and Pastor Samuel thanked David for his sincerity, emphasizing that God loves us and all of us need of His love. Since that day the topic was never mentioned in public again, and the church started to grow in numbers, activities, and on social media.

It was not until June 2016 when Pastor Samuel referred to the topic of homosexuality, announcing that he wanted to attend the 16<sup>th</sup> Queer Festival with some other members of the church and offer bottles of water to the people, talk with them, and listen to them. Unlike other religious congregations who stayed outside the festival, Light Church socialized as frequent visitors and warmly, but discreetly, invited people to the church; they experienced a gay parade for what it was. Approximately seven people visited the festival booths and offered water to the participants. At the next Sunday service, Pastor Samuel changed the schedule of preaching previously announced and invited David to share his unique journey. This second disclosure moment takes a new meaning because there were new people, church members, and those invited from the festival, that did not know David's story.

That Sunday, as usual, Pastor Samuel led the prayer in the beginning. The worship service started with about twenty-five people, but in the end, there were more than fifty. The worship team sang songs about grace and mercy several times. After singing, we had a meditation time and Pastor Samuel talked about how to be brave and overcome fears, focusing on our identity in Christ as sons of God. He emphasized more on the acceptance and



understanding dialogue than a condemning discourse, highlighting in the patience of God, who is waiting for us. He said: «Almighty God loves you as you are, although you are messed up, He welcomes you in this place» (Personal field notes, 2016).

Then he talked about his experience as a visitor to the 16<sup>th</sup> Queer Festival. He saw the ostracized LGBTI community as a future family who will belong to Christ. His words pointed out the LGBTI community as orphans who need a Father, as people who are thirsty and wishing for something new. «I wish they all go to Jesus. We are all orphans. We need to embrace radical encounter of love, and we need to love this city and pray that love reigns in this city,» said during the opening service. In general, his discourse was kind and expressed the pain for the lack of efforts in Christian churches to reach gay people for Christ. After this introduction, he asked us to greet each other and if we felt comfortable, hug each other, as well.

I think many of the people wanted to know who was the gay Christian married man invited to share his journey. As familiar with the Christian organizations as I am, I know every Sunday worship service is prepared with a purpose—the songs, the prayers and so on. Pastor Samuel decided to start the service talking about Light Church history in order to introduce the role of the three families who have contributed to establish the church. One of these families is David's family. With this introduction, Samuel recognized the critical role of David in the development of the church. We prayed for David and his wife and then he shared his personal story.

David presented a PowerPoint slideshow for the audience. The first slide might be shocking for someone as it featured the sentence: «I am a gay man who is blessed to be married in one flesh.» He recognized, in front of the congregation, his sexual orientation and talked about his actual condition. He never said «I was gay» because he still recognized his same-sex-attraction desires. He continued: «I am not in the middle of bisexuality, but I know that I am forgiven and redeemed as a child of God.» Although he realized that he is gay, he has not been in a romantic relationship with a man, and his wedding night was his first experience with the mother of his children. He said that his wife,



Amy, was the very first person to know about his identity and she did not believe it. After nine years of dating, David and Amy married. In total, they have known each other for twenty-one years and have been married for twelve years. He said his kids do not know about his identity, but he will tell them later when the time comes.

During his talk, he provided some educational information, as well. To explain the actual relationship with his wife, he used three different concepts of love: *agape*, *philia* and *eros*. Usually, he said: «couples started with the *eros*, then *philia* and end with *agape*. However, in my case, it went in reverse. My relationship started with *agape*, then *philia*, and finally *eros*,» David said. He offered that as the reason he has three kids. David started dating Amy with no erotic emotions, just pure friendship, and finally, God gave him a chance to explore the romantic relationship. He is falling in love with one woman, and he made clear that he feels attraction for men, but he is still the same person that everybody knows, until now.

During all his presentation, some faces were surprised but very interested in listening to him. In spite of the current *eros* relationship with his wife, he recognized his struggles with same-sex-attractions. After he married, he met other American guys who are gay and married to a heterosexual woman. He said that, «Probably God made us this way, maybe it is immutable.» He does not think that he chose his identity; he speculated: «I may be born in this way.» He continued: «Scholars talk that sexuality is fluid and malleable,» David said, and «I have heard that there are many harms when we try repair therapy and there are obvious side effects.» He recognizes his identity as a man of God with a deep faith. He surrendered his sexuality and gave up trying to figure out his identity, but he said: «I thought that I was different, but I am the same as others. All people have concerns with other issues.» He believes that God is telling him that he is unique, a gift.

Throughout his talk, David did not bring up theological/religious issues or biblical interpretations about whether or not homosexuality is a sin. The only Bible verse he referred to was Matthew 21.31 which says, «[Jesus said,] ‘Which of the two did what his father wanted?’ ‘The first,’ they answered. Jesus said to



them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.» He compared the tax collector in Jesus’ time with a *chinilpa* [a member of a radical, pro-Japanese faction] —villains as far as Korean history is concerned— as an example of just how hated tax collectors were. Then he introduced a host of book authors, theologians, worship leaders, and pastors such as Joe Dallas, Alan Medinger, Donnie McClurkin, Dennis Lernigan, and Henri Nouwen who have a more inclusive vision about homosexuality defined by love, mercy, and grace. David listed the different sexualities within the human experience: gay, lesbian, queer, bisexual, intersexual, asexual, and transgender. He merely stated: «All these kinds of different sexualities exist and I belong to one of them.»

Furthermore, he showed pictures of different particular families that he considered as «gay-straight-families» and talked about famous Christian singers who «came out» as gays or lesbian recently. He also listed some well-known Christian songs that were written by worship leaders that identify as gay or lesbian. With this discourse, David opened the door for every person to decide their position about this polarizing issue individually.

Before concluding, David offered support to the gay community, explaining his viewpoint to be that, «The gay community is a gift for the church.» That is a revolutionary thought that few churches can accept. He challenged people with the question, «What are you going to do with this gift?» One unorthodox analogy was to compare the LGBTI community with manure. «The function of manure is to enrich the soil, and the LGBTI community has been considered over the years as the worst part of the society, [yet, it] is the manure that could enrich the society» he concluded. With honesty and consistency, he recognized that he is Christian and gay with a family. After his talk, Pastor Samuel emphasized the importance of being a united family. He publicly asked for forgiveness from the gay people that were present in the church and offered it a safe space for worshiping God and being themselves. His message was humbling and powerful as he recognized the deep pain that the church, in general, has caused the LGBTI community.



Pastor Samuel said that this would not be an easy task for David, and the challenge is more prominent than we all think. «We need each other to build a *real* church,» he said. About the uniqueness of David's family, Pastor Samuel asked us, «Which church can David go to in this society?» He continued stating:

Many people say that church is not real and we do not believe it is real. In the City Hall, yesterday, Christians surrounding the gay parade were all shouting. LGBTI people were saying that Christians were around us all shouting and we do not see the love there. We do not understand love, and they might ask if you are ever interested in me? Are you trying to spend 5 or 10 min with us? (Field notes, 2016).

Pastor Samuel clearly expresses his view about the present Christian churches as a system. He did not talk in spiritual or abstract concepts. He was distinct in his position affirming that:

Church will be destroyed if the church relies on system and money. We need real Christians, and we did not know how to love the city. Sin is sin, but family should come first, and we do not judge them [gays and lesbians or others]. We need to love well, and not judge anybody (Field notes, 2016).

In terms of intercultural principles, David thoughts promote inclusion and prevent segregation by crossing socially taboo boundaries. That requires creative ways of interconnecting along with personal and collective development. First, he provided valuable information about other homosexuals who married and disclosed that he still struggles with his identity. Second, he stated that he could not change his identity and he did not choose his sexual orientation. Third, he didn't victimize himself or others and affirmed his responsibilities as a church member, leader, and a parent of future citizens of society. Lastly, he didn't ask other gay or lesbian attendants to choose the same path he took, but he showed respect for the individuality of those present in the church. After the Sunday service, the church's Facebook site lit-up with many positive comments about David and his story (see Figure 2).

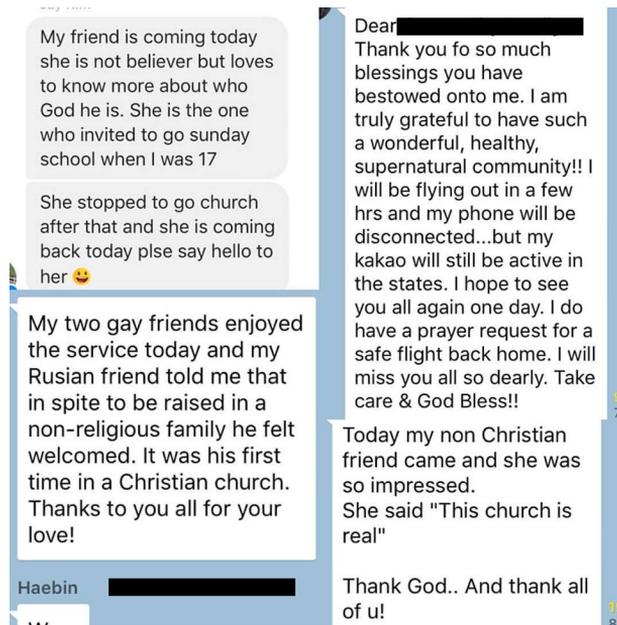


Figure 2. Pastor Samuel's Facebook post

Likewise, Pastor Samuel's Facebook post stated:

This past week I haven't prayed and cried as much as I did maybe since the Sewol Ferry tragedy. After going to the LGBT parade at Seoul City Hall Saturday, [Light Church's] Sunday Message by a gay man, and Monday's shootings in Orlando: I am thoroughly convinced that God is giving Christians an opportunity to really look into our hearts on this global human condition. Do we really know how to love our neighbors? Can mercy triumph over judgment? Is love the highest law? Are we not all sinners in need of a savior? Who will save us from our painful ways? Christians, are we not different from terrorists? Let us show the world know who Jesus really is (Facebook post, June 2016).

Talking about interculturalism to create community cohesion involves the understanding of 'contact theory' credited to Gordon Allport (1954). He says that bringing together the members of different groups, getting them working towards common goals on an equal footing, would lead to intergroup prejudice being reduced. This second intercultural dialogue in Light Church showed how they approached the LGBTI community and invited them in to get



to know them, not to convert them. At the same time, they shared how one of its members belonged to the LGBTI community and demonstrated their interest in the creation of intergroup friendships. The relation is more important than conversion. According to Cattle (2012), this type of contact reduces the prejudice and feelings of the threatened.

The evidence from Light Church suggests that the three disclosing events reoriented personal prejudices and stereotypes as there is a mutual understanding in favor of a common goal that forms the basis for integration. The interactions overcome social boundaries and reach another type of minority in a non-disruptive way. Roger, Kimberly, and David represent three views that are relatively rare in both social and religious domains. Roger recognizes himself as a gay Christian who has suffered discrimination from traditional churches. His pain and isolation came from the bigotry of church members. Kimberly represents the conservative approach to «pray the gay away,» and her pain came from a lifestyle where she experienced only disappointment and sadness. David accepts his same-sex-attraction and at the same time, is pursuing the love of only one woman, his wife. How can three views coexist in the same church? These stories represent opposing positions found inside and outside the church, in general. Roger, as a gay Christian, is rejected by traditional Christian circles and is also a minority inside the gay community. Kimberly, who decided to leave her homosexual lifestyle, to take a position scarcely credible by the LGBTI community, which considers sexuality as a fluid state. Finally, David, as a gay man married to a heterosexual woman, could be criticized by the traditional church as undisciplined for not renouncing his feelings of same-sex-attraction, and marginalized by the gay community for lacking the determination to find a gay partner.

The role of Light Church as an active influence transformed the outlook of its members from one of rigid conservatism to one of dynamic empathy. That, in turn, becomes a catalyst for multi-directional relationships resulting from interpersonal contacts with minorities and personal narratives. That does not mean Light Church affirms homosexuality, but it recognizes the equality of all persons in the congregation. In this process, they don't categorize people through sexual orientation or other differences which could



lead to stereotyping or judgment. Cante (2012) acknowledges that what generates hostility is not just the perception of a threat, but also a high degree of segregation of the groups. The fact that one member admits she set aside her homosexuality in front of other members who still recognize themselves as part of the LGBTI community could raise heated discussions between them. However, the benefit of knowing each other and focusing on common goals far outweighs the desire for pride-fueled debates for these members as bridge building opportunities increases understanding between them.

### **Light Church, Symbolic Interactionism, and Interculturalism**

While Light Church members may tend to understand these concrete disclosed events based on the biblical principles of the Golden Rule, the Beatitudes, or the parable of the good Samaritan, the symbolic interactionism theory postulates that meaning-making may be derived more from *perceived* reactions than actual reactions (Shrauger and Schoeneman, 1979). The reason is just that individuals are active interpreters of their world and Light Church members operate according to religious or biblical predetermined assumptions emphasized by the church. It implies that the church members' biblical interpretations and the symbolic meaning they attach to a controversial issue, such as sexual orientation, may determine their behavioral choices. These interpretations are often informed by background values and norms (Uksoanya, 2014). In Korean multiethnic churches where the primary operating model is the homogeneous-unite principle, it is not possible to combine differences. In terms of sexual minorities, they want to convert them in order to follow their biblical interpretation. For conservative churches, their symbolic meaning applied to offer a separate ministry for sexual minorities is very controversial or better said, impossible.

Most of the members of Light Church have experienced being a minority as Korean-Americans, foreigners, or native Koreans that don't assimilate into the conventional system; thus, they try to understand individuals in their contextual background in order to



reach a social adaptation. Nicky, a stay-at-home mother, explains the role of the church is to include diversity. She says:

We try to make space for everybody not for one group. We try to include everybody, and I know the feeling is different. When our boys go to Korean school, they are the weird one in the Korean environmental, and we [the church] try to be a safe place and be friends (Interview, 2016).

The position of Light Church toward the LGBTI community and other minorities is based on firsthand experiences and direct conversations that allow them to bridge two positions which traditionally conflict. James Angelo Forte (2004) asserts that, «symbolic interactionism can help practitioners understand culturally different interpretations of similar social experiences, explore meanings such as those of the members of undervalued groups, and attend to the social aspects of intense emotions» (p. 393). Light Church explores the meaning of being a member of the LGBTI community and decided to integrate willing members as individuals, not as a cast-offs needing to be rescued.

Religious congregations influence how people experience identity, friendship, social networks, racial, and ethnic attitudes, and even inequality (Edwards et al., 2013: 212). Light Church, a nonconventional multiethnic congregation, experiences dynamic behavioral changes because of its role in supporting people who feel outside of the mainstream, including North Korean refugees, members of the LGBTI community, single mothers, foreigners, and other minorities. Edwards et al. (2013) explain there is no concept to evaluate the success of these kinds of churches. In a way, the increase in membership number is a sign of success, yet, a mere number does not indicate if a person found a place where he or she can express themselves openly and spiritually. There is not a singular effective approach to define a church's success. The success of Light Church is self-defined—to cultivate a space where *all* people feel like a loved member of a family.

Additionally, the church can affect the environment and surrounding community with a message of unity, foster a place where they can express their struggles as individuals, regardless of social conditions. As previously mentioned, David explained that



his sons are being considered as «foreigners» in their school because they speak English fluently. This experience could hardly be shared and understood in a traditional monolingual church. People in Light Church are more aware of the increase of foreigners and the struggles they face; it represents a new model of interaction aligned with the social changes in the greater society.

Light Church demonstrates deep levels of interaction and bridging efforts compared to other traditional or multiethnic churches. This start-up multiethnic congregation led by a younger, Western-educated pastor, generates benefits for minorities, contributes to the dialogue of the changing world, and promotes integration on common grounds. However, this is not an easy task in a chaotic world-system that is far less tolerant in its present guise than in its earlier forms. The issues along the line between Caesar and God—what the law should dictate concerning abortion, homosexual marriage, and euthanasia, for example—are not as susceptible to resolution as autonomous issues (Wallerstein, 2005: 133). Light Church has not always received excellent reviews from people coming and going, but the analysis of the cost and challenges of this level of integration deserves further research. At the moment, the role of Light Church as a bridge between the religious world and sexual minorities is an innovative model that transforms a potential conflict zone into areas of positive contact in order to encourage social inclusion.

## Conclusion

This article has given examples and the realities of sexual minorities in Korea. It is clear that such situations of dialogue and mutual understanding are sensitive issues within the Protestant church. However, with the visibility of the LGBTI community and the monolithic vision of religious institutions is being challenged by reality. Although this minority segment of the population continues to be rejected by the social mainstream and conservative religious institutions, the reality is that Light Church, a start-up multiethnic congregation, challenges the traditional dichotomy of conservative believers because this congregation combines a conservative position of sexual orthodoxy with an inclusive, egalitarian ethos that avoids cultural or religious divisions. The presence of



members and ex-members of the LGBTI community constitutes a phenomenon that will eventually encourage other Protestant churches to open their eyes and promote open dialogue about diverse sexual orientations. Initially, Light Church hosted an essential space for bridging LGBTI-religious relations. Heterosexual Christians accept the story of faith experiences of people of different sexual orientation is a unique phenomenon that could potentially be replicated in other congregations. It illustrates how interculturalism can be practiced not only to provide a bridge between different ethnic identities but also to other types of minorities.

This study is an exploration of how Light Church came to be a multiethnic church. Ethnically inclusive communities like Light Church are essential not only for their uniqueness in the Korean religious market but because they may hold an alternative to improving the relationship between diverse people that voluntarily congregate together. The value of this congregation is they are continually adapting to social and cultural developments, even though they are surrounded by cultural tradition, teachings, and organizational habits. My research —located at the intersection of multiculturalism, symbolic interculturalism, and interculturalism— explored ethnic, religious, and sexual identity negotiations among native Koreans, Korean-Americans and foreign residents who live or stay for a long time in Korea and belong to a religious congregation.

As far as social paradigms are concerned, multiculturalism is a recently-initiated process for Korea; therefore, although its experiences with it are limited, the process is on-going. After situating these multicultural encounters in the broader context of Korean society, I analyzed the theoretical perspectives and the popular narrative among foreign residents in their interactions with Korean nationals. By focusing on the particular environment provided by emerging multiculturalism, I investigated how ancestry, cultural capital, and social hierarchies, influence and mold the dynamics of relations amid foreign residents and the Korean social mainstream. All these layers of negotiations interconnect with a Western vision of multiculturalism that has shifted toward other parts of the world.



Beyond the boundaries of Western multiculturalism, interculturalism is necessary to adopt for effective integration of minorities. It operates not only to analyze the way foreign migrants and Korean nationals perceive each other but also to understand how the process of integration of minorities is displayed and performed in daily life amid a religious congregation. In other words, individuals, regardless of their ethnic origin, are reflexive agents that through frequent interactions determine the meaning of their reality. These interactions practiced in a religious environment, reduce social isolation and promote inclusion, revealing new ways of creating a community in which members can negotiate their differences.

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