



Church at the heart of South Korea coronavirus

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- Sixty per cent of the 1,000 coronavirus cases in South Korea are associated with the Shincheonji Church of Jesus Christ in Daegu, the fourth-largest city in the country.
- All 200,000 of the Shincheonji congregation are being tested after “Patient No 31”, a 61-year-old female worshipper, tested positive.
- Now there are [reports](#) from Massimo Introvigne, founder of the Centre for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), that Shincheonji members have been insulted, discriminated and forced out of their jobs.
- Membership of Shincheonji, which is described as a “cult” and “secretive”, has grown rapidly since it was founded in 1984 by Lee Man-hee, then aged 53.
- Shincheonji means “New Heaven, New Earth” and Lee is regarded as the “counsellor”, the advocate promised in the New Testament to create God's kingdom of heaven on earth and only he is said to be able to interpret correctly God's word. Some believers think he is immortal.
- Membership is through baptism and attendance and graduation from a Bible study course.
- Members pay tithes – a tenth of their income – to the church and devote their lives to the group, giving time, energy and money to be among the chosen ones. Members are allegedly encouraged to break relations with their families if they disapprove of the church.
- Worshipers wear white in services, which attract thousands of people in huge auditoriums.
- The church has expanded into Europe, Australia and South Africa. In November 2016 the Church of England alerted 500 parishes in London about the activities of a charity, Parachristo, which runs Bible study groups and is linked to Shincheonji.
- Shincheonji members are organised into 12 tribes and believe they are the 144,000 “chosen ones”, prophesied in the Book of Revelation as those who are saved from damnation when Jesus returns.
- They describe themselves as a “peace organisation”, setting up groups such as Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light, putting on peace conferences including the World Alliance of Religions Peace Summit and promoting cultural, volunteer and youth activities to promote unity among communities working for peace. In 2015, Lee Man-hee addressed The Model United Nations Conference at Oxford University.

- They church also hosts the annual Shincheonji National Olympiad, which features performing arts based on the Bible and athletics.
- Further information is available from Inform, an independent educational charity providing information about minority religions and sects.

COMMENTATORS

- Massimo Introvigne, director of the Centre for Studies on New Religions (Cesnur), based in Turin, Italy.
- Professor Park, Kwangsoo, North Dakota State University (kscosmos@wku.ac.kr)
- Professor Chae Young Kim, Sogang University, Seoul (chaekim@sogang.ac.kr)
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- Joseph Yi, associate professor of political science at Hanyang University, Seoul (joyichicago@yahoo.com)

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- [Mystery surrounds visit to UAE of alleged religious cult](#)
- [Apocalyptic Korean Christian group goes by different names](#)