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Racial Diversity and Political Atmosphere: A Comparative Analysis of Non-Denominational Churches in Seoul

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Abstract. This research paper analyzes two non-denominational churches in Seoul, South Korea to consider how language and the racial composition of a congregation can affect the political atmosphere of a given church. Through observations of church services and interviews conducted with members and pastors at both churches, this study explores both the official stances of church leadership with respect to politics and the perceived political atmosphere identified by church members. It then places the results of its observations in the context of its linguistic practice and congregational makeup. Although neither church considers itself ‘political,’ this paper concludes that foreign language services and the national diversity of a congregation can create an atmosphere that is more open to political discussion.

Keywords. Korean Christianity; Non-denominational churches; religion and politics; political atmosphere; congregational diversity; multicultural congregations; comparative religion; qualitative research

Introduction

Christians compose approximately 30% of South Koreans, with the largest groups of believers identifying as Protestant or Catholic.¹ The former group is split into various denominations, with Presbyterian being the main denomination and the remaining falling under Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal headings.² In South Korea, most churches are predominantly founded by Koreans and are Korean-speaking. However, a portion of churches, mostly located in Seoul, host English-speaking services. Most of these churches are founded by foreign missionaries, and they generally host smaller communities.

My research suggests that differences between Korean- and English-speaking church groups may arise. For this study, I investigated two non-denominational churches, one Korean-speaking led by Korean pastors and the other English-speaking with American pastors. During this research, I analyzed the differences in language and culture between these two churches that emerged despite their shared non-denominational background. The overarching question was to determine how congregational composition and language shaped the political atmosphere of each individual church.

This research was launched in the hopes of addressing two main questions. First, it asks whether a church’s choice of language causes major differences in the nationality and ethnicity of the people who attend that church. Second, it asks whether a church’s chosen

language, and any differences in congregational composition that result, will affect its political atmosphere. I compared whether politics were mentioned in sermons, discussed between members of churches, between pastors or between pastors and members, and whether politics were explicit or implicit in the church's views.

Of course, these two questions overlap, as both the racial and national diversity of the churches and their language of choice may dynamically impact the political atmosphere of each church. Initially, it was my theory that an English-speaking church in Seoul would have a more diverse congregation than a Korean-speaking church and would therefore be more likely to have more explicit politics and greater political diversity. The theory was based not only on the role that people's different backgrounds would play in giving them a broader perspective on politics but also because in a more international congregation, Korean politics would be less charged and thus easier to discuss. On the other hand, if a church in Seoul has lower diversity (in that most or all of its members are Koreans), it is much more likely that everyone will have stronger feelings about politics and that politics will be implicit. Under this theory, because Korean politics are more relevant to Koreans, it becomes a much more sensitive topic to discuss political views.

Literature Review

Christianity in South Korea has a deep history. Many scholars present and focus on different aspects of this topic, which leads to multiple perspectives but come together to provide a relatively cohesive picture of the country's Christian landscape. This section will consider some major research into Korea Christianity to provide a background of the ideas and factors that informed this study.

Christianity first entered Korean culture in the 18th century and then grew rapidly following the Korean War, by which time the religion was heavily associated with anti-colonial patriotic attitudes. Christianity had succeeded in Korea because it aligned and adapted to existing traditional religious beliefs and frameworks. Andrew Kim of Korea University discusses how Christianity was so easily integrated, pointing out how Korean Shamanism, a religious culture that was rooted in Korean history, and Protestant doctrines were modified to suit the Korean religio-cultural palate. Kim emphasizes that Christianity did not require a complete transformation of religious beliefs, but, with a few modifications, fit with the traditional religious beliefs Koreans already held.³ In another article, Kim discusses the rise of Christianity, specifically observing its growth at the end of the nineteenth century in Korea. Kim argues that Christianity's doctrines and concepts alone were not the only factor for its success during this time period. Its socioeconomic appeal and approachability were also central reasons why so many Koreans quickly adopted Christianity.⁴

Scholars such as Hwang discuss the prevalence of Biblicism in the Korean Church and how four factors helped this approach become so rooted in Korean society and religion: the theology of Puritans, which foreign missionaries tried to follow, neo-Confucianism and its integration into Christianity, Nevius's (mission) methods, and Presbyterian creeds.⁵ Overall, many scholars have discussed how Christianity has been able to fit into traditional Korean beliefs rooted in family and history. This ultimately shows that in Korea, Christianity thrived because it did not need to overthrow the core values Koreans held for so long completely: it was able to integrate neatly with the culture it sought to influence.

Secondly, scholars have also discussed the intertwining of Christianity and politics in Korea, as well as the Korean church's relationship with major sociopolitical events in the country. Lim discusses the Orthodox Church in Korea, including its origin and its struggles

throughout Korean history. Specifically, she describes how the Korean Orthodox Church developed throughout difficult times in history, such as Japanese occupation, the Korean War, and the authoritarian government.⁶ She contends that, during chaotic times, the church came to be viewed as a stabilizing force that helped Koreans resist harmful influences. This view fits with the work of scholars such as Park, who discusses how Christianity first gained influence as a tool for resisting Japanese colonization. After the Korean War, the Korean church became associated with opposition to communism and played a part in the South Korean economic boom of the 1970s, ultimately leading to the conservative role it plays today.⁷ Scholars such as Baker discuss how, over the same time period, the Catholic Church in Korea transitioned from a church reliant on foreign missionaries as leaders to an almost fully local and indigenous church, with rituals in Korean with Korean leaders, who were often involved in the politics of the time.⁸ All this shows that different branches of Christianity in Korea, and Christianity in generally, were connected with major political questions in Korea from the very beginning.

Some scholars also use the success of Christianity in South Korea as a point of global comparison. In 2009, Kane and Park discussed that the success of Christianity in Korea can be used as a model to show how Korea is an exception to East Asia's general trend away from a high degree of religion. They discuss that Christianity's success in Korea is unusual because, for countries like China and Japan, historical and nationalistic patterns led to the rejection of new religions like Christianity. For Korea, though, local rituals fit well with Christianity, leading to the popularity of the religion.⁹

Many scholars also discuss the roots and growth of Protestantism, the single largest denomination of Christianity in Korea. Scholars such as Choi argue that the rise of Protestantism came from many factors, including religious ones, government intervention, and Korea's economic boom.¹⁰ In 2008, Ryu discussed the rise of churches claiming to be "evangelical", explaining that this concept for churches is incredibly prevalent as such churches believe they are continuing a historical trend from the 19th and 20th century evangelical church movement, which they hope to emulate.¹¹ Later, in 2022, Ryu provides an overview of Protestantism in Korea, zooming in on Protestantism in North Korea and its significance.¹² Overall, many scholars discuss the roots and development of Protestantism, which is a key aspect of understanding Christianity in Korea.

There is also a lot of discussion centered on non-denominational Christianity, including its characteristics, history, and growth. Scholars focus on this topic from multiple lenses. Firstly, scholars discuss the identity, structure, and theology of non-denominational churches. Scholars such as Thumma discuss how nondenominational churches form identity through independence, and that denominations do not control these churches, which function instead as loose networks. Thumma argues that this way allows for flexibility, more diversity, and services that could be catered locally.¹³ Scholars such as Herbst investigate the history and roots of nondenominational churches in America, in locations such as Denver. Herbst specifically presents how nondenominational churches adapt and expand by separating themselves from the rigid requirements of denominational churches.¹⁴ Scholars such as Ciciliot also discuss how nondenominational churches function concerning key aspects of Christian theology, like the Nicene Creed. Ciciliot argues that nondenominational churches tend to move away from traditional creeds, finding them confining.¹⁵ Scholars such as Thangsuanlian compare nondenominational churches with denominational ones, comparing them in aspects like worship and theology, acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of both.¹⁶ Overall, non-denominational churches stray away from tradition and maintain flexibility, unwilling to be controlled by a denomination but still willing to foster connections with other churches.

Scholars also discuss the statistics, patterns, and rising popularity of non-denominational churches. A survey conducted by Scott Thumma in 2010 shows that non-denominational churches are one of the fastest-growing religious groups in America, as these churches are new and decentralized, which makes it easy for them to adapt to the desires of the public.¹⁷ Scholars like Suh and Russell discuss the levels of religiosity among Protestants, demonstrating that non-denominational Protestants have stronger religious levels than those who are in denominations, and that switching denominations does not have much impact on religiosity.¹⁸ Scholars such as Wilson discuss how the rising prevalence of nondenominational churches shows a broader decrease in congregation loyalty to individual churches as lifelong institutions, a trend that has been heavily associated with the rise of non-denominational congregations.¹⁹ Scholars such as Kgate focus on non-denominational churches in specific locations, such as Africa, categorizing them and arguing that although these churches are popular, they lack a strong foundation in organization and theology.²⁰

Lastly, scholars also discuss how nondenominational churches participate in society, do outreach to communities, and improve society. Keck compares the civic participation of a nondenominational and a denominational church in a city in the Midwest, ultimately concluding that nondenominational churches tend to rely more on local initiatives, demonstrating their organizational systems as well.²¹ Scholars such as Moss focus on nondenominational churches from a racial perspective; Moss focuses on how American nondenominational churches in Black communities provide financial literacy, programs to help with empowerment, and welcoming congregations that avoid the strict doctrinal requirements that may turn potential members away from denominational churches.²² It is precisely this adaptability to different community needs and interests that drives the appeal and subsequent growth of non-denominational churches in general.

Reviewing the current literature on relevant topics to this research gave valuable insights into how Christianity in Korea worked and the characteristics of non-denominational churches in general. This literature demonstrates that Korean Christianity has always been political and that non-denominational churches in particular are more likely to provide a diversity approach to communal and political issues than denominational ones. With this in mind, the remainder of this paper aims to explore the relationship among language, diversity, and politics in the context of two non-denominational churches in Korea.

Methodology

This study first asks how language choice shapes the composition and political atmosphere of non-denominational churches in Seoul, South Korea. This question emerged from my own knowledge of several churches in Seoul that I had contacted to conduct research for a previous paper related to Christian sects and cults. I then identified similarities and differences between these churches. The two churches that were compared were both non-denominational, and this was unique because most churches in Korea have a denomination. The key difference between these two churches is that they are churches that operate in different languages.

The first church, Hope Church, is a non-denominational Korean-speaking church located in the Yangjae area of Seoul. It was formed in 2009 and has an active membership of around five thousand people. It offers separate services for pre-k, kindergarten, lower elementary, upper elementary, middle, and high school students, and has four Sunday services (8:00 AM, 10:00 AM, 12:30 PM, 2:30 PM), as well as multiple morning prayers and

Wednesday services. The church also offers real-time translation services for the sermons and has an English service for middle and high schoolers.

The second church, Riverlight Church, is a non-denominational English-speaking church located in the Haebangchon area of Seoul. It was formed in 2020 and has a church size of around 600 people. The Haebangchon area is in the center of Seoul and near to Itaewon, which hosts many embassies and a former U.S. Base. Although Riverlight Church exhibits Baptist tendencies, the lead pastor asserts that Riverlight Church is non-denominational. It hosts two services (10 AM and 1:30 PM) and also hosts various youth nights for middle and high schoolers, as well as Sunday school programs for young children.

The main effects of the linguistic difference between these two churches are the diversity of their congregations and their relationships to politics. Specifically, there may be differences in nationality and ethnicity among the people who attend these churches, and there may be a difference in political engagement and the public expression of favor towards certain political parties related to the choice of language in each of these churches.

The key research methods were observation and interviews. First, both churches' Sunday services were observed in person. Second, interviews were conducted. The same questions, related to politics and personal background, were asked of the same number of people from each church. I then listened to all the interviews, which were recorded on audio, and took notes on the answers, focusing first on Hope Church's interviewees and then moving on to Riverlight Church's interviewees. I then identified similarities, differences, and trends, which led to four key findings.

The two churches that were selected were chosen because of accessibility. Gaining access to the churches and getting interviews was not a very difficult process. The Korean church, Hope Church, is the church that I attend and have attended for ten years. Because of this, it was easy to get contact information of the church leaders and ask them for interviews. Because my family attended this church for a long time, it was also very easy to contact and gather the church members necessary to conduct the interviews as well. As for the second, English church, Riverlight Church, the connection to this church came from school. Riverlight Church's two pastors both coach varsity sports at my school, and many teachers from my school attend this church because it is so close. I personally was coached by one of the pastors from this church, so I have his contact, and it was easy to observe the services and conduct the interviews as well.

Conducting interviews was the key factor in data collection, so the process had to be clear and equal for both churches. First, both services were observed. The people were then selected for the interview. From each church, two church leaders (pastors to be exact) and eight church members who were not a part of the paid staff of their church were selected to be interviewed.

The selection process for the people who were being interviewed was heavily affected by practical concerns, but it did reflect each church's membership. The pastors were picked based on availability. Riverlight Church is a small church, so it only has three pastors. The two pastors whom I was able to contact and who were available for interviews were chosen. Hope Church has significantly more pastors, but a lot of them were busy and unavailable. Therefore, a pastor whom our family knew personally was contacted, and he was able to recruit one more available pastor for an interview. For the church members who were to be interviewed, availability played a part, especially for Riverlight Church. Because a good majority of the members of the church go back to America during the summer, the church size was smaller

than normal. Availability was also an issue for Hope Church, and the people were gathered through connections my family had with other church members.

The interview process looked very different for both churches. For Hope Church, the interview process was spread over a span of days, due to availability issues. Two to three church members were interviewed each day, and the church pastors were interviewed the following week due to scheduling issues. The church members I interviewed were youth leaders and small group members of churches, all very active members of the church. For Riverlight Church, the interview process was done over a span of two days. On the first day, seven members and one pastor were interviewed, and on the second day, two members and the lead pastor of the church were interviewed. Because many teachers from my school attend Riverlight Church, I was able to use my connections with the pastors to find people and set a time for interviews.

The differences in the interview process did not stop there. For Hope Church, all of the interviews had to be done over the phone, because all the church members were too busy to meet in person and could not make time to meet physically at the church. To record the interviews, the calls themselves were recorded and labeled. For Riverlight Church, most of the interviews were done in person right after the church's service. With the help of a church staff member I knew, I was able to interview several voluntary staff and members of the church, and a little while later, I was able to interview one of the pastors as well. The next day, I interviewed two teachers from my school who were members of the church over Zoom, as they were both in America, and the lead pastor of Riverlight Church also did so over Zoom, as he was also there. For the in-person interviews, voice memos were taken and labeled accordingly. For the Zoom meetings, the meetings were recorded, and voice memos were also taken.

There were some key insights that I noticed during the interview process. To me, it was significant that the interviews were all done over the phone for the Korean church pastors and members because it was difficult to find them at church physically, and they were too busy. For the English church, a lot of the members hung around and mingled after the service, and some even ate lunch together at the church. So then, excluding a member and the lead pastor on vacation, all of the interviews were done physically. It can be inferred that the English church, with a smaller church size, has a more tight-knit population. This is not to say that the Korean church does not have a close community, but the large church size may make it harder to have a more personal experiences in the church. This may in turn make casual interactions more important, as members will have fewer opportunities to overcome bad first impressions or unfavorable reputations.

There were many challenges that I encountered during the interview process. These challenges vastly differed between Hope Church and Riverlight Church. For Hope Church, the biggest challenge came from the church itself and its pastors. Politics is an incredibly sensitive topic in Korea, even more so than in America. Because of this, the pastors did not want any sort of study or research paper that could associate their church with a certain political stance or party. They said that if I did not change my topic from politics or make the churches anonymous, I would not be permitted to conduct interviews or research with their church. The solution was to use pseudonyms for the churches, and I was able to continue with my research. For Riverlight Church, the biggest issue was communication. Both the pastors that I know personally and who agreed to speak were in America, and their response times were slow. Almost all of the teachers I emailed who were members of the church did not reply to my request, so I was unsure if I could get the interviews by a certain time. However, one of the pastors returned to Korea early, and I was able to coordinate a lot of things with him to eventually get all of the interviews set up. There were many hurdles to getting the interviews, but in the end, the objective was fulfilled.

Findings

The interviews and observation of services led to key findings that proved crucial to answering the research question. The four findings are related to the stated culture of the churches, the diversity of the congregations, the political atmosphere of the churches, and the appeal each church holds for its members.

Initially, the two churches, Hope Church and Riverlight Church, have very different cultures that not only arise because of differences in language, but also because of differences in population. Hope Church, the Korean church, has a more organized culture with a larger community. After the service, the members of the church often speak with each other, and the pastors often greet a lot of the members. Overall, a lot of friendly greetings are exchanged. However, at this enormous church, everyone is in a hurry to leave and get lunch or go home individually. The church has a well-established youth community with many youth services, and there are small groups that meet weekly based on the location of members. However, because the church is so big and crowded, it is hard to find people to interview, so all the interviews were done over the phone. This church also seems to have a very organized community, with churchgoers who have been going for years already having longtime connections. In other words, it is hard to make friends at such a church by just walking up to someone and striking up a conversation. If small talk is difficult, tackling large issues is even more difficult. Politics seems to be an especially sensitive topic in this church, as according to one of the pastors, people have left the church because of their political stances. Overall, Hope Church has a larger community, in part because it operates in Korea. At the same time, however, the size of the church may lead to a feeling of impersonality or distance.

Riverlight Church, the English-speaking church, has a smaller community, and it is not big enough to have separate, established small groups with a pastor assigned for each one based on where the churchgoers live. However, this community is much more tight-knit. After the service, a lot of members stay and mingle around in the lobby area of the church. Children play with each other as their parents have conversations, people get refreshments, and much of the congregation either eats lunch at the church or at nearby restaurants. During interviews, a lot of the church members mentioned that they have personal conversations with the pastors, including the lead pastor, on a wide range of topics, including politics. The pastors also knew each member by name, and due to the members' habit of mingling after church, they were all available to interview at the church immediately after the end of service. It was also clear that the members were close and friendly with each other, as the members I interviewed brought other people to interview, so I did not have to make much effort to reach out to people and ask them to speak. Because of this, RiverLight is very unlike Hope Church, where it is very rare for the lead pastor to have personal, casual conversations with its numerous members. By contrast, the fact that the RiverLight pastors know their members by name shows that it has a personalized, cozy community that may feel more approachable.

There are also many differences in the composition between these two congregations, which include, but are not limited to their different racial profiles. For Hope Church, all 10 people interviewed, including members and pastors, said that the church sees itself as a church for the ethnically Korean, despite occasional differences that arise because of Koreans who have lived abroad. Both pastors have said that although up to 20% of the Koreans may have American citizenship, 99% of the people in the church are ethnically Korean. However, some of the people interviewed believe that this church is diverse when compared to other Korean churches. Some reasons for this are that Koreans who have lived abroad come to this church, and some people

are ethnically Korean but have different nationalities. “I believe that this church is diverse because there are a lot of Korean Americans, and Koreans who have lived abroad internationally who go to this church,” said a member who studied abroad in America. “This church is diverse in many ways. We have people from many socioeconomic backgrounds, people of all ages, singles, families, and more,” said one of the pastors.

For Riverlight Church, all 11 people interviewed said that their church was ethnically diverse. There are differing opinions from the members and pastors, but there are people from 35-46 countries who attend Riverlight Church. The head pastor of Riverlight Church said, “We have somewhere around 35 to 37 other countries represented at our Church. And so, people coming from every continent, besides Antarctica, I guess, attend church. And so that's a unique thing in Korea.” Although around 50% of the church members are ethnically Korean, there are a lot of members from America, Canada, South Africa, and Europe. The church's two services have different demographics, according to many of the people interviewed. One of the pastors said, “Our 10:00 AM service tends to have more international schoolteachers and their families, and more foreigners. Our 1:30 PM service tends to have more people that are ethnically Korean, including Korean Americans and Korean citizens.”

Language plays a factor in the racial diversity of the church. Because English is a language that unites many nations, Riverlight Church is much more racially diverse than a typical Korean church, non-denominational or otherwise. However, another factor is location. Riverlight Church is in Haebangchon, in the Itaewon area. This area is one of the most racially diverse areas in Korea, which impacts its racial and national composition. The Yangjae area, on the other hand, is a mainly ethnically Korean community that is not as foreigner-friendly as Haebangchon. Because of this, the relative diversity of Riverlight Church is hardly surprising at all.

The differences in language and diversity appeared to affect the political atmosphere and political engagement of each church. There were some similarities between the two churches when it came to politics. Neither church explicitly mentions politics in sermons, nor does either one take public, official stances on certain political parties or policies. A member from Hope Church said, “The lead pastor in our church does not explicitly mention which candidate should be voted for when it is election season.” The lead pastor from Riverlight Church said that politics are not mentioned at all during sermons, and that he makes this a rule. Both churches also make it a big point to pray for the country generally, especially during times of turmoil and before big elections.

Hope Church diverges from Riverlight Church in many ways, however. Firstly, 8 out of 10 members interviewed for Hope Church said that the church was more conservative-leaning, but both pastors said that the church is neutral. A longtime member of the church said, “I believe that our church tries its absolute best to not lean toward a certain political side, but it has some conservative tendencies. I do not think that this church is a conservative church, though.” Although the members said that the church tries to stay neutral, this difference in answers between the members and pastors is significant, as it may show that the pastors may be giving an answer that does not reflect their personal opinion but rather reflects the public stance of the church rather than the true beliefs of the members. Politics is also mentioned, even publicly, if they are seen as conflicting with the Bible or the Word. Aside from this, political discussion is discouraged within every other part of the church, whether in small groups or in various ministries. Both pastors interviewed from Hope Church said that it is a rule not to mention politics or discuss it with members, and one of the members, who is a small group leader, said, “I was instructed specifically to never mention politics when I was leading the

small group discussions.” The church’s political atmosphere seems to be very sensitive. Multiple members mentioned an event during the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, the lead pastor criticized the government for cracking down on church services, which caused members who supported the government’s policies to leave the church. “I do not think that the pastor was targeting a political side specifically, but some people perceived it that way, which caused them to leave,” a Sunday school leader said. Even though the pastor did it with the intention of putting the church first, because politics was involved, it led to consequences. Overall, it is clear that the political atmosphere is incredibly tense, and politics are shunned as a topic, even though some political leanings of the church may be obvious to members.

Riverlight Church is different from Hope Church in its political atmosphere. All the people interviewed, including the members and the pastors, said that politics is seldom mentioned. Although members in Hope Church said that the church does not mention politics in sermons most of the time, they can still list examples where it was explicitly mentioned. For Riverlight Church, there is no such case. Around 5 out of the 11 members, including both pastors, said that the church is more conservative, and the others said that the church is mixed in political opinions. They say that politics is not mentioned, and that a person’s political views are not important. “One thing I love about this church is that your politics do not matter in how people see you. No matter what political party you side with, you will still be loved, and your politics will not define you,” said one member. Political engagement is not done publicly through sermons, but it is done privately. Members who were interviewed said that when they have personal conversations with the pastors, they can see the political views of the pastors and that the pastors encourage them to be active politically, but to be active with the guidance of the Bible. Politics is discussed between pastors and members, something that is not allowed in Hope Church. Another key point is that because a majority of the church is made up of foreigners, the political situation is much different from Hope Church, a church with Koreans. First, the church body is diverse, so an emphasis cannot be put on a specific country’s politics. Foreigners also cannot vote in Korea, so it may seem irrelevant to follow Korean politics when most of the people in the church and the pastors have no say. Political activism and protests are allowed for Koreans but are illegal for foreigners; foreigners caught protesting may be arrested and deported. “The fact that we cannot vote or protest in Korea kind of incentivizes us to stay out of Korean politics in general,” said an international school teacher. All these reasons, members say, are why Korean politics are not generally emphasized. Overall, because of the diverse church body and the laws and circumstances regarding foreigners, politics is not very relevant, but it is not as sensitive of a topic among members and pastors as it is at Hope Church.

Overall, Hope Church and Riverlight Church have vast differences in their political situation and atmosphere, and these differences arise because of differences not only in language but also in the racial differences among the members of the church.

Lastly, there are differences in what attracts people to join these two churches. Hope Church and Riverlight Church have different appeals for why people attend the church, and the difference is not just due to language. Hope Church’s appeals are mostly related to the lead pastor. All eight members who were interviewed mentioned either directly or indirectly that the lead pastor’s sermons were the primary reason they started attending Hope Church. One member of the church said, “My parents sent me a video of the pastor’s sermon, and I really liked it. So, I switched churches and started attending this church”. Several were also recommended by friends and family or were drawn by the pastor’s reputation. The pastor, having experience studying abroad in America, also drew several members who were interested in the church, as they either also studied abroad in America or were Korean Americans. Those

who were drawn because of the theology said that the balance between evangelism, community, and scripture was appealing. Overall, for Hope Church, it seems that the lead pastor had a big influence on why people came to it.

For Riverlight Church, the appeal is very different. Most of the members interviewed came to the church because they either found it online or were recommended by coworkers or friends. “I searched online for English churches in Korea, and this church was one of the first to come up on the results,” said a staff member of the church. Most of the members and both the pastors mentioned that the diverse community of the church makes it very welcoming, which is a major attraction of the church. A youth group leader for the church said that the church could attract Koreans with little international experience: “Our church also attracts Koreans who have had negative experiences with the Korean church and want to try out an international church”. A difference can be seen here, as Riverlight Church’s appeals were not as much related to the pastor or sermons, but more related to the diversity and community of the church.

These findings illustrate two main points. Firstly, the language spoken in the churches impacts their racial composition and political atmosphere, but there are several other key factors that affect these characteristics. Factors such as the location of the church and the size of the church impact these characteristics. The locations of the churches impact the differences in racial composition, as the Haebangchon-Itaewon area is a much more racially diverse area than the Yangjae Area. The size of the church impacts differences in culture and political atmosphere. One church is a large church with thousands of members, and one church is a smaller church with several hundred members. This impacts political discourse and how the community operates, because it is simply impossible to have a more closely bonded community when it is so large. Secondly, the more racially diverse a church is, the more relaxed its political atmosphere seems to be. This is true for many reasons. First, a church being ethnically Korean will mean most members can participate in politics, which means that Korean politics will be a bigger part of the church members’ lives. Second, a church being more racially diverse means that there will be various political opinions from different contexts and backgrounds, because political discussion is not necessarily rooted or centered on one country’s politics specifically. Lastly, a church with many members that cannot participate in politics will mean that politics will not be a big concern, so political discussion will not cause as much conflict compared to if politics were a very important topic. These two key discoveries are the main insights gained from the interviews and the services.

Conclusion

To summarize the findings, the two churches have differences in culture; Hope Church has a larger, more organized community, and Riverlight Church has a smaller, more tight-knit community. While Hope Church’s members are almost, if not all, ethnically Korean, Riverlight Church has members from tens of different countries and is made up of diverse races. In Hope Church, the political atmosphere is very tense, with rules on not discussing politics. Although the church is considered more conservative by members, the pastors say otherwise. The church makes strong attempts to remain neutral and out of politics in general, unless events happen where they deem politics to go against the Word of God. In Riverlight Church, politics is not as important, and it is not as relevant. The pastors encourage political engagement, but only in personal conversations. Since a majority of members in Riverlight Church cannot vote and face consequences if they protest, political activity is limited, and politics are often not seen as an important topic. While Hope Church’s main appeal comes from its lead pastor’s sermon,

reputation, and books, as well as its theology, Riverlight Church's main appeal comes from its diverse, welcoming community, which can also be found easily online.

The two main conclusions that can be drawn from this research, then, are that language is not the only factor that impacts the characteristics investigated in this research, which are the composition of the congregation and the political atmosphere of these churches. Language is the most important factor, but it is not the defining factor for these two characteristics of the churches. The other conclusion that can be drawn is that the more racially diverse a church is in its composition of members, the more relaxed a political atmosphere will be. With a church being more racially diverse, political discussions will be more relaxed, it will not cause conflict, and there will not be as many instances where members leave churches because they are unhappy with the political atmosphere.

There were several limitations to this research. The first was the time. Since this research was only conducted over a month, there were many limitations on how many churches I could study and how much research I could complete. Another limitation was that this research was conducted during the summer, and a majority of Riverlight Church's members are international schoolteachers, most of whom were not available for interviews. Only two were able to be interviewed through Zoom. Fewer than ten members were able to be interviewed from both churches, which is not the majority. The members and pastors were not picked at random (for Hope Church, Riverlight Church only has two pastors). Not enough services were observed, and only observing one service may not have been a full representation of how politics are demonstrated in sermons, as member or pastor testimonies may not be enough. I also did not have enough time to observe possible changes. The racial composition of a church may not differ significantly a year or two later, but there is always a possibility. The political atmosphere of a church could also vastly change, depending on whether certain events happen, such as a political scandal or a big election. These potential changes could not be investigated in this research.

To improve this research, fixing these limitations is recommended. First, more members should be included. At least 20 members from each church should be interviewed, and the interviews should be in person if possible. The members should also be chosen at random and not based on personal connections. More services should be observed to increase the size of our data set. There should also be more research done into the activities of the church. Sermons from both churches could be analyzed, and small group and youth group meetings from both could be attended and documented for a better understanding of how the churches work and for better insight. Lastly, interviews should be done periodically to see if answers change over time. All these improvements will lead to greater insights in further research.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How did you come to this church?
2. Tell me about the people who attend this church.
3. What do you think are the factors that influence what type of people come to this church?
4. Tell me about the politics of this church.
5. Tell me about how this church is politically engaged.
6. Tell me about how this church leans towards certain political parties.

Is there anything else you'd like to share? For me to know?

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