Pastors worldwide unite for freedom of religion and expression

Sunday 23 August, 2026

Seven Christian organisations from South Korea and abroad host the first Joint Assembly of World Pastors, with speakers from Russia and Zambia raising concerns about due process and religious freedom in the Republic of Korea.

SEOUL, South Korea, August 13th. Seven Christian organisations from South Korea and abroad, including the Council for Christian Mutual Growth, the Korea Christian Leaders Training Institute, the Pastors Alliance for Life and Human Rights, the Russian Evangelical Alliance and the Thai Evangelical Alliance Association, held the first Joint Assembly of World Pastors. The event brought together an estimated 3,000 pastors from countries around the world, attending in person and online, to discuss the state of religious freedom and the principle of separation of church and state in the Republic of Korea. Presenters included pastors from Russia and Zambia, who addressed the assembly in person alongside Korean speakers, framing the discussion as one that extends beyond any single denomination or country.

The first presentation came from Reverend Young-woong, senior pastor of Saehimang (New Hope) Church of the Presbyterian Church of Korea, who considered the wider implications of recent debate in South Korea about the dissolution of religious corporations. Referring to the case in which the Tokyo District Court ordered the dissolution of the former Unification Church, known formally as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, in March 2025, a decision upheld by the Supreme Court of Japan in June 2026, Reverend Im noted that while the ruling did not dissolve the faith itself, it removed the group's legal status as a religious corporation and had a significant practical impact on the community, including the loss of tax benefits and the liquidation of assets. He also referred to Article 38 of Korea's Civil Act, which allows a corporation's establishment permit to be revoked for acts that harm the public interest, and pointed to two domestic cases he said illustrated a similar underlying question, a 2020 decision by the Seoul Metropolitan Government to revoke the establishment permit of an incorporated association linked to Shincheonji and to begin revocation proceedings against HWPL, and a December 2025 instruction from the President, made with reference to the Japanese case, to review the possibility of dissolving domestic religious organisations. Reverend Im said that criminal allegations against individuals should be investigated and that any proven crime should carry accountability, but argued that this was a different matter from treating an entire religious community of hundreds of thousands of members as a candidate for dissolution, and cited Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in support of the principle that religious freedom should apply equally regardless of a religion's age, size or popularity.

Reverend Vitaly Kirillovich Vlasenko, General Secretary of the Russian Evangelical Alliance, spoke on the theme of judicial neutrality, telling the assembly that public sentiment towards a religion or its leader should not alter the legal standard applied to them. He referred to 2020, when Shincheonji's links to an early COVID-19 outbreak in Daegu were followed by a national petition calling for the group's forced dissolution, which gathered more than 500,000 signatures within two days and eventually exceeded one million, and said the episode created an impression that public opinion had reached a conclusion before any court had heard the case. He noted that the Supreme Court of the Republic of Korea subsequently acquitted Shincheonji Chairman Lee Man-hee of violating the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act, while upholding convictions on other charges, and said this outcome illustrated the distinction between public sentiment and judicial process. Referring to Chairman Lee's current detention on charges under the Political Parties Act, Reverend Vlasenko said the legal standard should be applied equally to everyone, regardless of whether observers agreed with a group's beliefs.

Bishop Elias Elijah Changa, founder and president of Missionary Ambassadors for Global Evangelism in Lusaka, Zambia, drew on his experience in prison ministry to raise questions of due process and human dignity. He said that acknowledging Chairman Lee Man-hee's long-standing work on peace-building and interfaith dialogue through HWPL did not amount to a judgment on his innocence, and that any assessment of his case should rest on law and evidence rather than on views about his beliefs. Drawing on his prison ministry experience, Bishop Changa said detention could weigh especially heavily on elderly people, and asked the relevant authorities to give careful consideration to lawful alternatives such as bail, residence restriction or medical accommodation, in light of Chairman Lee's age of 95. He said the request was not for special treatment on account of religious leadership, but for the same fairness and dignity that should be extended to everyone.

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The assembly closed with a joint statement, signed by Christian leaders from around the world, calling on the South Korean government and political parties to refrain from involving religious groups, including Shincheonji, in political disputes, and to uphold the constitutional separation of church and state. The statement also called on the judiciary to maintain the presumption of innocence for elderly defendants and to give due consideration to the bail request submitted on Chairman Lee Man-hee's behalf. The organisers said the cases discussed at the assembly reflected concerns about religious freedom in the Republic of Korea more broadly, and that they intended to continue working alongside international human rights organisations and churches worldwide until fair judicial process and the separation of church and state were assured.

This discussion has relevance for a British audience as well as an international one. The United Kingdom has a long standing commitment to freedom of religion or belief, represented in government by the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief and, in Parliament, by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief. Shincheonji also has an established presence in the United Kingdom, registered in London since January 2023, and the treatment of the group in South Korea has already been the subject of questions in the UK Parliament. For British faith communities, human rights organisations and parliamentarians with an interest in freedom of religion or belief, the questions raised at this assembly, concerning due process, proportionality and the equal application of the law to religious minorities, sit within a debate that the United Kingdom has consistently supported on the international stage.

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