FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: S Korea's Tax Rules Put Overseas Religious Work at Risk

Knut Holdhus
September 25, 2026

South Korea's left-leaning Lee Jae-myung administration making it harder for religious bodies by introducing tax changes from 2026 with serious implication for religious organization supporting international activities and projects. Illustration: ChatGPT

세계일보

Segye Ilbo

Segye Ilbo Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)

New South Korean tax rules raise questions over overseas religious projects and funding that could affect organizations with international structure

A recent change to South Korea's tax regulations is creating serious uncertainty for religious organizations that support missionary, educational, medical and humanitarian work abroad. The issue was highlighted by religion reporter Jeong Seong-su (정성수) in an opinion column published by Segye Ilbo (세계일보) on 23rd September. At the heart of his criticism is a seemingly simple question: Should the public-interest character of religious work depend primarily on whether it takes place inside or outside South Korea?

The concern follows amendments to the enforcement decrees of the Inheritance Tax and Gift Tax Act and the Corporate Tax Act, which took effect on 27th February 2026. The amendments exclude foreign religious organizations and non-residents from the category of public-interest corporations in relevant circumstances.

Seven months after the changes came into force, uncertainty remains over exactly how overseas missionary funding will be treated for tax purposes. Large protestant organizations like the United Christian Churches of Korea (한국교회총연합) and the Korea World Missions Association (한국세계선교협의회) have therefore been calling for the rules to be revised and clarified.

The potential consequences are significant. Korean religious organizations may hesitate to continue funding overseas projects if future tax liabilities are unclear. Yet stopping or reducing transfers could disrupt missionaries, schools, hospitals and relief programs that depend on such funding. Long-term projects - such as building churches, schools and medical facilities - are particularly vulnerable because

they involve contracts and financial commitments made over several years.

Calling for new tax rules to be revised: The United Christian Churches of Korea

The government has a legitimate reason to be concerned about financial transparency. Religious organizations should not be able to use overseas entities as a means of making disguised gifts, avoiding taxation or transferring money without proper accountability. Donations from members and the wider public also create a responsibility to demonstrate clearly how funds are being used.

But, according to Jeong, the problem is the way the new rules determine whether an activity is in the public interest.

Under the amended framework, the location and legal status of the organization carrying out the work can become more important than the actual purpose of the project or what happens to the money. A project operated domestically may qualify for public-interest treatment, while a similar project operated through a foreign corporation or by a non-resident may be excluded.

This can produce an unintended and counterproductive result. Imagine a Korean church supporting a school in another country. Rather than sending money directly to an individual missionary, the church establishes a properly registered local corporation, opens a dedicated bank account and operates the school through that legal entity. From an accounting and transparency perspective, this may be preferable to using a missionary's personal account.

Yet under the new approach, the fact that the organization is a foreign corporation could itself create a tax disadvantage. In other words, a system intended to promote financial accountability could potentially discourage precisely the kind of formalized and transparent financial management that regulators should want to encourage.

South Korean missionaries provide food to children in rural areas of Zambia (2019)

There is also a broader issue concerning the nature of overseas religious activity. Missionary work is not necessarily limited to preaching. Korean religious organizations operate or support schools, hospitals, orphanages and vocational-training programs in different parts of the world. They may also provide food, medicine and disaster relief through local religious organizations and nonprofit entities. Such activities can have a humanitarian dimension regardless of where they take place.

In his opinion piece, Jeong therefore argues that public interest should not disappear at a national border. If an educational, medical or humanitarian project is considered beneficial when carried out in Korea, its location abroad should not by itself be sufficient reason to question its public-interest character.

Nor is the issue limited to Protestantism. The new rules could affect overseas activities supported by Catholic dioceses and religious orders, Buddhist temples and missionary centers, Won Buddhism and the Family Federation, among others. Protestant organizations may simply be encountering the problem earlier because of the scale and decentralized nature of their overseas missionary funding.

Jeong's proposed alternative is to shift the focus from where an organization is located to what it actually does with the money. A foreign organization that is legally registered, has an approved project plan and budget, maintains dedicated accounts and provides proper documentation could still qualify for public-interest treatment. Detailed accounting and performance reports could then be required after the project is completed.

At the same time, religious organizations would need to accept greater responsibility for transparency. Missionary living expenses should be separated from project costs, while construction, education, medical and relief expenditures should be separately documented. Personal accounts should not be used for broad, unexplained transfers, and receipts and records of asset ownership should be maintained.

Finally, Jeong calls for transitional measures for projects that were already underway when the rules

changed. Organizations that entered into contracts and funding agreements under the previous system could otherwise face unexpected liabilities. A two- or three-year grace period, he suggests, would allow existing projects to adapt to new accounting and management requirements.

The central issue, therefore, is not whether overseas religious funding should be subject to oversight. It is how that oversight should be designed. A system aimed at preventing abuse should distinguish between opaque or improper transfers and legitimate, transparently administered religious and humanitarian projects.

As Jeong puts it, the decisive questions should be the purpose of the money, its flow, and the results of its use - not simply the address of the organization receiving it.

What we can say with confidence is that the legal framework has changed in a way that potentially affects a Korean religious headquarters financing foreign affiliated entities, and that the uncertainty identified by Jeong is directly relevant to an organization with an international structure like the Family Federation.

FFWPU World Mission Headquarters (2026)

The February 2026 tax changes could indeed have implications well beyond Protestant missionary organizations. For the Family Federation, whose World Mission Headquarters is based in South Korea, the issue is particularly significant. Much of the organization's international work necessarily involves transferring funds from Korea to affiliated organizations and projects abroad.

The amended rules appear to make the legal status and location of the overseas recipient more important in determining whether such transfers receive public-interest tax treatment. The potential consequences could therefore extend from routine missionary support to the financing of overseas properties, construction projects, education, humanitarian work and other activities.

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

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Inside The Room Where They Tried To Break Faith

September 22, 2026 • The News Desk

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AI image by Dola AI, September 25, 2026

Japan: A firsthand account of life inside a room turned into a prison – 12 years of confinement, pressure, and attempted coercive faith-breaking

***Part 3** of "My Experience of*

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Toru Goto speaking during the online conference by PnR-T on 19th September 2026. Screenshot

***Abduction, Confinement, and Forced Deconversion**", a testimony on 19th September 2026 by Toru Goto (後藤徹), a Japanese member of the Family Federation and victim of attempted coercive faith-breaking – locked up for over 12 years in apartment turned prison. This first-hand witness account – of high relevance for the current dissolution case against the Family Federation in Japan – was delivered at a Zoom conference organized by Peace and Reconciliation Together (PnR-T), a Dutch-registered foundation focused on reconciliation, peacebuilding, dialogue, and healing historical conflicts.*

Continued from part 1: Apartment Turned Prison: 12 Years to Break Faith

Continued from part 2: Escaped from 1st Confinement, But Abducted Again

At around 2 a.m., the van stopped in front of an apartment building in Niigata, far from Tokyo.

With my arms restrained by my father and older brother, and surrounded by a large number of people, I was forced into a room on the sixth floor.

Illustration Toru Goto used during his online testimony on 19th September 2026. Author: Toru Goto

When I looked around the room, I saw that the windows and doors had been locked so that I could not freely leave.

There was no television or radio, and I was cut off from information from the outside world.

It was a room where, under my family's surveillance, there was no way I could escape.

This photograph is a reconstruction using the same type of equipment that was actually installed there.

I said to my family,

> "What is this? Do you really think such a violation of human rights is acceptable? Abduction and confinement are crimes."

My older brother Tsuru replied,

> "This isn't abduction and confinement. It's protection. We will settle this matter no matter what sacrifices we have to make. You should be prepared as well."

Before long, a Christian pastor began

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Carried out a campaign of criticism, ridicule, and theological challenge in Niigata designed to break Goto's faith: Faith-breaker: pastor ***Yasutomo Matsunaga*** *(松永堡智) of the Niitsu Evangelical Christian Church. Photo: FFWPU*

bringing former members to the place where I was confined in order to carry out the faith-breaking.

Day after day, in that closed space from which there was no escape, I was forced to listen to criticism of the Unification Church and the Unification Principles.

I had been prepared for the possibility of being confined again, but the suffering was far beyond anything I had imagined. I prayed,

"Heavenly Father, if I endure this, surely an opportunity to escape will be given to me. Please give me the strength to endure."

After approximately three and a half months of confinement, I once again decided to pretend that I had been deconverted in order to escape. I told my father,

> "I've thought about this a great deal, and I've realized that the Unification Principles are wrong. I'm sorry for all the worry I've caused you."

My mother's expression brightened.

I felt conflicted about deceiving my family.

A female believer appealed to the public, using a panel display to highlight the illegality of "kidnapping and confinement", 3rd November 2024, in front of JR Hakata Station, Hakata Ward, Fukuoka City, Kyushu, Japan. One of the panels shows Toru Goto who was forcibly detained for 12 years and 5 months by faith-breakers and family. Photo: Sekai Nippo

As I watched my mother rejoice, I also thought about how shocked she would be if, after escaping, I returned to the Church.

Nevertheless, I felt that as long as I continued to maintain my faith, there was no way I would be released.

I wrote a declaration stating that I had left the Church.

However, because I had escaped by pretending to have been deconverted during my first period of confinement, my family did not trust me.

The pastor gave me an assignment: I was told to write a detailed account of my life from the time I joined the Unification Church until I decided to leave it.

They continued checking me to determine whether I had really been deconverted.

Even more than six months after I had declared that I had left the Church, I remained confined in a room.

Once the confinement exceeded one year, my sense of isolation from the outside world became stronger day by day.

I kept thinking about the woman with whom I had pledged my

future through our Marriage Blessing. How worried must she have been? She must have been desperately searching for me. Those thoughts weighed heavily on my heart.

In order to become free, I had to conceal my true feelings and pretend that I had lost my faith. At times I even had to speak ill of the Unification Church and its teachings. Continuing to deny my own true feelings in this way became an enormous source of suffering for me.

More victims: *Four of the 4,300 Japanese members of the Family Federation who became victims of kidnapping, forcible detention and attempted deprogramming (faith-breaking). Here at a conference in Tokyo 10th September 2023. From left: Toru Goto, Hirohisa Koide (medical doctor), Ms. S, Hiromi Nakajima. Photo: Screenshot from YouTube video published by Japanese Victims' Association against Religious Kidnapping and Forced Conversion*

After that, I was moved between two more locations, and for the final approximately ten years I was confined in an apartment in Tokyo.

Even after two and a half years of confinement, there was no sign that I would be released.

I was reaching my psychological limit from having to conceal my true feelings and continue pretending that I had been deconverted.

In loneliness and hardship, a believer has one weapon. That weapon is prayer. I prayed desperately in the bathroom, in the bath, and late at night with the futon pulled over my head.

I began praying: "What is God's will? What should I do?"

Several days after I began praying, I received an inspiration:

> "Declare your faith and fight openly and honestly!"

I was astonished. The false deconversion I had maintained for two years would become meaningless, and the intense faith-breaking sessions would begin again. Honestly, I thought,

> "Please, no. I can't go through this again."

But during prayer, a passage from the Old Testament came to mind:

> "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified [...] for the Lord your God goes with you wherever you go."

Courage began to return to my utterly discouraged heart. I said, "Heavenly Father, I will fight," and made a vow to God.

I called my older brother and said in a loud voice:

> "Actually, I just pretended to have given up my faith. Even now, I believe that the Unification Principles are the truth, and I believe that Reverend Sun Myung Moon is the Messiah."

Then I slammed my fist on the table and said,

> "You people are the ones at fault for doing this. Don't mess with me!"

To be continued. Part 4 coming soon

Continued from part 1: Apartment Turned Prison: 12 Years to Break Faith

Continued from part 2: Escaped from 1st Confinement, But Abducted Again

***Featured image** above: Toru Goto going through an intense faith-breaking session led by professional faith-breaker Takashi Miyamura and surrounded by former members of the Unification Church and family members. Illustration: Dola AI, created for illustrative purposes 25th September 2026*

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