

# Thousands of S. Korea church members quarantined over virus

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Thousands of members of a Protestant church linked to a coronavirus cluster in Seoul have been asked to quarantine, South Korean authorities said Monday, as they accused the group's firebrand conservative leader—who has reportedly tested positive—of obstruction.

The country's "trace, test and treat" approach has been held up as a global model in how to curb the virus, but it is now battling several clusters linked to [religious groups](#).

Over the weekend the capital and neighbouring Gyeonggi province—between them home to nearly half the population—banned all religious gatherings and urged residents to avoid unnecessary travel after a burst of new cases sparked fears of a major second wave.

South Korea reported 197 new infections on Monday, taking its total to 15,515, its fourth consecutive day of triple-digit increases after several weeks with numbers generally in the 30s and 40s.

The largest current cluster is centred on the Sarang Jeil Church in Seoul, headed by Jun Kwang-hun, a controversial conservative pastor who is a leading figure in protests against President Moon Jae-in.

A total of 315 cases linked to the church had been confirmed by the end of the weekend, officials said Monday, making it one of the biggest clusters so far, and around 3,400 members of the congregation had been asked to quarantine.

Around one in six of the church members tested so far had been positive, "requiring rapid testing and isolation," said vice health minister Kim Gang-lip.

But a list of members provided by the church was "inaccurate", he said, making the testing and isolation procedure "very difficult".

The situation amounted to an "early stage of a large-scale outbreak", said Jung Eun-kyeong, director of the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"If the outbreak is not controlled right now, the number of confirmed cases will increase exponentially, leading to collapse of the medical system and enormous economic damage," she said.

## **Turbulent priest**

Sarang Jeil's leader Jun was among the speakers who addressed thousands of right-wing protestors who rallied against Moon's centre-left government in the heart of Seoul at the weekend, despite the outbreak and calls to avoid large gatherings.

Jun tested positive for the virus, Yonhap News Agency reported on Monday.

The health and welfare ministry and the Seoul city authorities have filed two separate police complaints against Jun, accusing him of deliberately hindering efforts to contain the epidemic.

He previously defied a Seoul rally ban to hold an anti-government protest in February, at a time the government was urging everyone to stay at home because of the virus, and was later detained on allegations of separately violating election laws.

The initial [coronavirus](#) outbreak in the South was centred on the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, which is often condemned as a cult and was also accused of obstructing investigators.

A lawyer for Sarang Jeil said the church had given authorities details of members going back 15 years, so many former congregants would have been included.

"This nationwide fear is a gimmick to arrest Rev. Jun Kwang-hun," Kang Yeon-jae told reporters at the church.

The leader of Shincheonji—to which more than 5,000 cases were linked—Lee Man-hee was arrested earlier this month for allegedly giving inaccurate records of [church](#) gatherings and false lists of its members to health authorities.

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