

# Reconciliation Possible?

## The Churches' efforts toward the peace and reunification of North and South Korea

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**2005 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the division of Korea, due largely to the action of the super-powers at the end of the Second World War. Here a Korean Christian theologian reflects on the years of suffering, and hopes for unification, of the Korean people.**

*Our desire is unification  
In our dreams, our desire is unification  
With all our effort, unification  
Oh, come, unification!*

*Unification which saves our people  
Unification which saves this nation  
Come, unification!  
Oh, come, unification!*  
(Korean children's song)

The conflict between the two Koreas is certainly the most pertinent and dominant concern for Koreans and has affected the lives of Koreans ever since the division of Korea, which began straight after the end of the Japanese occupation in 1945. Though the desire for reunification has been the most important agenda item for political leaders, the ways to achieve the goal have differed widely, as the two Koreas

were at the forefront of the Cold War ideological conflict. In this context, the churches in South Korea have gone through various stages in attempting to deal with the issue and often made a significant impact by formulating theological thinking as well as by participating in peace and reconciliation movements. In this short article, I would like to look at some of the main political encounters between North and South Korea, discuss the churches' efforts for reconciliation, and lastly make some suggestions toward a theology of reunification.<sup>1</sup>

### **Divided Korea and political efforts for reunification**

The Korean peninsula was divided by decision of the three leaders of the USA, the USSR and the UK in various discussions toward the end of the

Pacific War. The key decision for the Koreans was the occupation of the North by the Soviet Union and of the South by the United States for a period of five years. There were various reasons given for this decision, but the Cold War between USA and the USSR lay behind it. Koreans have resented that they were not part of the decision-making. They also felt and feel that they did not deserve yet again to be ruled by super-powers after they had gone through the humiliation of Japanese occupation for 38 years. The division has been the cause of what the Koreans call *han*, resentment or anguish that Koreans bear as a consequence of the action of others. Some of the most important encounters between the post-war Koreas were the Korean War (1950-3), the North-South Joint Declaration (1972) and the meeting between the two leaders of North and South in Pyeongyang (2000).

Soon after independence, North and South Korea, divided at the 38th parallel, established their own governments backed by the Soviet Union and the USA. Despite the efforts of many Korean political and civil leaders, the gap between the two governments widened as the ideological battle between them became intense, and eventually war between the two Koreas broke out. North Korean troops occupied Seoul within two days of the

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start of the war and pushed the South Korean army down to Pusan, the south-east coast city. Due to the war efforts of US and UN troops, the situation was soon reversed, as the UN and South Korean troops pushed up to the north near the Chinese border and expected to win the war imminently. However, Chinese troops then entered the war in support of the North Korean forces and the UN troops had to withdraw. The war stagnated roughly along the original border and talks on a ceasefire started in July 1951. The war officially ended only in 27 July 1953. During the two years of peace talks bitter conflicts continued along the border in order to gain an advantageous position in terms of both land and negotiating power.

The three-year war resulted in the death of over two-and-a-half million soldiers and three-and-a-half million civilians, three million refugees were created and over ten million families were separated. The war caused a deep scar of resentment toward the other side in the hearts and minds of Koreans. Up till the present day the memory of the cruelty done by both parties has

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haunted any attempt at reconciliation. During the brief period when each side occupied the other's territory, both parties committed killings, torture and kidnapping of civilians, accusing them of being either 'communist aggressors' or 'collaborators of the American imperialists'. For North Koreans, the indiscriminate bombing of North Korea, calculated to amount to more than the entire bombing of Western Europe during the Second World War, resulted in a great number of casualties and caused bitter animosity towards the Americans.

Since the war, the two Koreas have remained divided for 60 years. The two nations have a total of more than one-and-a-half million troops under arms, and bitter conflicts and mutually hostile propaganda has continued until recently. A typical propaganda song in the South was, 'Let's destroy communists, even millions of them... wherever brave Korean men go, there is nothing but victory!' For North Koreans, the South Koreans are 'puppets of the American imperialists' and in need of 'liberation by the People's Army'.

After the war, the South went through the political turmoil of a

student-led revolution in 1960, a military coup in 1965, and then a succession of military-backed governments. The South Korean government blamed the unrest of society on minority groups, who were supported by the North in order to destabilise South Korean society. As a result any discussion about peace and reconciliation was regarded with suspicion and harshly suppressed by the government. North Korea also established a strictly controlled regime under the dictatorship of Kim Il-Sung, who suppressed the freedom of the people in the North and imposed the *Jooche sa-sang*, or the ideology of self-reliance.

The major break-through in the relationship between the two nations took place when high-ranking officials from both North and South Korea announced a South-North Joint Declaration on 4 July 1972. This Joint Declaration has had a significant impact on the direction of the unification movement as it was based on the notion of self-determination, peace and grassroots unification. The Declaration suggested that North and South Korea should seek to implement

several courses of action. It encouraged the pursuit of the easing of tension, various ways to facilitate exchange between North and South, cooperating with the work of Red Cross, establishing a hot-line, and formation of the North-South Joint Committee. The initial response from the people in the South and the North was disbelief at this sudden and unexpected development, but they welcomed the move toward unification and there was a great sense of hope and an optimistic attitude about the process. However, this enthusiasm was soon quenched when the South Korean government declared martial law in the same year and the North stopped all communication channels abruptly in the following year. Both leaders were concerned with consolidating their political positions and the issue of reunification again became sidelined. Despite the short-lived implementation of the Declaration, it has made a deep impact on both sides and gave confidence and a green light to those who were campaigning for the cause.

The approach of the South Korean government toward the North again changed drastically in the late 1990s when President Kim Daejoong announced the 'Sunshine Policy'. This has two important dimensions: affirming peaceful reunification rather than the merging of the North into the South

along the lines of German reunification, and encouraging initiatives on the issue being taken by North and South Korea themselves rather than allowing outside interference. As a result of this initiative from the South and a change of relationship between the North Korean and US governments, the first ever meeting of the two heads of the Koreas in Pyeongyang in June 2000 was a landmark historic moment for the divided Korea. The joint declaration at the end of the meeting was focused on the acceptance of others as partners in peaceful coexistence, dialogue rather than conquest, and attempting to find common solutions to unification step-by-step. This was followed by economic cooperation between the two Koreas both at governmental and civilian levels as well as an increase of humanitarian support from the South to the North.

The succeeding government in South Korea has continued the policy of peaceful coexistence and the gradual reunification of the two Koreas, but this has been hampered by scandals relating to a large company's unauthorised transfer of funds in order to support the North and objections raised by conservative sections of South Korean society. The talks between the two Koreas are like waves, sometimes raising high expectations but often disappointing people on both sides. As the two sing a song of unification, 'our

desire is unification...’ there is great hope for the Koreans, though there will be very many obstacles and problems.

### **Churches’ attempts toward peace and reconciliation in the peninsula**

As in the case of politics, the South Korean churches are deeply divided into conservative and liberal positions, and this has been a constant struggle for Christians as they grapple with the political situation. Christian attitudes on the issue can be classified in three ways: unification as part of an anti-communist campaign and mission agenda (conservative Christians), promoting dialogue between two nations (liberal Christians), and the involvement in a supporting and sharing humanitarian campaign (both conservative and liberal Christians).

Even before the Korean War, Korean Christians held a negative attitude toward communist ideology because of its anti-religious stance, and this was confirmed by the persecution of churches by the government in the North and even the greater suffering during the war. About 400 ministers were killed and more than 2,000 churches were burnt or damaged by the communists in 1950-53. As a result, during and after the war, Christians were at the forefront of anti-communist movements, against the ceasefire, and regarded communists as evil.

The immediate post-war reflections by Christians were sombre. Some saw the war as a punishment of God toward Korean Christians for their unfaithfulness, including the way the church had bowed to Japanese pressure to impose Shinto worship, due to divisions among Christians. Others understood the war as part of a sacrifice for the greater good of the nation, linked to the sacrifice of the Christ for human beings, and therefore saw a salvific dimension to the tragedy. But the dominant interpretation of Christians in the South was that the war was the result of the communist aggression and this needed to be responded to with decisive force and vigour, on the one hand, and with prayer and mission toward the people of North Korea, on the other. This response was widespread since many of the senior leaders of the churches in the South were those who had escaped from persecution by the communist regime in the North during the war. On this issue, the conservative sections of the Christian church and the military-backed government shared the same attitude toward the communist government in the North. They believed regime change was the ultimate solution for peace and stability, and co-existence with the communist North was not an option. So for those who thought like this it was understood that the

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evangelisation of North Korea needed to happen prior to unification.

This rigid and hostile attitude toward the North was soon countered by a more sympathetic acceptance of the people of the North as same-blood relations. This coincided with the rise of the *minjung*<sup>2</sup> theology movement, increasing awareness of the role Christians ought to play in peace and reconciliation, and the ongoing support of the World Council of Churches for peace and reconciliation. An initiative was taken by a group of overseas Korean Christians who met North Korean Christian delegates in the early 1980s which created fresh new beginnings. However, since the declarations after these meetings were heavily critical of the South Korean and US governments and supportive of the North, they were rejected by the South Korean media and the general public, and did not really make any impact. Meanwhile, during this period, the WCC took the initiative to bring about dialogue between the two parties. The most significant direct

dialogue was a meeting between representatives from the North and South Korean churches at a seminar on the ‘Christian perspectives on biblical and theological foundations for peace’ in Switzerland in September 1986. The most emotional moment of this meeting was during the Eucharist, when all the participants were encouraged to greet one another. The representatives of South and North first shook hands but soon embraced each other. By participating in the Eucharist together – the heart of the Christ’s gospel of peace and reconciliation – they showed the desire and hope of the people of divided Korea.

Alongside all this, in the midst of a series of WCC meetings, in 1988 the National Council of Churches in Korea (KNCC) issued the ‘Declaration of the Korea National Council of the Churches toward the unification and peace of Korean people’, which made a significant impact both within the church and on the whole nation. The KNCC Declaration was welcomed by



'Pieta of Kwangju' by Taeko Tomiyama, from *The Christ we Share* pack

many Christians but also generated a heated discussion among the Christians and brought the issue of peace and reconciliation to the fore within the churches, motivating conservative Christians to participate in the debate. The Declaration starts with the affirmation that Christ came to the earth as the servant of peace and proclaimed the kingdom of God, which represents peace, reconciliation and liberation. It claims that, accordingly, the Korean church seeks to be present with people who are suffering. As a main thesis, the Declaration acknowledges and confesses past and present sins: the sin of mutual hatred, the sin of justifying the division of Korea, and the sin of accepting each ideology as absolute, which is contrary to God's absolute authority. The declaration, while affirming the three principles expressed in the Joint Declaration (1972), added the priority of humanitarian practice and the participation of the *minjung*, who are

the victims of divided Korea, in the process of unification discussions. The document made practical suggestions to both governments. These included the change of 'agreement for ceasefire' to 'agreement of peace' and, that when a peace treaty had been signed and the peace and security of the peninsula had been guaranteed by the international community, that the the US army should withdraw and the UN head office should be dismantled. The Declaration then proclaimed the year 1995 as a jubilee year for peace and unification when Koreans could celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of their liberation from Japan. It recommended practical steps for the jubilee year, suggesting working for church renewal, for the church to become a faith community for peace and reconciliation, and cooperation between all the churches.

### **Welcome and hostility**

The Declaration was welcomed by many

South Korean churches and also by the Council of Chosun Christian Church in the North, but provoked severe criticism from the conservative sections of the Korean church. They expressed deep concern about what they saw as naïve views in relation to the North, in particular regarding the peace treaty, the suggestion of the withdrawal of USA troops from South Korea, and the acknowledgement of the official Christian church in the North, which the conservatives considered as a part of the communist party. They viewed the Declaration as a theologically one-sided approach toward the issues and one which was in line with the North Korean political position. However, positively, the Declaration has led to the issue of reunification becoming part of the key agenda of Korean Christians and has challenged many conservative sections of the church to rethink their traditional approaches toward the North, moving from evangelism or relief to partnership for the common goal of peace and reconciliation. Furthermore, the Declaration has articulated the vital concerns, not only of Christians but also of the whole nation, on the issue, and has set the future direction of the Korean church. In spite of its limitations and shortcomings, the Declaration has been a most significant landmark in the Korean Christian attempt to bring peace and reconciliation.

At times it has seemed that the gap between the conservative and liberal approaches toward reunification has been as deep as that between North and South Korea. The tension was aggravated when Moon Ik-Hwan, a Protestant minister and activist for the reunification movement, made his controversial visit to Pyongyang to meet the leader of North Korea in March 1989, and when the Christian Council of Korea (CCK), consisting of some 20 Protestant denominations, was founded in the following month. Since that time the KNCC and CCK have often expressed sharply differing views, especially on the issue of reunification, and these have been reinforced by their theological positions, liberal and conservative respectively.

However, more recently, their theological and ideological distance has been bridged by various ecumenical projects. 'The South-North Sharing Campaign', founded in 1993, is perhaps the best example of a common project participated in by both camps, and it has gained increasing support from the Korean church as a whole. In its founding declaration, the participants express a wish to accept both 'prophetic mission' and 'priestly sacrifice', and for this purpose they seek to own in common, and to share, spiritual and material resources for the task of

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‘national reconciliation and peaceful reunification based upon a firm commitment to the Christian foundation of piety and temperance’. The changing policy of the South Korean government since the early 1990s and also the increasing voice of the younger generation mean that the church leadership is no longer saddled with the old pattern of conservative and liberal dichotomy but has to work together regardless of denomination and theological differences.

### **Theological quests for peace and reconciliation**

Several theological themes need to be further explored in relation to the Church’s involvement in peace and reconciliation issues.

First, the understanding and implication of the jubilee principle in the current context of divided Korea: the jubilee principle has several dimensions: sabbatical, restoration of ownership, and liberation of slaves. When the KNCC declared 1995 as the Year of Jubilee, it focused on the third aspect of liberation. It also stressed the

*proclamation* rather than the *actualisation* of unification in any given year. Though many sincerely expected and wished that unification could be actualised and achieved, the important point was that the jubilee has been proclaimed. It is the proclamation of the liberation of the Korean people from the bondage of ideological hegemony and from political systems which hinder the formation of a common community. Linked to this is the need to remember God’s grace in spite of the present situation, so that Christians are called to hold faith in confidence.

Restoration of community identity by employing the concepts of *koinonia* and *oikumene* is another important theme. Over a period of sixty years the separation of the people in the North and South into two very different socio-economic and political systems means that there are very few shared identities. What can the contribution of theology be in this context? Perhaps, as Ahn Byeung-Mu, a Korean *minjung* theologian insists, the early church in Acts was primarily a food community, in which people shared the basic needs

of humanity with others, rather than a worshipping community. The restoration of this concept of *koinonia* between the South and North is most urgent, especially as this is a time of severe economic hardship and even starvation in the North. Sharing of resources is a theological imperative that the church should be actively engaged in. It is a central affirmation of Christian faith that the people of God is catholic or universal. It is in this sense that the Greek word *oikoumene* – the household of God – has been adopted by the ecumenical movement to express its mission to foster the unity of the Church and humanity. Since God is one, the household of God must be one and this is not limited just to Christians but includes all – the people of North and South Korea. This gives us great hope and vision that, in God’s sustaining power, we know that we are one, and at the same time, we rejoice in the diversity of our culture and societies in the wider household of God.

The cross and resurrection are other themes which could be explored in order to overcome *han*. Koreans have experienced *han* through the constant cycle of hope and despair during the last half century and still there is no immediate sign of improvement of the relationship between the two nations. As a national entity Koreans understand and identify with the story of Israel in

the Old Testament times and with the meaning of the cross. The separation is understood as the cross which Koreans have to bear. Through these experiences of bitter conflicts and division Koreans understand the reality of human nature and yet seek hope in the midst of despair. Perhaps one of the most tragic aspects of this despair is the presence of divided families and relatives.

The story of Kim Haksoo, a prominent artist and an elder of a Methodist Church in Seoul is not unusual. He was married with four children and lived in Pyeongyang just before the war broke out. After the brief occupation of Pyeongyang by the UN, when the UN troops had to withdraw from the city, he was advised to escape to the South with them, leaving the rest of the family behind. This was because of fear of communist retaliation and the fear that, as a Korean man he would be forced to join the communist army. There was also the general understanding that the UN troops would soon return to recapture the city. Just before the time to leave, his wife went out to borrow money for his journey to the South. Because he could not hold up the last vehicle departing the city any longer, he had to say goodbye to his children in his wife’s absence, and left to go to Seoul. When the war ended he could not go back and could not get any news about his family. He

has been living with the sense of guilt of not saying good-bye to his wife and, though many who fled from the North remarried in the South, he has remained single until the present day. In 1989, after 40 years of separation, he unexpectedly received news from a close friend, who had visited North Korea, that his wife and family are still alive and that his wife has also remained single. He has very mixed emotions – on the one hand, he rejoices that they are still alive and well, but he very well knows that they cannot yet be

united. He holds *han* deep inside his heart and expresses his anguish through his faith in Christ and through dedication to his painting. Koreans like Kim Haksoo, from both sides of the border still sing a song, ‘... even in our dreams, our desire is unification... Oh, come, unification...’ Is reconciliation possible in the Korean peninsula? The answer has to be affirmative, yet the road to peace and reconciliation is as fragile as walking on a half-frozen lake; we tread it with great care as we are hoping to reach the shore together.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup>Here I am mainly concerned with churches in South Korea, and some of the complicated political events cannot be discussed in detail due to the lack of space.

<sup>2</sup>The following note drawn from the internet encyclopedia *Wikipedia* explains the term *Minjung*. *Minjung* is a Korean word that is difficult to properly translate into other languages in a way that retains its historical and cultural connotations. *Minjung* is a combination of the two Chinese characters *min* and *jung*. *Min* may be translated as ‘people’ and *jung* as ‘the mass.’ Thus, *minjung* literally means ‘the mass of the people,’ or more simply ‘mass’ or ‘the people.’ ‘The people’ is close to what *minjung* seeks to convey, both sociologically and politically. For Koreans, *minjung* are those who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, marginalised sociologically, despised culturally, and condemned religiously.