

Efforts of Korean Churches for Peace and Reconciliation

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The Role of the Korean Church for Peace and Reconciliation of the Korean Peninsula

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1. Preface - Formation of two antagonistic regimes

Upon liberation from the Japanese colonial rule in 1945, the Korean peninsula was divided into two halves, i.e. the North and the South along the 38th parallel, which led to formation of two antagonistic regimes on the peninsula. Entangled in the Cold War rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States, the two Koreas fought a bitter civil war that broke out in 1950. The 3-year long fratricidal war left countless of families torn apart and separated not even being able to check out whether any one of their family is still alive or not. And mutual hostility and animosity had been deeply entrenched on the peninsula for the four decades that followed the war. As a result, the division served as a political pretext to justify dictatorship and violate human rights of workers, farmers and ordinary citizens during the development-oriented authoritarian regimes. What was worse, such flagrant situation was considered a norm for collective mindset deeply seated in the South Korean society just for the sake of national security, and churches were not an exception. Up until the 1980's, the mere mention of words like overcoming the separation, reunification and peaceful coexistence was deemed as a threat to the state security, and led to harsh punishment and imprisonment. And the authoritarian governments fabricated a series of "Spy" cases as recently revealed by truth-finding initiatives. The Korean churches formed with the people who had fled from the North's communist regime as the central figures had also taken the same stance.

2. NCCK's 88 Declaration for Peace & Reunification on the Korean Peninsula

During the peak of the separation and dictatorship in 1980's, the Korean churches began to realize that democracy can't be achieved without unification and that there can't be peace without overcoming the separation of the peninsula. In so doing, the Korean churches had started giving shape to mission agenda, which was crystallized into the pursuit of ending the separation and achieving peaceful unification. However, any discourse on unification itself was made impossible by the government's blockade. Nevertheless, such efforts made by churches of both Koreas at home and abroad led to the following milestones: the 1984 Tozanso Declaration of CCIA/WCC, which proclaimed building "Community with Peace and Justice" adopted as the mission agenda for the Korean peninsula, and the first historic meeting of church leaders of the two Koreas in Glion, Switzerland, resulting in the Gilon Declaration, and lastly "the Korean Church Declaration on National Peace and Reunification" in 1988.

This declaration shed light on painful realities of the division of the peninsula and professed confessions about the Korean churches' sins of harboring hatred and animosity, and outlined 5 basic principles for the Korean churches toward national reunification: (1) self-reliance, (2) peace, (3) national unity transcending ideology and social structure, (4) assurance of freedom and human dignity, and (5) Korea-wide engagement.

To heal the wounds caused by the division, the Declaration suggested reunion of separated families, free mutual visits, and overcoming of social inequalities derived from the division as well as allowing Korean nationals to take part in discussing of the reunification issue, formulating relevant policies, and abiding by the World Declaration on Human Rights and UN Convention on Human Rights, all this to induce pan-national participation in the effort of ending the division. In addition, the Declaration proposed initiatives such as discontinuing the attack and criticism against the other party, opening up for mutual exchanges, visits and communications, promoting exchanges also in the areas of academia, culture, art, religion and sports. To reduce tension and promote peace on the peninsula, it also called for the North and South Korean governments to sign a peace agreement stipulating non-aggression (the South, the North, US, China), have US troops withdrawn upon the international assurance of peace

and stability following the peace agreement, trust-building efforts between the North and the South, reduce military forces and convert military spending into peace-building initiatives, and denuclearize the Korean peninsula. To realize self-reliance of the nation, the Declaration also suggested bold moves such as the followings: maintaining national sovereignty and self-reliance without depending on external powers and intervention from other countries; repealing and signing diplomatic treaties based on mutual agreement between the two Koreas and for promoting common interest.

The 88 Declaration led to a flurry of various other efforts aiming for reconciliation especially in student movement and civic societies, while the world churches also took part in the endeavor via participation in the Incheon World Conference in April in the same year. To name just a few, Rev. Moon Ik-hwan's visit to North Korea back in 1989, Easter Sunday Service held in March the same year at Bongsu Church in Pyongyang constructed in Nov. 1988, followed by Rev. Moon's meeting with Chairman Kim Il-Sung, and many other efforts from women's groups and other NGO groups promoting interactions between the Koreas leading to the reconciliation. Such efforts culminated in inter-Korean government-level talks in 1992 which resulted in the adoption of the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement which was later ratified by the National Assembly. Under the acknowledgement of the realities between the North and the South, the Basic Agreement deals with the challenges facing the peninsula in very practical ways as to how the reunification can be achieved, while ensuring mutual coexistence in most areas.

3. Inter-Korean relations since the 1990s and the role of Christianity

Further to the above events, the North Korean churches continued their interactions with the world churches through South Korean churches and the delegation from the South Korean churches started making official visits to the North with various activities ensued, including the North Korean churches' participation in the 7th WCC General Assembly and visit to the US, NCKK Director Kwon Ho-Gyeong's visit to the North in 1992, Human Chain event for reunification in 1994, and International Conference on the Jubilee for Reunification in 1995. Back then, these events provided testimonies presenting the case for reconciliation and triggered yet another series of multi-faceted

contacts between the two Koreas in ways unimaginable before.

The 1990s saw collapse of the 70 year-old communism, which ended as a failed experiment as the socialism practically got defeated in competition with capitalism. The Cold War rivalry and confrontation between the two ideologies in the wake of World War II also collapsed as the balance between the 'two forces' was tipped. As a result, currently there are only a handful of countries like China, Vietnam, Cuba and North Korea declaring themselves as socialist countries. The world underwent a sea change. Although there still are a few socialist countries, the Cold War era has relegated to history. China and Vietnam are very actively embracing such changes, and their efforts to transform themselves for the past decade led to many fruitful results in many areas. Faced with the wave of globalization, these countries are maintaining socialist regimes on the political front, but adopting capitalist system on the economic front.

In the case of North Korea, the country has been faced with severe social and economic challenges since 1990 along with threats to its regime. In particular, for the 10 years prior to the 1st inter-Korean summit, the North witnessed collapse of the world socialist economies and experienced a series of natural disasters, economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation. Subsequently, maintaining its regime became a more pressing issue for the North Korean authorities than reunification with the South. The so-called 'March of Suffering' in the North not only threatened lives of many North Koreans but also caused a serious shake-up of the North Korean socialist system.

When North Korean church delegates reported severity of the great flood and appealed for assistance at the Macao Conference in 1995, the South Korean churches made bold moves to provide supply of humanitarian aid through private channels, which was considered impossible back then. And such assistance still continues in the form of emergency aid and other support, with the world churches and many Christians joining the efforts by helping the agencies. Even now, much of the assistance is being provided through channels and groups initiated by Christian leaders and they are playing major roles in supplying various emergency aids and other supports to North Korea.

In an attempt to overcome economic isolation, the North Korean authorities spent a

lot of efforts for 4-5 years: building Rajin-Sunbong Special zone to gain economic benefits and also making efforts to improve diplomatic relations with countries like the US and Japan etc. In addition, the North also appealed to the international communities for humanitarian aid to alleviate their food shortages, and linked the military issues such as nuclear weapons and missiles to the supply of heavy oil, construction of power plants and lift of economic sanctions. Nevertheless, such efforts fell short of ultimately resolving their difficulties although they obviously were solutions that held the North Korean regime together at least for temporarily.

Against this backdrop, the 1st inter-Korean summit meeting was held in 2000. And it is safe to say that the real motive behind Pyongyang to be engaged in inter-Korean summit talks back in 2002 was to find a breakthrough solution to secure their regime amidst such crisis. Previously, the North tended to disregard the South in the process of making policy designed to maintain its regime. But North Korea is now putting the South in the equation as they have decided to keep their regime intact while acknowledging co-existence with Seoul. Ever since the 21st century began, they have expressed their change of position by inserting the phrase “by our nation itself” in all their agenda items.

4. Era of inter-Korean summit - Changes in inter-Korean ties in the 21st century

Given such timing and context, the June 15 North-South Joint Statement has significant implications: first, the two sides agreed to solve the issue of reunification on their own initiative; second, they recognized that the low-level federation proposed by the North and the commonwealth system proposed by the South for reunification of the country have similarity; third, they also agreed to settle humanitarian issues as early

as possible, including separated families & relatives and the issue of unconverted long-term prisoners; and fourth, to promote the balanced development of the national economy through economic cooperation and build mutual confidence by activating cooperation and exchange in various fields; and fifth, to hold an authority-to-authority negotiation as soon as possible to put the above-mentioned agreed points into speedy

operation. And the declaration concluded that the DPRK Chairman of National Defense Commission Kim Jong-Il would make a reciprocal visit to Seoul at an appropriate time. The June 15 Joint Statement played the most critical role in proposing a path for peace and reunification on the Korean peninsula, more than any other statements reached between the two sides had done prior to it, such as the July 4 Joint Statement in 1972, and the 1992 Inter-Korean Basic Agreement.

In the wake of the June 15 Joint Declaration, the North and the South have engaged in various meetings, exchanges, support programs and initiatives, which have brought about substantial changes in the inter-Korean ties and interaction. At the end of the recent 2nd inter-Korean summit meeting in 2007, the two leaders reached a new agreement based on the progress made over the past 7 years. We have left behind an era when the national division served as a pretext for justifying the human right violation and dictatorship. Now we are embarking on a new era.

As already well known, "The Declaration on the Advancement of South-North Korean Relations, Peace and Prosperity" adopted at the end of the recent inter-Korean summit talks consists of preface, 8 points plus 2 additional points. There are two underlying threads that run through the declaration. The first one concerns how to newly define inter-Korean relations and seek cooperation, and deals with political and military principles based on the spirit of the June 16 Declaration. Following the first three provisions on upholding the June 15 Declaration, building ties of mutual respect and trust, and putting an end to military hostilities, the fourth provision which is a key part of the declaration states that both sides will work together to end the current armistice regime and build a permanent peace regime. It is of paramount importance to build a peace regime on the Korean peninsula and peace mechanism in north-east Asia. This process involves declaring an end to the war, signing a peace treaty, getting agreement of other countries, forming a multilateral security framework with neighboring countries, mutually reining in military budgets, and actual reduction of military expenses. To be sure, this peace process is based on a premise that the Korean peninsula will be denuclearized.

Another main thread running through the declaration is about economic cooperation and concrete inter-Korean economic projects proposed. Notable among them are pledge

to make joint efforts for building a single inter-Korean economic bloc which is essential for building peace; promoting cooperation in various fields such as social, cultural and humanitarian areas; seeking various ways to create a special peace and cooperation zone in the West Sea where skirmishes used to occur between the two sides; developing Gaeseong Industrial Complex; joint use of Gyeongui railway line and the Gaeseong-Pyongyang expressway; establishing cooperative complexes for shipbuilding, while continuing cooperative projects in various areas such as agriculture, health and medical services.

At the same time, two additional provisions are added, which specify boosting exchanges and cooperation in the social areas covering history, language, education, science and technology, culture and arts, and sports; opening nonstop flight services between Seoul and Mt. Baekdu for tours to Mt. Baekdu; sending a joint cheering squad from both sides to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games via the Gyeongui Railway Line; regularizing reunion of separated family members and their relatives; cooperation in case of emergencies including natural disasters; and increasing cooperation on the international stage.

The key to practicing such multi-faceted cooperation lies in how Pyongyang and Seoul ensure balanced development through economic cooperation, building a single economic bloc integrated into the global economy. Benefits of inter-Korean economic cooperation are not merely confined to individual businesses immediately involved. It is true that the South would need to continue its large-scale investment in the North for the time being until the North can resolve the current economic difficulties. However, ultimate benefits will far outweigh the cost on the part of Seoul. For starters, the South can significantly gain from the sheer increase of the domestic market size: combining the current populations of the South (47 million) and the North (22 million), the domestic market size will grow by one third.

In addition, if Seoul can play a mediating role in the process of Pyongyang's integration into the capitalist system, the Korean peninsula economic bloc can have a competitive edge in the world capitalist market: as the North's resources and labor are combined with the South's technologies and capital, it will generate synergy effects to both economies, enhancing efficiency of resource allocation, ultimately leading to greater competitiveness in the global market. Moreover, it will also help enhance

international credit rating of North Korea.

What is also noteworthy is indirect economic benefits. Bolstering inter-Korean economic cooperation will ease tension between the two regimes and result in reduction of military expenses, which will present significant opportunities for overhauling economic structure distorted by massive military expenditure, enabling resources to be redirected to productive areas.

To be sure, once such a single economic bloc is established across the Korean peninsula, the combined production factors coupled with a bigger market size will obviously result in substantial increase in the economic size and dramatic rise in the efficiency. However, if opening up of the North Korean economy ever leads to yet another distorted economic system heavily dependent upon the US or Japan, it will likely generate friction with the South Korean economy. In this regard, whether we can create a truly integrated national economy across the Korean peninsula will dictate the future of our nation in the 21st century.

5. Conclusion

- What is expected of the church in the era of inter-Korean summit talks?

Now the change is happening at the government level as the authorities in two Koreas are seeking bolder moves than the private sector to move away from confrontation, establish peace and achieve balanced economic development thereby achieving co-prosperity. The June 15 Declaration opened up the doors of opportunities, paving the way for reunification. In the recent summit talks between Seoul and Pyongyang, both sides threw open the gates that stood between the two regimes, which unleashes a wave of peace on the peninsula. To date, if you wanted to visit Mt. Baikdu, you've had to fly there or take a bus, spending at least two days on the road to arrive at the so called "Changbai Mountain" as the Chinese would say. For our future trips however, we should just start putting some money aside along with a group of close friends to get ourselves financially ready for a trip to Mt. Baikdu, which would be just a simple one hour flight from Kimpo Airport.

Come next year when the Olympic Games are held, hopefully both the North and South Koreans will be traveling to Beijing in the same train that starts off in South Korea at Seoul Station then stops by Gaesung Station, passing Pyongyang and Shinuiju on the way to eventually arrive in Beijing. Wouldn't the train be more than just a one-time carrier of the passengers heading to the Olympics? Once the railway track opens up, the track will take the train all the way to the Siberian fields, going over the Ural Mountains and going all the way to Amsterdam, carrying the goods getting exported out of the two Koreas and bringing prosperity to both North and South Korea. The highway connecting Gaesung and Pyongyang already is linked all the way to Hyangsan in the Myohyang Mountain. And there's no reason why the people living in the Myohyang mountain area should be excluded from all such experiences. Even though the Haeju coast was once where the war vessels from two Koreas clashed against each other, it is no longer a dream to imagine fishing boats from the two Koreas peacefully casting their fishing net side by side in an effort to catch blue crab on the waves of the Baekryung Island.

The rising tide of peace is setting in. Let us throw ourselves into this tide of peace and forcefully blow this tide of peace into the air. May there be prosperity in both Koreas. May the two help each other no matter who is ahead of the other. May there be unification in our times. Clearly, there will be a new set of challenges and roles for the Korean church to play.