

Ecumenical Situation in Korea¹

1. The Korean People: 5000 years of history as one nation

To understand the ecumenical situation in Korea it is necessary to understand the special history of the Korean nation and people.

Korea, founded in 2333 BC by *Dankun*, maintained itself as a racially homogenous nation for 5,000 years. Although it faced great threats from China during its first 2,000 years, Korea kept its dignity and freedom as a nation (*Ancient Choson*). During the period from the 1st century BC to the 7th century AD, Korea experienced several dynasties. From 57 BC to 935 AD the *Kokuryeo* (37 BC to 668 AD), *Paikje* (18 BC to 660 AD) and *Shilla* (57 BC to 935 AD) Dynasties formed the *Three Kingdoms* (Samkuk) period in Korean history; in the north, the *Balhae* Dynasty (698-926 AD) was succeeded by the *Koryo* Dynasty (918 – 1392) in the 10th century, and the *Chosun* Dynasty (1392 – 1910) in the 14th century. During all this time Korea not only maintained itself as an homogenous nation, but also achieved great cultural developments.

In 1897 *Imperial Korea* (*Daehan Jeguk*) was founded, beginning a modern era in Korean history. From 1910 to 1945 Korea was occupied by the Japanese; yet the Koreans never lost their hope and never abandoned the struggle to achieve their freedom. Their efforts and struggle led finally to liberation from Japanese occupation in 1945, with the end of World War II. This history reflects the fate of Korea: since its location is highly important in geopolitical terms, it has had to suffer many invasive influences, and many invasions, from great world powers.

Korea has also had to struggle with internal conflicts reflecting various ideologies. Many years of ideological struggle ended in the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), based on Communism, in the north of Korea and the founding of the Republic of Korea (ROK), based on democracy and freedom, in the south. The conflict and confrontation between these ideologies led to the tragedy of the Korean War (1950-53), in which many persons lost their lives. In 1953 an armistice was signed, and the border between North and South Korea, with its demilitarized zone (DMZ), became the visible symbol of the tragedy of Korean history.

The number of families divided by the war and its aftermath may be as many as 10 million. Recently these families have been granted limited opportunities for meeting; but most do not even know whether family members on the other side of the north-south divide are alive or not. The grief of these families remains in the heart of every Korean; it is a deep wound in the pride and very identity of the nation.

2. North and South in relation to reconciliation and collaboration

On 4 July 1972, the Korean Peninsula experienced an historical turning point. The Joint Declaration of that date changed the atmosphere of conflict and hostility, curtailing mutual abuse and facilitating discussion and practical efforts towards national unification as a common task.

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The World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church have also shown great interest in facilitating peace and easing strained relations. In 1988, the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCC-Korea) announced the “Korean Churches’ Declaration on the National Reunification and Peace”, and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Korea (CBCK) organized its Committee on National Reconciliation. Following this event several churches (such as the Changchungdang Catholic Church and the Chilkok Church) have been founded in North Korea, and services are being held there.

In this context, the Nobel Peace Prize winner KIM Dae-Jung – a former President of the ROK – held a summit with the North Korean leader KIM Jong-Il. This meeting issued the Joint Declaration of June 15, 2000. This strengthened the South Korean government in its “sunshine policy” towards the North. However, the situation in the DMZ shows the high level of tension between north and south. Efforts for peace in the Korean peninsula, moderated by the countries involved in the six-party talks, have borne fruit in cooperation and collaboration in various realms: for example, material support on the governmental level and, on the civil level, exchanges in the fields of culture, sports, religion and art as well as academic and economic exchanges.

3. Overcoming conflicts and division on the way to unity and unification

In spite of the many efforts made to achieve peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula, there remain deep roots of conflict, division and confrontation. To realize peaceful unification, North and South must face some common issues: the confrontation between liberalism and socialism, the gap between wealth and poverty, and the oppression of faith and religion.

There is a wall between the two peoples of north and south, a wall which seems hard to break down. Yet the hope of, and longing for, unification is common to both sides, just as they sing the same song expressing this hope (“*Uri Ui Sowon Eun Tongil*”). All Koreans, even though they face many differences and conflicts, hope for a peaceful and reconciling unification on the Korean peninsula. As Christians we hope and wait for the day when God will bring the divided parties together, so that we may praise and thank God for this act of reconciliation and new creation.

4. Background of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2009: the Korean ecumenical movement

The Catholic community in Korea was founded in 1784 by the first baptized Catholic in Korea, LEE Sung-Hun, who spread the Christian doctrine among his compatriots.

Protestantism was introduced in Korea in the 1880s. In 1919, Korean Christians cooperated with their neighbours of other faiths, for example, leaders of Buddhism, Chon Taoism, and traditional religions, to resist the Japanese powers, for the sake of the independence of Korea.

The Korean ecumenical movement can be traced back to the recommendations and spirit of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and especially its *Decree on Ecumenism*, which emphasized the importance of all Christians’ efforts for Christian unity. The churches participating in inter-church dialogue in Korea are the Orthodox Metropolis of Korea, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Korea, the National Council of churches in Korea (and member churches: The Presbyterian Church in Korea, the Korean Methodist Church, the Presbyterian church in the Republic of Korea, The Salvation Army Korea Territory, The Anglican Church of Korea, the Korea Evangelical Church, the Korea Assemblies of God Full

Gospel), and the Lutheran Church in Korea. The NCC-Korea, which represents Protestantism, and the Korean Roman Catholic Church, have alternately hosted joint services for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity since the early 1970s. This joint prayer has provided Christians with a space for praying and working together to foster the ecumenical movement in Korea. In 1977 biblical scholars from both the Protestant and Catholic churches finished the common translation of the Bible so that, for the first time, all Korean churches could have the same Korean version of the Bible.

The Korean ecumenical movement now consists of diverse joint programmes for different groups: for the staff of various denominations, for theologians, seminary students, and for the moderators of different denominations. A study group of theologians has been hosting the Ecumenical Forum since 2000; this deals with diverse theological subjects in order to encourage mutual understanding between Protestant and Catholic churches. In addition, a group organized by seminary students has been carrying out programmes such as visiting different seminaries and hosting athletic games to develop friendship among members of various churches. The Moderators of various denominations meet and have meals together on a regular basis in order to improve their understanding and friendship, and to exchange ideas. A seminar on Christian Unity in Asia, held July 24-28, 2006 at Aaron's House, was a memorable event in the history of the Korean ecumenical movement. The seminar was hosted by Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity; it brought together ecumenical leaders from Asian countries to discuss and share different approaches to, and ideas for, Christian unity. On July 23, 2006, at the 19th World Methodist Conference held in Seoul, Korea, the Methodist Church "signed on" to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification which had been agreed by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999. Thus this notable world-level event for Christian unity took place in Korea.

Based on the experience and mutual trust accumulated through joint programmes and activities, leaders of both the Protestant and Catholic churches in Korea carried out an ecumenical pilgrimage on December 8-16, 2006. They visited Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican, the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, and His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul, Turkey. In Rome they also met the staff of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and in Geneva staff members of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches. During these visits they presented an idea that Korean Christians could prepare the draft resource materials for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2009. The two ecumenical bodies positively considered the idea, and agreed with the Korean churches' suggestion to produce the source materials.

On January 23, 2007, the Korean churches held services for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity at the Chongju Anglican Church, and also held a meeting of theologians from both the Protestant and Catholic churches. This meeting appointed two persons from the Protestant churches and three from the Catholic church to be members of the preparation subcommittee for writing the common prayer material for the week of prayer in 2009. The subcommittee held its first meeting on February 8, 2007 and chose Ezekiel 37:15-23, which contains the prophecy of the reunified kingdom of Israel, as the subject for the resource booklet for the Christian Unity Week in 2009. For the churches in Korea this passage in Ezekiel is evocative of the situation of the Korean peninsula, which remains such a divide. It was decided that each denomination would write a biblical reflection and a prayer for one of the "8 days". Thus began the work which eventually led to the materials distributed worldwide for the week of prayer, 2009.

Conclusion

The current state of the Korean peninsula - which prevents Koreans in one part from communicating with their parents, children, siblings, relatives, and friends living in the other - represents an unacceptable situation that must be surmounted. The political situation in North Korea, which prevents people from choosing their own religious tradition, represents an oppressive situation restricting human conscience. Yet such situations of confrontation, antagonism, conflict, violence, and war rooted in religious, racial, and ethnic hostilities are not limited to the Korean peninsula, but occur in many places in the world today. Thus the Korean experience of division and suffering is surely relevant for Christians and societies world-wide. The Christians (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox) in Korea work together for the common good – to bring an authentic peace to the Korean peninsula – with neighbours of other faiths, Buddhism, Confucianism, and other traditional religions, including Won Buddhism and Chon Taoism (*Chon Do Gyo*).

During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2009, Christians are requested to pray for the promotion of unity and the building of peace, tasks that are important responsibilities for Christians in this world. The hope inspiring this prayer is that all people in the world will become God's people; God will be their God; and people will be given the happiness of joy and prosperity when confrontation, conflict, and division are surmounted and unity is achieved. Christians must pray with patience until the "new heaven and the new earth" come to pass: "Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God" (Ezekiel 37: 23).