

Testimony of a PCUSA Young Adult Volunteer (YAV) in Dajeon, South Korea

By: Simon Doong

Before serving as a Young Adult Volunteer (YAV) in South Korea, my knowledge of the current situation in Korea was very simple: in North Korea there was a tight-fisted ruler who was firing missiles and abusing human rights, and in South Korea there was democracy and an ally who America helped during the Korean War. The issue of Korean division did not mean anything to me personally and I didn't feel any connection to it, even as a college educated American with a degree in international relations.

Fast forward to the present, when I have just finished serving as a YAV in Korea. I now know that there is so much more to the story of the current Korean situation, the Korean War, and US involvement than I had previously known.

As I learned about many controversial actions the US took during the Korean War, which ultimately led to the current division, I started to feel guilty. My country, the US, had come into Korea and killed people, many of them innocent and many who simply wanted leadership that was not put in place by a foreign power. When the armistice agreement was signed at the end of the Korean War, the US signed it, not the South Korean government. And that agreement didn't even end the war. Though I had no direct hand in any of this, it is all part of the legacy and reputation that I inherit as an American. I kept asking myself how did this happen?

The answer that I keep returning to is that American leaders in positions of power forgot that Koreans were people. This was because a combination of fears of communism, a bit of racism, and a belief that what we were doing was right. Add in the pressures of war, and a recipe was created for poor decision making and a tendency to not listen to others' opinions. Of course, as Christians we are called to listen and love others, but in this case, America wasn't very Christian.

I don't mention this to just bash the US. I mention this because the story doesn't have to end there. In fact, many times this year Koreans showed me how we can change the story. There is hope for positive action that can help lead to peace in the Korean peninsula. I learned from church leaders in the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK) and the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCCK) that there are in fact, Christians living in North Korea. These Christians sacrifice the opportunity of achieving any high-ranking government job to be able to practice their faith. Each Christian has their name recorded and monitored by the government. Yet, they still practice their faith. Some are even part of small discussions for re-unification. One NCCCK representative said, "Are there Christians in North Korea? Absolutely. And they are more sincere Christians than you or me."

We often hear how religion is a divisive force. But faith in God and a unified Korea has brought these North and South Koreans together, despite the political lines dividing their countries. Their strength of faith and willingness to sacrifice reminds me that God is at work amidst politically tense situations. As a Christian, to forget the story of the Korean War and the calls

and efforts for peace and/or re-unification by North and South Koreans, is turning our back on these fellow Christians.

A second story that resonated with me was the No Gun Ri massacre, an incident in which American soldiers killed innocent civilian refugees during the Korean War. As an American, learning about this was both appalling and embarrassing. It didn't seem possible that our military could have ordered and conducted such a terrible act. But once again, the Korean spirit surprised me. The survivors of the No Gun Ri massacre worked diligently to get the incident investigated and acknowledged by the Korean and American governments. And beyond recognition of the truth, they seek healing for themselves and the US soldiers involved in the incident. Leaders of the surviving refugee family members would like soldiers that participated in the No Gun Ri massacre to come to the No Gun Ri memorial and meet with them. The purpose being not to shame the soldiers but to offer healing for both groups, and even reconciliation. Instead of demonizing the soldiers who killed their loved ones, the victims are recognizing the humanity of those that wronged them, seeing the soldiers as victims of this incident and persons in need of healing.

As Christians we are called to pursue peace. One way to pursue peace is to acknowledge and remember past wrongs. We can remember the No Gun Ri massacre. We can acknowledge our country's decisions during the Korean War. By remembering, we can ensure that we do not forget the humanity of others and fail to recognize them as people. By listening to the Korean people's ideas, hopes, and dreams today, we can show that we learned from past mistakes. We may even help them achieve those goals, if we are asked and able.

Currently, many South Koreans seek peace on the peninsula, and even re-unification with the North. Given America's role in the division of North and South Korea, this is an issue in which Americans can play an active role. Working together with Koreans, we can help change the way the Korean War ends. But only if we remember the past and listen.