

June 2020 — Global solidarity to end the Korean War: ‘70 years is quite long enough’

*Kurt Esslinger, Mission Co-Worker in South Korea
Presbyterian World Mission*

Last year, partner churches and organizations, members of the Ecumenical Forum for Korea (EFK), gathered alongside Christians from South Korea and Christians who came from the North Korean Christian Federation (KCF), a federation of Protestant Christians officially recognized by the North Korean government. The Rev. Dr. Lee Hong Jung, of the South Korean National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK), made a proposal: “As next year, June 25, 2020, will mark the 70th anniversary of the Korean War, let us have our next gathering in the U.S.A. and invite our friends from North Korea to join us there. Together we can honor the occasion and call for an end to the war.” The meeting moderator, from the World Council of Churches (WCC), agreed with the plan but requested that we hear from our North Korean partners.

The Rev. Kang Myung Chul responded, “We would be very happy to visit the U.S., but we are worried



that our request will be denied again by the U.S.A. State Department. As you know, last year we were invited by the U.S. United Methodist Church to a meeting in Atlanta, but the U.S. blocked our visit and refused to give us permission to enter. We would like to avoid that disappointment, so we would also like to consider an alternative location.” All the members of the EFK agreed, so we began trying to seek ways to get entry permission for our North Korean partners, while also considering a neutral location for a meeting at a different time.

The NCCK planned on coming to the U.S. in June 2020 for activities related to the Korean War anniversary anyway. They looked forward to an ecumenical event alongside the WCC and the National Council of Christian Churches in the U.S.A. to call for an official end to the Korean War through the signing of a peace treaty between the active parties to the war.

For 70 years — since June 1950 — the Korean Peninsula has suffered under the cloud of war because the peace treaty has not yet been signed, which is also why the South Korean military still resides under the wartime command authority (OPCON) of the U.S. military commander in Korea.

Unfortunately, in January and February of this year, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancelation of all international face-to-face events. So instead of worship and ecumenical events on the ground in the U.S., the NCCK plans to release special resources that global church partners can use for worship, Bible studies and other gatherings of commemoration June 21–27. The EFK will also try to have an online gathering for its members. Even without the U.S. gathering, the NCCK and the WCC have already begun a prayer campaign together called “A Light of Peace: A Prayer Movement.” Both have posted prayers that have been written by ecumenical partners all around the world in solidarity with Korea (and I have been translating a few of them back and forth from English and Korean!).

As COVID-19 continues ravaging the globe and we continue wearing our masks, we also ask that you pray with us and consider how 70 years of war is quite long enough, learn what our partners have to say about methods for breaking the deadlock in negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea, and ponder how to build a world of peace for all. This education and advocacy work is the essence of my task as a mission co-worker in Korea, and why I believe my connection to you is so important. It’s why I believe mission matters.

The Rev. Kurt Esslinger and his wife, Hyeyoung Lee, have served as mission co-workers in South Korea since 2013. Kurt works with the Reconciliation and Unification Department of the National Council of Churches in Korea. Hyeyoung, a South Korea native, and Kurt, an alum of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s Young Adult Volunteer (YAV) program, serve as site coordinators for the YAV program in South Korea. To support their work, make a gift to pcusa.org/donate/E200496.

Photo courtesy of Kurt Esslinger