

북한개발소식

2023 JUL

07

통권 213호

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Faith Journey of NK Believers and NK Mission

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Missions can be said to be fundamentally about spreading the gospel. Sharing the gospel with North Koreans is clearly different from evangelism in South Korea, such as in overseas mission fields. This is because culture and values are dissimilar in a completely different system, especially since the NK regime is anti-Christian and quasi-religious. In understanding and overcoming these differences, the extremely limited points of contact with North Koreans become a major obstacle.

The number of NK defectors landing in South Korea reaches 34,000 according to the statistics of the Ministry of Unification, as of early 2022. Among them, four or more out of ten describe themselves as Christians. It is the fruit of the hard work of missionaries, overseas ministers and believers, and South Korean churches who devoted themselves to NK defectors for a long time. However, it is said that the number of those who truly experience conversion and continue the journey of faith is far less. Since NK believers landing to South Korea have experiences of North Korean values and culture, their journey of faith will be a credible example of the issues or obstacles that will be encountered in the process of sharing the gospel and acceptance, and how to overcome them in NK Mission. Based on the conversion of NK believers, research on their faith and field experiences, we want to look at what lessons we need to know in NK mission.

Conversion and Faith Life of NK Believers

When looking at the process of conversion of NK believers after hearing the gospel, they are usually sharing the gospel based on their relationship with the preacher or their needs rather than a doctrinal understanding or resolution of it. Although they did not accept the gospel at first, they reached conversion through spiritual experiences and realizations.

Seong-Jong Joo (2022) studied conversion and devotion of 31 pastors defected from North Korea.¹ In the study, 15 respondents, close to the majority, cited enlightenment through the Word as the main factor in their conversion, followed by spiritual experiences for 7 and prayers and answers for 5. In addition, it was confirmed that overcoming various external and internal difficulties with faith is a very

¹ Seong-Jong Joo (2022), **Research Methodology on North Korean Mission**, Seoul: Christian Documentation Mission, 92-99

important factor in conversion and devotion.

Jeong-Woo Han (2016) conducted a qualitative study on the characteristics of NK defectors in the process of encountering and accepting the Christian faith.² A large number of NK defectors who participated in the study responded that they encountered faith because they were moved by the church praying for them with tears in a desperate situation rather than understanding Christian doctrines. Judging from their existing values, Christian faith seemed awkward and irrational, but many accepted the faith because they liked the person who delivered the message.

Myung-Hee Jeon (2019) tracked their faith journey through in-depth interviews with 13 NK defectors who had been in South Korea for more than 5 years and had attended church for more than 3 years.³ According to the study results, when NK defectors first received evangelism, they had doubts rather than beliefs, or a sense of rejection due to the similarity with the North Korean system. However, at some point, after the doubts, the process of involuntary training, or the rejection of the strange and absurd things passed, they experienced conversion by encountering the existence of God irresistibly. This experience was termed "Ontological Encounter with God" in the study. It expresses "the phenomenon emphasized that it was an encounter with God by His irresistible providence, rather than a decision to believe on their own, as He came to them while praying and reading the Word".⁴

Difficulties and Obstacles Encountered in the Life of Faith

Even after conversion, NK believers face many obstacles in their faith growth. At the time of conversion, they think they can overcome everything with spiritual power, but they face various issues that cannot be solved in reality. Although they managed to arrive in South Korea with difficulty, they still live a hard life, and their faith and life are stagnant and fall into darkness. In addition, due to the extreme authoritarian system in North Korea and the experience of social violence that compels it, they tend to have a distorted image of God or find it difficult to establish a personal relationship with Him.

A study by Myung-Hee Jeon (2019) analyzed that in the case of the first generation of NK defectors, many had an authoritative image of God established behind their passionate and active participation in religious activities. It means that the image of a punitive God who judges and punishes people for

² Jeong-Woo Han (2016), "A Qualitative Study on North Korean Refugees' Encounters with Christianity," Sungkyul University Multicultural Peace Institute, Multiculturalism and Peace 10(2), 134-154.

³ Myung-Hee Jeon et al. (2019), "A Study on the Faith Journey of NK Defector Christians: Focusing on the Grounded Theory Approach," Journal of the Korean Christian Counseling Association 30(4), 173-207.

⁴ Supra 190.

wrongdoing works strongly.⁵

In order to examine the impact of NK defectors' trauma on their faith, Kyung-Sook Kim (2018) conducted an in-depth study on 12 women living in South Korea for more than 5 years, lived in North Korea for more than 30 years, and had been married for more than 5 years.⁶ NK defector women who participated in the study recognized the reality of the living God because they had a dramatic experience of Him in their journey of escaping from North Korea. However, the representations of God they experienced and felt were fearful ones, such as the experience of an abusive man and the fear of violent by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il regime. In North Korea, they experienced violent authority that punishes disloyalty, a system where they had to suppress their expressions and hide their true feelings because they could always be taken to a concentration camp if they did not pay attention to their words, and experience domestic violence. This study analyzed that these experiences had affected a distorted representation of God in their religious life. In other words, it is the fear of Him that they felt when hearing He inspects their deep inner self, and the obsession that they must work hard in their religious life to appease His anger. They still question why so many people died in political prison camps, millions starved to death, and why He allowed North Korea to run a dictatorship. While witnessing these realities, some dismiss Him as a helpless or an absent God.

In this way, NK believers experience conversion and spiritual change, but soon encounter many physical and mental obstacles, and overcoming them is an important milestone in growing their faith. Myung-Hee Jeon (2021) explained their journey by comparing it to the psychology of Jungian alchemy.⁷ She expressed it in the following five steps: 'Nigredo', the chaos before having faith; 'Alchemic Blue', the process of encountering the gospel and gradually moving toward conversion; 'Albedo', feeling uplifted and starting to have faith through spiritual experiences; 'Nigredo', a time of descent and suffering of death, when faith is shaken amidst various realistic difficulties; and 'Rubedo', learning a personal relationship with Him by overcoming darkness and breaking out of basic faith. This study analyzes that when NK believers overcome the 'Nigredo' stage of descent and suffering that they experience in their faith journey after conversion, they can move on to true faith growth. It emphasizes that counselors and community support are necessary for them to overcome the distance from Him, black-and-white logic and legalism, and lack of understanding of their inner world, which are revealed

⁵ Supra 202-204.

⁶ Kyung-Sook Kim (2018), "The Impact of NK Defector Women's Trauma on the Representation of God", Korean Christian Counseling Journal 29(1), 35-66.

⁷ Myung-Hee Jeon, Jung-Ah Park (2021), "The Process of Self-discovery in Christian NK Defectors' Religious Experiences: A Case Study of the Psychological Approach of Alchemy," Journal of the Korean Christian Counseling Association 32(1), 93-122.

in the 'Nigredo' stage.

Anti-Christian Thoughts in North Korea and NK Defectors

Looking at the previous research materials, it can be seen that oppression in North Korea and the influence of Juche idea acted as major obstacles in the conversion and religious growth of NK believers. First, there was the influence of anti-Christian education received from the NK authorities. According to a study on the religious experience of NK defectors⁸, it was found that a significant number of them consciously or unconsciously felt distanced from, or had negative feelings or antipathy towards Christianity due to the influence of anti-Christian education in North Korea. Furthermore, in the study by Jae-Hwan Lim et al. (2022), the NK believers who participated in the study most often cited the mental part due to the influence of materialist thinking and Juche ideology as an obstacle in conversion.⁹ While the content of the Gospel and the Bible feel absurd based on their existing values, on the other hand, there are parts similar to the contents of the ideological education they received from North Korea, which causes doubt and rejection. The NK believers said that they shared the Gospel and the Bible, and participated in the study as much as the ministers or church members who helped and served them with love, but had difficulty understanding and accepting it. Various studies on the conversion of NK believers commonly explain that it needs a spiritual impact from the outside that can go beyond the existing values to overcome these obstacles, such as understanding the Word through His sovereign work, experiencing prayer answers, spiritual experiences, or miracles in dead-end situations.

Not only the content of Juche ideology, but also the NK social control system based on it is an obstacle. It is a controlled society in which absolute loyalty to the authority of the whole society, including the leader, is enforced, and severe and violent punishments are imposed on residents who deviate from the eyes of the authorities. Being accustomed to such oppression, a tendency to feel dread and fear was observed even in the relationship with God. Just like they did in North Korea, they led a life of faith with zeal on the outside. However, in some cases, their motive was not religious belief, but rather a mere repetition of the behavior from loyalty that they showed to avoid punishment in North Korea. In addition, even in church activities, since they experienced a control similar to the structure of church worship gatherings in North Korea, such as 'Wednesday Lectures', 'Friday Study', and 'Sunday Life Review', they sometimes experienced recalling parts of North Korea that they disliked, felt uncomfortable with, and felt betrayed by. They said that sometimes the authoritative appearance of

⁸ Soon-Hyung Lee et al. (2015), *Religious Experiences of NK Defectors*, Seoul: Seoul National University Press and Culture Center

⁹ Jae-Hwan Lim et al. (2022), "A Study on the Conversion of North Korean Defectors through Grounded Theory," *Gospel and Mission* 57, 171-173.

officers who harassed them was similar to that of church pastors and lay leaders.

As well known, the Juche idea has a very similar structure to the Christian doctrine, as if the leader was replaced in place of God in Christian thought. These similarities may play a positive role in helping North Koreans accept the gospel, but rather, the fact that they are similar to North Korean ideology makes it difficult for North Koreans to accept the new doctrine. Juche ideology and Christianity have a high similarity on the one hand, but fundamentally have opposite ideological foundations. The Juche idea is based on materialistic and evolutionary thinking. Therefore, North Koreans either do not understand the concept or react negatively to invisible spiritual and divine beings. Ironically, it seems strange that people who have lived in a system that honors the leader as a divine being do not conceptualize the divine being well. However, to North Koreans, there are differences in that the leader is not a spiritual being, but a person who actually lived, and stands out as a great leader who leads the masses in the present world, not as a savior in the afterlife. Some also say that North Koreans can easily understand and believe in Him if it replaces the position of the leader. However, there are some aspects that are difficult to generalize. In addition, Juche idea is a very humanistic ideology that emphasizes the subjectivity of individuals, organizations and nations. This contradicts Christian teaching, which is based on total will and trust in God.

One of the issues derived from the influence of materialism and Juche idea is materialism. It is at the root of the system and ideology experienced by North Koreans. Even when they have doubts about the leader or system of North Korea, it is easy for North Koreans to have materialistic values with a rejection of spiritual or religious concepts due to the influence of materialism. In fact, many North Koreans have come to have doubts and skepticism about the North Korean system, which has abandoned their livelihood in the midst of extreme poverty called the Arduous March. Nevertheless, it is often observed that following the lessons learned from these threats to survival, they change their lives to pursue money and material things with all their might, even while living a religious life in South Korea. This trap of materialism acts as a serious obstacle to the growth of faith. According to a case study on the conversion process of NK defectors by Oh-Seong Kwon et al. (2023), NK believers feel that life of faith in South Korea is more difficult than in China or third countries. This is because there are many difficulties and temptations related to money, such as money taking the place of God. He said that a continuous process of conversion is needed to overcome it.¹⁰ In this regard, in addition to the influence of North Korea's materialistic ideology, a wrong understanding of the material blessings that exist in the church or elements of religion praying for blessings are also obstacles to the proper growth of faith of NK believers.

¹⁰ Oh-Seong Kwon et al. (2023), "A Study on the Conversion Process of NK Defectors through Case Studies," Gospel and Mission 61, 36.

Implications to NK Mission

The conversion and faith journey of NK believers in South Korea provide various implications for meeting North Koreans and spreading the gospel in the future. First of all, it can refer to the fact that considerable time is required in the process of sharing and accepting the gospel. It is difficult to find cases where they had faith from the first time they heard the gospel message among the NK believers. Rather, feelings of distrust and doubt arose in their hearts. The ideology and values of the past North Korean system they experienced became an obstacle to understanding the message of the gospel, and the anti-Christian education they received in North Korea also acted as a factor causing rejection. In this situation, it is very difficult to expect that sharing the gospel once will lead to conversion and faith. It must consider that those who shared the gospel need time to digest its contents.

Not only the time for understanding and acceptance, but also the time for forming a relationship between the deliverer and the listener is also important. A significant number of NK believers responded that they listened to the message and participated in Bible study, thinking of the person who shares the gospel and the service of love. From a common-sense point of view, no one will listen if a complete stranger suddenly delivers the contents of message that were forbidden in North Korea. Only when the messenger is recognized as a good and trustworthy person by the listeners, the message delivered also gains strength. Ministers who have directly preached the gospel to North Koreans in the field of missions say that sharing the gospel to North Koreans is closer to converting people who already have a religion than evangelism to non-religious or agnostic people. It means that the North Korean system and ideology already have a strong influence on each individual's values and way of thinking. With this in mind, it is necessary to prepare the fertile soil of mind to cultivate the gospel through the time to form a positive relationship with the target person with patience and persistence.

Although a person has been converted, it is difficult for his values to be completely renewed. The difficulties of life encountered in the journey of faith, the questions of faith that are raised and the shaking of belief allow believers to encounter wrong values, doubts, and inner problems that have remained in them. NK believers also experience difficulties in accepting authority and having a personal relationship with Him. Accordingly, care and attention are needed so that they can overcome these difficulties in Bible study or religious guidance. It is very helpful to observe whether their lives change through the teachings of the Bible in checking whether the gospel has been shared properly and whether faith growth is taking place. Among the NK believers met in the field, they outwardly memorize the words of the Bible they have learned, and are proficient in words and writing, but in reality their lives do not change and are often unable to escape from their selfishness and greed. Rather, these believers are the cases where missionaries or field workers have the most trouble in nurturing. They fall into the error of acting as a sincere believer who is too perfect on the outside, while not being able to look inside themselves and have a personal encounter with Him. It needs the attention of the ministers and the community so that the habit of doing well on the surface, which has become their habit for them in North

Korea, is not followed in their religious life.

Conclusion – His Love for North Korea

Fundamentally, it is important to rely on the Almighty of God, not our ability, and expect the powerful work of the Lord. As with any evangelist, there was a moment of spiritual experience and realization for NK believers to overcome rejection and misunderstanding and accept Jesus Christ as their Lord. This can be said to be a part of His forcible work on the soul. Even if the speaker is slow in speech and the attitude of the listeners is not good, it will be important to believe that He is working and tell them honestly. Ultimately, the fundamental to overcoming obstacles in missions, including missions to North Korea, lies in reliance to Him.

The experience of the overseas NK mission field confirms to us once again that it is a mission led by Him. If we want to look at NK mission works in the field of overseas missions, it is not easy to find and contact people to share the gospel and follow up. Although it depends on the type of ministry, in general, to meet North Koreans and get opportunities to share the gospel, the field ministers' constant efforts and the help of co-workers are required, accompanied by safety threats. Recently, North Koreans we meet abroad usually return to their hometowns unless escaping to South Korea, so even if the meeting is successful, there are limitations in sharing the gospel, teaching the Bible, and nurturing them due to the limited time and space. Even if we do our best to help them keep their faith even after returning to their hometown in North Korea, we cannot even imagine how difficult it is to keep their faith in a land of persecution. However, even when the believers return to North Korea after hearing the gospel and receiving limited faith training and materials, work has been done in many places to hold on to their faith, spread the gospel, and form a community. Hearing the miracle of healing and the work of God's help they testify about, we cannot help but confess that He loves the souls of the land and is carrying out a ministry that only He can do through believers.

Our mission is meaningful because He has not forgotten North Korea and loves the souls of that land. Our role is not to create new things from the beginning. Rather, it is planting seeds so that He can work through the lives of the people of the land. Considering the passion that He shows toward North Korea, the land of darkness is absolutely not a place where missions are impossible as we think. When we humbly participate in His Work with this kind of faith, it is sure that we will be blessed to experience His amazing work of salvation.

North Korean Defectors' Faith Journey and NK Mission

**Professor Myung-Hee Jeon (School of Counseling Psychology & Social Welfare, Handong
Global University)**

When asked to write about a journey of faith of North Korean defectors, there was a long hesitation due to my shallow knowledge and wisdom on such a big theme except for conducting several studies in the field. Nevertheless, something changed my mind to give it a challenge — the past experiences where a critical mind and curiosity felt during studies and while meeting the NK defectors had reached provisional conclusions. In this regard, this article can be seen as a part of the lessons drawn from the studies on the faith experiences of Christian North Korean defectors for the last 10 years. Born in a household of unbelief, I started to have Christian faith in my youth and experienced a transformation in life from the world of unbelief to the spiritual world. Based on the personal experiences, this article aims to closely look at how NK defectors were rescued from the world of unbelief and brought into that of belief, with special attention on interactions between faith and self-development.

The universal and dictionary definition of faith is “a state of believing and hoping for,” as a synonym of ‘belief.’ Professor James W. Fowler, renowned for his faith development research, says faith is “a universal condition for human existence” and a process of answering existential questions such as how to organize life and how to make it valuable with which, and thus, faith development is similar to building one’s identity.

The NK social system does not allow freedom of religion, which makes it very hard for the residents to encounter the Christian faith. The third generation succession of Kim Il-sung’s family in a row takes a form of a great religion. This means that for NK defectors, ‘to believe something sincerely’ inevitably accompanies big confusion and conflicts due to their past experiences. Experience of faith completely changes values and directions of one’s past life, and as such experience fills a bowl of ‘self’ of the past, one enters the process of development and sanctification. This article would like to introduce the faith journey mainly focusing on the NK youth. Since faith development goes through stages of promoting lagged psychological development, faith development and self-development can be regarded as complementary.

Faith Opens the Gate of the Second World!

The moment the NK defectors enter into the Christian faith is when the gate of the second world they have rarely experienced —a spiritual world— is thrown open. Life in North Korea where freedom of religion is wiped off and contact with unconsciousness and spiritual aspects is blocked can be seen as living in a one-sided world for survival with a materialistic view that focuses on physical matters only, without showing interest in spirituality or inner self as a creature before the Creator. Along with that, as

idolization of a human god has been promoted, North Koreans have lived almost losing touch with the spiritual world. Furthermore, they went on the journey of defecting from North Korea, prioritizing the lowest level of human needs, survival. However, with thirst and hunger for the spiritual world due to the inherent religiosity in human beings and inner workings to meet one's self, the NK defectors come to face Christian faith in the wake of 'defection' and enter the stage of faith, facing 'an opportunity to open the gate of the second world.'

Accordingly, NK defectors finally look at themselves in the two-sided perspective and start to develop their own faith in the dialectical course of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, opening and building a new world. Surely, NK defectors are not the only ones who are indifferent to the spiritual world. Yet, it is rare to see the whole society promoting utter ignorance of religion like in North Korea. Although many societies in the missionary fields believe in other religions or have no dominant religion, an exodus from North Korea is very meaningful transitions in one's life in that the NK regime itself exhibits the worst religious suppression and controls its people to not show natural interest into the spiritual world. In addition, as entering the world of faith, NK defectors see a time when psychological development once delayed or not solved because of the unstable and dreadful NK society and poor parenting environments(death or divorce of parents, domestic violence, poverty, and extreme control under the NK society) rework in a powerful personal encounter with God.

Strengthening Oneself by Improving A Psychological and Spiritual Constitution

In this sense, the journey of faith development can be regarded as a process of a new psychological and spiritual birth where a complete understanding of one's existence, which was once lost, and self-development take place. This is comparable to a 'digestive process' where food is ingested and absorbed to sustain life and supply nutrients. When likening spiritual activities to food, psychological status to a constitution, digestive capacity depends on one's inner preparation as a bowl to fill spirituality. In opening the closed door of the second world, NK defectors meet astounding spiritual power and tend to be immersed in various action-based spiritual activities (bible reading, recitation, fast prayer, dawn prayer, admission into prayer house and faith training, residence in a Christian community, etc.) to fill the deficiency and needs of the past. This is like one who has weak digestive power tries to eat all kinds of food in a buffet. There is no question that food intake is necessary for life. However, no matter how good the given food is, one must digest it well. To improve a constitution, those whose stomach is unhealthy and have difficulties in digestion must know their own constitution well to supplement their weakness and insufficiency. Many NK defectors have stomach disorders, literally, due to long-sufferings and this is also applied to their psychology and spirituality.

For a good psychological constitution, strong mental power must be built first, which is the aspect of self-development attained in life. Lacking or lagged self-development starts active psychological and spiritual absorption again as spiritual nutrients are supplied like eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus. Still, such nutritional food may not be helpful in accumulating nutrients unless one psychologically prepares himself as a bowl for digestion. The digestive power comes from the stability

of one's inner world and the level of self-development; Only when the psychological constitution is improved, spiritual resources are absorbed and go through interactions which lead to an internalization process of 'becoming one's very blood and flesh.' In some cases, the calling of devotion as an instrument of God for the NK mission is injected through Spartan-style training due to excessive passion without sufficient time to know who God is and what kind of religion Christianity is. Such harmful consequences pose a risk to NK defectors to internalize God as an oppressive, threatening and tyrannical being as what they felt in North Korea before establishing correct understanding and image of God. One young NK defector who entered a Christian university but dropped out several years ago said, "Here is almost the same as North Korea except love. There's nothing in Christianity but love." Since the NK social system has been utilizing religious fundamentals of Christianity for idolization, if the essence is lost from churches and Christian organizations, NK defectors are likely to connect it to their past experiences, without recognizing any difference. Therefore, it calls for special attention to introduce God and churches well when they begin to have faith and to help their sanctification process by joining ('presence') their extremely difficult process of adjustment in South Korean society, not focusing on evangelism only.

Experiencing Frustration and Descent After Immersion and Ascent

In classifying a journey of the faith development of the young NK defectors during the study process, it was found out that after entering the faith, they go through 'immersion and ascent,' and then 'frustration and descent' with heating the bottom, and finally 'integration and growth' with 'identity and balance,' drawing a letter N graph overall. Although it cannot be generalized since it is results of the qualitative study, at least some lessons are drawn from summarizing the experiences of NK defectors the author encountered during interview.

After strong **encountering with God** under His divine providence, NK defectors regard God as an object for complete idealization and experience inflation of ego with emotional elevation, feeling less pain, and life in faith becoming everything, that is, the emergence of the exaggerated self following **religious immersion process**. At this, they may show spiritualization in which everything is interpreted in a spiritual way only. However, this process leads to **frustration and descent** as they feel weary during cultural adaption into the new territory and reality and go through hardships where emotion and relationships are not settled magically. After the "nothing is impossible" period, they enter this "nothing is possible" period. The frustration and descent is a time for humility, which tests the limits of humans with a sinful nature. Thomas Moore calls this phenomenon "Dark Nights of the Soul." As the name implies, NK defectors actually go into a period of deep spiritual slump and darkness. At this stage, spiritual works are manifested, yet they do not bear inner fruits. That is why they fight with others, revealing pathological narcissism. It is also a 'nigredo' period when they occasionally appear to be very faithful from the outside but face frustration and a sense of emptiness inside, experiencing separate aspects of life and more serious pain.

One female NK defector, who is known for her great faith, arrived in South Korea by narrowly

escaping death and losing her father; in the early days, she felt healed of the old sufferings by experiencing deep first love with God. That happiness and exaggerated feeling empowered her to do anything in the world. Every week, she went to all churches that asked her to give a testimony about God she encountered and relentlessly prayed and trained herself, showing a tough spirit. She totally looked like a believer who overcame everything. As time went by, however, she was troubled by difficulties of college study and economic hardships. Especially, the longings for other family in North and harsh loneliness without anyone beside depressed her more and more. On the days when she went out for a testimony, she felt even more empty and cried again and again on her bed at night. At last, few years passed while she dropped out of the school and was completely lost, not knowing what to do. It has been only recently that she came out of it and integrated her faith and life with a sense of reality. Such experiences can give a feeling of endless frustration and discouragement which seem no faith can soothe. When superficially grasping their outer religious appearance only without an integrated understanding of their psychological frustration, suffering, and traumatic mood swings, it is hard to empower NK defectors to pass through the dark nights of the soul. What they need during this process is a safe relationship with mature people who sympathetically manifest God's love, which is unseen. Since many NK defectors experience dissolution, loss, and conflicts in the family that should have been their strong fence, they are in need of psychological and spiritual care from a community with affection to replace family.

Move Forward to Integration and Growth with Identity and Balance

The earlier mentioned psychological and spiritual constitution improvement is made in an affectionate relationship with others who cares for the one. However, would it be easy for NK defectors to engage in a such relationship? To Koreans, the place they form attachments and share affection has been small communities, which are represented by family or a 'faith community' where religious activities are shared. To share affection and experience 'weness' in a relationship, Koreans first need to share time and space for long to have a history to distinguish whether the other is a friend or a foe; this becomes a hurdle to NK defectors. Without any family member left due to family loss and dissolution, nor any local friend or neighbor, they are dispatched to a certain region in South Korea. The most challenging part for NK defectors, who are neither perfect strangers nor South Koreans, is that they find nowhere to be attached in South Korea after arrival. Such attachment requires a long time to be formed and allows one to express oneself and be accepted as a friend and family. Only when engaging in a community and relationships to build that affection, they can enjoy comfort and show their true self. That transitional place enables the progress of self-development which was delayed before. If their psychological exhaustion is settled and satisfied, the digestive process becomes smooth and religious growth is made possible. Also, one can independently choose a growth process that fits himself the most in a spiritual way like being particular about food.

Another study targeting the ministers for NK defectors notes that while the defectors want to engage

in an equal and love-sharing relationship with South Korean Christians, such an opportunity is lacking; Many South Korean churches separate ministries for NK defectors and tend to patronize them. During their journey of faith, NK defectors may seem somewhat insufficient since they are not yet culturally adapted or completed in their faith. However, their strong encounter with God and the religious competence they come to have while entering an unknown world from a completely different world may make new impacts on South Korean churches when their sense of balance and identity are formed after time passes by. In other words, they can be a 'creative core' in the periphery on which they are standing and a transformative being to show how God works in a different way. To get there, however, NK defectors need a safe place for recovery for a certain period. That is because not only their spiritual area but their psychological area also needs self-development simultaneously as a bowl to fill spirituality. The North Korean society does not allow parents to nurture free and healthy children. Therefore, after encountering God, NK defectors need someone ready to patiently wait for them and be with them during a great deal of trouble when they look back on various aspects of their lacking and delayed self-development owing to not receiving the love they needed until they finally reach maturity. As 20 years have passed since the start of defection from North Korea, we see the gradual accumulation of the NK defector ministers who personally experienced such process and know-how of helping them. Nevertheless, if there are people who are yet vague about the journey of life and faith of NK defectors, hopefully this article helps the understanding of the process to bring hospitality toward them and advancements to the unification mission in unity.

North Korean Defectors' Faith Journey and NK Mission

Professor Obanaba (Soongsil Cyber University)

1. Introduction

Conversion does not happen in an instant. From the start to reach conversion, it takes time and requires interactions between various factors. Certain factors cause one's conversion according to life circumstances. Also, unique conversion types happen to appear in such a journey of faith. This also applies to the faith journey of NK defectors.

So far, theories on the conversion of NK defectors seem to not have been established. Above all, their conversion process is dramatic, unique, and special, and accompanies consistent hardships, which sets limits in analyzing it with existing theories on conversion. Accordingly, it requires a study on factors, processes, and types of conversion to fully disclose and make a model of the faith journey of NK defectors.

This article aims to discover factors, processes, and types of conversion of NK defectors to unveil their faith journey overall, utilizing grounded theories. Then, it gives suggestions on the NK mission based on the study results.

2. Faith Journey of NK Defectors

In March 2021, 20 NK defectors were interviewed about their faith journey. After the defection, they converted to Christianity in China, Southeast Asian countries, Russia, and South Korea. The 20 NK defectors (hereinafter referred to as "study participants" or "participants") were formally baptized after receiving certain faith education, and now attending Evangelism-based churches, not heretical or cult churches. The first question was, "How was your life before becoming a Christian?" The second was, "What made you become a Christian?" The third, "What was difficult for you in becoming a Christian?" The fourth, "How did you overcome the difficulty?" The answers were analyzed according to the grounded theory methodology. Since grounded theory methodology can draw concepts from interview data, make upper and subcategories, and set a model, it is suitable for studying faith journey of NK defectors.

Using the grounded theory methodology, 1,242 concepts and 115 subcategories were extracted from interview data. The 115 subcategories converged into 8 upper categories: 'Life before conversion,' 'obstacles in conversion,' 'means to overcome obstacles in conversion,' 'those who affected conversion,' 'special religious experiences,' 'life after conversion,' and 'devotion to God.'

The 8 upper categories need a careful look in that they become important keywords in the faith journey of NK defectors.

First, regarding the 'life before conversion' of the study participants, 221 concepts were drawn out which were then divided into 18 subcategories, of which analysis results showed differences in factors of conversion. Especially, 'life of hardship' faced in North Korea, during the defection from the North, in the third countries, and in South Korea accounted the largest proportion among the factors of conversion. The participants mentioned 'life before conversion' for 130 times in total, of which 'life of hardship' took up 75 times. This implies they were exposed to continued hardship.

Second, from in-depth interviews on 'obstacles in conversion' of the study participants, 143 concepts were drawn out and 22 subcategories were generated. Through this, obstacles in conversion were specifically identified. Most of NK defectors had difficulties related to 'mental problems,' 'unhealthy state of life,' and 'experiences of Christianity.' Among others, the participants mentioned 'obstacles in conversion' 83 times, of which the theme, 'mental problems,' accounted for 35 times. This shows the importance of the theme. While living in North Korea, the study participants learned, developed, and accumulated their own standards, principles, thinking, and perspectives on life. These are all spiritual and although they did not matter before conversion, they became a barrier to conversion. Yet, NK defectors recognized the obstacles in conversion and created a space to understand and accept the form of their own life. They did not deny themselves but reinterpreted it in God. For instance, one of the obstacles in conversion was Juche (self-reliance) ideology education they had received while living in the North. However, as their perspectives switched under God's providence, they realized that Juche ideology rather can be a means to overcome obstacles in conversion.

Third, in terms of 'means to overcome obstacles in conversion' of the study participants, 168 concepts were drawn out to be classified into 24 subcategories. Study analysis results showed varied means to overcome obstacles in conversion. They can be divided into three themes: 'encounter with God,' 'longings for God,' and 'faith building.' The participants talked about means to overcome obstacles in conversion 118 times, of which 75 times were regarding the theme of 'encounter with God.' Through this, it was identified that 'encounter with God' played a major role in NK defectors overcoming obstacles in conversion.

Fourth, regarding the 'reasons for conversion' of the study participants, 55 concepts were deduced and 8 subcategories were created. It was found out the reasons they believe in God are very empirical. This reached the conclusion that NK defectors who actually experienced God's love and grace are very likely to convert. The reasons for conversion were as follows: 'astounding experiences of God,' 'faithfully answered prayers,' 'Christians' love revealing God,' 'faith-building bible,' 'messages that lead to God,' 'powerful experiences of Holy Spirit,' 'miraculous healing cases,' 'happy life eager to live.' These can be classified into different types of conversion of NK defectors.

Fifth, with respect to 'those who affected conversion,' the study participants obtained much assistance from Christians in their journey of conversion. In terms of the ratio, missionaries, pastors, acquaintances, teachers, family, and church members gave help in this order. As such, Christians demonstrate the invisible love of God, and it can be said that they play a key role in the conversion process.

Sixth, 'special religious experiences' can trigger a person to be transferred from hell to heaven, and

thus, has a huge influence. Yet, 'special religious experiences' are under God's sovereignty and we cannot jump to judgment. Notably, in this study, the participants went through 'special religious experiences' but did not pursue such experiences thereafter. After encountering God, they have been attending healthy churches and engaging in religious life while fulfilling the duty of believers.

Seventh, in the 'life after conversion' of the study participants, the keyword was 'change.' It is not made by human efforts but brought with meeting with God. Thus, it can be regarded as valuable. To NK defectors, the shift to a life of faith by overcoming the life of hardships and obstacles in conversion is like undergoing a cataclysmic change. Thus, life changes of NK defectors are the results of conversion and can be a touchstone for judging sincerity of the conversion.

Eighth, the study participants are preparing a devoted life to accomplish the mission and vision granted by God, beyond life changes after conversion. Their devotion reaches various areas including the preparation of a unified Korea, helping the North Koreans by evangelizing the Korean race, and establishing the reign of God in everyday life. In particular, since they experienced God's grace during the past tough life before the devotion, each devotion involves their own confession of faith.

While conducting this study, it was found that the most crucial factor in the conversion of NK defectors is empirical. Also, among types of conversion, empirical factors made a high proportion. NK defectors changed their hearts through an 'encounter with God,' and their conversion process showed a fundamental frame of 'hardship-overcome.' They conquered hardships through the 'encounter with God,' which made a great impact on their conversion.

Based on this, the 'conversion process model' of NK defectors can be summarized as **[Hardships → Encounter with God (Overcoming) → Altar Call → Change → Devotion]**. To put it concretely, NK defectors who had been influenced by Juche ideology and lived a life of suffering in North Korea, tend to convert through an 'encounter with God.' It seems like a universal feature that they got over the hardships through the 'encounter with God.' What's more, they successfully removed obstacles in conversion, experienced life changes, and devoted themselves to God through the 'encounter with God.'

3. Suggestions for the NK Mission

1) Establish a specialized organization to heal the trauma of NK defectors.

The NK defectors the author has met overcame a 'life of hardships' through the 'encounter with God.' Nevertheless, their in-depth interview revealed their wounds and pain from long-suffering. They are still living with memories of hardships and experiencing trauma. To keep getting over hardships amid such circumstances, South Korean churches must stand by them. South Korean churches also need to set up professional institutions to understand, heal, and recover their life of hardships, and nurture ministers who will deal with them well. Building a 'Christian Healing and Recovery Counseling Center' specialized for NK defectors is one example. The institution will become a channel for their healing and recovery, helping them to become children of God and live happy life.

2) Develop a model for the presentation of the gospel that fits NK defectors.

This study shows that NK defectors who were affected by Juche ideology and lived a 'life of hardships' in North Korea tend to convert through the 'encounter with God.' In addition, their overcoming of hardships through the 'encounter with God' on the journey of conversion can be regarded as a generic character. Thus, we need to build up a model to present the gospel to non-believers among NK defectors in the future. We must present the gospel in a way that fits them to be led to conversion. Especially, a gospel presentation model like the Four Spiritual Laws of CCC (Campus Crusade for Christ) that is simple and impactful must be set up to actively spread the gospel to NK defectors.

3) Produce customized Christian content for North Koreans.

We must establish a 'media center for the NK mission,' produce Christian content, and send it to North Korea. Most of the NK defectors the author has met lived a 'life that indirectly experiences South Korea' in the North. As watching South Korean dramas and listening to its music CDs flowed from China into North Korea, they came to realize the reality of South Korea and the fabrication of the NK social system. Ultimately, the realization greatly motivated the defection, making the North Koreans cross Tumen and Yalu Rivers. As such, the media casts a huge influence.

Therefore, it is time for South Korean churches to invest in 'the NK mission through media.' Christian content including movies, dramas, and music with keywords on the gospel and conversion, which consider the circumstances of North Korean people and are highly comparable to commercial content, must be made and stored into USB and various data storage devices to be shipped to the North. Through such efforts, the point of contact to conversion must be increased for at least one more North Korean to experience the Christian content.

To make such Christian content, however, tremendous financial assets and human resources are required. This cannot be borne by one mega-church only. Thus, all denominations must unite together in putting financial investments and recruiting media experts to set up a 'media center for the NK mission' to proceed with the NK mission with a selection and focus strategy.

4) Dispatch the missionaries to where North Koreans are and establish a mission center.

We must strategically dispatch missionaries to the land where North Koreans reside and build a mission center to help them. Since in the third countries like China and Russia, the mission center cannot officially operate under its name, it needs to be disguised as a business, etc. Nine study participants, in their 'life getting to know God,' accepted the gospel with assistance from Korean-Chinese churches and missionaries in China. Also, they met God at mission homes and theological schools set up in the third countries beyond China. What made them hear the gospel, experience God's help in defection, and

finally become God's children was the help from the missionaries. Later, before entering South Korea, they received intensive faith education. At last, this process allowed them to accept the gospel and take deep roots of faith. In this regard, dispatching missionaries to the overseas area where North Koreans are and operating a mission center there can be an alternative style of the NK mission amid the blockade of the direct NK mission.

5) Produce a discipleship training program specialized for North Koreans.

We must design and implement a discipleship training program targeting North Koreans. The nine study participants cleared obstacles in conversion and accepted Jesus Christ through discipleship training programs. They participated in discipleship programs run by alternative schools and each church to gain a foothold for conversion. The discipleship training programs enabled them to develop a Christian identity, learn how to live as God's children, and determine to do so. Yet, there were some cases where NK defectors abandon their faith by giving heart to worldly success when coming to South Korea after accepting the gospel in the third countries. This calls for building a discipleship training program that reflects their circumstances to assist them to live perfectly as His people through practicing God-centered lives.

6) Help alternative schools for Christian North Korean defectors.

South Korean churches must actively support alternative schools for Christian North Korean defectors in terms of finance and human resources. Three of the study participants converted through alternative schools for Christian North Korean defectors. Also, six out of the participants encountered God with love and encouragement from teachers at Christian alternative schools. This proves how significant alternative schools for Christian NK defectors are in evangelism and faith training. Thus, human and financial assets of South Korean churches must be invested in alternative schools for Christian NK defectors, which show high efficiency in spreading the gospel, with the two organizations developing a win-win relationship.

7) Experimental church planting movement

Experimental church planting must continue to rise to build churches in North Korea after unification. Five study participants accepted God through churches. In addition, seven participants met Jesus with love and encouragement from pastors. However, the churches they encountered Jesus were not only for South Korean believers; the place they heard the gospel had a NK mission service department or a NK defector as a senior pastor.

This can be an exemplary model for churches after unification. In other words, the future churches can be divided into one focusing on NK defectors or the other where South and North believers coexist. Even now the two types of church planting are taking place. Yet, it is too early to say each type is

sophisticated and systematized enough. Still, if such a church planting movement continues to boost, models for churches to be erected in North Korea will be set up.

4. Conclusion

No matter how their life circumstances were, NK defectors had in common the hardships in the journey of conversion, and the 'encounter with God' made them conquer the 'life of hardships' and convert. After converting, NK defectors had not only lived a changed life but even matured to devote their life to God. In conclusion, NK defectors who had a tough life under the influence of Juche ideology were inclined to convert through the 'encounter with God.' Their overcoming of hardships through the 'encounter with God' can be seen as a generic character in the journey of conversion.

Hopefully, this study results and its applications will become valuable assets to spread the gospel to NK defectors, and further, to accomplish gospel unification.