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달복판 수기

이끄심-1화

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The Latest Trend and Implications of Christianity Persecution in North Korea

NK Mission Research Institute, Open Doors Korea

At the beginning of 2022, the NK authorities claimed not to have a single COVID-19 confirmed case. Yet, they went through a nationwide Coronavirus spread throughout the year and proclaimed victory over COVID-19 at the year's end. It suggests how eventful the year was for North Korea. The remedy the NK regime came up with amid the hardships was firm control. Under the name of "quarantine," it closed the border. Subsequently, after admitting the occurrence of domestic COVID-19 confirmed cases in May, it carried out high-level blockade measures internally and externally. Also, it legislated Reactionary Ideology and Culture Exclusion Act for thought censorship and cracked down based on the regulations. At this, personal liberty was highly degraded, and many innocent victims were caused.

The reinforced censorship by the NK authorities was indeed threatening to the underground church members. Although the main contents of the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Exclusion Act (or just called 'anti-reactionary thought law') seem to be related to external thoughts, it targeted Christianity and underground Christians both directly and indirectly. Various sources reported that several underground churches already got caught to suffered greatly. Christianity persecution in North Korea has become even more intense since the coronavirus pandemic, over which many are raising concerns.

Specific data on the persecution in North Korea is still under cover. The recent number of NK defectors in South Korea remains the lowest. Consequently, studies on the reality and human rights of North Korea are blocked, which rely heavily on their testimonies. Yet, the lack of data does not mean any decrease or improvement in persecution. The current political directions and implementation of the NK regime rather imply that its anti-Christian stance remains the same.

The influence of COVID-19 is waning significantly. So far, the biggest victim of the pandemic so far is not Christians in South Korea that enjoyed high-end medical infrastructure, economic power, and freedom of religion, but those in NK, who survived the toughest oppression and persecution amid the lack of supplies and medical services. God surely cares for churches and their people in South Korea, but His heart certainly burns more for His children persevering with faith in the North Korean territory. Ushering in the New Year, we would like to cover the related story to remember and pray for our brothers and sisters in North Korea, aligning our hearts with the heart of God.

Stricter Control for the "COVID-19 Quarantine"

During the year 2022, the NK regime maintained its intensified censorship. Since the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the regime's control policy has unfolded in two directions. One is to prevent the spread of infectious disease; the other is to sift out external thoughts and promote ideological purity and political stability. The former includes border closure, movement restrictions, and isolation measures. As widely known, North Korea has insufficient medical infrastructure and is thus unable to provide appropriate diagnosis and treatment of the infection. Accordingly, it implemented complete blockade and control measures for prevention, which constrict economic activities in the private sector to a great extent. As supply imports and traffic between people decreased under control, *jangmadang*(marketplace) dwindled overall, too.

The NK authorities turned the shrinkage of marketplaces against themselves to build up the state-dominated financial system. According to a media press, the regime prohibited marketplaces organized by individuals from running and promoted nationalizing all of them. It also made a move to block private transactions between merchants including personal barber shops, hair salons, homeroom teachers, street food, street vendors, pushcart drivers, and bicycle drivers (people who are paid to transport goods by bicycle or pushcart) and to put them under the command of the state-run organizations such as Convenience Service Office, Food Service Management Office, and Passenger Office. The regime is also observed to install National Food Sale Office to control food and grocery sales at a national level and to restrict food trade between individuals.¹

The movement control under the name of quarantine together with economic hardships and the legislation of the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act led to the disruption of the information flow of the entire society. According to the news from North Korea, even three-to-four-person meetings were subject to rigorous control. Additional checkpoints were installed to control human traffic and for travel and the regime required not only a pass but a certificate of quarantine. Although the movement restrictions or lockdown measures of the NK authorities for COVID-19 quarantine seem inevitable, it was quite worrisome that they justified ideological censorship and suppression of North Korean people.

Mercifully, as the NK regime declared "victory" over COVID-19 in August 2022 and freight train operations between North Korea and China resumed, the strict control-oriented policies are likely to change to some degree. Regarding foreign trade, one media also said that North Korea is importing subsidiary materials for toll processing from China, and its export will be in full swing from 2023.² Internally, the quarantine control might ease, too. Still, the NK regime's

¹ N. Korea, Banned Marketplaces.... Began to Control Food Trade, Chosun Ilb, Mar. 04, 2021, <https://www.chosun.com/politics/north_korea/2021/03/04/YZOFcXxKGZFDtOBM4L7JT6ZU7A/>

² N. Korea, Imports Sub-Materials for Toll Processing from China...Export after Toll Processing in Full

military moves as ceaseless missile launches and gunfire and the resultant ROK-US joint operations are exacerbating military tensions in the Korean peninsula, which is very likely to become the justification for discipline establishment and control under the NK authorities.

Ideological and Cultural Control and Christianity Oppression in North Korea

Legislation and enforcement of the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Exclusion Act in North Korea imply that the reinforced control of the NK authorities does not target COVID-19 quarantine only. It was in December 2020 that the NK regime adopted the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Exclusion Act in the 12th Meeting of the 14th Plenary session of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly. The Act bans the introduction, possession, and circulation of any video or booklet from an external source and even South Korean behaviors or accents. Violators receive up to two higher level punishment compared to the current criminal law in North Korea: imprisonment in a political camp or even capital punishment. While the Act does not directly mention Christianity, Christian items like the Bible and religious activities belong to the target items and behaviors for the stated crackdown, which means Christianity is another main target of the Act. So far, the NK authorities have organized a special squad to control the inflow of foreign media or trends like *Hallyu* ((South) Korean Culture Wave). Yet, it is the first time the regime announced an official Act for the relevant issue.

The NK authorities did not stop at legislating the Act but have unfolding supplementary measures. In February 2021, the NK regime organized 'Combined Enforcement Unit Against Anti-socialism and Non-socialism',³ and further decided permanent establishment of the relevant organization to 'Unified Command 82' four months later.⁴ In September the same year, the NK authorities additionally legislated 'Youth Education Guarantee Act.' North Korean Chosun Central TV reported that the Act consists of five chapters and 45 articles in total, which set out principles to establish socialist way of living for the youth. Especially, it is known to encompass specific penalty clause regarding legal responsibilities in case of violations.⁵

Legislation of new acts and organization of regulatory departments naturally lead to more rigid

Swing Expected Next Year, Daily NK, Dec. 08, 2022, <<https://www.dailynk.com/20221208-3/>>

³ [NEWS Dongseonambook] NK Strengthens 'Battle Against Anti-Socialism'...'Hallyu' Spread to the Executive Ranks, VOA, Mar. 19, 2021, <https://voakorea.com/a/korea_korea-politics_north-korea-1/6057130.html>

⁴ N. Korea Changes 'Combined Enforcement Unit Against Anti-socialism and Non-socialism' to 'Unified Command 82'...Converting to a Permanent Organization?, Daily NK, Nov. 05, 2021, <<https://www.dailynk.com/北-반사·비사연합지휘부-82연합지휘부로-변경>>

⁵ N. Korea, Legislated Crackdowns of 'Anti-socialism of the Gen MZ'...Home Education Mandatory, Yonhap News, Feb. 05, 2022, <<https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220203098800504>>

enforcement of regulations. According to a telephone survey conducted by Unification Media Group targeting 50 residents in North Korea from June to August 2022, more than 80 percent (42 people) of respondents stated they felt more risk to access external information after the border closure between North Korea and China due to the coronavirus pandemic. Seven among them indeed heard or seen the violators taken to a political prison camp.⁶ One video, which seems to have been made for education and propaganda by the NK regime and recently acquired by Chosun Ilbo, reported that extensive monitoring activities such as night patrol are implemented in Pyongyang and about 1,000 residents and students in a certain district confessed their fault.⁷

Christianity-related items or activities are also important subjects of control. In fact, during the random censorship of expatriates after the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bible was one of the main crackdown targets.⁸ Also, there was news that reinforced anti-Christianity education was seen in the harsh critique of Christianity in ideological training of laborers dispatched overseas, etc.⁹ Furthermore, one testified that Christmas was labeled as an iconic anti-socialism culture, and expatriates caught following Christmas culture or celebrating the holiday received punishments as a reactionary.¹⁰

The control and censorship of external culture and ideology by the NK regime are clearly at an unprecedented level interlocking with the quarantine control, suffocating the residents' lives so much. One media analyzed that the number of political prison camps in North Korea increased during the coronavirus pandemic, marking 230,000 as of the middle of 2021 but fell to 200,000 in the same period in 2022 due to the occurrence of deaths attributable to poor environments and torturing.^{11,12} Although clarification on how much the report reflects the reality of North Korea is needed, we may guess that the reign of terror based on excessive control and

⁶ Study on Media Life of 50 NK Residents Published...“Access to External Information Means Imprisonment in a Prison Camp”, RFA, Oct. 18, 2022 <https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/humanitarian-10182022094322.html>

⁷ Hallyu Cleanup Operation in Pyongyang...“Double and Triple Night Patrols, 1,000 People Confessed in One District”, NK Chosun, Dec. 26, 2022, <<http://nk.chosun.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=181285>>

⁸ NK Authorities, Intensified Censorship of Expatriates in China... “Random Domiciliary Visits”, Daily NK, Dec. 22, 2020, <<https://www.dailynk.com/北-당국-중-주재원-대상-검열-강화-불시에-가택-수/>>

⁹ “Defectors First to be Punished After Reunification, Stressed NK During Training for Overseas Dispatched Workers”, Daily NK, May 08, 2021, <<https://www.dailynk.com/통일-후-탈북자-우선-처단-북한-해외-파견-노동자/>>

¹⁰ “N. Korea, Labelled Christmas Iconic Anti-Socialism Culture”, RFA, Dec. 25, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/ne-hm-12242020231709.html>

¹¹ “Imprisoners in Political Camps 232K in Total...23K Increase from March Last Year,” Daily NK, July 27, 2021, <<https://www.dailynk.com/210727-5/>>

¹² Imprisoners in Political Camps in North Korea Declined by 20K Last Year, Daily NK, Aug. 26, 2022, <<https://www.dailynk.com/20220826-5/>>

punishments is committed in North Korea, causing large sacrifices, not to mention aggravated persecution of Christianity.

Time for Korean Churches to Pray and Take Care for Brothers and Sisters in the North

We previously covered the environmental factors of persecution encountered by Christians keeping the faith secretly in North Korea during the pandemic. It lets us know how huge the difficulties North Korea deals with are and how great hardship Christians face there. Nevertheless, since specific persecution case reports declined, we might feel the oppression toward Christians stayed the same or even eased. Unfortunately, however, the once-quiet Christianity persecution in North Korea during the coronavirus period came to unveil as the NK regime reopened its borders little by little and we hear more and more from inside sources. According to the latest report, the NK authorities still maintain harsh persecution of Christians. Some cases of capital punishment due to possession of the Bible or access to media like Jesus movies were reported in detail. Besides, the news of underground churches caught worshipping together in hiding is heard directly and indirectly.

Sadly, despite the rough situation for Christians in North Korea, South Korean churches have lost their zeal for praying and caring for them. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions or churches which had engaged in reunification and the NK mission stopped or withdrew their ministry. Such ministries have not yet resumed even now as we see the end of the pandemic. In informational aspects, the number of North Korean news to the outside saw a sharp decline following a dramatic decrease in the number of NK defectors coming to South Korea, which led to the shrinking attention of South Korean churches toward them.

In 2023, everything that has been put off or stopped must regain vitality. Some argue that the NK mission cannot be done right now (or for a while at least) and that we need to focus on the post-reunification era in the long term, pointing to the not-ended COVID-19 pandemic in overseas countries. Although preparation for reunification is essential, it may make us turn away from the faithful Christians in North Korea in difficulties and postpone our mission of this time granted by God.

Above all, overseas mission environments are rapidly improving. Although the mission field of North Korea experienced longer-than-expected quarantine control owing to the lockdown of North Korea and the zero-corona policy of China and the like, now we see changes to come in their policy directions. After being plagued by a nationwide spread of the infection, the NK authorities are alleviating the concerns and showing a move to resume foreign trade and recover the economy. Similarly, China once maintained the former policy direction of zero-corona after Xi Jinping's 3rd term but started to change its policies watching public unrest such

as the 'White paper' protests. Currently, it is shifting its policy stance to support 'With COVID-19' policies faster than expected by interrupting isolation or closure measures. Many elements considered barriers and obstacles are seeing improvements. Things are not what they used to be before the pandemic, but the door is open little by little.

Some say the antonym of 'love' is not 'hatred' but 'indifference.' It is time for South Korean churches and Christians to rebuild the altar of prayers for North Korea, especially for our faithful brothers and sisters suffering from the world's most extreme persecution. That would be the least we could do to prove our faith as God's children who are first loved and share His love.

Christianity Persecution Trends in North Korea During Kim Jong-un Era and What We Should Do

Dr. Lee Seungju

(Former Head of North Korean Human Rights Watch Headquarters, NKDB)

As North Korea closed its borders for COVID-19 quarantine, we lost track of Christianity persecution there. Until then, many Christians in North Korea used to cross the border to visit China to get food or to make money and return to their country. That was how they lived off, holding the gospel as a believer. However, such activities are now restricted. Also, mission activities in China seem to have shrunken during the pandemic. As the activities in China, 'Contact Zone,' wither, no activity is brought into North Korea, and no information comes out. Amid difficulties in confirming new cases or data of Christianity persecution in North Korea, this article aims to set up future directions of Christianity in North Korea by inferring the current NK situations and summarizing relevant factors based on the patterns of 'Persecution' before.

Thae Yong-ho, former North Korean deputy ambassador to the United Kingdom, remarked that the most dreadful religion in North Korea is Christianity in his interview with Chosun Ilbo in May 2018.¹³ Since the inauguration of Kim Jong-un, Christianity persecution seems to have intensified. After the North Korean leader commanded, "Arrest people who contacted Christianity," China has been active in apprehending NK Christians.

The leadership change did not make a new move to alleviate Christianity persecution. It may be because the influence of Christianity will collapse the dictatorship that worships the Kim Family as idols. In North Korea, numerous statues of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jung-il are erected. Besides, the regime forces idolatry by hanging pictures of the two Kims and bowing their knee to them every morning and evening. The principal agent of the idolatry is the Party, and the violators receive a penalty. That is, the succession is at the center of Christianity persecution.

Life-threatening Religious Activities

According to '2018 White Paper on Religious Freedom in North Korea' published by NKDB(Database Center for North Korean Human Rights), deaths marked 17 percent of the persecution cases, which amounts to one fifth of the total. In overall, religious persecution showed a low survival rate. Survival without casualties was only 22 percent.

¹³ Kim, Hyeongeun BBC Korea, "NK and Christianity... the Start of Relationship or Ill-fated Relationship", September 19, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/korean/news-45507082>

Then what are the punishments? Regarding the penalties when caught engaging in religious activities, half of the respondents answered imprisonment in a political prison camp. The '2019 International Religious Freedom Report' by the U.S. State Department said 80,000 to 120,000 people are confined to political prison camps in North Korea, a considerable number of which are due to religious reasons.¹⁴

The imprisonment interlocks with 'Class.'¹⁵ Being a 'Political Prisoner' means that the relevant Christian and his/her family is degraded to the socially excluded class, labeled counter-revolutionaries, and restricted to live in a particular region under monitoring. In the past, the NK authorities carried out group expulsion of Christians immediately. Most were expelled to mountainous regions around North Hamgyong Province. The fall in social class brought residence change due to banishment and poorer social treatment in food rationing and educational level, etc.

According to the survey, 11 percent were sentenced to imprisonment in reeducation labor camps (Kyo-hwa-so) after a formal trial and 3 percent in labor training centers, which was the lowest level of punishment. The problem is that when caught in religious activities, the suspects experience more severe human rights violations during the investigation. The damages they suffer from custody, imprisonment, and questioning are significant, and some even encounter the same inflictor during the entire process. Accordingly, they enter the next detention facility with shattered health and often meet death there.

Korea Future Initiative¹⁶ reported that even under custody, serious human rights violations are committed against prisoners arrested for religious behaviors or religion. For instance, when an inmate in the detention center in Onseong County, North Hamgyong Province, prayed, others in the same cell attacked him as a mob in fear of potential damages.

Trends of Public Execution of Christians and Following Events During the Pandemic

Open Doors argued that North Koreans that had worshiped secretly got executed, leaving their families arrested in April 2022.¹⁷ A report by KFI also mentioned 20 cases of capital

¹⁴ Christianity in North Korea: Bible Possession Considered Spying..." Persecution on Religious People, More Intensified Violation of Human Rights", December 12, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/korean/news-46534793>

¹⁵ In the resident re-registration project from 1967 to September 1970, Christians were assigned type number 42, subject to ordinary and special monitoring.

¹⁶ A documentary by KFI, <Reality of Violations of Religious Freedom in North Korea>, stories of 76 people still under the punishment system in North Korea were disclosed with testimonies of 273 victims.

¹⁷ Senior reporter Kim Illeok, "Open Doors, 'N. Korea Executed Residents Secretly Worshipping-Arrested

punishment for faith.¹⁸ Specifically, it pointed out four cases of the death penalty of Christians for Bible possession and the like. Some witnessed watching a tragic public execution in front of about a thousand people in the Musan marketplace. In the case of public execution, the name of a crime was disclosed to alert people; many times, one person was found to have suffered various religious persecution.

Subjects to punishment consist of religious rites, religious activities in China, possession of religious-related items, or encounters with religious people. The victims of persecution are punished regardless of sex, with women and girls marking 60 percent of the total.¹⁹ Among the cases are a three-year-old child and an old man over 80. The level of religious persecution in North Korea during the coronavirus pandemic has not changed even a bit, still showing high severity.

How They Are Usually Caught

Crackdowns on religious behaviors are implemented following the plans of the central national organization.²⁰ During this process, national institutions commit illegal acts such as arbitrary arrests, assaults, and a demand for bribery. The activities of the security agencies are carried out in secret, and informants are planted among citizens to monitor people's movements.

It is expected that religious activities originally carried out secretly have gone further into the shadows due to COVID-19. In ordinary times, large numbers of search and surveillance are implemented not only among neighbors but also among family members through routine search.²¹ When this discovery is made, the entire family primarily suffers a decline in social

Their Families", April 7, <http://www.spnews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=50989>

¹⁸ KFI's report lists dozens of violation cases based on experiences from 1990 to 2019, which include 36 cases of family punishments, 36 of torture, and 20 of capital punishment.

¹⁹ Christian Today, "Christianity Persecution in North Korea Testified by 117 Christians", August 17, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/august/north-korea-persecution-christians-human-rights-report-kr.html>

²⁰ As a result of class check on residents from 1958 to the early 1960s under the name of 'Intensive Guidance by the Central Party,' Christians were purged and imprisoned in concentration camps. In addition, Christians and their families were classified as anti-revolutionary; their residence was limited to special areas and they were classified as special monitoring subjects. As part of the deportation project, they were exiled to mountainous areas, too.

²¹ In August 1962, through the decision of the 4th Plenary Meeting of the 4th Central Party, "On further strengthening communist education" and in May 1967, through the decision of the plenary meeting of the Central Party, "On further strengthening the education work for the establishment of the monolithic ideological system of the Party", North Koreans were encouraged to actively participate in the search for underground Christians and churches, and schools were also required to report their parents' Christian activities.

class. Secondly, they are classified into those subject to incarceration and deportation. Next, constant surveillance and labor follow. The international community pointed out North Korea's State Security Department and Ministry of Social Security (formerly the Ministry of People's Security), the Chinese Public Security Service, and the Border Patrol as organizations related to religious persecution in North Korea. In the past, China's top leaders used to place the blame for religious suppression on local officials themselves.²² Article 7(1) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) regards widespread and systematic murder, extermination, enslavement, torture and persecution as crimes against humanity. Even if Kim Jong-un did not directly command these actions, if he does not eliminate these acts of obliteration occurring in the regime, he is subject to punishment for superiors and instigators in the Rome Statute of the ICC.

Factors Influencing Religious Activities in North Korea

The Workers' Party of North Korea insists that Christianity, not only from an ideological and philosophical point of view, was used as a means of the US imperialism's invasion of Joseon (or Chosun, the name of former dynasty before Japanese colonization. North Koreans still usually call Korea as Joesun.) and justifies the suppression of Christianity. The NK authorities insist that the U.S. is still using Christian missions as bait to collapse the North Korean socialist system, so they must be vigilant against it and fight to stop their insidious subversive activities.²³ Nevertheless, it seems that North Korea is also looking at religion with a focus on 'Practical Interests.' In the past, Christianity was linked only to 'Anti-Americanism' and its oppression was emphasized. However, the NK regime now shows a move to continue religious exchanges due to the national need for outside support. Usually, religious exchanges lead to international support. That is why the NK authorities remain open to the outside world despite ideological disagreement over religion and suppression of civil society.

So far, openness to religion at the national level has not found contact with civil society. Clearly, if the community surrounding religion changes, the cognitive topography around

²² Translated by Oh Seonghun, 『Christian Persecution in China』, Holiness and Ministry/Recent Trends in World Churches (3). Documents collected about it at the time documented 22,000 testimonies, and is nearly 10 feet tall. These are indeed a staggering number of cases. It included court copies, internal documents of the Chinese government, and photographs.

²³ The NK authorities claim that during the Korean War, Christian pastors and Christians committed anti-party and anti-state crimes as spies for the US imperialist invasion force. Kang In-deok, former Minister of Unification, "Why North Korea oppresses Christianity so severely," January 28, 2019, https://www.rfa.org/korean/weekly_program/bd81d55c-b178b3d9b2f9-ac04bd80b4e4c5d0ac8c/sendletter-01282019094203.html

Christianity can change. Currently, the North Korean church does not exist as a physical place, but anywhere such as a mountain or a private house where people are rare is becoming a secret church. This phenomenon does not abate, nor does stop, even as arrests of Christians increase markedly. According to '2018 White Paper on Religious Freedom in North Korea', among the respondents who defected from North Korea before 2000, only 14 people had the experience of reading the Bible, but after 2000, the number reached 518 people.²⁴ It is speculated that many North Koreans are wary of Christianity due to the party's suppression of religious activities and distorted perceptions. Even in the current situation where people cannot carry a bible and religious activities are only available through secret point organizations, seeing North Koreans in difficult situations choose to have faith, it is clear that religion has power.

The Barrier of Perception that 'Contact' Breaks Down

North Koreans are cautious about religion because the risk of punishment for criminals related to religion constantly exists in society. The Nk society takes the most severe crime related to religion. Bongsu and Chilgol Churches were set up in downtown Pyongyang for propaganda purposes, but a case in point is that a North Korean citizen was taken to the People's Security Office (police, now the name of department changed to the Ministry of Social Security), and severely tortured just because he roamed around these churches without permission from the authorities. Then, what is the power to have faith and make it firm? Acts of propagating the Bible and religion secretly within North Korean society must proceed differently from ordinary contact methods for religion.

First is to tackle the harsh reality in North Korea. People open their hearts as religion repeats aid and support in overcoming their own economic difficulties. In the beginning, physical support is provided with the sacrificial and altruistic actions of the missionaries, which are then deeply rooted in the hearts of the North Korean people and arouse curiosity about the religion. Some testified that they came to believe Christianity after reminded of the 'Words of the Bible' while escaping from North Korea or in danger of forced repatriation.²⁵ The majority of the defectors escape North Korea with the help of Christian missionaries. Some say that nine out of ten

²⁴ BBC News Korea, "22% chance of survival if caught engaging in religious activities in North Korea... 'Human rights violation serious'", BBC News Korea, February 15, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/korean/news-47254919>

²⁵ The contents of the interview with Kim Joseph, a North Korean defector, are as follows: "Starting from that village in the far north of China, I walked on and on to Yanji and then to Tumen. I wandered here and there until I found another church. On the wall of the second church I finally arrived, these words were written: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.' It felt as if someone was saying directly to me, 'I know how exhausted and desperate you are.'" Kim Joseph, "Escape from North Korea," Christian Today, June 6, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/june-web-only/how-i-escaped-north-korea-kr.html>

received this kind of help. When they are in crisis and a serious problem arises, they are moved by the helping hand. Such assistance and love must continue to be given to the North Koreans, and in particular, sincerity must be revealed through the person who provides this kind of help.

Let's Plant New and Correct Values

In addition to support for missionary purposes based on this physical aids other aspects need to be considered. It is the fact that the contents of faith and the words of the Bible have a great influence on awakening their perception. According to one witness, the Bible plays a pivotal role in introducing new values and concepts that cannot be heard in North Korean society. He states, "They tell you to love your enemies... (omitted) Through them I learned that their beliefs are completely contrary to what I was told in North Korea."²⁶ In North Korean society, emotional satisfaction is hard to be achieved due to economic hardships, and only one-way communication takes place, injecting political ideology, anti-American ideology, and a hostile stance toward South Korea through all media and political education time. Among them, the contents advocated at the national level also have distortions different from the truth. Since people can now contact the outside world indirectly through the influx of external information, a natural 'Comparison Group' is formed in their perception. Accordingly, North Koreans are likely to want to know new ideas and values. In 2018, a 38-year-old man got confined in the detention center of the National Security Department in North Pyongan Province. A prison guard looked into the cell and asked, "Why did you commit the thing the State banned?" The prisoner guilty of possessing the Bible replied, "I just wanted to know by myself what it is." If the right values bring awareness of hypocrisy and lies in the North Korean society, it will be enough for each heart of North Koreans to open.

²⁶ JAYSON CASPER, "Persecution Against Christians in North Korea as Testified by 117 Believers", August 17, 2022, Christian Today, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/august/north-korea-persecution-christians-human-rights-report-kr.html>

Persecution of Christians in North Korea and the Mission of the Korean Church

Rev. Peter Jung(President of Justice For North Korea(JFNK))

Today, the NK human rights issue can be said to be a matter of freedom of thought, expression, and religion. The persecution of Christians in North Korea is very serious. Among the types of human rights violations in the country, Christians are the most severely and terribly persecuted. In 2014, the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on human rights emphasized the issues of freedom of thought, expression, and religion in North Korea, citing reports that 40 to 60 percent of the victims at North Korea's initial Total Control Zone were Christians. The COI pointed out that the country is thoroughly monopolizing information to establish a system of absolute obedience to the Supreme Leader. In particular, it was said that the NK authorities brainwashed residents from a young age, strictly forbade independent ideology, conscience, freedom of expression and religion through monitoring of privacy, and enforced suppression of Christianity. In addition, North Koreans are discriminated against in housing, occupation, study, rations, and marriage from the time they are born due to the family background system. It is said that various serious human rights violations are committed by strengthening the regime through this discriminatory system.

The biggest mechanism for regulating the people of North Korea is ideology control based on Juche ideology. The NK authorities maintain their dictatorial hereditary system for the third generation through ideological theories unparalleled in other countries. It was in the 1980s that North Korea's current Juche ideology was established. In a word, it can be called 'the Great Leader theory': The leader Kim Il-sung is the brain of an infallible creature, and the masses of people can be given life by being loyal to him. The party is equipped with a so-called religious system that inherits eternal life by forming a trinity between the leader, the party, and the masses of the people, which is the nervous system of life.

Another mechanism that controls the North Koreans is the operation of political prison camps—also called *Kwanliso* or revolutionary zones—which are said to be the core of the reign of terror. In the 1950s and 1960s, upon the establishment of the Kim Il-sung dictatorship, the opposing forces were accused of being anti-party, anti-revolutionary, and sectarianism, and sent to concentration camps such as the Deukjang coal mine area in Bukchang County, South Pyongan Province. Afterward, by 1970, about 70,000 people from 15,000 households belonging to the hostile class were deported to mountainous areas through the Resident Background Check, and many deported areas were operated as political prison camps.

Until 1958, the NK regime politically suppressed and purged Christians to completely exterminate them. The NK authorities imprisoned some Christians in *Kwanliso* (political prison camps) with the words, "We will show you whether your God wins or communism wins." Even in 1967, Kim Il-sung gave instructions to equate acts of Christian faith with acts of superstition, continuously hunted down underground Christians, and sent them to political prison camps.

The 1970s and 1980s were a period of idolization of Kim Il-sung and the establishment of a succession system for Kim Jong-il. During this period, Christians, intellectuals, Korean Japanese repatriated to North Korea, people from South Korea and abductees, defectors to North Korea, diplomats and students studying abroad, who were critical of the hereditary succession system or potential threats were imprisoned in the camps. Underground Christians in North Korea were arrested for defending their faith, branded as political prisoners, and sent to the camps or secretly executed.

Political prison camps are places where people cannot come out even after death. It confines not only the person stigmatized as a political prisoner but also their family members in the implicative system. When taken to the camps, underground Christians were treated inhumanely from then on. They had to suffer all sorts of torture and cruelty and experienced a human living hell where they could only survive by eating snakes, rats, and wild vegetables and anything due to starvation. In particular, some testified that Christians were classified as special treatment targets and imprisoned separately to be used as subjects for biological and chemical experiments and as teaching aids for special military training.

The NK authorities falsely propagated to the outside world that freedom of religion was allowed, enticed Christians and pastors living abroad to enter North Korea, and disguised it as if there was freedom of religion in the society. In 1987, Kim Jong-il, who took over the regime through hereditary succession, opened the Faculty of Religion at Kim Il-sung University to create departments for Christianity, Buddhism, and Catholicism, and recruited students with good social background as party members. The purpose of opening the seminary was to publicize a good image of North Korea's freedom of religion to the outside world, facilitate external relations, and receive support from overseas Christian organizations and the international community. The workers of all these religious propaganda activities were those who had graduated from the Religious Department of Kim Il-sung University and belonged to the NK Security Department or the Unification Propaganda Department. However, in reality, what students of the Christian Faculty did after graduation was to search for and investigate Christians in North Korea. They even took on special tasks by disguising themselves as underground Christians to hunt down Christians and send them to prison or concentration camps.

Among the remnant believers in North Korea with the inheritance of the Christian faith of their ancestors before communization were those who still retained or maintained faith in their hearts, avoiding the surveillance of the NK authorities even when their background was differentiated through the resident background check project. Many remnant believers were martyred, sent to concentration camps, or exiled to labor camps (Kyo-hwa-so) deep in the mountains. Although some of them got released by Kim Il-sung's amnesty in 1972, almost all of the underground Christians imprisoned in political prison camps(Kwan-li-so) or reeducation prison (Kyo-hwa-so) suffered terrible persecution and even died as subjects of living experiments.

It was specifically confirmed that remnant believers and underground Christians were alive in North Korea by the defectors who escaped during NK's Arduous March in the 1990s. At that time, it is estimated that 3 million died of starvation, and more than 300,000 people escaped out of North Korea. During this period, Korean missionaries and activists living in China and doing missionary work took care of the defectors with the Chinese Korean churches under the surveillance of Chinese public security. Among them were descendants of remnant believers who carried on the legacy of the gospel spread in Joseon(Chosun) Dynasty Era. Then, more than 80% of NK defectors in China were exposed to the gospel and gained faith through Korean missionaries and pastors.

However, countless defectors were arrested by Chinese public security and forcibly repatriated to North Korea. During interrogation, Chinese security officers recorded in the report if they were found to be Christians, and with this report, they were forcibly repatriated to North Korea. The Security Department (Ministry of State Security(MSS), North Korean government intelligence agency) in North Korea interrogated the defectors classified as Christians in isolation from other prisoners and sometimes executed them without any legal process or trial.

The first interrogation was about whether they had ever attended a church in China or met a Korean missionary or pastor. According to the testimonies of the defectors who had experienced forced repatriation, admitting to any of these questions during the investigation brought more severe investigations. When Christian-related activities were found, they were separated from other prisoners and even secretly executed or sent to reeducation labor camps or political prison camps. The trained professional investigators usually carried out the interrogation. They used extreme torture to make the subjects reveal the names, activities, and locations of underground Christians.

The believers who secretly live a religious life and keep their faith even after being forcibly repatriated to North Korea and barely surviving long punishment are called New Underground Christians (by the author). In 2005, when the New Underground Church spread in North Korea and Christian information flowed, Kim Jong-il ordered the increase of public executions and political prison camps to prevent the defectors and the spread of Christian ideology. However,

North Koreans who came in contact with Christianity, through the gospel of Jesus Christ and the experience of the Holy Spirit, boldly rejected the false Juche ideology and Kim Il-sung's idol dictatorship, kept their faith, and were martyred. Even today, they are spreading the Christian faith and the message of the gospel to their families and relatives despite the severe persecution by the NK authorities.

Although North Korea propagates externally that it has freedom of religion, underground Christians are still arrested, secretly and publicly executed, and persecuted in political prison camps. Even under the Kim Jong-un regime, North Koreans were taken overnight without trial and sent to political prison camps or executed just because they had the bible. They were also subject to execution simply because they escaped from North Korea and went to church in China. Forced abortion of pregnant women with Chinese men and even the killing of living infants with military boots were frequently committed. Yet, defections from North Korea continue, and the activities of the New Underground Christians have not stopped. As an excuse, the NK authorities and the Security Department are disclosing Christians by holding fake prayer meetings or infiltrating fake believers into underground churches to prevent their clandestine religious activities inside North Korea.

Several international Christian organizations conducted investigations on freedom of expression, thought, and religion in North Korea and reported to the United Nations and relevant international organizations. It said that the NK authorities charged Christians with subversion and espionage, interrogated and executed them without due process, sent them to illegal detention facilities, and imprisoned them collectively in closed spaces. Assuming that the entire group of people who were imprisoned from the time of Kim Il-sung, including Christians, lost their lives in concentration camps. It is considered as a subject of research and investigation in the international community whether this can fall under the current international law of genocide or similar international crimes.

From the beginning to the present, the NK regime has been attempting to dismantle the entire organization of Christianity and annihilate it collectively. In particular, according to the testimonies of the defectors from political prison camps, such as Ahn Myeong-Cheol, the former guard of a concentration camp and author of 'Total Control Zone,' and Kim Young-Soon, the former prisoner of Yodeok Prison Camp 'Revolutionary Zone,' the biggest fear is that in the event of a regime change in North Korea, prisoners detained in closed areas such as political prison camps may be massacred at once to cover up crimes.

The Korean church must stay awake and pray for the freedom of religion in North Korea. Only when we know the seriousness of freedom of religion in North Korea and understand North

Korea rightly can we carry out correct NK missions. For North Korea to change into a correct system, first of all, we must pray and take action so that North Korea's human rights issues are improved and freedom of religion is allowed. In addition, the NK authorities must stop violating the human rights of Christians and immediately allow religious activities guaranteed by the constitution according to the universal values of human beings, following the recommendations of the international community.

If the Korean church prays for improving the NK human rights and freedom of religion, those of persecuted Christians in North Korea will be restored and the door to the NK missions will fully open. Our action for the freedom of religion and human rights in North Korea is to repay the debt of love that the Korean churches experienced in revival through the seeds of the gospel that fell in North Korea in the early days. For us to remember the persecuted North Koreans is also to share in the suffering and persecution of Christ. It should be our answer to the question Jesus addressed, "Who is the neighbor of the man who fell among the robbers?"

God laid the foundation for the international community for the evangelical reunification of the Korean Peninsula by extracting the NK defectors for the freedom and salvation of North Koreans. We must now think of the NK missions with reflection on God's Word, holiness and justice and first consider those who are imprisoned and persecuted (Hebrews 13:3). "But the LORD Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will be proved holy by his righteous acts(Isaiah 5:16)."