

Beset from within, beleaguered from without: North Korea's catacombs in an era of extermination

Tim A. Peters

Historical precedents of internal and external persecution in Korea

The Korean Peninsula has for centuries been the stage for both the remarkable growth of Christian faith as well as iron-fisted suppression. The introduction of the Roman Catholic faith to Korea is unique in that it occurred not by the arrival of a foreign missionary on Korean soil, but through Matteo Ricci and his fellow Jesuits' influence on emissaries of the Joseon Dynasty during the Koreans' tributary journeys to China's imperial capital in the early 17th Century.¹ Books on the Christian faith that Ricci entrusted to an emissary on his first encounter became the seedbed of faith to a growing study circle of the aristocratic and scholarly *yangban* in the diplomat's native land. Over time word trickled down to the eager ears of the less privileged classes of a God who cared for the poor and vulnerable. Alarmed at the profusion of this new and foreign doctrine, Joseon's King Yeongjo in 1758 attempted to stamp out this new creed by pronouncing the Catholic faith "an evil practice"² that threatened social stability. The three-quarters of a century that followed the outlawing of the Catholic faith witnessed periodic religious crackdowns, including the brutal Sinyu (1800) and Kilhae (1831) Massacres of Catholic believers by Joseon kings. Despite the fierce state opposition to their faith, the number of Korean Catholics grew to nearly 13,000 during the reign of King Cheoljong who showed unusual tolerance.³

Protestant missionaries who arrived in Korea during the last two decades of the 19th Century found fertile soil for their preaching of a heavenly gospel and a down-to-earth emphasis on both education and social welfare.⁴ This missionary movement found its full blossom in the "Great Revival of 1907," a spark that was first struck in the Methodist congregations of Wonsan, burst into flames among the Presbyterians in Pyongyang,⁵ and then grew into a prairie fire of faith across the Korean Peninsula with a special fervency in the northern region. Once again, persecution came fast on the heels of an explosion of faith. The Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910 foreshadowed another era of official suppression of the Christian faith, one which reached a crescendo in the late 1920s and 1930s as increasingly iron-fisted Japanese governors-general sought to bring the Korean population into the "benevolent fold of the Tenno (Japanese Emperor)"⁶, alternately referred to as 'Arahigotami,' *a god who is a human being*. Korean pastors and their congregations were forced to appear before a Shinto shrine and publicly declare their loyalty to Emperor Hirohito. Imprisonment and torture were common punishments for those who resisted; scores of churches were burned when

¹ Yongdok Kim, "Yi Chosun-After Hideyoshi": in (no eds. listed) *Korea, Its Land, People and Culture of All Ages* (Seoul: Hakwon-sa Ltd, 1960), 61.

² *New World Encyclopedia*, "Yeongjo of Joseon/Successful Economic Policy», Frank Kaufmann (ed), www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Yeongjo_of_Joseon

³ Kim, *Korea, Its Land*, 64-65.

⁴ *Korean Report*, vol.3-4, (Korean Information Office, Embassy of Korea, 1963), 241.

⁵ Donald N. Clark, *Living Dangerously in Korea: The Western Experience 1900-1950* (Norwalk CT: EastBridge, 2002) 38-39.

⁶ Isop Hong, "The Modern Period (1910-1945)": in *Korea: Its Land*, 98.

congregations refused to submit to the Shinto shrines.⁷

Inconclusive discussions in early 1945 among Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin at the Yalta Conference left the fate of post-World War II Korea unclear. Months later, the stroke of a pen on a US State Department map marked out a divided Korea at the 38th Parallel. Intended to be but a temporary measure, this fateful line inadvertently launched the ever-diverging trajectories of the two Koreas for the next seven decades.⁸ In 2015, the two Koreas share a common language and set of family surnames, yet after 70 years of division they are barely recognizable in social and economic terms as having shared a common history of 5,000 years.⁹ The Republic of (South) Korea has grown into an open and democratic society, rising from the ashes of the Korean War to one of the leading economies on the globe despite its modest size and distinct shortage of natural resources.¹⁰ Its functioning, sometimes raucous, democracy is made up of a citizenry that exercises a full range of human rights and is home to vibrant Protestant and Catholic Christian faith communities that together comprise roughly 25-30% of the total population.¹¹ The contrast with North Korea could not be starker.

Beset within: Systematic and ruthless treatment of religious believers

From the very formation of the Democratic People's Republic of (North) Korea (DPRK) in 1948 under the leadership of Kim Il Sung, people of faith were viewed with great distrust and suspicion. Kim, whose mother and father were both devout believers, undoubtedly was aware of the explosive potential of Christian revival to transform society given what had transpired in Pyongyang and Wonsan 41 years earlier.¹² To what degree these accounts of 1907 may have fueled his crackdown on religion is not precisely known. What is clear is that Kim Il Sung lost no time in punishing clergy in labor and re-education camps, uprooting Christians from their residences, relocating them to different regions of the country (often to North Hamkyoung Province, known as North Korea's 'Siberia'), and simply killing others.¹³

From the beginning, North Korea's suppression of religion and its outright persecution of Christians have not been part of some hidden agenda, nor a secret policy of the state or its Workers Party. Absolute and relentless indoctrination to dissuade religious believers from their faith was the initial phase ordered by Supreme Leader Kim Il Sung. Secondly, religious leaders found to be engaged in "counterrevolutionary or anti-state activities [had to] be punished in accordance to

⁷ James H. Grayson. "Christianity and State Shinto in Colonial Korea: A Clash of Nationalisms and Religious Beliefs" (*DISKUS* Vol.1 No.2 Center for Korean Studies, University of Sheffield, 1993), 13-30.

⁸ Jinwung Kim, *A History of Korea: From "Land of the Morning Calm" to States in Conflict* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 365.

⁹ Thomas J. Belke, *Juche: A Christian Study of North Korea's State Religion* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Book Co., 1999), 35

¹⁰ Sung-hee Jwa, *The Evolution of Large Corporations in Korea: A New Institutional Economics Perspective of the Chaebol* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2002), 1.

¹¹ Donald L. Baker, *Korean Spirituality* (University of Hawaii Press: 2008), 4.

¹² Mike Kim, *Escaping North Korea* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield: 2008), 122.

¹³ Robert Collins, *Marked for Life: Songbun, North Korea's Social Classification System* (Washington D.C.: The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea: 2012), 79.

related laws;” an ominous category of “targets of dictatorship” was designated for those clergy who stiffened their backs against reform by the Workers Party.¹⁴ Kim Il Sung himself publicly declared in 1962 to the Social Security Agency in the bluntest of terms, “we cannot move into becoming a communist society if we have those religious people. For that reason, we tried all religious leaders above deacons and executed them...lay people were put to labor when they changed their belief or were locked up in prison; [and] when they did not...we executed all of them in 1958.”¹⁵

As subsequent examples painfully illustrate, state-sponsored repression of Christianity and the brutal persecution of its adherents have not changed since Kim Il Sung’s blunt pronouncement 53 years ago. This reality is punctuated by the classification of North Korea as the world’s worst governmental persecutor of Christians for the past 13 consecutive years by the respected international agency, Open Doors’ *World Watch List*.¹⁶

A handful of former inmates of North Korea’s *Kyohwaso* (Ordinary Prison Camp) #12 at Jeong-gori have been among the large number of refugees assisted along the so-called ‘Asian underground railroad’ by our non-governmental organization (NGO). This prison is noteworthy in that it houses a relatively high number of inmates imprisoned directly due to their Christian faith. Strategic NGO logistical support, in cooperation with other activists, has enabled a number of former prisoners to make their way to freedom and share with the world the ordeal of North Korean detention. Our charity was not directly involved in the specific escape of Chae Yong-sik, the source of the following testimony; nevertheless, his story is representative of other former inmates from *Kyohwaso* #12 Prison. Mr. Chae’s account deals specifically with the “crime” of being a Christian in North Korea:

One day in August of 1998, about 40 prisoners of a farm work unit were on their way to the fields at dawn. It was still quite dark. The weary workers came across a strange bag lying in the middle of the road. Opening the large bag, they found a human corpse wearing a red shirt. The prisoners immediately identified the deceased as Kim Ju-won, the Christian prisoner, who had been given a red shirt by his sister during a family visit. The prisoners remembered that Kim had recently been called out at night some days previously, ostensibly for reassignment to another prison.

A number of executed prisoners’ bodies had been carried away at night for burial upon the more remote hilly area of the prison camp. One of the primitive body bags had apparently tumbled unseen from a truck or cart carrying victims of secret executions to the disposal area for prisoners’ corpses. The discovery of the strangled body of their fellow prisoner and persecuted Christian, Kim Ju-won, in the distinctive red shirt, was soon whispered from prisoner to prisoner, thereby quickly exposing the prison’s secret executions, making them common knowledge among a wide circle of inmates.¹⁷

A female former inmate of *Kyohwaso* #1 Prison at Kaecheon provided her testimony at a UN Commission of Inquiry hearing and explained that she was “sent to prison for expressing her Christian religion, [and] was punished 10 times with solitary confinement during her seven years of detention. She was also assigned to pull the cart used to remove excrement from the prison latrines. Several times the guards made her lick off the excrement that had spilled over in order to humiliate

¹⁴ In-duk Kang, “North Korea’s Policy on Religion,” (*East Asian Review*, 7:1995), 94-95.

¹⁵ Korean Bar Association, *2008 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* (Seoul: Korean Bar Association Subcommittee on Human Rights in North Korea, 2008), 133.

¹⁶ Daniel Ottenberg, *World Wide Watch List 2015* (Harderwijk: Open Doors International: 2015) <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/north-korea/>.

¹⁷ Sang Hun Kim, *Eyewitness: A Litany of North Korean Crimes Against Humanity* (Seoul: NKHR: The 3rd Way: 2012), 82.

and discipline her.”¹⁸

Beleaguered from without: Christian refugees and the ‘Russian roulette’ of China’s illegal forcible repatriation policy of DPRK escapees

Tens of thousands of North Korean refugees live in fear and hiding throughout China. Driven by famine and an oppressive social system, a growing stream of North Koreans drained from every current of North Korean society risk their lives to furtively cross the Tumen River and Yalu River borders to China. For the fortunate few who evade capture by border patrols on the adjoining riverbanks, the mirage of China as a safe haven quickly fades in the glare of the enforcement policies of a security apparatus perpetually on high alert for any uncontrolled population movements on its borders, particularly from impoverished North Korea. At best, the well-tilled and prosperous Yenbian region of northeast China, home to over two million ethnic Korean-Chinese citizens, provides only a brief respite from the hunger and repression that haunt everyday life in Kim Jong-eun’s ‘workers’ paradise.’ With their clothing still wet from the river crossing, refugees are typically dismayed to discover that China is far less a ‘light at the end of a dark tunnel’ than its continuation, a ‘no-man’s land’ fraught with unexpected new perils: betrayal, capture, and rampant human trafficking. The dangers do not end there. Refugees dread interception by North Korea’s own secret police who roam China freely, tracking down refugees to either eliminate them “on the spot” or drag them back to prisons in the North. Despite the extraordinary odds stacked against them, new but smaller waves of North Korean refugees continue to accept the rising hazards of their fugitive existence in China in preference to the dismal and oppressive conditions in their homeland. Their numbers fluctuate according to border controls imposed at any given time by both the North Korean and Chinese state; however since the death of Kim Jong-il in December of 2011, border security has only tightened on both sides.¹⁹

As a signatory to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, The People’s Republic of China (PRC) is bound by its treaty obligations to protect populations fleeing for fear of persecution, including allowing the free movement of the Beijing resident staff of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to visit the Sino-DPRK border area.²⁰ The government of China, however, has consistently blocked the UNHCR staff from approaching the border area for the purpose of carrying out interviews of North Korean border-crossers to determine if they are indeed refugees.²¹ The Chinese government has given a ‘one-size-fits-all’ label to the North Korean border crossers: ‘illegal economic migrants,’ and systematically returns them to North Korea.²²

¹⁸ UN Commission of Inquiry (hereinafter COI), *Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea* (A/HRC/25/CRP.1), (Geneva: UN Human Rights Council: 2014), 253, <1205, TBG014>.

¹⁹ Tim A. Peters, “Refugees” (Chapter 6). In John Kotch and Frank-Jurgen Richter (eds), *Korea Confronts the Future*. (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2005), 111.

²⁰ Melanie Kirkpatrick, *Escape from North Korea: The Untold Story of Asia’s Underground Railroad* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012), 299-301.

²¹ Jim Butterworth and Lisa Sleeth, *Seoul Train* <transcript of statement by Ruud Lubbers, UN High Commissioner for Refugees and interview of UNHCR spokesman, Rod Redmond> (Denver: Incite Productions: 2006), from 29:33 to 32:33 minute in the documentary film.

²² Butterworth and Sleeth, *Seoul Train* <transcript of PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman on the status of North Korean escapees>, from 27:00 to 28:42 minute.

For well over a decade, an abundant body of evidence from many thousands of North Korean refugees, a substantial number being professed Christians, has been amassed by various data-collecting human rights organizations, including the North Korean Database Center, the UN Commission of Inquiry, the National Human Rights Commission of Korea, the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, Human Rights Watch, the Korean Bar Association, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. The extraordinary breadth of this evidence underscores the North Korean refugees' 'well-founded fear of persecution' upon forcible return to their home country by the government of China.²³

Upon forced repatriation, North Korean refugees are subjected to a spectrum of punishments, the full breadth of which has been determined by the UN Commission of Inquiry as amounting to crimes against humanity. These "inhumane acts" include: imprisonment (with special sentences for Christians in ordinary or political prisons); torture and murder (including border guards authorized to shoot border crossers at will; the crime of infanticide carried out by border guards when a baby of a returning refugee woman is known or suspected to be fathered by a Chinese male); rape and other forms of sexual violence (inflicted on women refugees during State Security Agency interrogation and/or during subsequent prison terms); and enforced disappearances (State Security agents abduct border-crossers in China, as well as South Korean or Chinese citizens who have helped the refugees).²⁴ All of the above mentioned crimes against humanity perpetrated on North Koreans who flee their homeland and suffer forcible return by China or other countries are deemed as ongoing, according to the COI report in March of 2014.²⁵ The following refugee accounts are indicative of the experiences of many North Koreans who desperately seek freedom:

A) *The Untimely Death of Yoo Chul Min:*

A 10 year-old North Korean refugee boy hiding in China swiftly assessed the dilemma before him in deciding to undertake a desperate life-and-death gamble to cross the arid Sino-Mongolian border under the cover of darkness, settling on a sobering course of action light years from the normal concerns of an elementary school student. However, for North Korean refugees, reaching Mongolia safely had meant putting to rest the constant fear of being arrested in China and the specter of repatriation to North Korea.

His name was Yoo Chul Min and his fateful decision ended with a tailspin into tragedy. Guided by South Korean missionaries in the northeast China region, he had been placed together with a group of five adult North Korean fugitives in China who were also desperate for even a fleeting glimpse of freedom. His adult North Korean companions were unfamiliar with the use of a compass and lost their bearings for 26 hours in the massive expanse of the Mongolian frontier. The lad's chubby pink cheeks, the result of months of an improved diet in China, masked the fatal reality of weakened vital organs brought on by years of malnutrition. A decade of chronic food shortages in his home province of North Hamkyoung had taken its toll, robbing Chul Min of the normal reserve of endurance and resistance to the elements one would associate with a healthy, growing pre-teenager. In the end, Chul Min's heroic young life was pitifully snuffed out by exhaustion and exposure in the Gobi Desert, yet another North Korean victim of what the UN terms "slow-motion famine." Once the surviving members of the group had regained their bearings, his lifeless body was quickly thrown across the shoulders of another refugee and carried to the nearest Mongolian guard post barely visible on the desert horizon.

This young boy's story became of personal interest because our paths had crossed during our own NGO/mission work in China sheltering North Korean refugees. Our encounter had been brief, as are most meetings of activists and refugees in the capital city of the border Yenbian region of China. It was immediately evident that I was the first Caucasian 10 year-old Chul Min had ever met. From his expression, he likely saw in me someone who closely resembled

²³ Kirkpatrick, *Escape from North Korea*, 147- 149.

²⁴ COI, 335.

²⁵ COI, 335-337.

ubiquitous pictures and drawings of those hated “missionary devils”²⁶ from America that appear in North Korean schoolbooks and propaganda posters. Therefore, by necessity, our initial conversation was awkward. Taking a children’s book off my friend’s bookshelf and noting it was the same publication I’d read to my own five children when they were small, I motioned as casually as I could for him to sit down and relax, inviting him to look at the storybook. Chul Min warily agreed and was soon engrossed, reading aloud the Korean text in the illustrated children’s Bible I had chosen. Savoring this tiny victory of indirectly introducing a Bible story to Chul Min, I sat and listened to his reading, fervently hoping that somehow this brief episode would begin to bridge the gap between our two worlds. Perhaps, I mused, Chul Min and my grandson might someday be friends in South Korea after his journey to freedom was complete. It never dawned on me that I would never see him alive again.

In the days that followed the jarring news of Chul Min’s death, the magnitude of the tragedy grew. Government officials in Mongolia refused our entreaties to wait for Chul Min’s father, himself a recent arrival to the South from China, to travel to Mongolia to identify his son’s body and to be present at his burial. In a tragic fate that seems uniquely North Korean, endless weeks passed before Chul Min’s father was able to successfully navigate the maze of South Korean and Mongolian bureaucracies and gain permission to travel to Mongolia. At last, he was led to a nondescript plot in the vast expanse of sand that is the Gobi Desert marked off only by a small wooden cross, left alone to his grief and bewilderment beside his son’s windswept grave.²⁷

B) The Specific Dread Felt by Christian Refugees in the face of Forced Repatriation by China:

Numerous interviews of refugees who have made it safely to third countries reveal a terror aroused in the hearts of North Korean refugees hiding in China linked to the prospect of arrest in China and forced repatriation to the DPRK. Many admit to having carried either a razor blade or some form of poison on their person, a grim preparation for suicide as an alternative to facing the fury of DPRK State Security Agency’s interrogators upon involuntary repatriation to the North. “Willful flight to another state” in the North Korean criminal code is tantamount to treason and the punishment can be as severe as the death penalty.²⁸ Such dread of forced repatriation is compounded if the refugee has been in contact with Christians in China or other countries such as Russia. A finely honed DPRK interrogation procedure includes an inquisition focusing on the captured refugee’s possible contact with foreign Christians in China.²⁹ Chinese authorities sometimes provide their North Korean counterparts with reports detailing circumstances of the refugee’s arrest, including whether the raid took place in a church, during a Bible study or in a similar religious setting. Refugees daring to make outside religious contacts are invariably aware that DPRK authorities perceive such activities as treasonous, and consequences will be grave.³⁰ Repatriated North Korean refugees who are discovered to have converted to Christianity in China or other countries are given special prison sentences in either ordinary jails or political prison camps.³¹

²⁶ B.R.Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves-And Why It Matters* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2010), 150.

²⁷ Peters, “Refugees”, 2005, 111-112.

²⁸ Kirkpatrick, *Escape from North Korea*, 142.

²⁹ David Hawk, *The Hidden Gulag: Exposing North Korea’s Prison Camps* (Washington D.C.: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2003), 58.

³⁰ Tim A. Peters, ‘Dark Night of the Soul: The Price of Exercising Religious Belief in North Korea’ (Written and verbal testimony presented to the Parliament of the United Kingdom’s All Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief in a November 20, 2014 hearing), 1-4.

³¹ COI, 335.

A Church in tribulation: Believers and missions in multiple hostile environments

By providing a backdrop for the opposition experienced by North Korean Christians, both within and outside their national borders, it should come as no surprise that the remnant of the North Korean historical church, which dates from 'Great Revival' of 1907, operates with almost world-class security protocols as a 'catacombs underground.' This network is so effective at keeping 'off the radar' that many trained outside observers, both secular and ecclesiastical, do not even believe that it exists! David Hawk, highly respected researcher into both the Cambodian "Killing Fields" and North Korean human rights abuses, wrote, "In this[repressive North Korean] environment, it is hard to imagine any independent religious belief or practice surviving openly unless it serves the government's larger purpose."³²

Such statements from human rights specialists notwithstanding, an ancient truth bequeathed to us from the Church Father Tertullian 18 centuries ago has survived to this day, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."³³ If one looks at this statement as a kind of mathematical equation, it's possible to come to the following conclusion: *if* the blood of martyrs is spilled, it *will* act as a seed, and there *will* be church growth. This author's experience strongly suggests this progression is exactly the case with the church in North Korea. Based on the author's personal experience, 14 years of waiting, watching and active indirect helping were required to catch a glimpse of the reality of the North Korean historical church. Considering the extent of social control within the North Korean state, such extreme secrecy should not be surprising. Only an ingenious and sophisticated communication system could conceivably withstand and evade governmental scrutiny. It also follows that for the author to write prudently and responsibly about secret Christians inside North Korea, such descriptions need to be restricted to generalities; very few direct references will be revealed to protect sensitive sources. It is safe to say, for example, that North Korean Christians do meet for prayer, worship and exhortation even if it is two or three brethren at a time in an ordinary setting. Training is most assuredly underway to pass the baton from pastors and evangelists now in their 70's and 80's to a new generation of leadership. North Korean Christian leaders are not only concerned about the spiritual welfare of their flocks, but are also cognizant of the pressing economic and health needs of their congregations.³⁴

Formulating and executing effective mission programs to meet believers' needs poses unique challenges. While other mission fields around the globe may exhibit similar economic, cultural and social obstacles to evangelism, North Korea's extreme form of militaristic and race-based nationalism³⁵ with its strict hereditary leadership cause the DPRK to be a daunting challenge for

³² David Hawk, *Thank You, Father Kim Il Sung: Eyewitness Accounts of Severe Violations of Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion in North Korea* (Washington D.C.: US Commission on International Religious Freedom: 2005), iv.

³³ David Wright & Philip F. Esler, "Tertullian." *The Early Christian World*. Vol. 2. (London: Routledge, 2000), 1027-1047.

³⁴ Secure communication from North Korean church leaders indicating receipt of special New Testaments from our NGO for the purpose of training young leadership; also acknowledged were various donated medications and health aids to assist ailing aged believers in particular.

³⁵ Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, 40.

traditional mission strategies. With a few notable clandestine exceptions,³⁶ setting up an open residential mission within North Korean borders is out of the question. Missionaries are officially vilified and foreigner visitors are virtually suffocated with surveillance by “minders” whenever they set foot on North Korean soil.³⁷ Just one example of ‘tourist guide’ vigilance: in 2014 a valiant, stouthearted foreign evangelist with many decades of mission experience in East Asia was caught leaving a gospel tract at a North Korean cultural site.³⁸ He was then subjected to 16 days of incarceration and intensive interrogation, including incessant accusations that he was an American or South Korean spy. To his credit, the seasoned veteran withstood the constant browbeating and slyly turned the interrogation sessions into evangelistic conversations.³⁹ The interrogators’ drumbeat of accusations that he was a spy clearly exposed the ‘dictatorial paranoia’ that is inherent in the North Korea’s Kim family regime and functions as a potent driver of the state-sponsored persecution of Christian believers.⁴⁰

To make matters even more complex for potential mission workers, North Korea’s closest neighbor, China, is anything but hospitable to the idea of being used as a staging area for missionaries who wish to focus on the vast spiritual and humanitarian needs of the 20+ million citizens north of the 38th Parallel. One very recent incident is revealing. Peter Hahn’s selfless Christian social welfare work for both Chinese and North Korean children was carried out on either sides of the northeastern Sino-North Korean border for nearly 20 years. In July 2014 Chinese security officials raided his mission office, put him under investigation, froze his humanitarian bank accounts, and confiscated his buildings and equipment. Eight months of withering interrogation later and languishing in a jail cell in Longjing, China, Hahn stands accused of embezzlement and falsifying receipts, charges that his Chinese lawyers flatly label as “groundless and mere excuses.”⁴¹ Such characterization by the government makes a mockery of the Korean American’s decades of sacrificial service to the needy. The clampdown on Hahn and hundreds of other Christian workers along the border in the past three years is likely driven, at least in part, by the desire of new leadership in both China and North Korea to limit foreign Christian influence on DPRK’s society.⁴²

A second and very vital component to the North Korean church could be colorfully rendered as the ‘refugee or émigré church,’ in recognition of those North Koreans who find some way to make human contact outside their own borders. Contact with Christians along the border has been

³⁶ Security concerns on behalf of those living and working inside North Korea prevent the author from providing further details.

³⁷ John Sweeney, *North Korea Undercover: Inside the World’s Most Secret State* (London: Bantam Press: 2013), 12.

³⁸ Christy Choi, ‘N Korea frees remorseful missionary: Evangelist flown to Beijing after penning apology for spreading Bible tracts at temple’ (Hong Kong: South China Morning Post: 3 March 2014), City C1, <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1439168/north-korea-sets-free-hong-kong-based-missionary?page=all>.

³⁹ Tim Peters, *Private conversation in a hotel café with the missionary in Beijing one day after his release from North Korean detention*, 4 March 2014.

⁴⁰ Daniel Ottenberg, *World Wide Watch List 2015* (Summary: Top Ten Country Profiles), 1.

⁴¹ Bill Powell, *The Last Bond Bad Guy* (New York: Newsweek/IBT Media: 26 February 2015), 1.

⁴² Powell, *The Last Bond Bad Guy*, 3-4.

frequent in large part because South Korean, overseas Korean and other foreign Christians make up the backbone of the aid community that reaches out to help North Korean inside and outside their borders.⁴³ Bible classes, leadership training programs, food and medicine aid projects are conducted by believers along the border to provide both spiritual and humanitarian assistance. This assistance is provided not only to temporary and permanent escapees who've fled their homeland in search of food and freedom, but also to documented North Korean temporary migrant workers who may spend only a few months to a year in China, Russia or other countries before returning legally to their homes. Innovative diaconal projects seek to maximize a "trickle down" effect to the most vulnerable North Koreans regarding aid shipments directly to North Korea or using returning border-crossers or migrant workers to deliver humanitarian assistance. One such effort, prepared in China and quietly sent into the North, utilizes high-nutrition rice crackers as valuable food supplements. Eschewed by North Korean elites as "dog food," this humble rice staple has a six-month shelf life, can swell into a hearty hot meal by simply adding boiling water, and regularly reaches the North's destitute who rank low on the social ladder.⁴⁴

To illustrate a number of facets of missions to vulnerable North Koreans outside their borders, the following summary of a series of events that took place in our organization's work with children is presented. The account earlier in this chapter of Yoo Chul Min is a story of the "1st Wave" of North Korean children to come across the border in the late 1990's into the early years of the new century. Ryong's story, in contrast, depicts the "2nd Wave" of North Korean orphans, children who've typically lost their North Korean refugee mothers in China to human trafficking and/or the China state security apparatus' policy of forced repatriation.

11 year-old Ryong's story was painfully familiar. His refugee mother had been discovered by Chinese authorities, perhaps reported on by a neighbor eager for a government bounty payment, and then detained by Chinese police in the rural village nearby. The police investigation revealed that the woman had, like tens of thousands of other North Koreans, been sold by human traffickers to a Chinese man to be his 'wife.' Worse still, the boy's mother was then accused by authorities of cooperating with traffickers to entice other North Korean refugee women to come to the same area. Already labeled as an 'illegal economic migrant' by official state policy, the judicial process in her case was a travesty of justice and Ryong's mother was given a very harsh seven-year prison sentence. Ryong's gloom deepened when the boy's Chinese birth father abruptly abandoned him upon learning that his North Korean 'wife' had been arrested and taken away by local police officials.

Our eyes drawn to a collapsing and abandoned farm cottage, we learned from another refugee woman that the boy had sought refuge from the cold and rain by huddling under the part of the farmhouse roof that still remained intact. Our refugee guide added the boy had survived by eating scraps thrown in the village garbage site nearby. Not surprisingly he had contracted food poisoning from his rancid meals. Providentially, a local Chinese evangelist had been alerted of the boy's plight by our guide, taken him under his wing and with his wife's help, nursed him back to health.

In short, Ryong became the first child in one of several foster homes our project has set up for children of arrested or repatriated North Korean refugee women. Before long six more children from similar situations joined Ryong in the home overseen by the same couple who first showed mercy to the ailing boy. Recent years have brought both joy and hardship for him.

⁴³ Kirkpatrick, *Escape from North Korea*, 45-46.

⁴⁴ Pastor XXXXX Han, Agreement with HHK/Catacombs for the delivery from the border area of two tons of rice crackers (nurunji) through small individual packages entrusted to returning North Koreans from China (NE China: Confidential agreement/receipt document: 1 December, 2014, 1).

Ryong was able to visit his mother in prison after six years of her incarceration. To the astonishment of the evangelist who had never heard the boy use anything other than the Chinese language inside the foster home, Ryong spoke fluently to his mother in Korean telling her that he loved her! Equally remarkable was Ryong's humbled and repentant mother, overwhelmed with tears to see her son standing before her, a healthy, well-adjusted teenager. Recognizing the critical role Christians had played in her son's care, she pledged that if any way could be found to allow her to remain in China after her release from prison, she would gladly serve the foster home that helped her son and other children like him who had been deprived of their mothers' love and care by state policy.

Release in China was not to be. Ryong's mother was sent directly back to North Korea after her seven years detention was served despite every effort by all Christians involved. Still dealing with that disappointment, Ryong was to discover that his absentee father had reappeared and demanded his son follow him to work on his farm. Heart-stricken, the foster parents were powerless to oppose the father's demand, reminded anew that their voluntary Christian social work lacks legal standing under Chinese law. With them, we encouraged ourselves with the fact that the seeds of love and faith sown in Ryong's heart can never be uprooted despite such cruel and harsh realities. Their belief in the sovereignty of God and the truth that all things will yet work together for good that are called of God could not be shaken.⁴⁵

The above account captures one of the great thrills of mission: to witness those who've been trapped in darkness transformed as the seeds of the Good News find fertile soil. North Korean refugee women, systematically degraded by rampant human trafficking in China, time and again embrace the redemptive message believers share with them, faithfully imparting the value of this treasure to their children despite reunions that too often are painfully short.

Bringing mission to North Korea full circle, we close with the wonderful example of Mr. Lee Min Bok, a former agricultural researcher for the North Korean Academic Society of Agriculture and Science, who fled North Korea after being condemned and threatened by senior government officials for encouraging private ownership of farmland as a method to improve agricultural output. Mr. Lee, now resident in South Korea and an enthusiastic Christian, devotes himself to sending balloons into his former homeland that are ingeniously triggered with devices to drop their payload at a certain altitude and latitude. Each balloon carries thousands of pamphlets with a Christian message of hope and love. Fully mindful of the gravely distorted image of Christians and missionaries that the North Korean leadership disseminates, Mr. Lee strives in his 'balloon messages' to portray a more accurate picture based on his personal experience following his dramatic escape as a refugee. What he sends to his countrymen is an expression vibrant both in Mr. Lee's newly gained freedom of belief as well as a love for the gospel and its dissemination:

This is my experience with Christian Missionaries and Christianity:

I had believed the North Korean teaching that religion is an "under-developed teaching and anti-revolutionary opium" and Christian missionaries are the worst of all rascals.

But, it was the Christian missionaries who extended helping hands to me when I was in crisis and had serious problems. Through them, I found out that their belief is totally contrary to what I was told in North Korea. They preach "love," and tell us to love each other to the extent of loving your enemy. They never preach hate....."The truth shall set you free" is the word of God. We must love each other, North and South Korea. This is the Christian message today.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Tim A. Peters, *A Ray of Hope Against a Landscape of Heartbreak and Tragedy* (Seoul: North Korean Monthly: 2014: 10-15.

⁴⁶ Min-bok Lee, *The Christian Missionaries and Christians I Have Met* (Seoul: Self-Published Pamphlet: 2014), 1-2.