

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

The search for peace in Korea

AS MEMORIES OF the recent Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang recede, news from the Korean peninsula has returned to the nuclear showdown between North Korea and the United States. Rising tensions in the region—fueled by nuclear bomb tests, economic sanctions, derogatory tweets and vivid memories of wartime suffering—are daily reminders that peace among nations is always precarious. Legacies of conflict, left unresolved, only beget more wars.

Almost forgotten in the current focus on North Korea is another ongoing story of unresolved conflict—namely, between Korea and its neighbor to the east, Japan. In 1910, Japan formally annexed Korea, and for the following 35 years treated it as a conquered territory. In Korean memory, that period of occupation—particularly the atrocities committed by the Japanese against mothers and daughters forced to work as “comfort women”—continues to fester, even a century later.

In the face of these persistent political tensions, a small group of Anabaptist-Mennonite Christians in the region are lighting candles of hope.

In 2003, Kaz Enomoto, a Japanese Mennonite then studying at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Ind., came to recognize more fully the deep animosity that many Koreans still have toward Japan and the Japanese people. Three years later, at a Mennonite mission consultation in Macau, Enomoto was moved to publicly

ask his Korean brothers and sisters for forgiveness. “If Christians cannot live in peace within the body, then faith becomes only a personal matter and has no power to transform the world,” he said.

Hearing these words, Kyong-Jung Kim, who was then working with the Korea Anabaptist Center, acknowledged that both sides were carrying burdens from their parents’ generation. At the

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gathering he embraced Enomoto and offered forgiveness.

Soon thereafter, a group from the Tokyo Mennonite congregation visited Korea, where they spent time visiting museums that told the history of the Japanese occupation. They also fellowshiped and worshiped with members of Jesus Village Church. Over the past decade, more exchanges have taken place, including several youth delegations.

These efforts, however small, have found echoes in other creative initiatives. In recent years, for example, Hyun Hur and Sue Park-Hur have worked tirelessly for the cause of peace through the ReconciliAsian Peace Center, building a network of personal relationships in North Korea, calling on the church for prayer,

and encouraging legislators to pursue a peaceful resolution to the current crisis.

In a similar spirit, the small Mennonite church in South Korea has initiated an Anabaptist Peace Exchange Program with believers in Israel who share their commitment to the gospel of peace. Like South Korea, Israel is a culture prepared for war, with compulsory military service. In January, the Korean Mennonite Church hosted two Israelis for a tour that included opportunities for worship with several congregations and visits to the MCC Northeast Asia office in Chuncheon and the NoGun-ri Peace Park. The delegation also visited a conscientious objector who is serving a jail sentence for his convictions.

In the scope of national history and deep cultural memories of conflict, shame and woundedness, these events are modest. Indeed, they barely register even in our church news. But they are evidence of “rhizomic” growth, small points of unpredictable connections that nurture a living and vibrant witness within the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church.

And, in the providence of God, they point to the promise of a more peaceful world.



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