

Praise Can Tear Down The Walls

Last fall thousands of Christians gathered in the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea to pray for a miracle. They expect the world's most repressive communist country to open to the gospel soon.

Imagine a line across the United States partitioning it from east to west—and no one was allowed to cross it. If you lived north of the line you couldn't travel south. If you lived in the south you couldn't see loved ones in the north. Family members would be split apart and could never see one another.

Now imagine two separate governments ruled these areas. A democratic government on one side of the border would permit free enterprise and freedom of religion within its borders. Across the line, a harsh communist dictatorship would mercilessly repress its citizens. One group would prosper while knowing that friends and family across the border were living like animals, forced to scour barren fields for grass and even dirt to feed their children.

This imaginary scenario is all too real for the citizens of North and South Korea, whose country was sliced in half after World War II and today remains the world's only politically partitioned country. Some family members have not seen one another in 50 years.

The situation for Christians who live on the divided Korean peninsula is much the same for Christians. South Korea has one of the largest and fastest growing churches in the world, with an estimated 15 million Christians, or about 31 percent of the population in this traditionally Buddhist country.

In contrast, across the border in communist North Korea, the church is one of the tiniest and most repressed in the world. There are perhaps 100,000 Christians in the country, most of whom are held in labor camps under appalling conditions.

These conditions reveal a national religious climate that is far different from the early 20th century's when the capital of what is now North Korea had such a large Christian population that it was known as the "Jerusalem of the East." In fact, this part of Korea once had so many Christians that it sent missionaries to the south.

Honoring a Spiritual Debt

Today South Korea's Christians recognize their spiritual debt to the north. They also know that only God can reunite their divided land, and they have developed a strategy to pray for reunification of their country. The strategy relies on three of the most effective weapons of spiritual warfare—unity, prayer and worship.

For God to tear down the walls between the north and south, Korean Christians say they must first remove the walls between themselves. Unity is a key weapon in their fight.

The second weapon is prayer, something the South Korean church is known for. Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, pastored by David Yonggi Cho, is just one of many throughout the country that have joined together to pray for "healing, oneness and vision for this land, and [to] cry out together as one nation," Cho says.

The third weapon in the battle for reunification is praise and worship. Organizers have developed a four-part, eight-year strategy enlisting the aid of some of the world's top worship leaders and artists.

They launched their reunification effort three years ago with Worship Explosion 1999—a major praise and worship gathering in Seoul, where tens of thousands of Korean Christians came to praise God with worship leaders such as Don Moen and Paul Wilbur of Integrity Music, and others.

Last fall, organizers held the second phase of the reunification effort, Worship Explosion 2001, and invited worship leaders, music artists and musicians from five continents, representing Integrity, Hillsong, Maranatha, Vineyard, Kingsway, and other praise and worship music labels.

The event, dubbed the world's largest worship festival, was broadcast internationally by satellite and the Internet. Tom Brooks, producer of dozens of albums for Integrity, compiled a live CD and video of the event. Worship Explosion 2001 began in Seoul at the War Memorial of Korea, a large outdoor amphitheater honoring the men and women who died in the Korean War, including 37,000 from the United States, whose names are inscribed on the walls of the memorial.

Evening praise and worship services drew thousands—mostly youth who joined in worship led by Ron Kenoly, Marty Nystrom, Bob Fitts, Randy Rothwell, Kent Henry, Jeff Deyo (formerly of SonicFlood), Brazilian artist Aline Barros, Korean worship leader Hannah Kim and others. Top Christian musicians included Justo Almario, Abraham Laboriel, Tom Brooks, Chester Thompson, Paul Jackson Jr., and singer and percussionist Sheila E. (formerly with pop artist Prince).

The first lady of Korea, Lee Hee-Ho, who is a Christian, spoke by videotape to the gathering, which combined praise and worship music with intercessory prayer.

Replacing Walls With Bridges

During one of the most moving moments, large screens on each side of the stage showed secretly taped footage of horrific conditions in North Korea—emaciated children with arms as skinny as an adult's finger, starving parents stripping bark from trees and boiling it to make soup, and people being shot at point-blank range by communist soldiers. Experts estimate that 3 million people died of starvation between 1994 and 2000.

Most of the artists and musicians of Worship Explosion 2001 have ministered all over the world, yet they say this event was one of the most significant. Kenoly called it "history-making."

"God destroyed the walls at Jericho through Joshua," he said. "Jesus destroyed the gates of hell at Calvary. God destroyed the communist wall in Berlin, and we believe that He will remove the DMZ," referring to the Demilitarized Zone that divides North and South Korea.

In fact, the final event of Worship Explosion 2001 was to be held inside the DMZ, a no man's land that is the most heavily guarded border on earth, but security concerns pushed it back three miles from the border to the historic Freedom Bridge, which crosses the Imjin River.

On this spot at the conclusion of the Korean War, North and South Korea exchanged prisoners of war. Some marched across the bridge to freedom in the south, others to a dark future in the north. Today there are armed guards on both sides of the bridge, which reportedly is mined in case North Korean troops decide to cross it unannounced in an attempt to take over the south.

Commitment to Freedom

On that crisp Sunday morning—the final day of Worship Explosion 2001—“missiles” were launched from South Korea to North Korea. They were the spiritual type, however, aimed not at humanity but at the forces of spiritual darkness holding some 22 million North Koreans captive.

South Korean Christians are already at work on Worship Explosion 2003, when all concerts will be held inside the DMZ. Two years after that, organizers hope the final event of Worship Explosion will be held in Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea.

At the moment, such plans are just a vision, but South Korean Christians—who are known for intercession that is fervent, passionate and persistent—are praying this will happen. They long for the day when they can share with their northern brothers and sisters not just the economic and social freedom they enjoy in the south, but also the spiritual freedom they enjoy as Christians.

Elisabeth Farrell, a frequent contributor to Charisma, traveled to South Korea to file this story.