

South and North Korea: Can Christians Cross the Great Divide?

“There used to be 3,000 churches in the North of Korea—more than in the South,” observes Operation Mobilization’s Northeast Asia Regional Leader, Gim SuYong. “Many pastors in the North left and started some of the biggest churches in the South. In fact, my own fellowship started that way. But 70 years ago the country was divided into two: North Korea and South Korea”.

For the last seven years, Gim SuYong has partnered with the church in leading a Bible study among North Korean defectors. Approximately 25,000 North Koreans now live in South Korea, he says, and every year 3,000 more come through China.

For two years Gim SuYong was designated by the Korean Church Council as leading pastor of a Korean defector camp. He has met several thousand men and women who have chosen to escape the North.

“The defectors I meet have left because they hate what their government is doing,” he states. “When I asked a 60-year-old woman what the big difference is between North and South, she said, ‘In North Korea everybody lives for one man. But through the South Korean Church I now understand that one Man died for all!’ The government in North Korea is taking God’s glory for themselves,” continues Gim SuYong. “They have copied the church system of hymns and worship to their ‘god’, Kim Jong-un.

“North Korea’s first priority is to preserve their system. Thousands of people can die without food, but if it interferes with the system, they won’t allow aid from outside. However,” he adds, “the doors are not absolutely closed. People are

being allowed in to do humanitarian work, and South Korea is funding much of it. A new science and technology university also recently opened in Pyongyang, and the government is aware that it is staffed and supported by Christians.”

The Mongolia Connection

Gim SuYong’s OM responsibility extends to Mongolia where, he says, 50 percent of the population have some relationship with Korea. “Many work in South Korea, and it’s not difficult for South Koreans to go to Mongolia, only three hours away. Even the languages are related. Newcomers in either place can be fluent enough to preach within six months. Many Korean Christians go and live there during the summer to do outreach. Mongolia International University was established by a Korean, and he wants to send students to OM.

“But Mongolians can also visit North Korea without visa problems. Many believers have an increasing vision to reach the people in the North. In this way God humbles us!” Gim SuYong smiles. “He can use the tiny Mongolian Church to do what the big South Korean Church cannot do!

“Northeast Asia is the heart of the 21st century—politically, socially and economically. Seoul, Pyongyang, Beijing, Ulan Bator and Tokyo are all key cities. That’s why I have a heart burning for this area.

“I want to say I have hope in the North Korean Church,” finishes the field leader. “When believers in the North pray with South Koreans, it’s different. Their experience has shown them how to cry out to God, and with their passion there is hope for revival. I believe in God’s time they will revitalise the Church in the South! When visitors to North Korea tell believers that they are praying for them, North Korean Christians respond, ‘No, we’re praying for you!’

“One hundred North Korean defectors have studied in Bible school. I hope one day some of them can join OM!”