

What's Really Happening in North Korea's Underground Church

A new Associated Press report details the lives of the Christians in North Korea's underground church: Singing hymns in virtual silence, praying under blankets or in bathrooms and refusing to recant, even after severe beatings.

OpenDoorsUSA ranks North Korea as the worst persecutor of Christians in the world.

"If Christians are discovered, not only are they deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot, their families will share their fate as well," according to the 2019 World Watch List. "Christians do not even have the slightest space in society; on the contrary, they are publicly warned against. Meeting other Christians in order to worship is almost impossible, and if some believers dare to, it has to be done in utmost secrecy. The churches shown to visitors in Pyongyang serve mere propaganda purposes."

The AP report backs up the watchdog's claims.

Here are the highlights:

- Another defector in Seoul, Kwak Jeong-ae, 65, said a fellow inmate in North Korea told guards about her own religious beliefs and insisted on using her baptized name, rather than her original Korean name, during questioning in 2004.
"She persisted in saying, 'My name is Hyun Sarah; it's the name that God and my church have given to me,'" Kwak said. "She told (the interrogators), 'I'm a child of God and I'm not scared to die. So if you want to kill me, go ahead and kill me.'"

- Another, who was jailed after being repatriated from China, described praying silently in his cell after a hungry fellow prisoner shared some precious kernels of corn.

"We communicated by writing on our palms (with our fingers). I told him I was a Christian and asked whether he was too," said the man, who asked to be identified only as J.M., citing safety concerns about his siblings in the North.

- Jung Gwangil, a North Korean defector-turned-activist, said he saw a man praying and singing hymns when they were held together at a detention facility in the northern city of Hoeryong in October 1999. The man was beaten frequently, and one day, was hauled away, Jung said.

"While leaving, he shouted to us, 'God will save you.' I hadn't encountered Christianity before at the time, and I thought he was crazy," said Jung. It wasn't clear what happened to the man.

According to OpenDoorsUSA, approximately 300,000 of the more than 25 million people in North Korea are Christians.

"I would love to see human rights be a part of the discussion when you are talking about nuclear arms because you can tell within 30, 60, 90 days if conditions have improved for Christians in the labor camps," David Curry of OpenDoorsUSA says. "Right now, there are over 60,000 Christians in labor camps in North Korea. A lot of people don't know that."

The gospel spreads in the communist country through the airwaves.

"They don't allow us to come in—any missionaries or preachers," evangelist Billy Kim says. "So the next best thing would be the AM radio wave to send the Gospel to North Korea."

OpenDoors detailed the alarming process of what happens when a Christian is caught in North Korea:

When a Christian is discovered, he or she will be taken away by the police. Not only the Christian, but also his or her spouse and children. Sometimes even his/her parents too. To North Koreans, anyone who knows a Christian is "guilty by association." If you're guilty, so are the people who live or even just know you. After arrest, a Christian will be locked up in a small but overcrowded cell in a detention center. There, he/she will be interrogated for hours and subject to "light" or even heavy torture. Prisoners hardly receive any food and water; many don't survive their detention.

After a few months, the courts will decide if the Christian will be prosecuted. When someone must go to court, he/she will be sent to a re-education labor camp with his/her family members. Prisoners in these camps receive on average of 500 calories of food a day and must work 10 to 12 hours a day. They will receive one day of rest every 10 days. At night, lengthy ideological training sessions are testing for the exhausted prisoners.

If someone is not sent to court, he/she will be transferred to a political labor camp. There, the circumstances are even more gruesome than re-education camp. Here, the prisoners have no hope of escape or release; they don't receive ideological training. These camps are like the Nazi death camps of World War II.

A last possible fate for Christians is execution. Until a few years ago, Christians were sometimes publicly executed by a firing squad. But civilians found those executions too upsetting. Nowadays, political enemies, such as Christians, are killed in prison or labor camp basements by North Korean soldiers.

But there is hope. U.S. President Donald Trump and North

Korean leader Kim Jong Un are scheduled to meet again this year in a Vietnam summit.

“In light of the once-unimaginable prosperity and partnership we have with Vietnam today, I have a message for Chairman Kim Jong Un,” U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says. “President Trump believes your country can replicate this path. It’s yours if you’ll seize the moment. The miracle could be yours; it can be your miracle in North Korea as well.”

In the meantime, OpenDoors published key prayer highlights for the North Korean church:

- Pray that new diplomatic efforts will pay dividends and will lead to a softening of the North Korean government toward its people.
- The situation for Christians is vulnerable and precarious. They face persecution from state authorities and their non-Christian family, friends and neighbors. Pray for their protection.
- Pray for strength and courage for Christians who suffer in prisons, labor camps and remote areas.
- Pray that God will prepare the underground church in North Korea to be a light for the country—and that they will be ready to share the gospel freely someday soon.