

COMMENTARY

BY CHRIS RICE



DANGER: 'SINGLE STORIES' ARE BAD FOR PEACE

Christians in North Korea disrupt political narratives.

In any deep national division, political peace is critical. The absence of a formal peace treaty between North Korea and South Korea and the U.S. is an enormous barrier to a new future. Yet easily overlooked is that lasting peace also requires decades-long work of people-to-people engagement.

Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has spoken of "the danger of a single story." In few places is that danger more real than between North Koreans and Americans who are profoundly misinformed about each other after 70 years of mutual isolation.

This is why the quiet humanitarian work by Americans from church-based agencies in North Korea is so important today. American Friends Service Committee, Christian Friends of Korea, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), and World Vision have all been working continuously in North Korea for 20 years.

Shared projects to bring clean water to pediatric hospitals or address North Korea's tuberculosis crisis interrupt mutual narratives of the "threatening other." Some of the North Koreans I have worked with (or learned about in my role with MCC) include a dedicated director of a tuberculosis sanatorium who, while compassionately expanding care for his patients, himself contracted and died from the disease. Or the government officials who saw the positive impact of one American couple's cerebral palsy work and gave permission to set up pediatric rehabilitation centers in all the country's provinces. Or a North Korean diplomat visiting Canada who was

overwhelmed by the hospitality of a South Korean restaurant owner and of a Mennonite farm family who hosted his delegation for dinner in their home.

When North Koreans and Americans discover their shared care for the vulnerable, "single stories" of hostility can stretch to imagine a future of peaceful coexistence.

From Northern Ireland to East and West Germany to South Africa, no deep social change toward peace has occurred without the willingness to engage the "threatening other." But as recently as three years ago in South Korea, positive engagements toward North Korea were denounced as pro-communist, and Christians were deeply fractured within the hostile climate.

Then, in 2016, millions of ordinary South Koreans nonviolently took to the streets during the "candlelight" movement. South Korea's scandal-ridden president was impeached and President Moon Jae-In was elected. Within a year came astonishing changes: The two Koreas marched together during the 2018 Winter Olympics opening ceremony, Moon and North Korean Chair Kim Jong-un met at the border, and inter-Korean momentum toward economic and social collaboration emerged.

While South Koreans still cannot freely cross the border, and Christians and politicians are still divided, political change has brought signs of social change: Churches have started youth groups to discuss reunification from a biblical perspective; Christian scholars and pastors, tired of megachurch scandals and fast-but-shallow church growth, are seeking solutions in Anabaptist peace theology; and audiences for the Korea Peacebuilding Institute are growing.

In the South, the peacebuilding work led by young Christians is the most important. For example, one South Korean friend had grown up not feeling the trauma of the Korean divide, and she had no passion for a different future. But she decided to join an InterVarsity Korea trip to the China-North Korea border. On a boat ride to view the North, she saw North Koreans up close—two soldiers sitting on a beach. "One of them looked exactly like my brother," she said. "Only then did I understand that we are one people."

There may be no greater social divide today than between the people of North and South Korea. For 1,300 years prior to 1950, Korea was a united peninsula, with a unique culture and language. Amid political uncertainty and remaining resistance to a new future from all sides, seeds of reconciliation are sprouting in the cracks of hostility. A new season of opportunity is opening. ✦

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