FOREWORD:
From the Rev. Eric Foley, Chief Executive Officer, Seoul USA

When my wife and I speak about North Korea at events in the West, people always ask us, "How can we pray for North Korean Christians?" So we asked a group of North Korean underground Christians that question. They answered, "Pray for us? We pray for you!"

When we asked why, they replied, "Because Christians in the West still have some wealth and freedom and power. Most have not yet experienced what it is like when all you have in life is God."

Mr. and Mrs. Bae's story is a testament to the truth that North Korean Christians do not seek pity or yearn primarily for freedom. Instead, constantly in danger of death in the only society in human history ever built as an intentional distortion of Christianity, they seek and yearn for more of God.

It may seem strange to us that North Korea tries so hard to get rid of Christians. After all, North Korea doesn't seem to fear anything else. They have the fourth largest standing army on the planet, with more than 1.1 million soldiers.[i] And they have the largest contingent of special forces in the world[ii] —even more than the United States or China. Economic sanctions don't really slow them down—80 percent of their economy is

underground.[iii] They make a billion dollars a year from money laundering and trafficking in illegal drugs.[iv] Weapons sales aren't even calculated in that windfall. So why do they work so hard to kill Christians?

To answer that, we must dismiss the stereotype that North Korea, a Communist country, is also a godless country. The truth is, North Korea is almost certainly the most religious place on earth. And, in fact, the religion of North Korea should look very familiar to Christians.

The religion of North Korea (they prefer the term "ideology") is called Juche, which means "self-reliance."[v] Every week 100 percent of the North Korean population has to gather together, village by village, in special buildings for worshipful services called self-criticism meetings.[vi] Juche even has a trinity—Kim Il Sung, his wife, and his son Kim Jong Il[vii] —and veneration for the latter has not waned in the wake of his death and the ascension to power of his son Kim Jong Un. In the weekly self-criticism meetings, North Koreans sing from a hymnal containing six hundred songs of praise glorifying Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.[viii] North Korea tried to share these hymns with the whole world in 1998 when they attempted to launched a satellite into orbit to broadcast all Juche hymns all the time; sadly for them, it fell back to earth.[ix]

North Koreans pray by looking up reverently at the pictures of the Kim dynasty leaders that have to be hung on the best wall of every home.[x] The original Kim, Kim Il Sung, died in 1994, but North Koreans continue to call him the country's president and regard him as immortal, the god of North Korea.[xi] A Chinese reporter once asked a young North Korean student, "Do you spare a particular time of the day, such as before you go to bed, for Kim [Il Sung]? Do you talk to [him]? Does he talk to you?" "Yes," said the student.[xii]

As for Kim Jong Il, they say a star appeared overhead when Kim Jong Il was born in a humble log cabin in the

snowy midwinter. Like one reporter wrote, "All that is missing is the three kings and their camels."[xiii]

If Juche sounds like a twisted imitation of Christianity to you, then you can understand why North Korea works so hard to neutralize it: Only Christianity has the power to unmask Juche as a fraudulent faith. And that is why North Korea has always worked hard to exterminate every Christian within its borders.

Christianity was introduced into North Korea earlier than in South Korea. By 1941, an estimated three hundred thousand North Koreans identified themselves as Christians.[xiv] But the first Christian blood spilled on North Korean soil wasn't under the order of Kim Il Sung. It was under the order of the Japanese, who occupied Korea from 1910 through the end of World War II. Most Korean Christians, under the advice of their pastors, actually did fulfill the requirement to bow at the Japanese Shinto shrines. Not every church complied, however, and those who resisted were persecuted mercilessly. Some fled across the border to northeast China, but the Japanese imperial advance into that area meant the persecution of Korean Christians there as well.

After Korea's liberation from Japan, it was split provisionally into northern and southern administrative zones, with the North under the oversight of the Soviet Union. Christians in this new northern territory resisted Communist influence and, initially, their numbers were strong enough as to constitute a formidable resistance. Kim Il Sung certainly took notice: it would be necessary, he realized, to eradicate Christianity in order to establish Communism.

The government first attacked the church financially, confiscating Christian finances through the 1946 Land Reform Act. In 1949, as the North prepared for war, Kim Il Sung ordered the arrest of everyone who attended religious activities. Christian blood was spilled once again. Untold thousands of believers, their stories lost to history, suffered for Christ.

Following the war, North Korea either demolished church buildings or repurposed them as Kim Il Sung research centers. Christians who did not escape to the South during the war were purged as counterrevolutionaries, publicly executed, or imprisoned in labor and concentration camps. In 1959, anti-Christian literature was propagated by the government. Why Do We Deny Religion? was one such book. It claimed:

For the last three years, the Chosun War and the South Chosun War were triggered in God's name and led by Americans who caused massacre, arson and plunder through inhumane actions. This is proof that religion is the cause of all these things.

Blamed for the war and indicted as coconspirators with the hated Americans, North Korean Christians were executed in increasing numbers throughout the 1960s, and the formal church was completely crushed. The few remaining Christians sought to keep the faith alive through an underground church.

Of necessity, the underground church was not formally organized or networked. Links between believers always proved to be deadly. Pastoral training and oversight was impossible. The majority of Christians worshipped in secret with only family members present. Those who had come to believe in Christ before the end of the Korean War—those who had had comprehensive discipleship training—were aging; the average age of Christians was over sixty. Only a few damaged Bible chapters and crosses remained. Parents could not even talk freely to their own children about God; if they did, the children would be tricked by public schoolteachers into revealing the Christian identity of the family. If a Christian child's parents died before the child turned fifteen, she would never know that her family was Christian.

In the early 1980s, the North Korean government's Korean Christian Foundation opened its first fake church to deceive foreign visitors into thinking that Christians were able to freely practice their religion. In the Foundation's carefully

staged services, a small group of state-trained actors used hymns created from the Psalms by the Presbyterian Church of Korea in the mid-1930s. In 1984, the North Korean Communists translated and printed a small number of Bibles and a hymnal. In 1988, they constructed a church building to complete the facade. In 1989, North Korea opened two more fake churches—Bongsu and Chilgol—and staged religious activities, such as Christmas and Easter services, when visitors were present.[xv]

But a new level of genuine religious activity also began during this period—activity that caught the North Koreans by surprise. China became a more open country. In the early 1990s, motivated by South Korean missionaries, ethnic Korean Christians living in China went into North Korea to share the Gospel. Then during the March of Tribulation—the unprecedented period of famine in the mid-1990s—hundreds of thousands of North Koreans escaped to China and Russia, where Christian missionaries led them to faith in Christ. Many became faithful Christians who returned to North Korea with a vision to rebuild the North Korean church.

The number of underground Christians multiplied, as did the number of martyrs. North Korea arrested these new Christians for espionage when they returned to North Korea. First, the Integrity Department investigated individuals based on information from North Korean citizens who betrayed their neighbors out of fear of the government. After being investigated, the Christian was either publicly executed or sent to a concentration camp.

Today, with Kim Jong Un sending out upwards of 40,000 North Korean workers to 40 different countries around the world in an effort to bring desperately needed hard currency into North Korea,[xvi] the likelihood of North Koreans intersecting with the gospel—and bringing it back to North Korea along with the foreign currency—continues to increase. Still, it is impossible for North Korean Christians to admit

their faith openly unless they defect and gain citizenship somewhere else, most typically South Korea. There are now more than twenty-three thousand North Korean refugees in South Korea,[xvii] and less than 1 percent of them have personal knowledge of the existence of Christians in North Korea. Most of the refugees came to know God in China, and many are now involved in undertaking or supporting ministry efforts to reach their homeland for the Gospel. Today, the most reliable estimates indicate that there are around one hundred thousand underground Christians inside North Korea.

That's the arc of the North Korean Christian story—the dates, the details, and the statistics. For the last ten years, my wife, Hyun Sook, and I and our brother DH, chief operations officer of Seoul USA, have between us shared that story on every continent. But last year, something happened that amazes me to recount it for you even now. We met a couple—we must call them Mr. and Mrs. Bae in order to safeguard their true identities—whose family has lived out the entire story, from the Japanese persecution through the deepening night of the formation of the North Korean state, through the years of absolute silence and isolation and terror, through the reconnection with missionaries in China, and now through their arrival in South Korea to share their story with the world. Theirs is a family story of miraculous provision and of near starvation; of deliverance from evil and of deliverance into its hands; of belief so bold that it shook villages and of belief so quiet that it passed, undetected yet faithful, under the nose of the ever-watchful state.

It is a story that reveals for the first time to the world just how different the North Korean underground church is from any other church in the world—and thus how surprisingly precious and beautiful and instructive it is. For years, our (incorrect) picture of the North Korean underground church has been that of a more extreme version of the Chinese underground church, with believers toting Bibles and stealing

glances over their shoulders as they gather together by the dozens in caves and believers' homes under the cover of night. But the truth of the North Korean church, shown to us over nearly a century in the life of the Bae family in this book, is so fundamentally different from this. As you'll see, North Korean underground Christians are like people who have inherited a small handful of badly bent and faded puzzle pieces. They know that what they have received is inestimably precious, but they have never seen the puzzle-box lid, so they don't know what the picture is that the pieces would make if they had a complete set. They guard the pieces with their lives, and in fact their whole lives are wrapped up in understanding the pieces they have, in ensuring the transmission of these pieces, and in searching for more pieces and for information about the puzzle-box lid.

Almost all the North Korean Christians whose stories you have read are not Christians of this type. They are individuals who recently learned about Christ in China and brought him—and a fair amount of systematic teaching and resources—back with them into North Korea. But the Baes are from an altogether different part of the sheepfold. They are the remnants, born of the martyrs, heirs to the bold faith of their forefathers and foremothers, guardians of the Gospel in the world's darkest corner, God's seven thousand to whom he gave the nearly impossible task of never kneeling to the Baals[xviii] in arguably the most idolatrous country in human history.

"These are the generations," the book of Genesis intones in chapter after chapter. Likewise, these are the generations of the North Korean church. These are the generations of whom we have known next to nothing except the dates, the details, and the statistics that were the footprints that they left. Now they appear before us here in Technicolor—not as larger-than-life saints but as businessmen and bread bakers, prisoners and prophets, evangelists and invisible pillars of an unshakable kingdom.

Mr. and Mrs. Bae are on a mission still, though it is not a personal mission or vision that began with them. It is a trust that they inherited, something they are bound to uphold and bring to completion. What amazes—and humbles—me is the degree to which they have exhibited such costly and complete faithfulness despite having far fewer puzzle pieces than me, not to mention no picture-box lid by which to organize them.

I can still hear the response of North Korean underground Christians to our query several years ago. "You pray for us? We pray for you!" We may have all the puzzle pieces and even the puzzle-box lid, but they, tightly clutching at times only a single-folded, faded puzzle piece inside a trembling, yet reverently closed fist, know and worship and trust the puzzle Maker in ways I have yet to. With my comparative wealth and power and freedom, I am too often wrapped up in far too many puzzles to see that only One truly matters.

June 22, 2012
Seoul, Korea