

Internacional Forum on interfaith and transcultural peacebuilding
Daring reconciliation?!
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EIGHTY YEARS: DIVISION; RECONCILIATION; AND THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

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The Korean Peninsula remains a divided land. Despite the liberation in 1945, the peninsula never experienced true unification; it was split between the US and USSR, underwent trusteeship, and endured the Korean War from 1950 to 1953. As of 2024, it has been 79 years since the division into North and South Korea. Next year will mark the 80th anniversary of Liberation Day, but it will also signify 80 years of division.

For nearly eight decades, both North and South Korea have remained divided, despite numerous efforts by both government and private sectors to bridge the gap. There have been many gestures of reconciliation and direct exchanges between the two Koreas, but the current conflict and military tensions are escalating. Geopolitically, relations between neighboring countries are becoming clearer but more confrontational. Importantly, the Korean Peninsula is still in a state of ceasefire—meaning the war is not officially over. In this context, I would like to highlight recent reconciliation efforts by civil society organizations, churches, Christian youth, and others. Although covering the entire 80-year history is beyond the scope of this discussion, I will focus on recent initiatives.

On July 27, 2023, we commemorated the 70th anniversary of the armistice that halted the Korean War. To mark this milestone, we launched a signature campaign advocating for the armistice to be formalized as a peace agreement. Initiated in 2021, this campaign lasted three years and emphasized the need to end the Korean War. We submitted 230,000 signatures to the UN Secretariat, the US Department of State, and the governments of North Korea, South Korea, and China. Our key recommendations included:

- Ceasing hostilities and improving North-South and North-North American relations.
- Ending the Korean War and signing a peace agreement.
- Achieving a Korean Peninsula and world free of nuclear weapons and threats.
- Resolving conflicts through dialogue and cooperation, rather than sanctions and military threats.
- Ending military cooperation between South Korea and Japan to achieve peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula and in Asia.
- Breaking the cycle of arms races and investing in citizen safety and environmental protection.

Eighty years later, the conflict between North and South Korea is not the only issue; South-South conflicts have also emerged as serious problems. Ideological conflicts and animosity towards North Korean defectors, often fueled by media portrayals and misconceptions, have intensified. South Korea's National Security Act has contributed to this issue by suppressing freedom of thought and falsely accusing individuals of espionage, creating victims of ideology. Attempts to abolish this law have failed, and state censorship of ideas remains a concern.

Another significant issue is the growing hostility towards North Korean defectors in South Korea. This xenophobia, akin to refugee and anti-immigrant sentiment, is exacerbated by media portrayals of North Koreans as threats or enemies. This fosters negative attitudes, leading to opposition against funding for defectors and aligning with broader 'hate' phenomena seen globally.

In response to these challenges, both the government and civil society organizations have conducted 40 "Peace and Unification Social Dialogue" programs over the past four years, attended by 10,000 people. These programs aimed to bring together conservatives and liberals to share common perspectives on reunification and address North Korean issues.

The dialogues culminated in the National Convention on Peace and Unification, where, for the first time, liberals and conservatives collaborated on ideas for peace and reunification.

Desired Future of the Korean Peninsula:

- A peaceful Korean Peninsula free of military threats.
- A denuclearized Korean Peninsula.
- A region where human rights and diversity are guaranteed.
- A welfare state where all residents of North and South Korea thrive.
- A fair social system.
- Guaranteed freedom of speech.
- Resolution of conflicts through social consensus.
- Freedom of movement and travel.
- Active cultural exchanges.
- The ability to travel globally through the North-South railway connection.

Next, I would like to highlight Christian reconciliation efforts on the Korean Peninsula. In 1980, the World Council of Churches initiated the Dozanso Process to foster peace and reconciliation between North and South Korea. In 1981, church leaders from both sides met for the first time in Glion VD, Switzerland. The meeting began with mutual distrust but was transformed by the Lord's Supper, leading to a heartfelt embrace and marking the start of the Dozanso process.

The first Glion began with fear and trepidation, with representatives from the North and South openly confessing that they did not trust each other. Both sides knew they would be held accountable for their words and actions upon their return home, but the invisible barriers that had separated the two sides for so long were broken down by the Lord's Supper at the end of the day. They embraced each other in tears. It was the beginning of the Dozanso process.

Since then, the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCCK) has maintained dialogue with the Korean Christian Federation (KCF). Every year on Easter and Liberation Day, the NCCCK and KCF write and share joint prayers. Additionally, the NCCCK holds a joint prayer for peace on the Korean Peninsula with the global church community. In 1988, the Korean Christian Church issued the "Declaration of the Korean Christian Church on the Unification and Peace of the Peoples" (88 Declaration), acknowledging the division and proposing a path for reconciliation and peace. This declaration aimed to overcome antagonism and recognize the shared Christian identity, fostering dialogue and reconciliation.

Despite these efforts, 80 years have created generational dissonance regarding reunification and reconciliation. Many younger people are indifferent to these issues, leading to generational conflict. To address this, the NCCCK has conducted Christian Youth Peaceful Reunification Workshops for three years. These workshops highlighted:

- Cynicism about reunification and the need for a public approach.
- Addressing reunification through security and peace discourses.
- Moving beyond militarism in a military culture.

Recognizing 'hostility' and 'dislike' in ourselves and understanding others is crucial for progress. I would like to conclude with this Easter prayer:

May God's will be fulfilled on earth. As the azaleas bloom on the Korean Peninsula during Holy Week, let Easter peace also flourish. Let us reflect on the wounds of the Korean Peninsula and envision a reunified Korea through Easter. May all churches on the peninsula reconsider the division after Ascension Day. May peace on the Korean Peninsula be realized, as God's will is fulfilled in heaven.
2024 Joint North-South Korea Easter Prayer (Proposed)