

Accounting for North Korea: Korean Reunification, the CCIA, and the Korean Christians Federation

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Abstract

During the 1980s, the issue of the peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula became of interest to Christian communities in South Korea. In seeking to understand this phenomenon, conventional narratives have focused on the agency of South Korean Christian activists who had, by the late 1970s, identified reunification as a fundamental goal that needed to be achieved in order to address the political, social, and economic maladies that plagued South Korean society. By contrast, this article accounts for the roles played by non-South Korean actors, in particular the Church Commission on International Relations (CCIA) and the North Korean Christian community. The activities of North Korean Christians in the international arena during the 1970s and early 1980s spurred the CCIA to consider the role it should play in fostering reunification and to act as a bridge linking Korean Christian leaders on both sides of the 38th parallel.

Keywords: Korean Christianity, reunification, World Council of Churches (WCC), Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), Korean Christians Federation (KCF)

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From providing relief aid to assisting North Korean refugees, churches in South Korea engage North Korea in a multifaceted manner. On the one hand, this engagement is unsurprising (Chung 2003, 81–110; Jung 2015). Today, nearly 30 percent of the South Korean population is Christian, and the country ranks among the top nations in numbers of missionaries sent abroad on an annual basis.¹ Seeking to evangelize to North Koreans appears to be a natural extension of this missionary drive. On the other hand, until at least the mid-1980s, publicly discussing North Korea in positive terms, let alone evangelizing in the country, was dangerous for South Koreans. Likewise, only a small percentage of Christians—both Protestant and Catholic—openly spoke of the need for peaceful engagement with their “brethren” to the north.

During the 1980s, a transformation occurred that made North Korea an important part of the broader South Korean Christian consciousness. Peaceful reunification in particular became a major issue of concern for Korean church communities. According to many scholars of Korean Christianity, during the 1970s, talks of reunification percolated in the discourse of socially engaged Christian dissidents like Mun Ikhwan. However, because these individuals focused on human rights and democracy, reunification remained largely a secondary concern. After the assassination of Park Chung-hee (1979), Chun Doo-hwan’s military coup (1980), and the Kwangju Massacre (1980), activists in South Korea came increasingly to believe that progress in democracy and human rights could not be achieved without addressing the problem of division. It was Christians who took the lead in bringing the issue of reunification to a place of prominence. The fruits of these efforts include the Tozanso Consultation (1984), the Glion Declaration on Peace and Reunification (1986), and the declaration of the Korean National Christian Council (KNCC) on reunification (1988) (Yi 2001; Chōng 2003; Min 1995; Han and Kim 2007).

In this narrative, the important roles played by non-South Korean actors have been largely glossed over. Specifically, how did North Korea influence the discussions on how the Christian community should approach the reunification of the Korean Peninsula? The current focus on the activities of South Korean Christian groups has inadvertently portrayed North Koreans as passive actors—merely responding to outside stimuli or receiving aid and furtive evangelism. Certainly, because of a lack of sources, ascertaining the

motivations of either the North Korea government or the Christian communities in the country is difficult. However, contrary to the belief of many in the West, especially those based in the United States, North Korea is not a hermetically sealed country, rejecting all contact with the international community. As will be demonstrated in the pages to come, starting in the early 1970s, North Koreans actively engaged the international Christian community. This engagement shaped the way South Korean churches approached the issue of reunification.

This article highlights the importance of accounting for the agency of North Korea when discussing South Korean Christians' engagement of reunification through an examination of the roles played by the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), a department of the World Council of Churches (WCC). At first glance, seeking to understand the Christian communities of North and South Korea through the prism of a non-Korean party may appear odd. However, as will be argued below, especially before the 1990s, when the political realities of the peninsula prevented direct contacts between private citizens residing on either side of the 38th parallel, the action of a third party—in this case the CCIA—was critical in facilitating contact. What follows is first an examination of South Korean Christians' motivations for re-emphasizing the issue of reunification and of the obstacles to discussing this issue, which necessitated the involvement of the CCIA. The second section will consider how the activities of North Korea prompted the CCIA to thrust itself into the issue of Korean reunification. Starting in the 1970s, North Korea began to engage the international Christian community. As will be detailed in the pages below, as this engagement became increasingly visible and frequent, the CCIA increasingly felt pressured to establish a policy on how to engage North Korea and what role Christian communities, both international churches and Korean Christian churches on both halves of peninsula, should play in fostering reunification.

Reunification, the CCIA, and the Tozanso Process

As with other aspects of (South) Korean society, the history of Christianity in the country after 1945 cannot be divorced from the issues of division and

dictatorship. From 1910 to 1945, Korea was a colonial possession of Japan. With Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, Korea was liberated from colonial rule. However, political autonomy was short lived as the country became a frontline of the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union partitioned the peninsula along the 38th parallel shortly after Japan's surrender. This partition was originally intended to be temporary, but separate governments had formed on either side of the dividing line by 1948. To the present day, the border between the Republic of Korea (ROK—South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK—North Korea) remains a visible legacy of both World War II and the Cold War.

The division of the Korean Peninsula and the Cold War figured prominently in the daily lives of all Koreans for much of the second half of the twentieth century. From the late 1940s to the 1980s, successive dictators in South Korea buttressed their right to rule by manipulating the politics of the Cold War. On the one hand, communist North Korea was the enemy at the doorstep of a supposedly free and democratic South Korea. On the other hand, the North Korean "threat" was not simply a problem of international relations, but an immediate domestic concern. In the words of one scholar, the idea of "communist North Korea" was "not geographically specific or bound; it was ubiquitous and unrelenting" (Lee 2007, 92). Communist spies and pro-North Korean elements were said to lurk among ordinary South Koreans. Rooting out these elements was said to be not merely the right but the responsibility of the state. Under the pretexts of "anti-communism" and public safety, the South Korean government arrested, tortured, and eliminated Koreans who protested the multitude of social, political, and economic ills in South Korea.

Especially during the 1970s, the repression of protestors was so great that the period would later be dubbed the "dark age of democracy" in South Korean history. However, pockets of resistance existed. In particular, Christian churches and organizations played major roles in leading protests (Koo 2002, 73–94; Chang 1988, 437–465). These groups remained viable spaces of protest in large part because they possessed connections to the international Christian community (Chang 2015, 98–102). In particular, organizations like the Korean Student Christian Federation, the Urban-Industrial Mission, and the Urban-Rural Mission were all connected, both directly and indirectly, to the WCC.

Park Chung-hee could not summarily suppress these organizations because relations with the democratic Western world, and in particular the United States, were crucial to his ability to maintain power. Because these institutions had connections with Western churches and could disseminate information, Park needed to exercise care.

The WCC was certainly concerned over conditions in South Korea and desired to assist affiliated organizations. At the same time, it also possessed a set of motivations, which, though overlapping with the concerns of the dissident Christian community in South Korea, also diverged from them. The WCC grew out of a movement of ecumenical cooperation among the various Protestant denominations that began in the late nineteenth century.² It was formally established in 1948, mere years after the conclusion of World War II, and its architects believed that this new institution needed to be involved in world affairs (Lehmann 2016, 82–83).³ But from a practical standpoint, the WCC's function and its relationship to the various churches of the world were at first unclear. Particularly troublesome was the issue of defining the boundaries of legitimate activity on ostensibly “secular” issues and in various national contexts (Lehmann 2016, 82–94). On what theological grounds could the WCC intervene in cases of social injustice? How should it engage foreign governments on behalf of its member churches? How should it respond to international conflicts when the interests of its member churches clashed? In part because of such questions, Protestant leaders moved to establish the CCIA in 1946. Designed to act as an independent body, the commission was composed of experts in international relations who advised and assisted both the WCC and the International Missionary Council (IMC), formed in 1921, on political matters. The early direction of this commission was significantly shaped by Frederick Nolde, a member of the standing committee and head of the New York office of the CCIA. Under his guidance, the CCIA linked the concepts of religious freedom and human rights (Lehmann 2016, 84–95). From protesting apartheid in South Africa to advancing the economic reconstruction of Western Europe after World War II, the CCIA strove to promote human rights as a part of the Christian mission (Hudson 1977, 59–218).

Eventually, the role and status of the CCIA shifted as a result of two changes. First, in 1961, the IMC merged with the WCC. Because of this

merger, the CCIA became integrated into the World Council of Churches. Second, the composition of the WCC shifted from the 1950s to 1960s. While at first the institution had been dominated by Western, or so-called First World, nations, churches located in the “Third World,” such as those in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, gradually became more prominent. Likewise, social justice and poverty became of increasing concern. In line with the rise of Liberation Theology within the Roman Catholic community, the WCC reoriented itself to focus on human rights, broadly defined (Lehmann 2016, 104–115). The rise of human rights as a concern across the WCC’s many departments led to an attendant decline in the CCIA’s specialist status, as the WCC started to deal directly with governments and local agencies.

Though the CCIA no longer acted independently of the WCC or monopolized the expertise on human rights and international affairs, it still performed an important role in supporting member churches. Specifically, its area of expertise remained deftly and diplomatically addressing sensitive and volatile political situations. In this context, South Korea became an especially important area of concern in the 1970s. The CCIA had been active in the affairs of South Korea as early as the 1950s,⁴ but its involvement in South Korea became more intense and sustained during the 1970s because of the sudden increase in arrests and often violent suppressions of Christian dissidents protesting the numerous labor and human rights abuses in the country. The long engagement of the CCIA with the labor and human rights movements in the South during the 1970s led to the formation of important ties between CCIA officials and Korean Christian activists.

By the 1980s, those in charge of the CCIA were well-versed in the social, political, and cultural conditions in South Korea, and a cohort of South Korean Christian leaders who understood the workings of the CCIA had coalesced. Not surprisingly, in the early 1980s, the focus of the CCIA shifted to mirror changes in the attitudes of South Korean dissidents. By the late 1970s, many Christian leaders shared with their non-Christian colleagues a belief that the fundamental impediment to reform was the division of the peninsula. Both Syngman Rhee (Yi Sŭng-man) and Park Chung-hee had long spoken of the need for reunification, but little concrete progress had been made. Instead, the rhetoric of reunification appeared to be a tool of dictatorial

rule. For example, in 1972, the world was shocked by a sudden joint declaration issued by North and South Korea announcing a commitment to peaceful reunification. Though received with approval by both the general South Korean populace and the South Korean Christian community, this joint declaration failed to produce improvements in North-South relations. Commenting on this situation, one Korean Protestant leader remarked that Park was merely using the rhetoric of reunification to justify his Yusin Constitution, which increased his power and effectively made him president for life.⁵ Park was not truly committed to reunification, and the continuation of division served to rationalize his draconian policies.⁶ Thus, many South Korean dissidents believed by the late 1970s that achieving reunification was a necessary precondition to ending the rationale for dictatorial rule and opening a pathway to democracy.

Against this background, in June 1982 the CCIA convened a secret meeting at its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, with a group of Korean Christian leaders. The purpose of the 1982 meeting was to decide how to engage North Korean Christians and establish the policy of the CCIA on the issue of Korean reunification. Over the course of two days, the participants discussed the use of division to justify oppression, the international factors preventing reunification, the theological reasons for promoting reunification, and the general strategy to be pursued.⁷ These participants included some of the leading figures of the Korean Protestant community: Kang Moon Kyu (Kang Mun'gyu) was General Secretary of the YMCA; Park Sang Jung (Pak Sangjung) was associate general-secretary of the Christian Conference of Asia; and Kim Kwan Suk (Kim Kwansök) was the former chair of the KNCC and director of the Christian Broadcasting System. Ninan Koshy, the director of the CCIA, and Erich Weingartner, an executive secretary with the CCIA, were also in attendance.⁸

The meeting's participants quickly agreed that the fundamental problem confronting the peninsula was not any particular regime, but division. Koshy opened the meeting and set the tone by remarking that national security was "not of people but of regime."⁹ Neither the government of North Korea nor the government of South Korea genuinely desired reunification, as they both used the rhetoric of national security to maintain their rule. Thus, without

addressing the issue of division, there could be no real democracy and no progress on human rights. Unification and democracy were intimately tied. Offering another rationale for pursuing reunification was Park Sang Jung, who declared that it represented the “fulfillment” of liberation from colonialism. In other words, without an end to the division of the peninsula, Koreans could not move on from the colonial period. Similarly, Kang lamented that Koreans had been “victimized” by foreign pressure for centuries and that they needed to “regain” control over their “historical destiny.”¹⁰

Despite the participants’ agreement on the importance of addressing division, determining what reunification should look like and what steps should be taken next proved difficult. Weingartner asked whether the goal should be to achieve a permanent peace between North and South Korea, at the expense of reinforcing division, or to press for union. Park followed by asking whether reunification should mean the absorption of either the North or South Korean system or whether it could permit the continuation of the unique social and political systems that had developed on both sides of the peninsula.¹¹ Partly in response to this question, Kang stated that reunification must be accompanied by democracy.¹²

In the midst of conflicting opinions and suggestions, two important decisions were made that set the trajectory of the CCIA’s future efforts at Korean reunification. First, as will be discussed in more detail below, the participants decided that partnering with a group or agency within North Korea was critical. Second, the participants agreed that the CCIA and KNCC would operate independently to pursue a dialogue on reunification between Christians of North and South Korea. There were two reasons for this second decision. First, South Korean laws prohibited citizens from freely discussing North Korea, division, or unification. For example, at a 1981 joint meeting of South Korean and West German Christian leaders concerning Korean division, it was recommended that South Korean churches push for reunification. The KNCC shortly thereafter decided to establish a commission on reunification. Even so, domestic politics and local resistance prevented the KNCC from opening up substantive public forums for Koreans to discuss division or unification (Yi 2006, 247).

In addition, those meeting at the WCC in 1982 were quick to point out that the Protestant community in Korea was deeply divided. Decades of official rhetoric and propaganda had ingrained in the minds of many South Koreans the idea that North Korea was the enemy, hindering domestic efforts to establish a unified position on peaceful reunification. In a similar vein, Kang Moon Kyu emphasized that only six denominations were members of the KNCC and that a broader coalition was required if talks on reunification were to bear fruit.¹³ He thus questioned the efficacy of discussing unity and reunification if only six denominations participated. As a third party, the CCIA could encourage a broad coalition of churches in South Korea to gather to discuss reunification and, it was hoped, establish a neutral space for Christians from North and South Korea to congregate (Weingartner 1982b).

To this end, the CCIA organized what would be known as the Tozanso Consultation, held in Japan in 1984.¹⁴ Later scholars of Korean Christianity would call this meeting a watershed moment in the history of the South Korean Christian churches' promotion of Korean reunification, and Christian leaders have cited the set of prescriptions outlined at the consultation, known as the Tozanso Process, as guiding principles for Christians approaching the issue of Korean reunification. As noted above, the specific purpose of the meeting was to open a channel to discuss reunification, but discussions of division and peaceful reunification—topics that supposedly only “pro-North Korean” elements ever broached—were forbidden in South Korea.¹⁵ Thus, the organizers sought broader themes. In the initial planning stages, the themes suggested included “Reduction of Tension in the North-East Asia and Peace in Korean Peninsula” and “Peace in Conflicting Area: A Case Study of North-East Asia” (sic). In the end, the organizers chose “Peace and Justice in Northeast Asia.”¹⁶ It was hoped that couching the consultation as a meeting about peace in the region and postulating that the division of the peninsula was the root cause of most, if not all, of the international conflict in the region, would allay the South Korean government's suspicion that this was a subversive enterprise.

Officials at the CCIA understood that overcoming the mistrust of the South Korean government and many Protestant congregations was crucial for the ultimate success of Tozanso. With this need in mind, Victor Hsu and Erich Weingartner traveled throughout East Asia in the spring of 1984 to secure

broad support for the seminar. In Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea, they met with local church leaders and officials. One of their goals was to ensure that delegates from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan would support the argument that Tozanso was focused on regional peace and not simply Korean reunification. Of course, Hsu and Weingartner's journey to South Korea was of primary importance. While in the country, they held exploratory discussions with local church leaders and government officials regarding a proposed international consultation on the church's role in peace and reconciliation in general, and reunification in particular (Hsu 1983).¹⁷ In attempting to convince government officials of the necessity of Tozanso, Weingartner and Hsu emphasized that this consultation would combat the North Korean claim that the South Korean state prevented free and open discussions on reunification and was thus an illegitimate regime. This argument appeared to be convincing, as both Weingartner and Hsu remarked that the officials seemed receptive to Tozanso (Weingartner 1984a).¹⁸

The leaders of the CCIA hoped that the general and abstract topic of "Peace and Justice in Northeast Asia" might encourage North Korea to send a delegation.¹⁹ For example, on April 16, 1983, Koshy wrote the ambassador of the North Korean permanent mission to the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland to inform him of the upcoming meeting at Tozanso. Weingartner followed by writing to the North Korean mission on July 26, 1983 requesting a meeting with the ambassador. Four days later, Weingartner and Robin Gurney met with Pak Tchan Rim (Pak Ch'annim), a DPRK diplomat, who later arranged a meeting with the ambassador for August 1. In their correspondence and meetings with the mission, Koshy and Weingartner emphasized that the meeting concerned peace in the region and the church's role in promoting peace. Furthermore, perhaps to alleviate any fear on the part of the North Korean government that the consultation would produce binding resolutions, Koshy and Weingartner stressed that participation at Tozanso would not commit the participants to any official position (Weingartner 1984b). Ultimately, however, the North Korean government declined to send a delegation.

The planners of Tozanso structured the various presentations to proceed from the broad topic of peace and justice in northeast Asia to the more focused issue of the reunification of the peninsula. After opening remarks by Philip

Potter, general-secretary of the WCC, Kjell Skjelsbaek of the University of Oslo and Bruce Cumings of the University of Washington gave presentations on the roles played by intergovernmental organizations—such as the WCC—in producing peaceful resolutions to conflicts and on the prospects for a “peaceful resolution of a divided Korea” (Koshy 1984). In addition, Kim Hyung Tae (Kim Hyōngt’ae), chair of the KNCC’s Committee on Reunification, gave the final presentation on Minjung theology and unification. During this presentation, Kim emphasized that the two Koreas needed to be reunified before peace could reign on the peninsula. Reunification, in other words, was a critical step toward liberating all Koreans from oppression (Kim Hyung Tae 1984). Following these presentations, the participants were divided into working groups, each of which examined a different set of issues related to the division of the Korean Peninsula and the prospects for reunification. On the final day, the groups presented their findings and an effort was made to build a consensus. The result of the consultation was the formulation of a number of recommendations known collectively as the Tozanso Process. These recommendations included:

1. the need for unification to be achieved primarily by Koreans
2. the need for accurate information on the situation in Korea
3. the need to overcome the rhetoric of North or South Korea as the enemy
4. the need to promote humanitarian initiatives—in particular family reunions
5. the need to promote the right of Koreans to discuss division
6. the need to stem the arms race in Korea.

These recommendations would serve as guidelines for the CCIA, KNCC, and other churches affiliated with the WCC in their attempts to engage North Korean Christians in a dialogue on division and unification.

Responding to North Korea and Justifying Ecumenical Cooperation

Tozanso was important not simply because it was an international consultation or produced a set of guidelines, but rather because it eventually led to a historic

meeting between Christian leaders from both North and South Korea. The Tozanso Process charged the CCIA with establishing direct and official ties with a Christian organization in North Korea. At first, it seemed that this task would require both good fortune and tremendous effort. The CCIA had been attempting to establish such ties since its meeting in June 1982. At that meeting, the participants had highlighted the need to partner with a Christian organization or group in North Korea. Working with only South Korean churches would mean ignoring the other half of the population, and any such efforts would thus lack legitimacy.²⁰

The most obvious group to partner with in North Korea was the Korean Christians Federation (Chosŏn kidokkyo ryŏnmaeng; KCF).²¹ Founded in 1948, the KCF was largely defunct by the mid-1960s as a result of Kim Il Sung's move to consolidate his power. However, shortly after the historic 1972 joint communiqué issued by the North and South Korean governments that called for a peaceful resolution of conflict and division, the KCF resurfaced. According to Sebastian and Kirsteen Kim, during the 1970s, the North Korean government believed that non-governmental groups, and in particular those affiliated with Christianity, could promote its vision for the reunification of the peninsula (Kim and Kim 2015, 258). Put differently, as Hazel Smith has noted, in part as a reaction to the Sino-Soviet rift, starting no later than the 1960s North Korea worked to cultivate a "broad network of diplomatic relations" throughout the world (Smith 2015, 131). Of equal significance, however, was the network of extra-bureaucratic, or rather "non-political," ties that North Korea established during the same period. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the KCF, and more generally the North Korean government, actively engaged with Christian communities around the world—whether to tout North Korea's own system of government or to improve the country's international profile.²²

As a result of these activities, the WCC was aware of the KCF's existence. In fact, in February 1974 the KCF sent a letter to the WCC expressing gratitude for its support of the "Korean people's struggle for the country's peaceful reunification" and criticizing the "oppressive" South Korean regime (Korean Christians Federation 1974). In 1974, a delegation from the Permanent Mission of the DPRK to the United Nations in Geneva visited the

WCC to inquire about its structure and programming (Brash 1974). During this visit, additional letters from the KCF were conveyed to the WCC. According to Alan Brash, though it was not mentioned in the letters, the delegates who visited the WCC indicated that the KCF desired membership. Because of a lack of first-hand information on the status of Christianity in North Korea, however, the WCC was hesitant to establish formal ties with the KCF. Recent scholarship on this topic has questioned whether the KCF made such a request (Kim 2005, 103–127). Regardless, the fact remains that in the minds of the WCC officials, such a petition had been made (Brash 1974).

The WCC was not the only Western organization the KCF contacted. The KCF cultivated relationships with churches around the world, and it occasionally extended invitations to church organizations to visit North Korea. One of the first to accept and travel to P'yŏngyang was a delegation led by Don Borrie of the Methodist Church of New Zealand in 1976 (Borrie 1976; 1977).²³ Other groups followed. For example, in 1978, Gustave Schultz journeyed to the country as a representative of the World Christian Students Federation, and in 1980, the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organization, also traveled to North Korea.²⁴ In all of these instances, those who traveled to North Korea issued positive reports of their experiences upon their return (Koshy 1976; Borrie 1977).²⁵

One of the results of the North Korean engagement of the Western Christian world was to prompt the WCC to reconsider its role in Korea and its policy on reunification. The immediate catalyst for this change was a 1981 meeting in Vienna between overseas (South) Koreans living in the West and a delegation from the KCF.²⁶ According to Wijo Kang, a group of Korean Christian leaders living in the West, including Kang, was intrigued by a North Korean proposal, announced in 1980, for confederacy as a first step towards reunification. These overseas Christians contacted the KCF and arranged a meeting (Kang 1997, 127–140). The original intention had been to hold this meeting in Gwatt, Switzerland but protest led to organizers to change the venue to Vienna, Austria. Leading the protest were South Korean Christian leaders, who argued that the KCF was, in fact, a puppet organization of the North Korean government and was not a true Christian community (Park, Oh, and Ji 1981). For instance, the KNCC also dispatched an urgent message

to Philip Potter, general-secretary of the WCC, insisting that he refrain from supporting the meeting (Korean Christian Counter-measure Committee 1981). A more official letter from Won Sang Ji (Wŏn Sangji), general-secretary of the KNCC and president of the Lutheran Church in Korea, followed, which claimed that the North Koreans had under their control a number of Korean Christians living abroad (Won 1981). In other words, Won insinuated that the Korean Christian leaders who met with the KCF in Vienna were in fact controlled by the North Korean government and that not only was the meeting a sham, it would serve to give an air of legitimacy to the KCF.

The Vienna meeting presented the WCC a vexing conundrum. On the one hand, given the widespread criticism of this meeting within South Korean Christian circles and a general belief that the KCF was not a true Christian organization, Weingartner noted that “any group which is promoting human rights in South Korea would be forfeiting their effectivity if they were to get involved in this [Vienna] conference” (Weingartner 1981a). On the other hand, he noted that “any excuse which brings clearly identifiable Christians out of North Korea should be regarded as a positive development.” Stated differently, engaging North Korea could endanger the CCIA’s work in South Korea. Indeed, likely because of the reason, the WCC in fact did not support the Vienna meeting. Yet the mission of the CCIA, and the WCC more broadly, was to foster ecumenical cooperation among Christian churches in all countries, including North Korea. Indeed, the WCC had, from nearly its founding, accepted churches from the Eastern Bloc. Bringing North Korea into the fold was in line with the WCC’s commitment to ecumenical unity regardless of the political system under which its member churches existed.

Resolving the two conflicting goals of continuing to promote human rights in South Korea and fostering Christianity in North Korea was critical because of rumors that the WCC had facilitated the Vienna meeting. For instance, Weingartner was criticized within the WCC because some assumed that he had furtively and without authorization written the organizers of the Vienna meeting that the WCC would happily meet the incoming North Korean delegation (Green 1981). Weingartner vigorously denied these charges (Weingartner 1981a). Park Sang Jung—at the time associate general-secretary of the Christian Conference of Asia—wrote to Weingartner expressing support

and commiserating that because of the sensitive nature of reunification, the CCIA needed to approach the issue with utmost care and consideration (Park 1981a). In response, Weingartner wrote and thanked Park for his support. More importantly, Weingartner informed Park that the CCIA was considering holding a small, confidential meeting to establish a policy on how it should respond to the growing push by the North Koreans to engage the Christian community on the topic of reunification (Weingartner 1981b; Park 1981b).²⁷ The goal was to develop an engagement plan for North Korea “on a basis quite different from that undertaken by the now infamous group which met in Vienna” (Weingartner 1982a). This was the origin of the secret planning meeting of June 1982 on the topic of what role the WCC should play in promoting reunification in Korea, and the first step towards the Tozanso Consultation of 1984.

Perhaps because of the WCC’s initial rebuff during the 1970s, the KCF expressed little interest in joining the WCC in the early 1980s (Marshall 1982).²⁸ In addition, although it sent letters of support, the KCF rejected requests to join the Tozanso Consultation. However, the KCF’s interest in the WCC seemed to increase suddenly in the spring of 1985. In April of that year, Weingartner and the CCIA sent reports to the North Korean ambassador stationed in Geneva on the Tozanso Process. They also indicated a desire to visit North Korea. Unexpectedly, on May 30, 1985, the CCIA received a formal invitation to travel to P’yŏngyang. It is impossible to know for sure why the KCF, likely upon the order or at the very least with the approval of the North Korean government, expressed such a rapid change of heart. But it is reasonable to assume that the KCF had come to view the CCIA and the Tozanso Process as aligning with its interests.

While the invitation to visit may have represented a shift in how North Koreans chose to engage the CCIA, an examination of the various reports of the Christian groups and individuals who had traveled to North Korea during the late 1970s and early 1980s reveals that this invitation was in line with the KCF’s broader aims and practices. For example, in preparation for the Tozanso Consultation, Robin Gurney of the CCIA wrote to Paul Wee in August 1984 to gather information on the KCF and gauge whether it was a true Christian organization (Gurney 1984). Wee was the general-secretary of

Lutheran World Missions and had traveled to North Korea for a two-week tour with a delegation of three other church members in May of that year. In response, Wee gave the CCIA a copy of a confidential report summarizing the delegation's two-week visit, along with his own observations (Wee 1984).

As they accepted the KCF's invitation, Wee and his colleagues were aware of the political undercurrents that brought them to the country. They noted that it was readily apparent that the main objective of the North Korean government was to cultivate a positive image of the country in the West—especially in the United States (Moyer, Herzfeld, Boonstra, and Wee). Explaining this motivation, he suggested that North Korea feared becoming isolated internationally and eventually embroiled in another war. Though the report acknowledged that many in the West might regard the fear that North Korea would be invaded without provocation as unfounded, it criticized the Western media for depicting the North Koreans as “inherently treacherous, animalistic, morally and intellectual inferior and racially sub-human” (Moyer, Herzfeld, Boonstra, and Wee).²⁹

During the visit, the delegation's hosts gave numerous lectures on the history, socio-political system, and economy of North Korea. Of particular importance were the lectures given over the course of two days on *chuch'e* and its relationship with Christianity. This term, which first appeared in a speech given by Kim Il Sung in 1955, has proven to be enduring and today serves as the fundamental ideology upon which North Korea's socio-political system is built.³⁰ During the 1960s, Kim Il Sung championed *chuch'e* in the international arena as a political ideology of self-reliance. An individual was the master of his or her own fate and could change his or her natural surroundings through both self-reliance and the creative use of available resources (Suh 1988, 305–309; Shin 2006, 89–93). This was an inversion of Marxist-Leninism, which focused on how material conditions determined human history, and it was indicative of Kim Il Sung's attempt to mold North Korea into a strong, independent nation both diplomatically and ideologically. More specifically, rather than relying on other countries or simply following the Soviet Union or China, North Korea needed to act with economic, political, and military independence. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the concept of *chuch'e* was expanded to include North Korean society. All individuals were called to be self-reliant

and independent, albeit in service of the collective, regardless of the material conditions—or rather limitations—they might face.

By identifying people as the ultimate arbiters of their own fates, *chuch'e* appeared to conflict with Christianity. However, the delegation's hosts insisted that North Korea upheld the right to religious freedom and that *chuch'e* ideology allowed for peaceful coexistence with religious belief. The reasoning given was that both *chuch'e* and religion ultimately sought human happiness (Moyer, Herzfeld, Boonstra, and Wee). Though Wee and his colleagues expressed some concern over the potential conflict between *chuch'e* and Christianity, they also noted that their hosts were extremely open to engaging in discussions on this topic and patiently answered their questions (Ibid.).

As indicated by the multiple lectures and emphasis on *chuch'e* ideology that Wee observed, the maintenance of independence and Korean agency was critical for both the KCF and North Korean officials. Thus, it is likely that North Korean officials were also concerned whether permitting the KCF to affiliate with the WCC or the Tozanso Consultation would impinge on their ability to act freely. For this reason, it is important to remember that the Tozanso Process called for an end to the vilification of both North and South Korea, emphasized the need for reunification, and maintained that Koreans needed to take the lead in ending the decades of division of the peninsula. These were all points that the KCF repeatedly conveyed to Wee and the other visitors invited by the North Korean government.

Even after Tozanso, the CCIA consistently insisted that reunification was to be undertaken by Koreans and that it was involved in this matter simply upon the invitation of the South Korean Church. For example, in early May of 1985, Dwain Epps of the CCIA travelled to the United States to report on the Tozanso Consultation to concerned Korean-American Christian scholars at George Mason University. Early in his speech, Epps stressed that Kim So Young (Kim Soyōng)—general-secretary of the KNCC—had called for the churches of the United States and Canada to “intensify” their efforts in promoting unification (Epps 1985). In other words, he subtly reminded his audience that the Tozanso meeting was rooted in a desire of the leaders of the South Korean Church. In the remainder of his address, Epps stressed that reunification should ultimately be driven by Koreans and that the ecumenical

Christian community could play only a supporting role. The attitude expressed by Epps and his colleagues must have allayed any concern on the part of the North Korean government that the CCIA sought direct influence over discussions on reunification; it thus opened the door for the representatives of the WCC to travel to North Korea.

From November 11–19, 1985, Koshy and Weingartner visited P’yŏngyang on behalf of the CCIA. They were greeted at the airport by the vice-chair of the KCF and the director of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland (Choguk p’yŏnghwa t’ongil wiwŏnhoe; CPRF). During their stay, they visited various sites, met with officials, and sat through lectures explaining *chuch’e*, the history of division, and the country’s proposal for reunification. Koshy and Weingartner met with Christians on the seventh day of their visit, among them Ko Kijun, general-secretary of the Central Committee of the KCF. At the time, Ko was 64 years old and a pastor. Ko explained the origins of the KCF and the current status of Christianity in the country. He claimed that there were some ten thousand Christians in North Korea. This figure was double what previous visitors like the New Zealand Methodists had reported, and Koshy and Weingartner questioned its accuracy. But Ko repeated the figure and stated that of the pastors who had been ordained prior to the Korean War, only ten remained. A theological seminary had been established in 1972, and it had ordained an additional twenty pastors. Since 1983, nearly ten thousand Old and New Testaments, in addition to new hymnals, had been published. In sum, Ko painted a picture of a small but rebuilding Christian Church in North Korea (Weingartner 1985).

On the whole, Koshy and Weingartner were pleased with their trip to North Korea and left with a favorable impression of the government officials they had met and, more importantly, the leaders of the KCF. Seeking to preserve the momentum that had been built, in mid-April 1986, Weingartner invited the KCF to a meeting at Glion, Switzerland (September 2–6, 1986) (Weingartner 1986b). Koshy and Weingartner made it clear in the letter of invitation that representatives from South Korean churches would also be in attendance. In addition, they took the step of writing to the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland to inform them that the KCF had been invited and that a contingent from South Korea would attend a meeting on the

“Biblical and Theological Foundation of Christian Concern for Peace” (Ibid.). For these reasons, the CCIA was “skeptical” that it would receive a positive response (Weingartner 1986e). In fact, the KCF did not respond immediately, which indicates that North Korean officials were contemplating their next move. Because of the silence, Weingartner sent another letter in late May (Weingartner 1986d). On June 15, 1986, the KCF dispatched a letter accepting this invitation and asking what other organizations would be in attendance (Central Committee of the Korean Christians Federation 1986).

After receiving this affirmative response, the CCIA quickly moved to plan the meeting. Well aware that this first meeting between North and South Koreans acting as private citizens rather than government officials was a historic event, the CCIA operated quietly. Weingartner and Koshy decided to keep the meeting small and chose to not issue invitations to any overseas Koreans (Weingartner 1986e). Moreover, in a strategic move, the CCIA decided to invite delegates from member churches of non-aligned countries, assuming that the North Korean contingents would feel less wary if these churches were included (Weingartner 1986i). To keep the news of Glion a secret, the initial invitations refrained from mentioning the participation of the KCF—though those invited were later informed of the true purpose of the meeting either by a second letter or in person. Unlike Tozanso, Glion was not a conference intensely packed with working groups or academic lectures. Nor was there any effort to issue a joint statement. The reason was simply that the CCIA wished to avoid unnecessary conflict during what it hoped would be a harmonious meeting between delegates from South and North Korea. In the end, the various participants agreed on several common points, including an affirmation of the 1972 Joint Communiqué between North and South Korea, an affirmation of the Tozanso Consultation, and an affirmation of the role the church could play in breaking down barriers between North and South Korea to promote peace and unification.

The 1986 Glion meeting was the first interaction between the leaders of the KCF and the KNCC, and it injected a new excitement into the prospect of peaceful reunification between North and South Korea. Now that the barrier preventing direct meetings had been broken, regular meetings took place between North and South Korean Christians on the peninsula and abroad

throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, as Yi Mahn-yol has noted, after 1988 the Christian groups engaging North Korea and the topic of reunification became diversified (Yi 2006, 247). This engagement set in place the relationships and networks that allowed South Korean Christian NGOs to enter North Korea during the early 1990s to provide relief aid after a series of catastrophic floods, which led to a severe famine (i.e., the Arduous March, 1994–1998). In a similar vein, Weingartner’s experience led him to reside in P’yŏngyang from 1997 to 1999 to head the “Food Aid Liaison Unit,” which was affiliated with the United Nations World Food Program.

Conclusions

Many Christian leaders in South Korea during the 1970s and 1980s were interested in reunification as a means to overcome political oppression and the numerous labor and human rights abuses that had confronted the country since its founding in 1948. Assisting these Christian leaders and affiliated organizations in the country was the CCIA. In June 1982, the CCIA held a confidential meeting at its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland to discuss the importance of reunification and what roles Christians should play in achieving this goal. Because of the political restrictions the South Korean government placed on organizations in the country from discussing North Korea, in general, and peaceful reunification in particular, the CCIA worked to create a space outside of the peninsula for South Korean churches to engage in open debate on this topic. This led to the Tozanso Consultation of 1984. Subsequently, the KCF, with approval from the North Korean government, extended an invitation to the CCIA to visit P’yŏngyang, in the following year. Taking advantage of this positive momentum, the CCIA invited the KCF to a meeting in Glion, Switzerland in 1986. In extending this invitation, the CCIA was sure to mention that leaders of South Korean Christian community would be in attendance. As a meeting between civilians from both halves of the Korean Peninsula—as opposed to a visit between state officials—what would come to be known as Glion I was an historic event and stimulated the movement to discuss the topic of reunification within Christian communities in South Korea during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

An important part of this growth in public discourse on reunification in South Korean churches was the role played by North Korea and the KCF. Since the early 1970s, the KCF had sought to engage the world Christian community. Its efforts eventually led to a meeting held in Vienna in 1981 with expatriate Koreans. This meeting sparked protest from church leaders in South Korea, who viewed the KCF as nothing more than a puppet organization of the North Korean state. Thus, the meeting placed pressure on the CCIA, since many in South Korea believed that the CCIA at least tacitly supported this meeting. Prompted by these rumors and the Vienna meeting, the CCIA organized the June 1982 meeting cited above and began the process that would lead to first the Tozanso Consultation and then Glion I. Viewed from this perspective, the KCF and North Korea were not passive actors, but rather active participants in advancing discussions on what roles Christians should play in the reunification of the peninsula.

Notes

- 1 The 30 percent figure refers to Protestants and Catholics combined. Protestants represent roughly 20 percent of the total Christian population in South Korea at present. Though this paper is primarily concerned with Protestantism, I have chosen to use the term “Christian” and cite the combined 30 percent figure because most casual observers do not view South Korea as simply a case study of the success of “Protestantism” or “Catholicism.” They instead use, albeit imprecisely, the term “Christianity.” Furthermore, even in South Korea, most adherents of Protestantism—though certainly aware of the differences between Protestantism and Catholicism—identify as Christians rather than Protestants.
- 2 For a recent examination of the importance of ecumenicalism as an ideal shaping both Protestant missions and United States engagement with the broader world, see Hollinger (2017). For an in-depth examination of the Edinburgh World Mission Conference, see Stanley (2009).
- 3 The decision to establish the WCC was made in 1938. However, because of World War II, the official establishment of this ecumenical institution was delayed until 1948.

- 4 In 1953, Frederick Nolde travelled to Korea as head of the CCIA to convince both Syngman Rhee and Korean church leaders to accept an armistice as a first step towards reunification. Whether this trip was successful is questionable. However, Nolde did remark that South Korean officials, months after his trip to the country, indicated that their discussions with Nolde had softened their stance on the armistice. In addition, Secretary of State John Dulles informed Nolde that his actions had made South Korean officials, especially Rhee, more amenable to the armistice. See, “Confidential Appendices to the Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting, Château de Bossey, August 5–9, 1953,” File 428.16.2.9.2, Folder 1, Archives of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland.
- 5 “An Interview with a Prominent Leader of the Korean Presbyterian Church (Tokyo, March 5, 1973),” File 428.16.2.9.2, Folder 5, Archives of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland.
- 6 As Namhee Lee has demonstrated, many intellectual dissidents during the 1970s believed that Park Chung-hee used the division of the peninsula as justification for his draconian policies (Lee 2007).
- 7 “CCIA—Korean Unification Meeting” (21 June 1982), File 428.16.2.9.5, Folder 1, Archives of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland. This document consists of notes taken during the meeting. Though not signed, it appears to be the work of Erich Weingartner. The document is very detailed, and Weingartner took care to identify who said what. Thus, we can attribute specific ideas to specific individuals attending the meeting.
- 8 By at least the late 1970s, Ninan Koshy was familiar with the political obstacles South Koreans confronted in advancing the human and labor rights movements. In 1976, for instance, he wrote an in-depth report detailing the arrest of those working at the Seoul Metropolitan Community Organization (SMCO). The SMCO was a Protestant-based group that worked among the urban poor of Seoul. The leader of the institution was Pak Hyōnggyu. Erich Weingartner specialized in Asia and started working at the CCIA in 1978. In 1980, he was sent to South Korea, along with Victor Hsu, to investigate the Kwangju Massacre.
- 9 “CCIA—Korean Unification Meeting” (21 June 1982), File 428.16.2.9.5, Folder 1, Archives of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Kim Il Sung had earlier suggested a confederate republic as the first step towards Korean reunification. Park may have been referring to the concept of confederation when broaching this point.

- 12 “CCIA—Korean Unification Meeting” (21 June 1982), File 428.16.2.9.5, Folder 1, Archives of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Reminiscing some three decades later on the CCIA’s involvement in fostering discussions on reunification, Weingartner remarked that various South Korean Christian leaders suggested that the CCIA would have to “go it alone” in creating a space outside the Korean Peninsula for Korean Christians to discuss reunification. The CCIA would bear the criticisms and consequences, if any, from organizing this event. For this reason, the KNCC was not actively involved in organizing the Tozanso Consultation. The lack of discussion in this article of the KNCC or other groups in South Korea in organizing either Tozanso or, as will be discussed later, Glion I is in large part a result of the fact that many South Korean Christian leaders had decided not to be directly or officially involved. See Weingartner (2013).
- 15 “CCIA—Korean Unification Meeting” (21 June 1982), File 428.16.2.9.5, Folder 1, Archives of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland.
- 16 “Aide-Memoire,” File 428.16.2.9.5, Folder 2, Archives of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland. No date for this Aide-Memoire is given. However, the document states it to be a summary of a meeting held in Tokyo during the first week of December 1983. The purpose of the meeting was to plan for the upcoming consultation on the unification of the Korean Peninsula.
- 17 Victor Hsu had previously visited the country in 1983 to discuss the prospect of holding an international consultation on reunification. He met with leaders of the KNCC and leaders of member churches of the WCC. In addition, he met with Yi Chungbae, director of the Bureau of Religious Affairs. At the meeting, Yi indicated his support for this proposed consultation.
- 18 Weingartner and others viewed the trip as a diplomatic success. Indeed, Park Sang Jung praised Weingartner’s “diplomatic visit to Korea” and suggested that the WCC establish a formal secretariat for state affairs and assign “roving ambassadors.” See Park (1984).
- 19 The CCIA also invited a Christian delegation from the People’s Republic of China to attend. However, Bishop K.H. Ting declined, stating that a number of domestic concerns would prevent the China Christian Council from participating.
- 20 “CCIA—Korean Unification Meeting” (21 June 1982), File 428.16.2.9.5, Folder 1, Archives of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland.
- 21 The Korean Christians Federation sometimes appears in the literature as the Chosŏn Christians Federation (CCF). While the CCF is a more literal, if not

accurate, translation of the Korean name of the organization, Chosŏn kidokkyo ryŏnmaeng, this article uses the former because the leaders of the organization have used this particular translation in their English-language correspondence.

- 22 The KCF periodically sent correspondence to the WCC. In 1981, for example, Kim Song Ryul, vice-chair of the Central Committee of the KCF, sent a New Year's greeting letter. In the letter, Kim criticized the despotism in South Korea, the presence of US troops on the peninsula, and the "Team Spirit" exercises that were to take place. In addition, Kim stressed that Kim Il Sung had recently proposed reunifying the country by establishing a confederated republic. See Kim Song Ryul (1981).
- 23 Borrie traveled to North Korea in 1976 and again in 1977.
- 24 "Report of the American Friends Service Committee Delegation to North Korea, September 2–13, 1980," February 1981, File 428.16.2.9, Folder 4, Archives of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland.
- 25 Of particular importance, Ninan Koshy wrote to Borrie prior to his departure to North Korea. Koshy explained that the WCC had been told of the existence of the KCF, which had made a request to join. But the WCC still lacked direct ties. Thus, Koshy asked Borrie if he could make contact with officials of the KCF while in North Korea. Borrie reported that not only did he meet with officials of the KCF, but a "significant minority" of North Koreans was still actively practicing their faith in the country.
- 26 This group of overseas Koreans self-identified as hailing from South Korea.
- 27 Park Sang Jung responded positively to Weingartner's proposal for a small meeting to discuss how the CCIA should approach the issue of Korean reunification. Park stressed that the CCIA needed to gather more information on the Vienna meeting before issuing any public statements.
- 28 In July 1982, Park Sang Jung received from Russell Marshall a report concerning a visit to North Korea by a group of New Zealand Lutherans. Marshall informed Park Sang Jung that on the topic of the WCC, the leaders of the KCF indicated that it had "no desire at this point in time to pursue any further links with the World Council of Churches or the Christian Conference of Asia or other ecumenical agencies. They do continue links with FCK (Christian Peace Consultation) based in Prague, Czechoslovakia" (Marshall 1982).
- 29 In particular, the report cited the popular sitcom "M*A*S*H" as a prime example of negative caricatures of North Korea.

30 Scholars of North Korea have noted that *chuch'e*, as presently understood, was not a fully formed idea when Kim Il Sung first used the term in a December 1955 speech criticizing those who blindly followed the Soviet Union. In February 1963, Kim gave a speech regarding the need for self-sufficiency and self-defense. Scholars generally agree that this was when *chuch'e* started to become the foundational ideology of North Korea. See Suh (1988, 305–309) and Shin (2006, 89–93).

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