Introduction:

By the time the Korean War ended with an armistice treaty, Protestant Christianity came to be defined as an imperial religion of the United States in North Korea although Pyongyang had been once touted as the “new Jerusalem” by missionaries before the division. This had much to do with the way Koreans in the North had experienced the U.S. offensive during the Korean War. The following words of U.S. Air Force General Curtis LeMay who served as head of the Strategic Air Command during the Korean War attest to their experience: “We went over there and fought the war and eventually burned down every town in North Korea.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

On the other hand, in the southern part of the country where many Protestant Christians from the northern part of Korea found themselves as refugees, Christianity by and large became the religion of those who hated the god-less communism, and therefore, North Korea. This is because many of the Protestant Christians who had fled North Korea for the South after experiencing the communist purging of Christians embraced anti-communism with fervor and religious conviction. For all these reasons and more, the relationship between Christianity and Korean reunification has been mostly difficult and elusive at best.

It is not therefore surprising that, during the Korean war, the leadership of an interdenominational association of Protestant churches that was formed early at the outbreak of the war espoused the “northern expedition policy,” meaning the conquering of North with force and the unifying of the country without communists.[[2]](#endnote-2) For a couple decades following the War, Christians did very little to overcome the division. They were paralyzed from the trauma. Consumed by the experiences of their own suffering and loss, many bred enmity towards people in the North, although many of them had their own father, mother brother, sister, uncle and friends in the North.

The fear of North Korea which was close to paranoia ran rampant in the psyche of those living in South Korea because the South Korean government made anti-communism an integral part of its policies and practices beginning with the National Security Law first established in 1947. Still, over time, some Koreans in South Korea and the diaspora started to dream the unimaginable. Risking their lives, they rose up to meet the challenge, and sisters and brothers of the world communion have responded. This brief account of Christian response to the Korean conflict and for Korean peace is limited to the major actions led by: 1. Protestant churches in Korea, particularly those member churches of the National Korean Churches in Korea (NCCK) in South Korea, in collaboration with global ecumenical bodies such as the World Council of Churches and Christian Churches of Asia; 2. Korean Christians in diaspora and some partner church bodies in the U.S. and Germany. The timeline is interspersed with a few key milestones in inter-Korea relations to provide the context.

**A Selective Timeline of the Protestant Christian Ecumenical Movement**

**for Peace and Reunification on the Korea Peninsula**

1950 On June 25, Korean War breaks out. On July 13, meeting in Toronto, Canada less than a month after the breakout of the Korean War, World Council of Churches’ Central Committee issues a statement in support of the UN Commission on Korea report that declared North Korea as the aggressor and called for ‘police action’ on North Korea. This position was a shift from WCC’s earlier position which was that of ‘negotiation.’ T.C. Chao from China, one of the Presidents of the World Council of Churches resigns from his position in protest.

It was later revealed that the WCC ignored the many dissident voices coming from China and North Korea. Some say that John Foster Dulles, who was directly involved with the Korea issue and special advisor to President Truman, was mainly instrumental in changing WCC’s position on Korea and that WCC was used for providing the moral ground of ‘police action.’

1953 On July 27, a Korea Armistice Treaty is signed by North Korea, China and the U.S. on behalf of the UN Command.

1960s- 70s Having lived under the dictatorial leadership of Rhee Syng-man (1948-1960) and Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) both of whom ruled with an iron arm of anti-communism, some Koreans come to a better appreciation of the connection between democratization and reunification and draw a conclusion that democratization has to be a precondition for Korean reunification. Churches begin to speak out for democracy in the latter 60s.

1972 July 4 - In the background of international detante between the U.S. and China, Seoul and Pyongyang announce the historic South-North Joint Communique, in which the two sides vow to cease slander and defamation of each other and to promote exchanges. They also agreed to create a South-North Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and to open a direct Seoul-Pyongyang telephone line.

1979 Rev. Kim Sŏngnak, a Korean American minister of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., originally from Pyongyang, visits North Korea and meets Kim Il-sung. His visit is followed by the visits of other Koreans living in diaspora.

1980 Following the Kwangju uprising, the discussion on the issue of unification gains new momentum.

1981 In June three Korean Christians living in Germany visit North Korea. They meet with the leaders of the Korean Christian Federation(KCF) and the Korea Peace and Unification Committee of DPRK. Together they agree to hold the first meeting of Korean Christians in diaspora for the reunification of Korea. This has a special significance as KCF because until then KCF had not been considered as a legitimate Christian organization by Christians in South Korea.

In May, a German-Korean church consultation takes place.

On June 8-10, Christians of Germany and Korea, two divided countries, hold a consultation in Seoul under the theme of “Confession of Sin and a New Responsibility.” This leads to a decision for the two countries’ Christian communities to form a joint consulting group to carry on a dialogue on the issue of unification. For the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) which until then had not considered the feasibility of having a direct dialogue with North Korea, this experience gives it a new awareness of the importance and rai·son d'ê·tre for a North-South dialogue. The dialogue that started at this meeting continued on through 1987 and culminated with the issuance of the “Declaration” in 1988.

On Nov. 3-6, the first global gathering of Christians from North Korea, South Korea, and abroad takes place in Vienna, Austria. The main purpose of the gathering is to hear each other out to increase understanding of each other.

Churches in South Korea by and large refuse to see this meeting as a Christian gathering, treating it as a gathering of pro-North Koreans that met under the guise of Christianity. Those from South Korea experience a lot of backlash upon their return home both from the church and society, and some even end up in courts. Despite these challenges, this historic gathering draws the attention of the South Korean church and society.

1982 NCCK establishes an Administrative Committee for the Institute of Reunification Issues.

On Dec. 3-5, the second gathering of Christian Consultation for Korean Unification takes place in Helsinki and since then, this gathering is held annually for ten years in various places including Pyongyang, Beijing, Vienna, and Frankfurt. Following the meeting in Vienna, South Korea bans the entry of those Koreans in diaspora who participated in the meeting.

1983 The issue of peace and justice in the Korean peninsula is taken up by the World Council of Churches (WCC) as “a matter of conviction and also an inescapable task at its Sixth Assembly.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

1984 On April 7, Korea-Germany Church issue a joint declaration on Korea peace and reunification.

**Tozanso Consultation**: On Oct. 29-Nov. 12 the first ecumenical gathering for the peaceful reunification of the divided Korean peninsula is convened by the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) in Tozanso, Japan. Representatives from churches in South Korea and North Korea, as well as other countries are invited; unfortunately, representatives from North Korea do not attend. Representatives from South Korean churches agree to work towards reducing their antagonism toward North, work against policies that isolate North Korea, and work to improve North-South cooperation in solidarity with worldwide churches.

**1985** On Feb. 19-23, the Christian Conference of Asia(CCA) issues a declaration on Korea peace and reunification.

On Feb. 28, the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) issues a Korean Church Declaration for Peace and Reunification. The declaration states two principles for the church’s unification movement: people-centered and peaceful.

NCCK launches the Consultation on Reunification Series and holds its first consultation on May 24. Four more consultations are held before Feb. 29, 1988.

NCCK requests the four political parties of South Korea to each develop a policy on national reunification.

On Nov. 11-19, upon invitation from the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland (CPRF) and the Central Committee of the Korean Christian Federation of North Korea, Ninan Koshy and Erich Weingarner of WCC visit North Korea. It is the first “official” visit by a church/ecumenical body to North Korea.

DPRK acknowledges the presence of Christians in North Korea.

At the third Korean-North American Church Conference held on Dec. 9, the conference adopts a resolution that holds the U.S. responsible for dividing Korea and declares that it must assume responsibility to work together with the Korean church for the reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

In December, United Church of Canada issues a declaration on North Korea

From the mid-1980s, South Korean women’s groups start asking serious questions about the meaning of security and begin play an active role in the peace movement.

**1986** Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK) adopts a report on North Korea Mission and Unification Policy.

Presbyterian Church in Republic of Korea (PROK) issues its position paper on Peace and Unification.

**Glion I**: Sponsored by the WCC’s Committee on International Problems, representatives of the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) meet representatives of Korean Christian Federation (KCF) for first time in Glion, Switzerland. This is the first gathering of Christians from North Korea and South Korea since the division, and this Glion meeting takes place every two years since then.

Members of the NCCC-USA visit Pyongyang, North Korea.

PCK and PROK, two Presbyterian Churches in South Korea, hold a consultation with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the three churches adopt a Joint Statement on Peace and Reunification on the Korean peninsula, and the PC(USA) at its General Assembly held in the same year adopts a resolution regarding peace and reunification on the Korean peninsula. This contributes greatly in building a momentum to draw the attention of churches worldwide to the issue of Korean division.

The WCC holds a conference under the theme of "the theological and biblical base of Christian concern on peace". Christians from the South and the North participate in the communion.

On Nov. 11-19, two delegates of WCC visit Pyongyang in order to implement the agreed results of the Tozanso meeting.

A South Korean branch of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) is founded.

**1987** Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) adopts a resolution on Peace and Unification of the Korean Peninsula.

United Methodist Church (UMC) adopts a resolution on Korea Peace, Justice and Unification.

A delegation of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) of the World Council of Churches visit North Korea.

**1988** On Feb. 29, the NCCK General Assembly adopts a historical document of   
 *Declaration of the Churches of Korea on National Reunification and Peace*. The declaration outlines five basic principles for the Korean churches toward national unification: 1. Self-reliance, 2. Peace, 3. National unity transcending ideology and social structure, 4. Assurance of freedom and human dignity, and 5. Korea-wide engagement.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Go to “Historical Documents” for the text of the Declaration.

In April, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) convenes an international consultation that brings together representatives of churches in Asia especially in Japan and China, North America and the USSR by the Christian Conference of Asia provides a very important opportunity to continue the process of ecumenical engagement started in Tozanso for peace and unification of Korea.

**Glion II**: On Nov. 23, at the 2nd Glion Conference the "Glion Statement" for peace andreunification on the Korean peninsula is adopted. It includes 7 important principles: 1) proclaim year 1995 as a year of Jubillee for reunification 2) adopt 5 principles for peace and reunification 3) exclude policy to aggravate state of division adherence 4) preference for recovering of mutual trust 5) nonaggression, disarmament, denuclearization and withdrawal of foreign militaries 6) mobilize exchanges of reunion of separated families and release military and political confrontation at the same time 7) open channel of ecumenical exchange between the NCCK and the Korean Christian Federation in North Korea.

**1989** In March Rev. Moon Ik-hwan makes an unapproved visit to North Korea via Japan and China. He is immediately arrested in violation of South Korea’s National Security Law. He is tried and sentenced to a prison term.

At its meeting in Moscow, the WCC Central Committee admits its Toronto statement (1950) as a serious mistake and its obligation to support efforts begun by the churches in the Republic of Korea for reunification. Furthermore, it adopts its own policy toward peace and reunification on the Korean peninsula on the basis of the Glion Statement in front of representatives from churches in the South and in the North. Some of the elements given as priority considerations in the declaration include:

1. The people of Korea should be the ultimate subjects in decisions affecting thir future, without outside interference of tutelage. The reunification of Korea should be carried out through a process of democratic participation by all members of the Korean nation.
2. All parties concerned should be called upon to commit themselves to the principles contained in the joint North-South declaration of 4 July 1972.
3. A radical reduction of military force facilities and weapons should be sought on the Korean peninsula in order to eliminate one of the major threats to regional and world peace.
4. As a contribution to reduction of tensions and a sign of good faith, the USA should be urged to remove immediately all nuclear weapons from Korean soil, and both the USA and USSR should be urged also to remove all nuclear weapons aimed at Korea.
5. Both North and South Korea should be pressed to find solutions to outstanding humanitarian problems, foremost among them the tragic situation of millions of separated families.[[5]](#endnote-5)

**1990s** Churches in South Korea make efforts to engage churches in North Korea directly. North Korean economy suffers terribly from the fall of the Communist block due to the loss of its trade partners as well as from serious natural disasters that followed. Churches in South Korea respond by sending relief items and Bibles. Evangelical Korean Christians who did not align with the approach of NCCK and WCC and had formed their own group called the Korean Christian Council begin to take an interest in the reunification movement and the two groups form the South-North Movement for Sharing for Peace and Reunification as well as the Korean Christian Council to Promote Peaceful Reunification.[[6]](#endnote-6)

On July 10-13, representatives of the churches both in the North and South hold the Christian Conference on the Peaceful Reconciliation and missions of the Fatherland in Tokyo. They adopt an agreement with the following main points: “urging mutual reconciliation and maintaining a position for coexistence between the two Koreas, abolishing all obstacles that stood in the way to expanding the exchange, and reducing armaments and invigorating peace negotiations.” The agreement also called for “withdrawal of U.S. troops and nuclear arms, adoption of a nonaggression pact, and mutual visits of northern and southern churches to further their various ministries.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

**1991** Following the declaration made in Glion in 1988, South Korean churches declare the year of 1995 as the “Jubilee Year” since it marks the 50th year since 1945, the year of Korean liberation from the Japanese occupation. And, in anticipation of the “Jubilee Year” South Korean churches hold a “Christian Conference on Peace and Reunification.”

**1992** Jan. 7-14 Rev. Kwon Ho-Kyung, General Secretary of NCCK at the time, makes an official visit Pyongyang, North Korea at the invitation by Rev. Koh Ki-Joon, Chair of the Korean Chrisitian Federation (KCF) at that time. This is the first official visit of a South Korean Christian to the North.

**1995** On March 28-31, the fourth Tozanso Conference convenes. Since 1995 worldwide churches such as WCC, WARC, churches in Germany, Canada as well as the PCUSA and the Uniting Church in Australia provide venues to invite representatives from the North and the South for easing tension in the peninsula and for reconciliation, peace and reunification.

June 28 - A preliminary meeting for the inter-Korean summit was held at the House of Peace in Panmunjom and the two sides agree to have an inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang from July 25 to 27.

July 9 - North Korea announces the death of Kim Il-sung.

July 11-North Korea announces that the inter-Korean summit would be postponed indefinitely.

**1997** Oct. 8 - Kim Jong-il is selected as the general secretary of the North Korean Workers Party.

Dec. 9 - The first full-dress meeting of the Four-Party Talks is held in New York.

**1998** Feb. 25 - In his inaugural speech, President Kim Dae-jung announces three principles of his North Korea policy and proposes an exchange of special envoys to implement the 1991 Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation Between the South and the North (the Basic Agreement).

Nov. 18 - Hyundai Corporation launches its first cruise liner service to Kumgangsan (the Diamond Mountains) in North Korea for South Korean tourists.

**1999** May 5 - In an interview with the CNN, President Kim Dae-jung of South Korea lists five major tasks for dismantling the Cold-War structure on the Korean Peninsula.

June 3 - The two Koreas agree to hold vice ministerial-level talks in Beijing during the month.

June 22-26 - The two sides of Korea hold the first vice ministerial-level talks in Beijing.

**2000** First Inter-Korea Summit: In June, Kim Dae –jung and Kim Jung-Un, the heads of the two states of Korea meet for the first Inter-Korea summit in Pyongyang. They issue a joint declaration called 6.15 declaration.

June 20-23 About 1,000 members of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) pay a visit to Mt. Keumkang in North Korea and hold a prayer meeting for peace and reunification.

In August a Korean Peace Forum is founded by Rev. Kang Won-yong on the occasion of the first inter-Korea summit that took place in Pyongyang in June 2000.

**2002** March-August A people’s prayer march is held hoping for reunification. The marchers visit places of suffering caused by the Korean war and the national division: Jeju Island, Geoje Island, Maehyang-ri, Jiree Mt. and Backdoo Mt.

Aug. 14- Kang, Young-Sup, Chair of Korean Christian Federation visits South Korea for the first time as a church delegate among delegation of 8.15 National Reunification.

**2003** Joint Prayer meeting of the churches in the North and the South is held at Mt. Keumkang.

On March 1, a National Religion's Meeting is held in Seoul to commemorate the March 1st Independence Day. Fifteen members of the Korean Christian Federation (KCF) visit Seoul for the first time since the division. They worship at Somang Presbyterian Church.

On June 16-20, an ecumenical meeting is held in Washington, D.C. to discuss the USA's policy toward North Korea’s nuclear program as well as the relationship between DPRK and the U.S.

On Aug. 27, China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States meet for the first round of Six Party Talks.

In November, a “Korea Peace Forum” organized by the Koran branch of the World Conference of Religions for Peace takes place in South Korea. Representatives of the churches in the nations that participated in the Six Party Talks in August are invited to this forum in addition to the members of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) because of its special on-going relationship with both North and South Korean churches due to its own division history.

**2005** On May 23, a joint prayer meeting of the churches in the North and the South is held at Mt. Keumkang for urging the implementation of the June 15 agreement.

On Sept. 19, the second round of Six Party Talks takes place in Beijing, China.

**2007** The Second Inter-Korea Summit takes place in Pyongyang on Oct. 2–4, 2007.

**2008** A series of events are held and actions taken in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the NCCK' 88 Statement for Korean peace and reunification:

* Korea-German Seminar on Peace and Reunification of Korea at the Protestant Academy at Arnoldshein, Frankfurt.
* The first meeting of the Ecumenical Forum for Peace, Reunification, and Development Cooperation on the Korean peninsula at the same place as the above: 4 representatives from the KCF in North Korea including Rev. Kang Young Sup and Rev. Lee Jong Ro.
* The 1st Steering committee meeting of the Ecumenical Forum for Korea in Nanjing, China. 2 representatives from North Korea including Rev. Lee Jong Ro.
* NCCK issues a statement welcoming the USA's decision to release NK from the list of states that sponsor terrorism.
* Ninety nine South Koreans to North Korea and hold a joint prayer meeting with three hundred North Koreans in Pyongyang. They pray for the implementation of the June 15th Agreement for Peace and Reunification.

2009 Rev. Sam Kobia, President of WCC and delegation meet with Kim Young-nam, President of the DPRK Supreme People’s Assembly North Korea in Pyongyang, North Korea and other leaders of the Korean Christian Federation at Kim’s invitation on Oct. 19, 2009 before the Tosanzo meeting scheduled to take place in Hong Kong on Oct. 21-23. Discussing the issue of nuclear power, Kim points out that all of the members participating in the Six Party Talks either already have nuclear capability (China, Russia and the U.S.) or are nations “under the nuclear protection policy of the United States (Japan, Republic of Korea).” [[8]](#endnote-8)

WCC and CCA bring together church leaders from the two Koreas and partner churches to Tusen Wan, Hong Kong, October 21-23 on the anniversary of the Tozanso meeting that launched the ecumenical movement for Korea peace and unification.

2013 At the WCC’s 10th Assembly in Busan, South Korea, member churches renew their support for and commitment to peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula. See “Historical Documents for Peace Building” for the text of the WCC Statement on Peace and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula adopted by WCC delegates on Nov. 8, 2013.

NCCK launches a Korea Peace Treaty campaign. For the entire text of the proposed peace treaty go to “Historical Documents.”

2014 On June 17-29, the International Consultation on Justice, Peace and Reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula is held in Bossey, Switzerland on the 30th anniversary of the Tozanso Consulation. Rev. Kang Myong Chol, chairperson of the Korean Christian Federation (KCF) of North Korea attending the consultation remarks, “I believe this gathering of brothers and sisters of churches of various countries is a manifestation of the strong desire and will to pool efforts and actively contribute to the cause of peace and reunification on the Korean Peninsula. . . . Since Emmanuel God will always be with us and lead us to the road of justice and peace, the ecumenical cause...will surely be achieved under the special divine protection and grace of our Lord.” [[9]](#endnote-9)

2015 The Church of Christ (Disciples) adopts a resolution entitled “A Call for Peace, Justice and Reunification in the Korean Peninsula.”

2017 On July 7-8, the Ecumenical Forum for Peace, Reunification and Development Cooperation on the Korean Peninsula (Ecumenical Forum for Korea) convenes in Leipzig, Germany.

On Nov. 22, WCC urges all parties in Korean Peninsula confrontation to be instruments of peace.

On Nov. 31 – Nov. 8, a peace delegation of PCUSA led by the Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson visits South Korea.

# On Dec. 1, WCC launches ‘A Light of peace’ campaign for a nuclear free world where the Korean Peninsula is the focus. https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/korean-peninsula-is-focus-in-a-light-of-peace-campaign-for-nuclear-free-world

Resources on the Tozanso-Process:

* “Der Tozanso-Press: Chronological Summary” prepared by Tsuen Wan for the International Consultation on Peace, Reconciliation and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula: Towards an Ecumenical Vision beyond the Tozanso Process held in Hongkong, October 2009. [www.doam.org/index.php/projekte/frieden-und-sicherheit/tozanso-prozess/538-pr-fs-tozan-chron](http://www.doam.org/index.php/projekte/frieden-und-sicherheit/tozanso-prozess/538-pr-fs-tozan-chron) accessed July 26, 2017.
* Ninan Koshy, [“Reflections on the Tozanso Process: A historical perspective and today’s geopolitical context”](http://ecuforumkorea.org/bbs/bbs.php?table=meeting&query=view&uid=16&p=3) accessed July 26, 2017.

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2. See Mahn-yol Yi, “Korean Protestants and the Reunification Movement,” in *Christianity in Korea*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. & Timothy S. Lee (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’I Press, 2006), 239-240. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ninan Koshy, “Reflections on the Tozanso Process: A historical perspective and today’s geopolitical context,” 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “Efforts of Korean Churches for Peace and Recommendation” [https://rethinkingmission. org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/sungkwong.pdf](https://rethinkingmission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/sungkwong.pdf) accessed Dec. 1, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ninan Koshy, “Reflections on the Tozanso Process,” 6-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Yi, “Korean Protestants and the Reunification Movement,” 250. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Yi, “Korean Protestants and the Reunification Movement,” 250-251. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/kobia-and-wcc-delegation-meet-north-korean-president-kim-yong-nam> accessed Nov. 25, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2014/6/23/church-leaders-meet-and-agree-advance-peace-korean/> accessed Dec. 11, 2017 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)