

Reflections on a visit to Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Peter Prove, director of WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs

A 12-person delegation representing churches and ecumenical bodies around the world gathered for an historic international ecumenical visit and meeting in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), 23-30 October.

Peter Prove, director of the WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, participated in the delegation. He offered the following reflections on his visit.

How do you define “progress” in the DPRK in light of the impact of international sanctions?

North Korea represents a political, economic and social system that is – obviously - very different from any other country. But there is evident pride on the part of North Koreans in the economic and social progress achieved, despite the impact of international sanctions. To North Koreans, this progress is a sign of the “Juche” political ideology – stressing independence, self-reliance and creativity – in practice.

What did you hear regarding the North Korean vision of reunification?

I heard repeatedly of the North Korean desire for reunification with the South, though not following the German example - of absorption - but rather through a “one country-two systems” model of confederated unity.

What are the biggest obstacles to peace?

From the North Korean perspective, the biggest obstacles to peace are the tensions generated by the repeated joint military exercises in the vicinity of the Korean peninsula, the economic sanctions, and other “provocative” measures – including the repeated scattering of propaganda leaflets by helium balloons from the South, and the international denunciation of the human rights situation in the DPRK.

The WCC is and has always been committed to promoting the realization of human rights for all people around the world. In such a tense and dangerous situation as that on the Korean peninsula, it is especially important to find ways of pursuing this issue that avoid unintended and counter-productive consequences for the people living in that context. Based on all we have seen and heard of the current situation on the peninsula, I believe that the human rights of people in the region could be better secured by urgent measures to reduce tensions and to promote peace and reconciliation, than through measures that risk provoking conflict, which could be catastrophic for the people of the region as a whole.

Is there religious freedom in the DPRK?

There are many credible and well-documented reports of the denial of religious freedom in the DPRK. Certainly, the North Korean political system involves close control of all aspects of society – including religious expression. However, the view – quite prevalent in the outside world – that Christians and other religious communities are prevented entirely from worshipping and

expressing their faith in the DPRK does not match our experience and observations in the country. The Constitution of the DPRK recognizes – in principle – freedom of religion or belief. The fulfilment of that constitutional guarantee in the DPRK is of course another question – as it is in other countries too. But we have witnessed and participated in regular worship services, and seen the social service functions of the Korean Christian Federation, with which we have a long-term relationship. The KCF is officially recognized and enabled by the government, along with some other religious entities including the Korean Catholics Association.

How does the WCC's call for a nuclear weapon-free world impact progress on reunification?

The WCC has repeatedly called for a nuclear weapon-free world and for the de-nuclearization of the North-East Asian region in particular, including in resolutions adopted at the WCC 10th Assembly in Busan, Republic of Korea, in November 2013. Insisting on the complete elimination of North Korea's nuclear arms as a precondition of negotiation is not politically realistic. Instead, there should be a process of dialogue aimed at the de facto recognition of the DPRK as a nuclear weapon state, which would facilitate North Korea's entry into the established international mechanisms for verification, monitoring and regulation of nuclear arms.

North Korean counterparts call for full implementation of the measures already agreed in the declarations adopted at the North-South summits held in June 2000 and October 2007 in order to reduce tensions and promote negotiation. They also called for the replacement of the 1953 Armistice Agreement with a formal peace treaty, ending the suspended state of war on the peninsula – a particularly dangerous context for un-verified and un-monitored nuclear weapons. Accordingly, these calls were supported by the ecumenical delegation.

What are the next steps?

I believe we should encourage and promote dialogue and people-to-people encounter through the church and ecumenical structures in the region, including the Korean Christian Federation (KCF) in North Korea, and the National Council of Churches (NCCCK) and the churches of South Korea. We can also promote such dialogue internationally as a means of reducing "enemy images", and de-escalating tensions that risk sliding toward conflict. Provocation does not offer a path to peace. Encounter, dialogue and negotiation offer a much safer and more promising route forward.

It is hoped that the next steps in the process of mutual encounter and dialogue among the churches of the region and internationally will involve representatives of the KCF undertaking further visits to sister churches in other parts of the world in the near future, in continuation of the long history of mutual visitation launched following the Tozanso consultation in 1984.