

Moderator, Members of Mission Council

Thank you for the opportunity to share something of the Conference in Korea arranged by the National Council of Churches in Korea. The banner heading was 'Cultivating Peace, Proclaiming Hope' and the aim was to mark the thirty years since the NCKC published its declaration on peace and reconciliation for the Korean peninsula. We easily forget that South Korea has suffered under military dictatorship and until recently right wing Governments. Koreans have grown up with a National Security Law that criminalised contact with North Korea and with state run propaganda that demonised the communist regime in the north. That background alone emphasises how remarkable the 1988 declaration on peace was and how unexpected the recent breakthrough in North/South relationships is. It took real courage to make the 1988 declaration that carried with it the threat of prosecution for the authors. The hope was that the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary would create an opportunity to publicise the need for a peace treaty and bring to an end the Korean War. A war for which a cease fire was signed in 1953 but for which no peace treaty has yet been agreed.

Most of us probably watched the TV coverage of the opening ceremony at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics when the two Korean teams, the DPRK and ROK, walked out together with a united flag of Korea. Replaying that footage what is apparent is the eruption of joy at that show of unity. The whole stadium rose to its feet and cheered wildly with the exception of three people who remained glum faced and rooted to their seats. Mike Pence and the US representatives. And in that moment we were witnessing both the opportunity and the challenge in the search for peace and reconciliation in Korea.

The conference two weeks ago in Seoul had the atmosphere of trying to catch up with events that were unfolding around us. The government minister scheduled to speak sent an assistant to read his paper as he was having dinner in Pyongyang with Kim Jung-un. The conference was writing its final communique as the announcement was made that there would be a North/South summit in April and after we had dispersed came the news that Donald Trump was ready to meet with the North Korean leader that he so recently dismissed as little rocket man! Those closest to events in Korea remain optimistic but realistic. The Korean peninsula has been under foreign occupation since the Japanese annexation in 1910 and anger at that Imperial occupation still runs deep. The refusal of the government of Japan to fully apologise for the use of so called 'comfort women' during the years of occupation, the incidents of racism against Koreans in Japan and the intentions of the Japanese government to alter the constitution to create a military capacity are all background to a people wanting to emerge from under the heel of occupying powers. It was America and Russia that arbitrarily divided the peninsula in 1945 to suit their own geopolitical ambitions. What began as an attempt by America to contain the influence of communism has the potential to de-stabilise the whole region. The awareness of being occupied by a colonial force is a factor in Koreans pushing for a summit between North and South whatever Trump might decide.

Two insights from gathering of global partners in Seoul. If you ask South Koreans about the threat of a nuclear Armageddon they will point out that it was America that first introduced nuclear weapons into the peninsula in contravention of the 1953 armistice agreement. It was that action that prompted the north to move their conventional forces close to the border so that any nuclear attack would hit American and South Korean installations as well as the north. The DPRK asked China and Russia for help in providing a nuclear deterrent, both refused and the North began the development of their own weapon system. South Koreans will often say that they are more worried about the actions of the US than the DPRK. They will point out that much of the negative propaganda surrounding the north is false. The second insight is to say that the initiative of President Moon Jae-in inviting the north to participate in the winter Olympics was not without risk. There is a generational divide amongst South Koreans. Older people still remember the flight from home and

family that they thought was temporary. They want to see lasting peace that will allow contact across the border and still talk of one Korea. Younger people while also wanting a lasting and just peace have grown up believing the north to be a separate country and would favour separate development that recognises the cultural gulf between North and South. Division is their normal.

Any peace treaty will involve America, North and South Korea as well as China. The agreements signed between America and Japan in 1952 guarantees and South Korea in 1953 American interference in North East Asia. What are known as the San Francisco Treaty and the Panmunjom System provides for mutual defence and guarantees the right of the S to maintain bases in South Korea and Japan. The economic and political consequences are that Cold War structures and attitudes are now deeply embedded. Relationships and agreements need to be re-negotiated to create mutually agreed peace and security treaties. The complexity of relationships makes negotiation complex and by no means certain. The ambition of many is to declare the region a nuclear free zone. There is a widespread belief that Kim Jun-un has no territorial ambitions but is fearful of regime change and will defend that at all costs. The removal of Saddam Hussein and Colonel Gaddafi are quoted as reminders that America and the West cannot be trusted not to engineer regime change.

The WCC is campaigning for the end of nuclear weapons not only in North East Asia but more globally. It believes that removing nuclear weapons from the peninsula could be the first step towards a lasting peace. The reality is that we are searching for a starting point where relationships between north and south can be normalised, where there can be humanitarian engagement. There needs to be dialogue without conditions and which creates a safe space for all. The threatening and bullying tactics that Trump has engaged in are the opposite of what is needed and it must be hoped that any potential summit begins from a more reasoned approach. The present approach of the US is to impose sanctions that drive the North into a corner but leaves the North no option but to fight back. The churches of Korea see the call for peace as a God given responsibility which cannot be shirked.

Moderator the 2016 General Assembly adopted a resolution committing the URC to supporting our partners the PCK and PROK and to ecumenical engagement in the search for peace in Korea. In pursuit of that we are now members of the World Council of Churches Forum on Korea. It would be appreciated by our partners if Mission Council felt able to send a message of support and encouragement at this critical stage in the journey towards peace.



### Text of Letter

“Mission Council meeting on March 19<sup>th</sup> was pleased to receive a report from Revd David Grosch-Miller following his participation in the International Conference in Celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup>. Anniversary of 88 Declaration of the NCKK. At this critical moment in the search for a lasting and just peace for the people of Korea Mission Council affirms the continued

commitment of the United Reformed Church to support ecumenical engagement towards peace and reconciliation of the Korean peninsula.

We send warmest greetings and heartfelt prayers to our partner churches the PCK and PROK and to the NCK. We look forward to further engagement through the participation of the URC in the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Forum for Korea.”

Signed: Alan Yates – Moderator and John Proctor General Secretary.

