1. PROK statement on private-school reform bill

On December 20, 2005 the Church and Society Committee of the PROK General Assembly issued a statement on the private-school reform bill which was passed by the Korean National Assembly on December 9, 2005. The Church and Society Committee welcomed the decision of the National Assembly, saying that “the revised law will eventually contribute to establishing transparency and democracy in the management of private schools.”

The controversial legislation requires private schools to elect a quarter of their seven-member board of directors from among faculty members and parents, with the aim of improving transparency in school management and curbing corruption among school owners. The law further stipulates that no family member or relative of the chairperson of the school board may be appointed as president or director of any private school ranging from elementary school to university.

As of April 2005, 482 schools or 24.4% of the total 1,974 private schools are owned by the seven major religions in Korea, including Protestant, Catholic, and Buddhist. Among these 482 private schools, 349 schools belong to the Protestant church. Representing some of the strong opposition, the Christian Council of Korea (CCK), a conservative wing of the Protestant churches in Korea, and the main opposition Grand National Party jointly launched a nation-wide campaign against the bill, claiming that the leading government Uri Party, which rammed the revision through the National Assembly, and some leftist groups in Korean society are attempting to destroy the autonomy of private schools.

The PROK, however, clearly declared in its statement that “the Korean church must understand the spirit of the newly revised law which will enhance transparency, and must try our best to work together to set up a legal mechanism for achieving true education.”

2. PROK youth give direct support to tsunami-devastated Nias and Aceh

One year after the massive earthquake and subsequent tsunami caused catastrophic damage and loss of life in countries rimming the Indian Ocean, fourteen PROK young people traveled to Indonesia in early January 2006, accompanied by the Vice-Chair of the PROK Church and Society Committee and one staff person of the PROK Domestic Mission Department. In response to an appeal sent out to church members across the PROK immediately after the disaster, the Church and Society Committee has received offerings amounting to 300 million Korean Won (approximately US$300,000) over the past year and passed these on
to partners in the stricken areas. Now, from January 9-18 the fourteen young people and two leaders, moving beyond financial support, visited Indonesia to see with their own eyes and, in their words, express Christ’s love with their own bodies through their presence and their physical labour. Traveling first to Mellabo in Aceh, one of the most severely damaged areas, the young people visited a farm of the GKBp (Grejia Karo Batak Protestant Church), helping with the farm work for two days. In Aceh where almost 100% of the population is Muslim, the GKBp has extended help to all neighbours irrespective of religion.

The PROK team then spent several days on the large island of Nias. For one full day they lent their youthful strength to helping reconstruct a heavily damaged church building; the PROK has financially supported the project. For two days in another area of Nias, in two teams they helped dig a well which will once again bring clean water to the inhabitants, and led a Bible school for the children. In a one-day visit to a refugee camp sheltering tsunami victims, they presented a gift of rice and salt, and played games, sang and talked with the children.

Traveling then to Medan, the PROK youth met with GKBp youth, and the two groups shared their respective youth activities, ideas and plans. Mutually encouraged by this rich interchange, the young people agreed they want more future such exchanges.

Traversing the long distances of Indonesia often by all-night train, bus and car, the young people, undaunted by the rigorous conditions and hard work and their own tiredness, returned to Korea inspired to share their joyous experience and learnings and new Indonesian friendships as widely as possible through their local churches and the PROK National Youth Association and wider network. Before leaving Indonesia one of them commented, “We came to help and to share love, but in fact we received much love and help and gained new experiences that now we must pass on.”

3. PROK center receives Prime Minister’s Award
On December 28, 2005 the Prime Minister’s Award was presented to Elder Choi Young-Sook, Director of the Suso Youth Retreat Center in southern Seoul. The Center, under the Social Welfare Foundation of the PROK, has a strong program of youth empowerment. The award was given in recognition of Elder Choi’s dedication to empowering youth through programs imparting values and vision. The PROK Social Welfare Foundation was legally recognized by the Korean government in 1995. Under the Foundation, 48 registered social welfare centers offer a variety of programs and services to those who are shunned by and marginalized from the mainstream of Korean society.

4. Emergency fund supports churches damaged by heavy snowfall
A lethal snowfall, the heaviest in seven decades, wrought damage amounting to 200 billion won (200 million USD) on the worst-hit North and South Cholla Provinces and South Chungchong Province in early December 2005. Some 14,000 civilians and soldiers were mobilized to repair roads, farms and homes. More than 1,200 schools were temporarily closed. On December 26 the government declared
the snow-devastated areas a special disaster zone, making them eligible for state subsidies and compensation.

Responding to the disaster, the PROK Church and Society Committee in an emergency meeting released emergency relief funds for severely damaged churches. One church in North-Cholla Province was completely destroyed, and about 10 churches elsewhere in the heavily-hit area suffered major damage. Rev. Yoon Kil-Soo, General Secretary, and Rev. Jeong Jin-Woo, Director of the Mission Department of the PROK General Assembly, visited the snow-devastated provinces twice, expressing pastoral concern and strong solidarity with the suffering churches.

Ecumenical News in Focus

On December 15, 2005 the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) held an “Ecumenical Unity Conference”, inviting representatives of the Korean Orthodox Church, Catholic Bishop’s Council and Lutheran Church. Participants shared their ongoing activities for “unity” and “ecumenism” and planned a worship service to be held at a Catholic church in Kwangju City on January 20, 2006 to celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.