Erich Weingartner: “Peace needs an emotional bond” on the Korean Peninsula

Erich Weingartner representing WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs at the International Consultation on Peace, Reconciliation and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula in Hong Kong, China, 22 October 2009. Photo: Peter Williams/WCC

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Erich Weingartner, who previously helped lead the World Council of Churches (WCC) Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, has also represented CanKor, a Canadian interactive resource on North Korea. From
the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, he was also founding head of the Food Aid Liaison Unit of the World Food Programme.

Below, Weingartner shares his reflections on the 70 Days of Prayer for Peace in Korea.

**Do you think prayer is an effective way to bring about peace in Korea?**

**Weingartner:** If we consider prayer to be a substitute for advocacy and action, then NO. That kind of prayer would just be like passing the buck, or diverting our responsibilities to a higher power.

When North and South Korean Christians decided to engage in annual joint prayers for peace, they did so to express a common aspiration. These prayers were the sign that they participated together as a community of hope. The Korean Christian Federation of North Korea and the National Council of Churches in South Korea committed themselves to practice peace and unity with each other even before it was possible to achieve peaceful reunification on the political level.

**You have been involved in official exchanges between Christians from both sides of Korea since the beginning. What have you learned from these experiences?**

**Weingartner:** Let me tell you about the encounter between North and South that first proposed an annual joint prayer as a central part of Korean Christian action for peace. The year was 1986 and the place was Glion, Switzerland. To prepare for this meeting, I had to negotiate permission from both North and South Korean governments. South Korea was still ruled by the dictator Chun Doo Hwan. The National Security Law was strictly enforced with draconian
punishments for any citizen that made contact with anyone from North Korea. Having obtained the necessary authorizations from both governments, the two delegations met face-to-face for the very first time. Although each side recognized the historical nature of this meeting, they also harboured extreme suspicion and mistrust of each other. Southern delegates bombarded the Northern delegates with questions that were obviously meant to verify whether their counterparts were really Christians or just communist agents masquerading as Christians. The Northern delegates harboured similar suspicions in reverse. The programme over the next three days included worship, Bible studies and prayers. It was these prayers—spoken by both delegations—that gradually melted the ice and revealed the humanity of the other.

The meeting ended with a Eucharist celebrated in a large circle. When the pastor leading the service asked participants to give each other the blessing of peace, everyone began to intermingle. First they were shaking hands, saying the traditional “Peace be with you.” But the significance of that simple act soon overwhelmed everyone with emotion. People began to hug each other as they wished peace upon each other. Tears began to flow freely. Peace ceased to be a demand made of the other, but a gift given freely to the other.

It was on the basis of this experience that the traditional annual joint prayers for peace in Korea were initiated. Peace needs an emotional bond to be established between opposing sides. Prayer recognizes that our intellectual, rational human efforts to establish peace are not enough.
Prayer is not meant to change God's mind. Prayer changes human attitudes from distrust and hatred toward cooperation and love.

You lived in North Korea for more than 2 years as an aid worker during the terrible famine of the 1990s. How has that experience shaped your perception on the need for peace?

Weingartner: The early days of humanitarian assistance saw a tremendous disconnect between aid workers and North Korean counterparts. A good number of aid workers arrived with the attitude that they were entering enemy territory. Misunderstandings and prejudice caused numerous conflicts and a lack of cooperation that disrupted the work.

Our perceptions are largely shaped by our attitudes. One of my colleagues once said that North Korea is like Rorschach ink blot test. When you go there, you will see what you expect to see. If we look for enemies, we will find enemies. We no longer see individuals as human beings with the same needs, fears, joys and tears as ourselves. And often we project onto others what we fail to see in ourselves. If, on the other hand, we look for potential friends, if we try to understand the other within their own context and lives, then we will surely find friends, as I have certainly done.

Do you see the 70 days of global prayer for peace on the Korean Peninsula as a useful action during this 70th anniversary of the start of the Korean war?

Weingartner: I see Korean peace as a kind of Litmus test for all of humanity. If we cannot find a way to end the insanity of a 70-year-old war on the Korean Peninsula, how do we expect to solve the most urgent problems threatening the
survival of our entire planet?

On the other hand, if we can manage the relatively simple task of declaring an end to the war in Korea, it would send a powerful message of hope to the entire world. Korean peace can teach all of us that problems can be solved if we work together to heal our fractured, polarized humanity.

Making peace requires a change in our own perceptions. It requires a conversion of sorts. It requires that we open our hearts and minds in order to see ourselves in others. Prayer can help us to overcome the enmity that lies within ourselves. Through prayer we can come to see the humanity that resides in all of us, even our enemies.

My personal prayer for peace is as follows:

*God of love,*

*We confess*

*that we have been unable to love our enemies, as you have commanded.*

*We confess*

*that we have been more efficient in waging war than in negotiating peace.*

*We confess*

*that we have lost our trust in your guidance as the Lord of history.*

*Grant us faith*

*that peace is possible on the Korean Peninsula even after 70 years of war.*

*Grant us hope*
that our feeble efforts to promote peace with justice will bear abundant fruit.

Grant us love

that encourages us to overcome suspicion and hatred with open hearts and minds. Prince of Peace,

help us to discover the truth in ourselves so that we can become agents of reconciliation; pour your mercy upon Korea, and likewise on the rest of this troubled world.

Amen.

Worldwide prayer campaign begins to end 70-year Korean War (WCC press release 06 February 2020)

“We Pray, Peace Now, End the War!” – 70 days of global prayer announced for Korean Peninsula, WCC press release 05 February 2020

Light of Peace campaign resources, prayers and social media kit

Photos from the Launch of the Global prayer campaign for peace in Korea

Video recording of the Global prayer campaign launch event