

# Spiritual Landscape of North KOREA

**L**ittle is known about North Korea. This small country of 22 million may be the most secluded and mysterious nation in the world. With intolerable living conditions, people are escaping to China to find money, food and clothing. Each day hundreds cross the Tumen River. These tell stories of millions who are perishing and suffering in the land of a ruthless regime.

Famine in North Korea has claimed two to five million since the mid-1990s. That's more than the famines in Ethiopia and Somalia combined. Refugees report that at the height of the famine in 1997, there weren't enough coffins for all the dead. Trucks drove through the villages every morning to pick up bodies on the streets. People ate grass and tree bark. Malnutrition made many children blind. Nearly every refugee has personal accounts of people eating other people.

In the 1940s, Christianity grew tremendously on the peninsula, especially in the northern half. According to some estimates, in 1950 North Korea had 2,850 churches, 700 pastors, and 300,000 Christians. Pyongyang was called the "New Jerusalem."

At the end of World War II Kim Il Sung rose to power. He outlawed all religion. Thousands fled south.

Interviewed refugees relate no concept of God or religion. They were taught in school that there's no such thing as God. They had never heard of Jesus. They had no concept of life after death. They believe that once people die that's the end. Interviewed refugees didn't know how to pray, and didn't even know what prayer was. One refugee said he saw people praying in a movie on North Korean TV, but didn't understand what they were doing.

The state indoctrinates North Koreans in the *Juche* philosophy. Instead of the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, people are taught a trinity that includes Kim Il Sung, his mother Kim Jung Sook and his son Kim Jong Il. The written style of national laws resembles the law of Moses. One refugee who was



learning about the Bible for the first time said he had an easier time understanding the Old Testament than the New Testament. Children give thanks to Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il for their food. Photos of these leaders adorn walls to remind people of who supposedly cares and provides.

Refugees report that merely saying that you're Christian results in immediate death. Two refugees took personal Bibles back into North Korea from China. Back in their hometowns, they kept the Bibles hidden. Some children discovered one of the women with her Bible. She immediately disappeared, never to be heard from again.

North Korea defector Hwang Jang Yop, a former confidant of Kim Il Sung, said, "If someone really wanted to attend church, or declared allegiance to it, he would be shot within five minutes."

The government runs two official Christian churches in Pyongyang. These are for show. Hwang said, "Those that go there are state-ordered 'believers.'" Knowledge of underground churches is minimal. Some report rumors of "Christian guerrillas" hiding out in the mountains.

Despite deplorable conditions, starving refugees refuse to blame Kim Il Sung. Even after receiving food and clean clothes from relief workers the refugees will defend Kim Il Sung and get upset if

relief workers speak ill of their "great" leader.

From childhood, North Koreans are indoctrinated that North Korea is the world's wealthiest and best country. They are taught that America causes their present hardships. They are also taught that the U.S. sends food and medicine as peace offerings. One refugee who had just finished obligatory army duty said that many believe war is inevitable to reunite the Korean peninsula, and all feel if it comes to war, the North will win. Even after seeing the truth, he remained steadfast in defending North Korea.

Refugees share that they constantly fear death. Many had seen or heard about people taken away in the middle of the night for watching a foreign television program, listening to a foreign radio station, criticizing Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il, or owning a Bible and praying. No one can talk against the government. People who complain are arrested and punished. People live in fear of one another and are never free to share their personal doubts.

Some Koreans reside in China. Some of these are Christians, and some of them are aiding North Koreans. These speak Korean and can sneak in and out of North Korea. They deliver food and medicine into North Korea and provide shelter for refugees who make it out to China. One grandmother in China uses six ID cards at different border crossing points to deliver food and supplies. Koreans who reside in China are allowed to visit relatives in North Korea once a year, but they cannot give humanitarian aid openly because that affronts North Korea's self sufficiency and pride.

When refugees go back to North Korea they tell their trusted relatives or friends what they've seen and heard. More and more North Koreans suspect that they are being tricked. Also, Christians in China are impacting North Koreans. Many refugees come out to China having been told by their friends to look for buildings with crosses on them because that's where they can receive help.

The World Network for North Korea informs people and facilitates discussion, training and projects towards preparing church planting, Bible distribution, and relief and development teams for when North Korea opens. It also facilitates projects for creative ministry as long as North Korea remains closed.