



Barnabas Fund has helped to fund this Christian bakery building

# North Korea

## hope behind the veil

*A North Korean Christian was suspended upside down and ordered to deny his beliefs. When he refused the warder began to stab him and pushed him to the ground. Still the Christian would not deny Christ. Finally the warder ordered 6,000 other prisoners to walk over him, trampling him to death.*

*Very little is known of the totalitarian state of North Korea, which has been veiled in secrecy for over half a century, but reports of the tremendous courage of its Christians emerge from time to time. One of the few countries to remain under communist rule, what little is known about North Korean society is often learnt from those who have escaped the oppressive regime to seek freedom in South Korea or China. What has become clear is that life for North Koreans is made up of misery, hunger and oppression by the State, and Christians are singled out for particular persecution. Despite such hardships, the Christian faith is growing as courageous believers endure hideous suffering and even martyrdom for the Lord they love.*

### Land of conflict and of Christianity

For centuries the Korean Peninsula was fought over by its larger neighbours, China, Russia and Japan. Korea was absorbed into the growing Japanese empire in 1910 and remained under Japanese control until Japan surrendered at the end of World War II in 1945. Korea was immediately seized by competing occupying powers. The USSR took control of the north, while south of the 38th parallel was

administered by the US. Though this division was intended to be temporary, it resulted in the two separate countries of North Korea and South Korea which we find today.

Until the division into North and South, Korea had enjoyed a diverse religious background, which included Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. The Christian faith was first introduced by missionaries in the late 18th century. Though the Korean government banned the spreading of Christianity,

continued missionary activity over the next century meant that by 1863 there were an estimated 23,000 Christians in the country. Korean government policy ordered harsh persecution of Christians. Yet by the late 19th century Korea had become one of the most "Christianised" nations in Asia. Pyongyang (which later became the capital of North Korea) was an important Christian centre, with Christians comprising one sixth of its population. After a great revival in 1907 Pyongyang became

known as “the Jerusalem of the East”.

North Korea under Soviet rule soon began to adopt communist policies, bringing it into direct opposition with the US-administered South Korea. In 1948 North Korea established the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) headed by Premier Kim Il-Sung. A deep distrust developed between North and South Korea, which soon erupted into warfare. The Korean War lasted from 1950-1953, when an armistice agreement was signed. There is still no comprehensive peace agreement between the two countries.

*Christians... were labelled as “counter-revolutionary elements”*

### Kim Il-Sung and the purging of religion

Kim Il-Sung had been recruited by Stalin to establish a communist North Korean state. On taking the premiership of North Korea in 1948 he sought to develop a Marxist-Leninist political model which centred on the principle of autonomy and self-reliance, called *Juche* (pronounced “joo-cheh”). Part of the process was a brutal suppression of all religious activity and rival systems of thought and belief. Christians, Buddhists and followers of other religions were labelled as “counter-revolutionary elements”.

“We purged the key leaders above the rank of deacons in Protestant or Catholic churches and the wicked among the rest were put on trial. The general religious people were... put into prison camps [and given a chance to reform]... We learned later that those of religion can do away with their old habits only after they have been killed.”

Kim Il-Sung<sup>1</sup>

The *Juche* belief system led to the construction of a very rigid social class system, with 51 layers

### Juche and “Kimilsungism”

Over time *Juche* has developed into a quasi-religious personality cult centred on Kim Il-Sung, who was venerated almost like a god. When he died in 1994 Kim Il-Sung, “The Great Leader”, was assigned the post of president for “eternity”. His son Kim Jong-Il is the current head of state, and has been absorbed into the personality cult as “The Dear Leader”.

The Kim dynasty is portrayed as the ultimate source of power, virtue, spiritual wisdom and truth. Facts concerning their lives have been altered to back up the image of divinity. For example, Kim Jong-Il was born in a Soviet army camp in Siberia; however the “official” history teaches that he was born on North Korea’s holy Mount Paekdu, and that at his birth a star shone, lightning flashed and a double rainbow appeared. A North Korean scholar says that the two Kims are like God and Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> People are encouraged to sing their praises and pray to them. Any dissent is ruthlessly repressed.

of privilege and status. People were categorised according to their family background and also their perceived loyalty to the state. Christians and followers of other faiths were classified into the lowest levels, viewed as “irredeemables”. People in these low categories suffered in education and employment. Some were forcibly relocated to remote and desolate areas, where they were deliberately left to starve.

### Religious intolerance

The DPRK claims that there is freedom of religion within North Korea. Its constitution even includes articles which defend religious liberty. But this is not the reality of life in North Korea. While in the late 20th century the government sanctioned the opening of three churches in the capital Pyongyang, it is believed that these are merely “show churches” for international visitors.

The Christian presence in North Korea is sustained through many hundreds of underground churches. The punishments for being a Christian and taking part in religious activity outside of the government-sanctioned churches range from fines to imprisonment and even execution.

Just being related to Christians can also bring persecution. Imprisonment in North Korea’s

*Continued overleaf*



A delivery of equipment for the new Christian bakery funded by Barnabas Fund

### Human rights abuses in prison camps

Prison camps in North Korea are notorious for their brutality. Prisoners are subjected to forced labour, or used as test subjects for chemical and biological experiments. Most are kept in starvation conditions, glad even to eat the raw flesh of rats they catch. Sometimes they are confined for days in punishment cells which are 24 inches wide and 44 inches high. Unable to stand upright, sit or lie down, when finally released they are usually permanently crippled. Some die soon afterwards.

But the worst tortures are kept for Christians. A former North Korean prison guard reported that Christian prisoners are singled out for extra harsh treatment, and are regarded by the authorities as insane. For example:

- A group of elderly Christians were ordered to renounce their faith and accept *Juche* instead. When they refused the security officers ordered molten iron to be poured over them one by one.
- A woman was repeatedly kicked and her injuries left unattended for days, because a prison guard had overheard her praying for a child who had been beaten.



North Korean steamed bread. This bread is distributed free to the hungry

notorious prison camps will usually mean brutal treatment and torture, frequently to the point of death.

Only legally documented foreigners are allowed to own Bibles, and they must take them out of the country again when the leave. Any North Korean citizen found to own a Bible is imprisoned, and sometimes executed.

A closed door policy, first adopted by Korea in the 19th century, has led to a lack of accurate figures, but it is believed that one in five Christians in North Korea is in a prison camp, and that as many as 400 Christians are executed in a year.

### Growth in the shadow of persecution

With the introduction of *Juche* and the purging of all religious activity from North Korea, the number of Christians initially declined. Many Christians were executed or worked to death in labour camps, while others escaped the country to live as refugees in China or South Korea. Many of the Christians who stayed in North Korea were too frightened to pass on their faith even to their own children.

Yet a Christian presence has remained, and from the small amount of information which does leak out from behind the veil of secrecy it appears that the Church is growing. In 1989 there were an estimated 11,000 Christians in North Korea. By 2004 this had risen to as many as 100,000, and by 2006 the estimate was somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000 Christians.

One of the reasons for this church growth, humanly speaking, may be the discontent with the current regime which keeps North Koreans in desperate poverty. Poor economic policies and a lack of agricultural equipment and fertilizers have led to chronic food shortages. In addition North Korea spends a disproportionately high share of its GDP on the military. (North Korea has the fourth largest army in the world but its population is only 23 million.) Despite international food aid, much of the population continues to live with malnutrition and is close to starvation.

## Order your copy of the DVD today

A short DVD presentation on North Korea is available from Barnabas Fund entitled:

***"North Korea: Hope Behind the Veil"***

Contact the UK office or your national office for a free copy.





Bread making in the Christian bakery

Even apart from the effects of poverty, life in North Korea is extremely harsh, with every area strictly controlled by the state.

A recent visitor said: "Most people dress in black or grey. Only the red flag of the party and the occasional coloured child's coat breaks the monotony of dullness. There is little music to be heard... The houses are

*A former police official who escaped North Korea claimed that his fellow officials are particularly anxious to catch Christian believers because they fear that "Christianity will defeat Juche".*

dilapidated and the demeanour of the people appears to be oppressed."

### Taking the Gospel back to their homeland

Large numbers of North Koreans have fled to China or South Korea where many find shelter with churches and other Christian humanitarian organisations. The love and care which they are shown is seeing many come to faith in Christ, despite years of indoctrination against Christianity.

Amazingly after the risk they have taken to leave North Korea, some of these refugee converts are choosing to return to North Korea to take the Gospel back to their homeland. To return to North Korea is dangerous. Returning refugees picked up by the authorities are questioned about the extent of their contacts with South Korean missionaries, whether they have read the Bible and whether they attended church. To admit to any of these activities would lead to imprisonment or execution. Despite knowing the dangers these courageous Christians still choose to return.

As well as returning North Korean converts, many South Korean Christians are also crossing the border to bring humanitarian relief to the suffering North Koreans and share their faith.

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### Five Principles of Faith

Many North Korean Christians daily recite the Lord's Prayer and five principles of faith. The expectations of suffering within their faith life are evident in these principles:

1. Our persecution and suffering are our joy and honour.
2. We want to accept ridicule, scorn and disadvantages with joy in Jesus' name.
3. As Christians, we want to wipe others' tears away and comfort the suffering.
4. We want to be ready to risk our life because of our love for our neighbour, so that they also become Christians.
5. We want to live our lives according to the standards set in God's Word.

A 21-year-old woman who converted to Christianity while in China returned to North Korea in 2000. She was soon arrested for evangelising. While in prison she was not cowed by the harsh treatment but instead sought to share the love of Jesus Christ with her jailers. She defended her actions by saying that she prayed for North Korea because she loved her country and the Korean people, which should not be considered a crime. Unexpectedly she was told "You have committed a crime related to religion, but the general forgives you." She was released.



Supported by Barnabas Fund, this bakery provides jobs for North Korean Christians

### The faith that will not be repressed

It appears that while all religious activity is subjected to repression by the Kim Jong-Il government, Christianity is particularly feared. A former police official who escaped North Korea claimed that his fellow officials are particularly anxious to catch Christian believers because they fear that “Christianity will defeat *Juche*”.

Christians in North Korea have persevered through more than 50 years of persecution, poverty and severe hunger. They continue to pray that the Church will be restored within North Korea. A North Korean Christian, speaking of their hopes for the future, said “We well know where all the churches destroyed in the past were. We will build every one of them up with the consent of God.” Despite every effort of the Korean regime, what tremendous faith, courage and hope are shining out from behind the veil.

1. Goh Tae Woo, *Bukhanui jonggyo jeongchaek (North Korea's Policies on Religion)*, reported in *Thank you Father Kim Il-Sung: Eyewitness accounts of severe violations of freedom of thought, conscience and religion in North Korea*, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, (November 2005), p.2.

2. Kongdan Oh, quoted in Peter Carlson, “Sins of the Son”, *Washington Post*, 11 May 2003, [www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A40505-2003May10?language=printer](http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A40505-2003May10?language=printer), viewed 9 May 2007.

### Quick Facts

- In the 19th century Korea was an important centre of Christianity. It was the second most Christianised country in Asia after the Philippines.
- The Korean Peninsula was separated into North and South Korea at the end of WWII. North Korea was dominated by the USSR, the South by the USA.
- In 1948 Kim Il-Sung became president. He introduced the *Juche* regime of self-reliance, and outlawed all religions.
- *Juche*, or “Kimilsungism” has developed into a personality cult, in which the Kim dynasty is revered. Belief in *Juche* is mandatory.
- All religious activity is suppressed, but Christians come under particular persecution as the Christian faith is seen as a threat to the *Juche* ideology.
- The *Juche* tenet of self-reliance, poor economic policies and a famine in the 1990s have left much of the country facing starvation.
- Barnabas Fund is funding a project employing Christians in a bakery which gives away its bread to the poor.

### Jobs for North Korean Christians through Barnabas Fund's aid

Barnabas Fund is working to help Christians in North Korea. Two Chinese Christian women manage a bakery in the north of the country which employs mainly Christians. The bread they produce is distributed free to the poor and hungry in the region, often to children.

Barnabas Fund gave grants to help towards the building costs of a second bakery. The vision is to see a network of these bakeries across the country, bringing both employment for impoverished Christians and practical love and care in the name of Jesus Christ to the many starving North Koreans.

Barnabas Fund hopes to be able to continue partnering in this pioneering work. It costs approximately £98 per day to run the bakery, producing 2,500 steamed bread rolls a day and giving employment to approximately 30 staff.

### Project ref: 86-642



Many children receive free bread from the Christian bakery

