It is a turbulent time of rising hostilities on the Korean peninsula. The 70-year division between the Korean people is one of the most tragic in history. The war remains unresolved between North Korea, the U.S. and South Korea, and little progress has been made toward a new future.

Yet, over decades of working on both sides of the Korean divide, including 22 years in North Korea, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has learned that hope is not only possible, but is a sign of God’s faithfulness. For the policies of nations do not dictate the practices of the church under the lordship of Christ.

A Korean expression says, “Love without conditions.” This is the way Jesus loves. This love does not follow the logic of political realities, but of Jesus’ death and resurrection and the “new creation” and “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:11–21).

Such love commits us to the idea that if we approach other people as human beings beloved by God, we can work through deep differences and see that reconciliation is not only possible but desirable.

The call to today’s church is to wash feet across divides, to provide hospitality to strangers and to go into deeper waters of risk and faith. Engaging a place like North Korea calls us to be more faithful Christians, including in our witness to the U.S. government.

View from South Korea into North Korea. Red crowned cranes are an important symbol on both sides of the border of longevity, purity and peace. The cranes thrive in the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between the countries because of the relatively undisturbed habitat.
Reimagining creative diplomacy between the U.S. and North Korea

by Charissa Zehr

The division on the Korean peninsula is one of the longest holdouts from the Cold War. While an armistice agreement in 1953 brought a ceasefire in the Korean War, a final peace agreement was never reached. Even today, narratives surrounding the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, also known as North Korea) are limited by this Cold War mentality.

As with any country under authoritarian rule for decades, there are concerns about human rights abuses, transparency and individual freedoms such as speech and religion. Yet President Nixon went to China in 1972 when Mao Tse-tung was in leadership and the U.S.-China relationship was hostile, demonstrating that engagement is possible, despite disagreement.

With North Korea, U.S. policies have rarely sought to address concerns directly, instead using them as cover to ratchet up sanctions and isolation in hopes of voluntary nuclear disarmament by DPRK. In addition, the U.S. is rarely willing to shine a spotlight on its own human rights abuses or its nuclear arsenal of more than 6,700 nuclear weapons.

Considering ways to compel North Korean leadership to end their nuclear development is a popular theme for some pundits and analysts. Yet many analysts and observers point out that before discussing denuclearization, Pyongyang must feel secure.

John Delury, an academic and longtime observer of U.S.-DPRK relations, says that “North Korea will start focusing on its prosperity instead of self-preservation only once it no longer has to worry about its own destruction. . . . The world can best help most North Koreans by relieving their deprivation and bringing down the walls that separate them from the outside world.”

It will take creative measures to begin to break down the walls that many countries have built through sanctions and policies of isolation.

Seeds for a new future

Through MCC’s work in North Korea, our office in South Korea, and our work with churches in the U.S. and Canada, MCC seeks to be a reconciliatory presence working on all sides of the divide.

MCC was deeply involved in South Korea during and after the Korean War, and 500 war orphans graduated from MCC’s vocational school.

For the past 22 years, on the other side of the divide, MCC has served the vulnerable in North Korea, investing approximately $20 million in relief and development support, including helping farmers grow better food, supporting soymilk production for children, and providing material assistance and canned meat for orphans and tuberculosis patients (see box on page 3).

Through MCC’s efforts in North Korea—serving the vulnerable, creating spaces for face-to-face encounters, bringing North Koreans to other countries for mutual exchange and learning—we believe the hidden power of the gospel is at work in planting seeds for a new future. A new future requires all parties to be deeply changed.

For MCC and its supporters, this is how we understand God’s “new creation” interrupting mutual hostilities and isolation. We can help bring imagination and creativity to policymakers who insist that all options have been tried.

Chris Rice is the MCC representative for Northeast Asia.

The greenhouse at a tuberculosis rest home to help them grow more food for their patients and for extending the growing season. Location withheld due to security reasons.

Current U.S. policy toward DPRK

To date, a peace treaty has never been signed to officially end the war and the U.S. relationship with North Korea (or lack thereof) continues in a stalemate. Lacking a definitive resolution, North Korea has remained isolated; fear and mistrust have devastated diplomatic relations between our two countries.
These hostilities have ebbed and flowed for decades but were exacerbated by the Obama administration’s increased militarization of the Asia-Pacific region. As tensions mounted around military threats, there was no escape valve for the building pressure because traditional channels of diplomacy do not exist between the U.S. and DPRK. The Obama administration held to a policy of “strategic patience” but the wait-and-see approach yielded few results.

While the details of the Trump administration’s policy toward DPRK are still elusive, the rhetoric and limited actions from the administration indicate they are operating on a lukewarm version of strategic patience, renamed “maximum pressure.” So far, most of the pressure has been placed on China to deal with North Korea, thus absolving the U.S. government of direct engagement. Of greatest concern is the threat of military action which looms large over the new administration’s Korea policy.

Each year, further sanctions from the U.S. and United Nations are meant to pressure North Korea toward unilateral nuclear disarmament. But isolating North Korea in the global community has not produced the desired effect. If anything, it has driven DPRK’s government to further develop their nuclear capabilities.

As North Korea threatens the Korean peninsula. It is time for a new vision for our work in DPRK. Men-nonite Central Committee (MCC) is uniquely positioned as an organization that provides humanitarian assistance in DPRK while also advocating for a path toward engagement and dialogue to reduce hostilities at a governmental level.

In Washington we speak to the U.S. government about creative ways to work toward dialogue and open a door for people-to-people exchanges that could begin to thaw this relationship. Coming to an agreement on humanitarian issues or retrieving the remains of U.S. soldiers killed during the Korean War are small steps that could lay the groundwork for dialogue on other important issues like nuclear disarmament. Although many U.S. government officials claim to have tried “everything,” there has been little appetite for using diplomatic solutions to end the years-long impasse.

Publicly, many U.S. policymakers are skeptical about making progress with DPRK. Their votes for sanctions or threat-making regarding nuclear weapons are largely unchallenged and are an easy political “win.” Privately, many acknowledge that the long-standing policy of wait-and-see has not yielded results. Members of Congress need to hear support from their constituents for engagement—peacemaking possibilities before military action—that could move our countries toward pursuing a new future of peace.

With increasing volatility in the Asia-Pacific region and threats of escalating U.S. military involvement, voices for engagement and diplomacy must come to the forefront. There is a paucity of diplomatic imagination when it comes to North Korea, but focusing on humanitarian issues and taking small steps toward dialogue are responsible ways the U.S. government can work toward engagement. Sanctions and isolation have not proven effective in bringing peace to the Korean peninsula. It is time for a fresh approach.

**Recommendations for future policy**

Providing a reconciliatory presence in a time of hostility is the guiding vision for our work in DPRK. Men-

**Responding to hunger in DPRK**

In the 1990s, MCC began shipping canned meat to locations in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, also known as North Korea) for famine relief. Currently, MCC supports 14 orphanages as well as tuberculosis rest homes and hepatitis hospitals with canned meat.

Medications for treating tuberculosis and hepatitis are hard on the liver and protein is needed for the liver to heal properly. The canned meat is easier to digest because it is already processed. Last year, more than one-quarter of all the meat canned by MCC fed patients and those caring for them in DPRK.

Local orphanage directors are enthusiastic about the canned meat. “We don’t have turkeys in our country, so the canned turkey is a good chance for the children to try something new,” reported one director (name and location withheld for security reasons). Cooks are creative with the meat, using the broth to flavor soups and adding the meat to everything from stir-fried dishes to stews as a protein supplement to the meal.

After learning how hundreds of volunteers across the U.S. and Canada come together to hand-pack the meat for MCC projects, an orphanage director commented, “Today I learned that this canned meat is not a simple product. I appreciate your donation very much!”

Jennifer Deibert is North Korea program coordinator for MCC.
For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. —Ephesians 2:14

Sunday, August 13, 2017 is designated by the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) in South Korea and the Korean Christian Federation (KCF) in North Korea as a “Sunday of Prayer for the Peaceful Reunification of the Korean Peninsula.” These resources may be used on that Sunday or at any time.

Songs

HWB 322 For we are strangers no more
HWB 371 Let there be light, Lord God
HWB 408 O day of peace
STJ 53 O God in heaven
STJ 56 Make me a channel of your peace
STJ 87 Put peace into each other's hands

Prayer for peacemaking

O God,
by your Son Jesus Christ,
you have broken down the walls of partition
between Jew and Gentile, slave and free,
rich and poor, male and female.
Break down all the barriers that divide us;
remove all the hindrances that keep us apart.
Reveal our jealousies and show us our pride;
cure our alienation;
open up our narrowness.
Shatter all prejudice though we may have different histories,
different cultures, different viewpoints.

May we live together as loving neighbors,
in honor preferring one another,
to the glory of your great name.
Amen.

—Arlene Mark. Reprinted with permission from Words for Worship. (Herald Press, 1996)
All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Joint North-South Korea Prayer

Lord,
You have shown us how to live as God's children,
And Your Spirit has led us not only through life,
But also through history.

But Lord,
The sorrows of the 70-years ethnic separation
Still linger since the time of our North-South division.
We have lost the hope of “becoming one with God”
And have sought after earthly goods instead of peace.

Pity us, Lord.
Clear away the pain-filled memories of separation
And also the rusty barbed wires.
Help the North and the South fulfill a life of harmony and peace.
As farmers ready themselves to till new land and plant new life,
Prepare us Lord.

God of peace,
Help us work together with one united mind,
To fulfill the dreams of unification.
Help us remember the days when the North and the South once were one,
To better live into a world of harmony and peace. Amen.

—Adapted from a Joint Easter Community Prayer from NCCK and KCF. The full prayer is online at globalministries.org/2017_easter_joint_north_south_korea_prayer.
Facts about North Korea

64
Years of division and unresolved war between North and South Korea since armistice agreement in 1953

160 miles long, 2.5 miles wide
Size of the demilitarized zone (DMZ)

22
Years MCC has been working in DPRK

28,500
U.S. military personnel stationed in South Korea

38th parallel
The line of latitude that served as the pre-Korean war boundary between North and South. Currently the DMZ or “buffer zone” divides North and South Korea.

1 in 4
Cans of meat packed by MCC volunteers are sent to DPRK

Photos (clockwise from top):
Children play on a new playground at an orphanage supported by MCC; names not used due to security reasons. A display in a peace park on the South Korean side of the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Lunch is served at an orphanage that receives canned meat from MCC; names not used due to security reasons. A South Korean sailor waves flags as the USS Carl Vinson arrives in March 2017. Cans of meat packed by MCC volunteers are sent to DPRK.

Sources: U.S. Forces Korea “Strategic Digest 2016”; Wikipedia
**POLICY PRINCIPLES**

U.S.–North Korea policy should...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Prioritize diplomacy and dialogue.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>While there have been attempts to engage North Korea in multi-party talks over the years, DPRK’s government has stated it is willing to engage with the United States directly. Ahead of pursuing negotiations on nuclear weapons, the U.S. government should seek agreement on humanitarian issues, laying groundwork for a respectful dialogue that could lead to the resolution of more contentious issues down the road.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2</th>
<th>Support exchanges.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The U.S. should utilize current State Department exchange programs and/or allow private organizations to facilitate academic, artistic, educational and cultural exchanges. The U.S. has an extensive history of using exchanges to lay the groundwork for larger diplomatic breakthroughs in countries during times of hostility. Examples include former USSR, China, Myanmar (Burma), Cuba and Vietnam. This crucial component is missing from current U.S.-DPRK policy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>Prioritize remains retrieval.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The U.S. should designate remains retrieval as a humanitarian issue, which could open a window of engagement between both governments. North Korea has offered to return the remains of U.S. Korean War soldiers that have been uncovered in the decades since the war. Remains collections missions happened in the past between the Department of Defense and DPRK government but, in recent years, the U.S. government discontinued the work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4</th>
<th>Establish a liaison office.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The U.S. should establish an “interests section” in Pyongyang to help facilitate communication on issues such as remains retrieval operations, family reunions, U.S. prisoners in DPRK and humanitarian work in the country. Currently the U.S. has no direct communication mechanism with DPRK.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recommendations above adapted from Korea Peace Network (KPN) talking points and recommendations. The MCC U.S. Washington Office is an active member of KPN.

Resources for learning more

- Frequently asked questions on DPRK sanctions: [washingtonmemo.org/2016/03/15/dprk_faq](http://washingtonmemo.org/2016/03/15/dprk_faq)
- People-to-people exchanges:
  - Engaging North Korea, a report from the American Friends Service Committee: [afsc.org/document/engaging-north-korea](http://afsc.org/document/engaging-north-korea)
  - Remains retrieval:
    - Coalition of Families of Korean and Cold War POW/MIs: [coalitionoffamilies.org](http://coalitionoffamilies.org)

A park near a tuberculosis rest home that receives support from MCC.