

The Ecumenical Movement on Peace and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula

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The 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) took place in Busan, Republic of Korea, from October 30 to November 8, 2013. I was so blessed to have participated in the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute (GETI) program that was a major event for about 160 younger advanced theology students from all regions of the world and all Christian denominational traditions. It was held in Seoul and Busan from October 25 to November 9, 2013, occurring with the Assembly. The project was designed to bring young theologians to the Assembly for an intensive theological course program for 2 weeks. Its curriculum focused on "the future of ecumenism and the transformation of World Christianity in the 21st century" and was geared to the theme of the WCC Assembly "*God of life, lead us to justice and peace*".¹ GETI has become a place for ecumenical leadership formation, intense theological learning and mutual dialogue as well as intergenerational dialogue with important leaders of the ecumenical and evangelical movement. GETI was a special initiative that was prepared and supported by the Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) Program of the World Council of Churches in cooperation with Bossey Ecumenical Institute and a network of partnering theological colleges and associations of theological schools in both Korea and

¹ <http://wcc2013.info/en/news-media/all-news/theological-education-initiative-begins-in-seoul>

the regions. Along with the lectures given during GETI, the participants were assigned into the seminar groups to research on various issues in the light of the ecumenical visions for the 21st century Christianity. We participants had faculty mentors who led the seminar groups and facilitated the paper presentations on regular basis. Seminar sessions gave me excellent opportunity to reflect and dialogue with fellow seminarians for the current and future ecumenical movement. It provided a rich vantage point as we listened to each other's voice from the varied contexts and perspectives. Personally, Busan was my hometown where gave me a birth and Seoul had been home since I was one year old until I graduated from college. So this journey literally meant a homecoming to me.

The assembly, as a whole, provided space for celebration, dialogue and reflection through common prayer, Bible studies, thematic plenaries, ecumenical conversations, business sessions, workshops, the *madang* exhibition and the weekend pilgrimage with the Korean churches. Ecumenical conversations, in particular, engaged assembly participants in sustained, in-depth dialogue on critical issues that affect the unity, mission and witness of the church today – issues that require a common response by the churches together. The results of the conversations would help to guide future ecumenical cooperation. There were 21 ecumenical conversations. The conversation focused on a unique topic and provided four ninety-minutes sessions for sustained dialogue. Among these ecumenical conversations, one major ecumenical issue of my interest in relation to the theme of the Assembly was “The Korean Peninsula: Ecumenical Solidarity for Justice and Peace” and I participated in the conversation

throughout. The delegates and the participants had dialogues on a broad impact that the tense situation on the Korean Peninsula has influenced in other regions of the world and discussed about how to build and strengthen ecumenical networks that could lead to a vision of unity. As a result, peace and reunification of the Korean Peninsula was one of the subjects of the public statements along with politicization of religion, rights of religious minorities and stateless people, and just peace that adopted at the WCC's 10th Assembly in Busan. Through the statement on *Peace and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula*, churches "call upon all stakeholders in the region to participate in a creative process for building peace on the Korean peninsula by halting all military exercises on the Korean peninsula, by ceasing foreign intervention, withdrawing foreign troops and reducing military expenditures".²

The assembly also highlighted significance of peace. During the "peace" plenary session, a Korean theologian Chang Yoon Jae, speaking about peace on the Korean peninsula, urged an advance beyond the Korean Armistice Agreement of 1953, after which the Koreans kept living in the fear of war. He said there still needed to be a transition from "unfinished war" to "permanent peace."³ Chang added that, to achieve peace, he envisioned a world free of nuclear power plants and weapons. Since the last WCC assembly in India in 1961, he pointed out, the number of nuclear states in the region has more than doubled. Chang asserted, "nuclear weapons cannot co-exist with peace and Christian faith."⁴

² <http://wcc2013.info/en/news-media/all-news/wcc-assembly-addresses-contemporary-public>

³ <http://wcc2013.info/en/news-media/all-news/busan-assembly-highlights-significance-of-peace>

⁴ <http://wcc2013.info/en/news-media/all-news/busan-assembly-highlights-significance-of-peace>

A “Peace Train” was another aspect of the Ecumenical movement on peace and reconciliation of the Korean peninsula. It was a project sponsored by the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCCK) and the Korean Host Committee for the WCC Assembly. The project aimed to raise awareness about the 60-year division of the Korean Peninsula. Around 130 people from 15 countries participated in the event. The train started its journey from Berlin, Germany on October 9 and traveled through Moscow, Irkutsk, Beijing, Dandong and Seoul, and finally arrived in Busan on October 28 around the beginning of the assembly. A friend of mine was a part of the travel, so I was able to listen to the first-hand stories from the journey that was ultimately towards reunification of the North and South Korea. After the participants arrived in Beijing, the organizers had originally planned for them to journey on to North Korea’s capital Pyongyang by plane. They had hoped for the go-ahead from North Korea up to the final minute – but it did not come. Instead, the participants traveled by train to the Chinese city of Dandong, located on the border with North Korea, where they held a church service with a Chinese community that also included North Koreans. They then took a ferry to the South Korean port of Incheon, and they continued on a bus to Seoul. The group completed the last stage to Busan by the train again. The participants were not disappointed about not being able to make the journey to Pyongyang. “The trip is an initial impetus,” said one of the participants, and he added, “Our commitment will continue.”⁵

⁵ <http://wcc2013.info/en/news-media/all-news/by-train-to-busan-journeying-for-peace-in-korea>

The weekend pilgrimage program of this assembly was a unique experience with the Korean churches. On Saturday 2 November, more than 800 participants in the WCC 10th Assembly joined in a pilgrimage of peace to Seoul, expressing solidarity with the people of Korea and endorsing the worldwide call for the unification of Korea. The pilgrimage moved to the pond at Imjingak, where participants gathered at the spot under the bridge which is the front line of the division. The spot “integrated the past, present and future.”⁶ At the bridge, the pilgrims shared messages of peace. Singing together, they offered a hymn called “Now go in peace” as they placed ribbons of peace with a message and prayer for peace on the iron fence along the military demarcation line, adding to the thousands of ribbons and prayers already on the fence. It was a powerful picture of solidarity and peacemaking together on the spot of division and hostility.

As already mentioned, one particular aspect of the ecumenical movement as I experienced during the Assembly in Busan was “The Korean Peninsula: Ecumenical Solidarity for Justice and Peace.” Korea, my home country, is the last but only divided peninsula due to the Cold War ideology. Since 1945 Korea has become an “indicator of the state of peace and security in the world.”⁷ God’s intention for the world is shalom: peace and justice for all creation, yet the world is wounded by violence and broken by war. Forces of brutality and aggression are at work in all aspects of human life, even within the church. Christ came to break down dividing walls of hostility and to establish

⁶ <http://wcc2013.info/en/news-media/all-news/wcc-assembly-participants-make-pilgrimage-for-peace-on-korean-peninsula>

⁷ Melisande Lorke and Dietrich Werner. *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century: A Reader for Theological Education* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council Of Churches, 2013), 41.

God's new way of reconciliation in the world. All who follow Christ are called to live as peacemakers in a world that lacks the deep reality of God's concord and unity. As we live in unity with brothers and sisters around the world, working ecumenically to overcome violence, we both embody and proclaim fullness of the Lord's peace. Rodney Peterson, Executive director at Boston Theological Institute, urged in his powerful lecture "Reconciliation as an Ecumenical Key Mandate: Is Forgiveness Possible?" during GETI session, reconciliation is the resolution of violence.⁸

Among 21 Ecumenical Conversation themes, the conversation on "The Korean Peninsula: Towards an Ecumenical Accompaniment for Building Justice and Peace" drew many people's attention. According to reference document on the conversation, the conversation was to seek to explore the lessons learned from initiatives to date taking into consideration the broader implications and impact of tensions on the Korean peninsula for North East Asia and other parts of the world. It then explored the issues, challenges and obstacles that should have been addressed by the ecumenical movement as a whole, and specifically by the WCC. The ecumenical conversation would work to identify specific areas for partnership among churches, as well as with governmental and non-governmental organizations, and regional and global ecumenical organizations. The ultimate aim was to promote and strengthen ecumenical accompaniment for building justice and peace on the Korean peninsula, which can foster reconciliation with a vision toward eventual reunification. The conversation was a great process for the participants to be introduced to the various initiatives undertaken

⁸ Rodney Peterson, "Reconciliation as an Ecumenical Key Mandate: Is Forgiveness Possible?", GETI Keynote Lecture. World Council of Churches 10th Assembly Busan, Korea. October 31, 2013.

by the Korean churches and the ecumenical movement, their significance and the lessons learned. Each gathering consisted of opening & closing prayer, plenary session, buzz group discussion, presentation of report and feedback.

The conversation allowed me to meet various ecumenical leaders from the Korean churches and all over the world. It was a wonderful experience to have Erich Weingartner who began to plan what has come to be known as the “Tozanso Consultation” with other ecumenical leaders as a presenter. The ecumenical consultation was held in Tozanso, Japan in 1984 on “Peace and Justice in Northeast Asia.” Despite the division and walls of separation that were both physical and spiritual, Tozanso thread a complex web of barriers and initiated lines of communication between Christians of North and South Korea. He recalled that the Tozanso consultation was the most tension-filled event of his entire WCC career. Weingartner continued, “To the very end, there was nervousness, fear and resistance to what everyone knew would have to be the next step. In prayers both public and private, we wrestled like Jacob for God’s wisdom and blessing to assure us that the moment of *kairos* had really come.”⁹

Weingartner, in conclusion, emphasized the importance of ecumenical accompaniment. According to him, “... Above all, accompaniment means being there for them as sisters and brothers, in sickness and in health, through trials and triumphs, without judgment or prejudice. Ecumenical accompaniment is about being witnesses to hope in the midst

⁹ Erich Weingartner, “Ecumenical Accompaniment for Building Justice and Peace in Korea”, Ecumenical Conversation Plenary Lecture, World Council of Churches 10th Assembly Busan, Korea. November 4, 2013.

of despair.”¹⁰ Then he shared some of the lessons learned from the Tozanso Process. It included also points that in the past were accepted by the ecumenical community as what was called the “Tozanso Discipline”.

The confidence built in the “Tozanso Process,” enabled representatives of the KCF to travel four times to the USA between 1989 and 1997 for official meetings with US church counterparts. These ecumenical efforts opened the way for the DPRK officials to request the WCC international humanitarian assistance for flood victims. WCC’s involvement in Korea was certainly a unique ecumenical story that deserves to be documented. Important aspects of this effort which could serve as lessons for ecumenical methodology include: Unity among actors within and without Korea; Clear objectives around which the actors coalesced and supported; Well-defined strategy and ecumenical discipline in implementation; Clear identified roles and responsibilities for the network of actors; Excellent coordination in the implementation of the strategy. The Tozanso process placed the WCC in the front and the center of the unfolding drama still being played out on the peninsula. Not only has it been for three decades a pioneer in promoting peace and unification in North East Asia in working on the peace and unification of Korea; it has also developed a unique access to the political authorities on both sides. The situation calls for a renewed commitment of leadership, resources and expertise and reactivation of a worldwide ecumenical network to rededicate itself to the important agenda of just peace and reconciliation in Korean peninsula.

¹⁰ Erich Weingartner, “Ecumenical Accompaniment for Building Justice and Peace in Korea”, Ecumenical Conversation Plenary Lecture, World Council of Churches 10th Assembly Busan, Korea. November 4, 2013.

It is noteworthy that the delegates of the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) adopted the “Statement on Peace and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula.” bearing witness to the suffering of the men, women and children of the one Korean people through decades of violence caused by war and hostility that have left them divided into two nations. The statement pointed out that “the present situation in the Korean peninsula prompted us to a renewed engagement in efforts to work for peace and justice throughout the region and for the reunification of a divided Korea.”¹¹ The statement addressed new challenges to reconciliation and healing that “Changing geopolitical dynamics among the four major powers -United States; and three other “power poles”, China, Japan and Russia- can stifle the aspirations and hopes of the Korean people for peace and reunification. Increasing arms build-ups in several Asian countries make this one of the fastest-growing regions for military spending in the world, including nuclear arms and high-tech weapons of mass destruction. The peace we envision is a condition of justice embracing the whole of life and restoring harmony among neighbors. We are convinced that it is the right time to begin a new process towards a comprehensive peace treaty that will replace the 1953 Armistice Agreement and secure just and peaceful relations among nations in the region while normalizing relations between North and South, and facilitating Korean reunification.”¹²

The statement on peace and reunification of the Korean Peninsula

¹¹ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/peace-and-reunification-of-the-korean-peninsula>

¹² <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/peace-and-reunification-of-the-korean-peninsula>

recommended affirmations, "... realizing that as we pray with and for the peoples of Korea the churches and ecumenical partners have a specific responsibility toward working together for peace and reconciliation in the Korean peninsula with renewed energy, in close partnership and transparent relationships with each other and with the churches and Christians in both North and South of Korea, the National Council of Churches in Korea and the Korean Christian Federation,"¹³ as well as our commitment to take actions.

What then it means to be a part of the Ecumenical Movement responding to the issues arising out of changes in the global religious landscape? The "Message" of a WCC assembly gives me a clue for the meaning and the direction of the ecumenical movement. The Message of 2013, adopted by representatives from 345 member churches, affirms in the context of the churches' invitation to the pilgrimage of justice and peace "We intend to move together."¹⁴ Describing their time in Busan and other parts of the country, participants in the 10th Assembly offered this affirmation:

"We share our experience of the search for unity in Korea as a sign of hope in the world. This is not the only land where people live divided, in poverty and richness, happiness and violence, welfare and war. We are not allowed to close our eyes to harsh realities or to rest our hands from God's transforming work. As a fellowship, the World Council of Churches stands in solidarity with the people and the churches in the Korean peninsula, and with all who strive for justice and peace."¹⁵

¹³ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/peace-and-reunification-of-the-korean-peninsula>

¹⁴ <http://wcc2013.info/en/news-media/all-news/message-of-the-wcc-assembly-2013cwe-intend-to-move-together201d>

¹⁵ <http://wcc2013.info/en/news-media/all-news/message-of-the-wcc-assembly-2013cwe-intend-to-move-together201d>

Participating in GETI program alongside the 10th Assembly of the WCC was not only a homecoming to my hometown but a pilgrimage on the faith journey. As WCC staff Guillermo Kerber said, “A pilgrimage is always a transformative experience.”¹⁶ It was absolutely a transformative journey for me. I came back my American home after the once in a lifetime experience filled with enormous energy. My new pilgrimage has begun. It is not a lonely journey. It is a journey together for healing and reconciliation. The renewed vision of solidarity for justice and peace gives us courage towards the life and just peace movement engaging in ecumenical efforts to heal the divisions between the churches. This ecumenical accompaniment and solidarity will lead us to peaceful co-existence and finally make full visible unity. *“God of life, lead us to justice and peace!”*

¹⁶ <http://wcc2013.info/en/news-media/all-news/peace-train-takes-a-journey-towards-reunification-of-koreas>