

Market Drayton Churches Together: Prayer for Persecuted Christians - 6 Dec. 2018

NORTH KOREA

4 Nov: Fox News - WorldHelp

Two secret churches in North Korea show how powerful the Bible really is

<https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/two-secret-churches-in-north-korea-show-how-powerful-the-bible-really-is>

In the early morning light, a small group of North Korean believers meets on the riverbank, lugging their fishing gear with them.

Quietly, they load into a small boat and push off from land. It's not until they're far into the middle of the river that they dare to dig through their gear and pull out their Bibles.

This is the only place where they feel safe enough to worship together and study God's Word. And even then, they are constantly on alert.

If they are caught reading the Bible, they could immediately be sentenced to 15 years in a labor camp – or worse. They've heard the stories of what happens to people who are heard speaking the name of Jesus. Many of them have family members and friends who are living in the camps now ... or have been buried there.

That's why when another boat approaches, they panic and scramble to hide their Bibles. "It's the police!" someone shouts.

Only after the man in the boat greets them in the name of Jesus and tells them he has a gift for them do they start to calm down. He asks to see their Bibles, and the believers who own one hand them to him.

There are only a few Bibles among the church members – not nearly enough for everyone. And each copy is practically falling apart. After years of being carefully studied and then hidden over and over again, the bindings have come loose and pages are beginning to slip out. Many of the Bibles have water damage from these early morning meetings on the boat. But they are still these Christians' prized possessions ... they risk their lives for these Bibles.

So when the stranger pulls out a box of new Bibles provided by generous World Help donors, there is an immediate celebration on the boat. The believers clutch God's Word to their chests and many of the people who had not had one previously break down into tears.

To them, a new Bible is the greatest gift they could receive.

There are still countless believers across this dark nation who are desperate for Bibles. Some people have never even seen a copy of the Scriptures in their life ... but they know they would do anything to get their hands on one.

After the man delivered the new Bibles to the secret church on the river, he took the damaged copies back to the hotel where he was staying and hid them. But soon afterward, they disappeared.

He later discovered the janitor had found the Bibles. Instead of reporting them, he took them. It turns out that he was a Christian himself, and his tiny house church of four people had been praying for Bibles.

He praised God for the Bibles – even as damaged and falling apart as they were – because he and his friends could finally study God's Word for themselves. That's how desperate North Korean Christians are for copies of Scripture!

The story above is true. We heard it from our partners – defectors among them – who help us smuggle Bibles into North Korea. They also told us the No. 1 request from the church in North Korea was getting more Bibles. So, a year ago we set the goal of sending 100,000 Bibles to North Korea. It was both a daunting and ambitious goal, but we knew these Christians are longing for a chance to have a Bible, despite the risks.

North Korea - World Watch List 1 - Open Doors

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/north-korea>

Persecution is led by the state which sees Christians as hostile elements that have to be eradicated.

Due to constant indoctrination, neighbours and family members, including children, are highly watchful and report anything suspicious to the authorities. If Christians are discovered, they are deported to labour camps as political criminals or killed on the spot; their families share their fate. Meeting for worship is almost impossible, so is done in utmost secrecy. The churches shown to visitors in Pyongyang serve mere propaganda purposes.

"Every day was as if God was pouring out all ten plagues on us simultaneously. That's how hard it was. But God also comforted me and brought a secret fellowship into existence. Every Sunday we would gather in the toilets and pray."

This was life for Hea-Woo, a Christian woman who spent three years in a North Korean labour camp because of her faith in Jesus. She was eventually able to escape, but most are not so lucky. We estimate that between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians are imprisoned in these camps; most will die there.

North Korea is ruled by Kim Jong-un, the third generation of the Kim dynasty who have ruled North Korea with an iron grip since 1948. The two ideologies used to govern the state are 'Juche', which points to man's self-sufficiency, and 'Kimilsungism', the god-like worship of the Kims; children are taught the name of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-un's grandfather, before they are taught the names of their own parents.

Any suggestion that there could be a higher authority than the Kims is immediately crushed. North Korean citizens are constantly scrutinised by the Inminban, a neighbourhood watch system in which the leader writes reports on their neighbours, trying to work out if anyone is disloyal to the ruling regime.

Christians must keep their faith completely secret; most do not even tell their own children about their faith until they are older teenagers for fear that they may let something slip. If a Christian has a Bible, or part of one, it will be carefully hidden and only read when the believer is sure they are alone.

A social stratification system in North Korea called 'Songbun', similar to the Indian caste system, divides people into three main classes: the loyal, the wavering and the hostile. These are further divided into 51 subclasses; Christians are part of the 'hostile' class, with Protestant Christians being number 37 and Catholic Christians being number 39. If discovered, Christians face arrest, torture, imprisonment, and perhaps even public execution - they are considered spies and traitors of the nation, and are condemned for treason.

And yet, many have decided that knowing Jesus is worth the risks they face. The church in North Korea is not only surviving, but growing - and they have great hope for the future. One Christian has shared: "One day the borders will open and we will unite with the South Korean and the Chinese church to bring the gospel to some of the darkest places on this earth."

Your prayers and support make a real difference to believers in North Korea. One shared with us: "Whenever we faced difficult situations you supported our North Korean underground believers so that we could break through all difficulties with courage and spiritual power in Christ. We thank you and all supporters in Christ who encourage and support our believers. Your prayer and support help our believers to be ready for the battle at the frontier."

Dates of future P4PC Session

10 Jan, 14 Feb, 14 Mar, 11 Apr, 9 May & 13 Jun 2019

Find out more: churchestogether-marketdrayton.org.uk/p4pc

Six steps for surviving in North Korea - Open Doors

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/north-korea-180104>

North Korea is once again the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian. It's number one on the World Watch List, Open Doors' annual ranking of the 50 countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution, and it's been number one every year since 2002.

Why has it been number one for so long? Every aspect of life in North Korea is controlled by the state, and the belief that there is a higher authority than the nation's leader, Kim Jong-un, is seen as a threat that must be crushed. Tens of thousands of Christians are incarcerated in horrific labour camps, and thousands more keep their faith in Christ a complete secret.

And yet, incredibly, the church in North Korea is growing – Open Doors estimates that there are 300,000 courageous believers in North Korea. In such an oppressive state, this should be impossible. How do they survive?

Survival step 1: Keep your faith a secret

The people of North Korea are under constant surveillance, and the authorities are always looking for signs of anything that might pose a threat to the ruling regime. There are even rewards for those who help discover Christians, such as being given a better house or a better job.

There is a neighbourhood watch system called Inminban, and every North Korean citizen is part of a local unit. The unit leader will write reports on each of the members, asking questions about who has been visiting their homes, any absences, whether they have participated in volunteer work, and even whether they clean the portraits of the country's leaders on their walls (all homes in North Korea have these portraits).

North Koreans also have to take part in self-criticism sessions with their local communities every week. They must say what they have done wrong that week and how they will improve, and then others in the group will accuse them of other wrongdoings. In reality, friends will arrange to criticise each other, but only for minor offences.

With so many eyes upon them, Christians must be very careful to keep their faith completely secret.

Survival step 2: Be suspicious of other Christians

Government spies often try to infiltrate Christian networks. A refugee who has escaped North Korea remembers talking to someone being trained as a spy: "There are courses for religion in Kim Il-sung University. Most graduates are recruited by the NSA (the National Security Agency). The informant said he was being trained to uncover religious people according to special directions from the NSA.

"He was supposed to look for things such as a person who remains silent with closed eyes and meditates, or when habitual smokers or drinkers quit smoking or drinking all of a sudden. These people should be targets to be watched closely."

These spies may set up fake prayer meetings and learn extraordinary conversion stories. They will be given a good knowledge of the Bible, which makes it possible for them to convince real Christians that they are trustworthy. "Our biggest fear is that there may be a Judas within the church organisation," a secret church leader told Open Doors.

Survival step 3: Don't tell your children

Most Christian parents don't tell their children about their faith until they are adults, for fear that they might accidentally let something slip. Children are indoctrinated from a young age to love the leaders of North Korea; the first words parents must teach their children are the words 'Thank you, Father Kim Il-sung.' At school they learn about the Kim family and their wonderful deeds. They are also taught that Christians are evil spies who kidnap, torture and kill innocent North Korean children, and sell their organs and blood.

But by God's grace, some North Korean children do find out about Jesus, often by accident. Kim Sang-Hwa* says, "My parents were Christians, but they never told me and my brothers and sisters. One day, when I was 12, I discovered the family Bible by accident. My duty was to turn them in, but I also knew I would never see them again. So I told my father. He was shocked to find out I had discovered the book. Then he explained the gospel to me and also emphasised that I should never tell anyone."

Survival step 4: Share what you have

This might seem like a strange instruction for surviving in North Korea, where most people have very little. Every year there are natural disasters, with droughts in the dry seasons and flooding and mud slides in the rainy seasons. Harvests are poor. North Korea operates a 'military first' policy for distributing food and resources, meaning that ordinary people are often left to go hungry. An incredible 60,000 secret believers depend on Open Doors to smuggle in food, medicines and clothes to help them survive.

And yet, North Korean Christians choose to share the little resources that they have with those who have even less. One Chinese worker who has been involved in missions among North Koreans says, "At the height of the famine a leader felt called to reintroduce the concept of 'holy rice', a practice whereby rice is set apart for use in God's kingdom. Ever since, these Christians don't consume all the food they receive from us. They save some to give to people who are even worse off than them. This gives them an opportunity to build trust and later share the gospel with these people."

Survival step 5: Hold on to hope

Kim Jong-un's recent missile tests and verbal threats have provided an excuse to demand more work of the North Korean people, making them too tired to engage in illegal activities. He counters international tensions by calling for 100-day mobilisation periods. During these periods, people are called to do extra work, on top of the 48-hour work weeks that many people already do and the 'voluntary work' that is expected of them, leaving them with little spare time.

"These mobilisation periods drain our energy," says one secret church leader. "However, we try to serve God when we can and even have small meetings. Whenever I visit our suffering believers' houses, I see if they have any problems and try to prepare any countermeasures for them. Even though they are suffering from many things in life, I encourage them to find hope and happiness through their hardships and live with hope for the eternal kingdom of God."

Survival step 6: Don't give up – even if you get caught

Open Doors estimates that there are between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians imprisoned in terrible conditions in North Korea – in labour camps comparable to the concentration camps of the Second World War. But we know from the stories of those who have escaped that many stand firm in their faith, even under the most horrific circumstances.

Hannah* and her family were arrested for leaving North Korea. When it was discovered that they were Christians, they were all put in solitary confinement. She says, "Prisoners in solitary confinement were badly beaten up. Nobody dared to resist because you'd only make the torture worse. But my husband was different. The more they tortured him, the harder he defended his faith. He yelled at them: 'If believing in God is a sin, I'd rather die! Just kill me! It's my mission to live according to God's will!'"

"Of course, we prayed throughout our time in prison. One day, our entire family was called out of the prison cell. We were in front of the deputy of the prison, waiting to hear our verdict, and in our minds we all desperately prayed for a miracle. We didn't want to suffer and die in a political prisoner camp. God answered our prayer. The deputy gave us a special amnesty. When we walked out of the prison that night and were finally free and alone, we quietly sang a hymn."