

Aquariums of Pyongyang: an update

Thirty plus years ago a 10-year-old boy entered a North Korean labor camp with his family. He lived to tell about it, the first story of its kind: The Aquariums of Pyongyang, by Kang Chol-Hwan. There's probably not a serious North Korea watcher who has not read Aquariums. In a now-rare public appearance, Mr. Kang addressed our SeoulUSA team a couple of weeks ago. For those who have wondered what happens to refugees once they have their dramatic escape, this talk was certainly informative.

Kang Chol Hwan is doing his best to live a normal life. Can anyone imagine how abnormal his life was, by any standard the world over, living in a labor camp in North Korea?

Once settled in South Korea, he graduated from Hamyang University. After all, his former study, in prison, was limited to survival tactics and knowledge about the Kim dynasty, not far removed from the education afforded the entire nation. he needed the real thing, and got it in Seoul.

He was then employed by the Korea Electric Company for three years. He is working now, and has been for nine years, as a reporter for Chosun Ilbo, the well-known Korean daily newspaper. Nevertheless, he has not completely severed his ties with the sorrowful past of his life. He is a well-respected member of the North Korean Democratic Movement. The Council of Five upon which he sits includes men like Voice of Freedom's Kim Seung Min and Juche architect Hwang Jang Yop.

Later editions of his book trace his journey to faith in Christ after his experiences. For the last fifteen years he has attended a Baptist church in Yeoido. For those who may remember, this is the church Jimmy Carter visited on a diplomatic trip to Korea.

Kang continues to grow in his understandings of faith, and life itself. He came to South Korea with what he describes as a "messed-up mental state." He left family in the North when he departed. The sons of North Korea are all given a legacy of misery and emotional chaos.

As he pointed out, in a democratic country, there are many choices that determine one's fate. In an un-liberated nation, the choices are already made. That puts a lot of responsibility on the free.

Taking his responsibility seriously, he -as he says - *accidentally* went to a church at one point in his searchings, but *deliberately* got on the right path when the message he heard captivated him.

In 2005, the George W. Bush White House invited him for a 40-minute private session, where he was able to tell his story, and offer a copy of it to the leader of the free world. Such honor. From such misery. He gives God the glory for this incident, one which deeply affected the President as well. It was such testimony as Kang's that helped Mr. Bush properly to discern the character of this rogue nation and its rogue leader.

Does Kang desire democracy for North Korea? Absolutely! But without hesitating he will tell you that he wants the Gospel to go there even more! Kang claims - and the claim is not without

contest in some quarters - that North Koreans are finished with Juche, that is, the political philosophy of the Kim dynasty, and further that North Korea will fall soon.

Most would agree that at least inwardly, a multitude of North Koreans have soured on this evil regime, and that eventually it will end. If Kang has spoken in an extreme manner only out of a consuming hatred for what he has seen, who can blame him?

But even so, he says, we need a plan. We are not ready now to evangelize or disciple properly the masses of citizens that would be set free in a total failure of the government.

The people of North Korea need to know the right path of life or they won't know what to do when everything dissolves, he affirms. They simply cannot adjust without the Light that comes from knowing the Lord.

He should know. Seventeen years ago he came to South Korea, uneducated and without a clue. Well, he had one clue. It was faith in Christ. And through that faith he has been able to progress. He documents many who came over at about the same time, bright, strong, but faithless. They fell apart in this new world.

So faith must get to North Korea before North Koreans come south in an avalanche. But the Book that contains that faith is a sure way to get more Koreans killed. If one is caught with a Bible he can be killed instantly or at least sent to prison.

So Kang suggests that broadcasting is the best way to give the Word to North Korea. In keeping with this he has been given 1000 radios by Far East Broadcasting Corporation for distribution in North Korea. He delineates at least three methods of media distribution, which I must leave to your vivid imagination.

Kang believes that Kim Jong Il is afraid. He will not change, but his people can. Hearing over and over the truth via the media that has been the pathway of lies is the salvation of this country.

Even the United States State Department is supporting these projects. For this reason, among others, he is regularly followed by the Korean CIA. These are serious matters. Kang says that being a Christian is a more severe crime than espionage. Put the two together, though, as NK leaders do for some reason, and you have a target that the NK government eyes regularly.

Though he continues to desire the "normal life" that every man seeks, Kang Chol Hwan has been touched forever by two dynamic forces: the darkness of the Kim Jong Il Empire, and the Light of the Kingdom of God. These things war in him daily, and in that sense, for the Christian, he has entered into a sort of normalcy after all. Is that not your conflict also?

Will you pray for your brother Kang today, and often?