**Helping North Koreans Defect Is Easy Part, Missionaries Find**

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In from the freezing cold on a recent Sunday morning, sitting on the heated floor of a cozy apartment in northeast Seoul, the North Korean defector seldom looked up at the South Korean missionary who had been trying, for the last year, to convert him to the Christian faith.

The North Korean mechanically checked the messages on his Samsung cellphone and restrained his two daughters from using hymn sheets as telescopes to peer at the half-dozen North Koreans in the home church.

When the South Korean started strumming his guitar and led his congregation in a hymn, the North Korean's lips barely moved, even as a young man next to him raised his hands, palms up, and intoned, ''Can't replace the Lord with anything!''

After the service, the North Korean said, ''Even when I pray, I'm not sure it comes naturally.''

Perhaps realizing that the South Korean missionary, Peter Jung, sat within earshot, the North Korean softened his words.

''When you've had the kind of life I've had, it's difficult to believe in anything,'' said the North Korean, who, fearing for his relatives in his hometown, asked that he be identified only by his surname, Park. ''It's even difficult to believe in myself.''

Mr. Jung made no attempt to hide his frustration after Mr. Park had left, holding himself ''responsible'' that the North Korean, after a year, had yet to ''feel the Holy Spirit.''

''If I can't spread the Word,'' said the missionary, who spent 16 months in prison for proselytizing in China, ''God might as well put a stone around my neck and throw me into the ocean.''

As the two Koreas have moved closer in recent years, the complicated relationship between defector and missionary has come to symbolize, perhaps more than anything else, the yawning gap of a half-century of division. While the North remains Communist, the South has grown into the foothold for Christianity in Northeast Asia.

With a nearly 30 percent Christian population, the South has the world's second largest missionary movement, after the United States, with 14,000 people abroad. An estimated 1,500 are deployed in China, evangelizing secretly and illegally among Chinese and among North Koreans living in China -- a population that various estimates say ranges from 10,000 to as many as 300,000. South Korean missionaries shelter North Koreans and have brought thousands here to the South; others train them to return home to proselytize, as well as smuggle Bibles into the North.

For the South's missionaries, converting people from the North, where Christianity first spread before the peninsula's division, dovetails with their dream of a reunified peninsula. ''Oh Lord, please send us, for our brethren up North,'' reads a verse in the most popular hymn among missionaries working with defectors, ''Evangelical Song of Unification.'' It is also part of a larger dream of spreading the Gospel along the Silk Road back to its source.

''Only when we open up China, with South and North Korea as one, will we be able to go back to Jerusalem,'' said the Rev. Cho Gi Youn, the manager of missions at the Christian Council of Korea, whose missionary school graduates 300 students a year.

Behind these movements, though, are personal ties between defector and missionary, complicated by a balance of power tipped in the South Korean's favor and the inevitable mix of religion, politics and money.

To the North Korean defectors, some South Korean missionaries seem more concerned about brokering deals to smuggle them out of China and using them in Seoul as publicity tools against North Korea. To South Korean missionaries, who have risked their lives to evangelize in China, some North Korean defectors appear ungrateful. Although no precise figures exist, only a fifth to a third of North Korean defectors ultimately convert to Christianity, according to most South Korean missionaries interviewed.

It was a year ago that Mr. Park and Mr. Jung, now both 38 years old, met in Seoul through a mutual friend. The missionary had just returned here after spending several years in China. The defector had arrived here with his wife and two girls after spending several years in China.

Although the defector's wife had converted to Christianity in China, he remained ambivalent, despite his friendship with the missionary.

''There are missionaries who look like con men to me; they're just interested in taking money from defectors in China,'' said Mr. Park, who fell victim to such a swindler before making it out of China. ''But Peter even went to jail to help North Korean defectors. I wonder how can he love so much that he would put himself in jail for us?

''He's a pastor, he's a good friend, we're the same age, so I go to church,'' the defector went on. ''But if you're a Christian, you have to feel from the bottom of your heart. Even though Peter is right next to me, I still haven't felt that. But I'm very, very grateful to him.''

Peter Jung became a missionary after spending a chunk of his childhood studying and sleeping in the local church where his mother sent him when his father had drunk too much. He studied theology in the 1990's, just as South Korea's missionary movement was furiously growing, and decided that there was only one place to spread the Gospel: China.

From 1997, the missionary worked in northeast China, near the border with North Korea, evangelizing among Chinese and North Koreans there. China views the North Koreans as illegal economic refugees and often deports them to the North. Typically, Mr. Jung would be in charge of taking care of a couple of defectors, sheltering and feeding them.

''After they'd settle down, I'd start teaching them the Lord's Prayer,'' the missionary said. ''But it wasn't easy to change their hearts into Christians.''

Mr. Jung was more cautious than other missionaries, refusing to send North Koreans to smuggle Bibles across the border and sing hymns inside home churches. Still, in mid-2003, he and his colleagues, as well as several North Koreans in their care, were arrested. After he was released from prison, Mr. Jung was deported here.

It was around the same time that Mr. Park, the defector, found his way here. In the North, he lived in a town along the border with China, not far from the Chinese city Yanji. A member of the Korean Workers' Party, he said he had been assigned to work at a mining company but never went.

Instead, Mr. Park made money in the growing unofficial trade between North Korea and China. A strong swimmer, he smuggled people back and forth across the Tumen River, charging about $60 for the 30-minute swim and sometimes making as much as $1,000 a month. He often bribed a North Korean intelligence official to protect him.

At the time, while most people in his town counted themselves lucky if they ate three meals of corn a day, he and his family ate chicken, pork and rice daily. He said that he liked the freedom and opportunities in South Korea, but that he missed his relatives and the power he had back home.

''Here I'm just a follower, but over there I was a leader,'' the defector said. ''It's not because I was a party member, but because capitalism is creeping into North Korea, if you have a lot of money, you can have power.''

But in the middle of one night, in 1999, the friendly intelligence officer woke him up. He told Mr. Park that he had been implicated in a case and warned him to flee to China. With his wife, seven months pregnant with their second child, Mr. Park swam across the river, barely making it to the other side. A month later, he returned to North Korea one last time,to get his older daughter and money for a lattice machine for his wife.

In China, a missionary couple arranged for his wife to be admitted at a hospital, and visited often. Mr. Park's wife delivered safely and persuaded him to name their second daughter Mary as a reflection of her new faith.

In South Korea since late 2003, Mr. Park recently started a job as a real estate agent, hoping that will give him the experience to buy land one day. His wife, busy with two jobs, entrusts him to attend Mr. Jung's home church every Sunday.

''There are times I'm tired and I don't want to come here,'' the defector said. ''But my wife says it's good for the children.''

''My wife was never a party member, so it was easier for her to accept Christianity,'' he said. ''I was a party member for 10 years, and they indoctrinated us with the party ideology. When I hear Christian preaching, it sounds similar to the party teachings. Christians praise God, but North Koreans praise Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il,'' the founder of the North Korean state and his son, the current leader. ''At least, they are mortal and we can see them. In Christianity, they ask me to praise the Lord, whom we cannot even see.''

At the home church on Sunday, the missionary, in his sermon, counseled his congregation that winning the lottery or marrying Julia Roberts would not bring eternal happiness. Only God's love would.

''In North Korea, there is no God,'' the missionary said. ''There is only Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung. But there are North Korean defectors who have stopped worshiping them and have gotten the Holy Spirit. It's a miracle that they come to believe in God as quickly as they do.''

After everyone had left, though, the missionary said he knew he had not won over Mr. Park. He knew that Christianity reminded Mr. Park, as well as other defectors, of ''North Korean ideology.''

''It's understandable,'' the missionary said. ''We can only pray that he'll meet the Holy Spirit one day. Only God knows where and when that will happen.''

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