

Caux, 21 July 2008



Syngman Rhee, former Moderator, Presbyterian Church, USA, speaking as a panelist on the theme, 'How do wounded memories destroy trust and create human insecurity?'

Six years ago I was invited to be here as a speaker in a conference for world peace. It is wonderful to be back here again.

The tragic wounded memories of the Korean War of the 1950s are still deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of the Korean people. At the end of the Second World War in 1945, Korea was divided into north and south by the then allied forces, mainly the United States and the former Soviet Union, and there came the infamous 38th parallel, dividing still the Korean people into north and south until this day. The division eventually led to the Korean War of 1950, some three million Korean people died, and 36,000 young lives of the UN forces were lost during the war. In North Korea, under the communist regime, my father faced imprisonment and eventually martyrdom as a religious leader, along with other leaders.

I fled from North Korea to the south soon after my father's death as a 19-year-old with my young brother, aged 17. Two of us fled leaving behind the rest of our family – our mother whom we never saw again and four sisters. Upon fleeing to the south we joined the South Korean marines and fought against the North Korean soldiers, brother against brother. We were convinced that it was the right thing to do as we were filled with a deep sense of hostility and enmity – although the tragic wounded memories hurt me now and I think about it with a sense of regret.

After five years in military service I was able to come to the United States as a student, but still filled with the same sense of hostility and enmity towards the North Korean regime for what they had done to my family and to others. However a life-changing transformation took place in the early 1960s as I began to participate in the civil rights movement as a minister under the leadership of the late Dr Martin Luther King.

Dr King's message was that the civil rights movement was not only to liberate blacks from oppression but also to liberate the whites from their prejudice and racism - in order that the blacks and the whites both liberated together work for the establishing of a just and peaceful society. That was a powerful message. Furthermore Dr King's message that the key to establish such a new society was with the oppressed people, as they had a choice either to revenge or to forgive and start anew. This message was so powerful to such a person as me who had lived under the oppressive structures of Japanese rule of the Korean people for a half century and under the Communist regime in North Korea. Dr King's message challenged me, and turned my life around. I moved beyond hostility, enmity and even demonizing some people.

Attending a conference here at Caux six years ago reaffirmed my conviction. The last 30 years I have devoted to reconciliation in Korea and around the world. The work of reconciliation is not easy. It is risky, at times misunderstood, often shot at from both sides, but I am convinced that peace can only come through reconciliation. A military solution is no solution at all.

Dr. Syngman Rhee

Syngman Rhee is the Director of the Asian American Ministry and Mission Center at Union Theological Seminary/ Presbyterian School in Richmond, Virginia. He formerly served as the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. In this capacity, he represented the church as its 'good-will ambassador', visiting congregations in the U.S. and the church's numerous overseas missions. He has made over 30 visits to North Korea in an effort to encourage reconciliation between the North and the South.