

GLOBAL

Reaching North Korea's Secret Christians by Radio

South Koreans are proselytizing in the adamantly atheist country using thousands of illicit radios smuggled over the border.

RACHEL COHRS APR 28, 2018



Chung Soo Kim is a radio host who has worked with the Far East Broadcasting Company for more than 20 years. (Alan Mittelstaedt) (ALAN MITTELSTAEDT)

SEOUL—South Korea turned off dozens of high-volume loudspeakers on Monday, putting a halt to the propaganda they normally broadcast over the border into North Korea. The move, a government spokesman said, was designed to set a peaceful tone ahead of the talks between the two Koreas Friday—a tone that was reinforced by the announcement that the countries had committed to work toward a peace agreement. The strikingly amicable inter-Korean summit will in turn set the tone for an upcoming U.S.-North Korea summit, during which President Trump and Kim Jong Un are expected to discuss denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. But while the South's loudspeakers have stopped blaring reports critical of the North, forbidden messages are still flowing across the border—on the airwaves of a Christian radio station.

South Korea's largest religious radio broadcaster, the Far East Broadcasting Company, transmits gospel-centered programs to both North and South Korea every day of the week. The station's goal is to use Christian radio to subvert the Kim regime's strict ban on religion, and ultimately pave the way for a unified, Christianized Korean Peninsula. The Christians behind FEBC advocate for the reunification of the two Koreas under a democratic system, which they believe would bolster religious freedom. What's more, they see Christianity and North Korean ideology as mutually exclusive—and argue that the former can be an antidote to the latter.

Around 20 percent of South Korea's population identifies as Protestant, and Protestantism has roots on the Korean Peninsula stretching back to the 19th century, when American missionaries began arriving there. The religion gained stature as churches became associated with the resistance to Japanese occupation of a then-unified Korea during World War II, but still remained on the margins—only 2 percent of South Koreans were Christian in 1945.

But the two Koreas took different religious paths following their division in 1948. In South Korea the government was friendly toward the United States and Christianity, and Protestantism continued to grow based in part on its association with wealth, modernity, and Americans. Churches also served as social hubs for rural South Koreans who moved to cities during the country's industrialization. But under the communist system that took root in the North, religion was suppressed, though not altogether outlawed. The current Kim regime is intolerant of any independent religious practice. Christian-run institutions there, like the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, have been in a precarious position—two American former teachers at the school are currently being detained by the North Korean government.

FEBC spreads its message through far-reaching broadcasts—the station has a strong 300-kilowatt transmitter that can reach all of North and South Korea, as well as Japan and parts of Russia and China. Beyond broadcasting, the station also hosts Christian music festivals and runs children's choirs that travel internationally. It receives approximately 1.2 million calls, texts, and letters per year from listeners and is entirely funded through donations. Though it's impossible to estimate North Korean listenership, Mary Kay Park, a media strategist at the station's Los Angeles branch, estimated that the number is likely

“in the thousands.” She offered a lofty characterization of the station’s role. “We transmit changed values, and different ideas of the gospel and what freedom looks like. The transformational message of the gospel will help if there is reunification.”

The station broadcasts different programs to its North Korean audience than to its South Korean listeners. North Korean programming focuses on defector-run shows about Christianity and provides audio church services—the latter because most North Koreans cannot attend local churches, or even speak about Christianity, without risking forced labor or execution. While the North Korean government allows a few formal, state-controlled religious groups, the CIA World Factbook reports that these groups “exist to provide an illusion of religious freedom,” and that independent religious activity is “almost nonexistent” in the country. North Korea “curtails all basic human rights,” according to Human Rights Watch, and religious freedom is no exception.

In the 1940s, estimates put the number of churchgoing Christians in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang between 25 and 30 percent of all adult residents. Though it’s impossible to get an accurate count given the Kim regime’s strict controls on information, after decades of oppression, the United Nations in 2014 cited estimates that the number of Christians living in North Korea was then between 200,000 and 400,000, or around 1 percent of the country’s population.

But South Korean Christian groups like FEBC cannot meet them, or potential converts, face to face. Tourist visits to North Korea are closely chaperoned by state-employed guides, and proselytizing is prohibited. The station has settled for what it sees as the next best thing: reaching the curious through illicit radio receivers.

FEBC buys handheld radio receivers and gives them to Christian organizations that work with smugglers to get the radios into North Korea so residents can secretly listen to the station’s broadcasts. Chung Soo Kim, who has for more than 20 years been a radio host for FEBC, where he translates California pastor Rick Warren’s sermons, estimated that the company has purchased “tens of thousands” of receivers over more than two decades. He said he recognized that while simply owning a radio is not necessarily risky, smuggling the radios into North Korea, or being caught listening to FEBC, can be dangerous. He justified the station’s distribution methods by saying that the smugglers know the risks of these missions, and they choose to carry them out anyway. FEBC sometimes donates

receivers to organizations that send them over the border by balloon, rather than using smugglers on foot. (Secular human-rights organizations run similar smuggling operations to expose North Koreans to foreign movies and television.)

Because the radios are not pre-set to any specific channel, recipients of the radios can choose which stations they want to listen to. Chung Soo Kim said FEBC does not encourage North Koreans who listen to its programming to share their faith with others under the current regime. “We just want to share the Christian gospel with them. We don’t want them to put themselves at risk by openly claiming that they are Christian in North Korea.” He added that although the North Korean government has attempted to jam its signals, “financially, they cannot afford to jam our broadcasts. They do not even have enough food to feed their own people.”



A radio announcer seated at a control board at FEBC in Seoul (Alan Mittelstaedt)

The station has indications from defectors’ testimonies and listener feedback that its broadcasts are reaching their destination. Sookook Kim, who works in the feedback department, said correspondence from North Korean listeners is rare because of the risk involved in sending it, but arrives occasionally. She recounted

one letter from a Christian living in North Korea who listened to the company's broadcasts under a blanket at 4 a.m., the only time that listener deemed it safe to do so. The listener meticulously copied down pages of sermons and Bible passages and sent the papers to the station with a monetary offering. "It was so touching for us," she said. "If we don't receive these kinds of materials, it's hard to have faith that they are really listening to FEBC Korea."

On the South Korean side of programming, FEBC has a show dedicated to reunification, under what would effectively be the South's terms of a democratic system of government, and informing South Koreans about news in the North. The South's version of the reunification concept has historically been popular there—indeed, seeking "peaceful unification based on the principles of freedom and democracy" is codified in the country's constitution—but it is becoming less so. A 2017 study by the South Korean government found that 58 percent of South Koreans support reunification, down from 69 percent just four years before. Many young South Koreans in particular have described opposition to absorbing the costs of joining two societies with such profound economic and cultural differences, and are more inclined to see the North as a threat, or potential source of impoverished refugees, than a neighbor. "There is a cultural gap between North Korea and South Korea, so we have to minimize those gaps," Sookook Kim said.

While the station refrains from suggesting specific paths toward reunification, its ideal unified state would give all Koreans "an equal amount of freedom to South Koreans," said Chung Soo Kim. He said he believes the spread of Christianity can help bring this about by exposing North Koreans to ideas from the outside world. If reunification under a more democratic government took place, that would in turn provide more freedom to spread Christianity. "Korea is divided, and we consider them as our people," he said. "We are solely doing the best we can do to bring reunification through the religious sector."

FEBC's sleek, listener-funded, \$40-million building with floor-to-ceiling glass walls opened in 2013 in Hongdae, one of Seoul's trendiest neighborhoods. Around 80 employees bustle around the office dressed impeccably in formal business attire. Permeating every corner of the building is the memory of the famous late evangelist, Billy Graham, who visited South Korea in 1973. A Lego recreation of the largest rally of Graham's career, held in Seoul, greets visitors in a coffee shop in FEBC's headquarters. The model is accurate, even down to the color of the flowers

in front of the stage and its plastic styling of Graham's hair. Another tiny Lego figure stands beside Graham's likeness: Billy Kim, a pastor who translated for Graham during the 1973 rally, and who now serves as the chairman of FEBC.



A Lego model depicts Billy Graham and Billy Kim at a 1973 rally in Seoul (Rachel Cohrs)

The Billys' friendship spanned four decades, and Kim spoke at Graham's funeral last month. ("It's as we say in Korean, 'a big star has fallen,'" Chung Soo Kim said about Graham's death.) Photos of the two pastors hang in several places around the FEBC building. The second floor is home to a new office of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, opened to prepare for the 2020 trip of Franklin Graham, the late evangelist's son, to Seoul.

Billy Graham held communism in contempt, and in 1949 proclaimed that "communism is a religion that is inspired, directed, and motivated by the devil himself who has declared war against Almighty God." Despite his outspoken opposition to communism, in 1992 Graham became one of the first foreign religious leaders to visit the North Korean capital. Though Graham did not preach

to stadium crowds there, he gave Kim Il Sung, the communist country's first leader, a Bible.

“I think that [Graham] saw evangelism as a way to spread the gospel, and help democratize countries,” said Helen Kim, a historian of Korean and American Christianity at Emory University. She has spent time at the FEBC office in Seoul, and said that while the station says it wants to stay out of politics, its mission of facilitating the spread of Christianity in North Korea is inherently political. That's because full acceptance of Christianity directly undermines North Korea's government-mandated *juche* ideology. “It's like mixing oil and water,” she said.

While North Korea's first dictator grew up with Christian parents, the *juche* ideology Kim Il Sung instituted is adamantly atheistic. Important tenets of *juche* include veneration of the dictator, devotion to the communist state, and self-reliance. North Koreans are also required to revere the Kim family. The country has an estimated 40,000 statues of Kim Il Sung, each household is required to hang portraits of past dictators in pristine condition, and newspapers featuring photos of Kim Jong Un cannot be folded. This required activity, which arguably amounts to worship, contradicts core Christian doctrines that prohibit idol-worship.

Despite the political, economic, and cultural challenges that would accompany reunification, and despite the tense atmosphere that persists ahead of another looming summit, FEBC is holding onto hope. A banner depicting colorful, harmonious images superimposed onto a map of a unified Korean peninsula hangs prominently outside the company's recording studios. “When reunification happens,” Chung Soo Kim said, “we are ready to plant a radio station in Pyongyang anytime.”