

Risking It All for Fellowship

-- Colonel (USMC, Ret.) Phil Exner, ACCTS' executive director

Every year, ACCTS' Korean partner ministry, Mission Support Organization (MSO), brings together military Christians from countries that have a struggling military Christian fellowship (MCF), or no MCF, for a week of training, encouragement, and relationship building. The 2017 Missionary Evangelism Observation (MEO) program brought 21 people from 15 such countries to Seoul, where ACCTS and UK-based Military Ministries International (MMI) staff members joined with MSO staff to instruct the attendees in military ministry fundamentals and leadership, and to help them set a vision for establishing a strong and effective military ministry when they returned to their countries.

ACCTS staff Rick and Melissa Ryles, Phil and Sue Exner, and emeritus staff Don Snow all joined in leading classes, devotionals, prayers, and other activities. Some of the classes, such as "The Establishment and Growth of MCFs" and "Inductive Bible Study" are quite helpful to those who are unfamiliar with MCF operations. But the biggest impact of MEO and other conferences, and events like it, is building relationships and encouraging military Christians through fellowship.

It is difficult to convey to Americans how powerfully encouraging fellowship can be – or how valuable. One delegate from a South Asian country told me, "In my country, I cannot sing loudly, I cannot pray loudly; I cannot worship loudly." One of the highlights for him was attending the opening of the National Salvation Prayer Convention, which annually celebrates South Korea's deliverance after North Korea's 1950 invasion. This MEO participant was emotionally overwhelmed to see over 13,000 young Christian Korean soldiers who voluntarily came to sing praises and give thanks to God for their country -- and to pray for its peaceful reunification.

He wasn't the only one for whom the prayer convention was beyond anything they had ever seen. None of the other participants I spoke to had ever seen that many Christians together, and all were deeply moved by the faith and fervor of the Korean soldiers – most of whom were young -- who came to pray. One MEO attendee, who lives in a religiously-open country, said that the intensity of the event helped him appreciate the importance of military Christian fellowships. He confessed, "Until today, I didn't understand why MCFs are so important, but now I see." A participant from a Southeast Asia country who had told me, "In our country, we are not allowed to go into a church," was powerfully taken-aback when he entered the worship center with 13,000 singing and praising young soldiers.

Delegates at the MEO conference told of harassment they have endured. One was arrested just prior to trying to attend a Christian event, while another was disciplined upon his return from one. When asked why they would go anyway, the answer was that it was worth the risk so that they could fellowship with other military Christians.

One delegate talked about how important fellowship is to him. "It is very lonely [back home]. My family are the only Christians in my village, and there are none I know of in any of the ten closest other villages." But the nation's small MCF meets once a month in the capital, which is five hours away from his home. He makes an effort to attend every month and thinks nothing of making the ten-hour drive just to have fellowship.

The bond of Christian fellowship can overcome significant obstacles. I was struck by how quickly participants from countries which have disputes bonded and fellowshiped together anyway. The disputing countries are solving their conflicts with destruction, death, and generations of misunderstanding and revenge. Yet the delegates from those countries prayed, laughed, and enjoyed great fellowship together in the unity they have in Christ. It reminded me of a comment I heard at a different conference – a soldier pointed to a soldier from his nation who was reading the Bible with a policeman from an “enemy” nation. He said that any human solution to the complex conflict between the two nations was doomed -- the solution for Christians from those nations lies in seeking the unity that comes from Christ. In nations like that, the AMCF motto, “All one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28) comes alive in a practical way.

On Thursday of the MEO training week, our group visited the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which separates North and South Korea. There was a stark difference between the two countries – neat homes, farms, and communities along the way to the DMZ and lush forests in South Korea, but empty fake villages and deforested hills in North Korea. One MEO participant from the former Soviet Union was overwhelmed by the sharp difference, and by the South Koreans’ gracious prayers for peaceful reunification and for the persecuted and suffering people of North Korea. “When I was in the Soviet Army,” he related, “I was told that North Korea was our friend and South Korea was our enemy. I never would have dreamed I would someday be in South Korea!”

One conference participant was an African woman who was married to a Muslim soldier. She and her children became Christians and were, as a result, banished from her husband and extended family. She wants to return to her country to plant the seeds of a military Christian fellowship there, when that is possible.

A delegate from an Asia conference related an incident that happened to him shortly after he returned home from attending an AMCF/ACCTS military Christian conference. He was awoken at 6 A.M. by a rough knock on his door, and six men took him to a police station where security services personnel interrogated him for a week on his Christian activities. He was detained for seven days for questioning. Throughout the detention, he did not know why they had arrested him, nor what they were looking for. But there were two clear lessons from his experience.

Prior to the incident, he imagined himself to be much stronger in his faith -- but he humbly admitted that his courage melted almost as soon as they started asked him questions. His resolve to courageously resist answering questions evaporated and he told them anything they wanted to know. “So much for my imaginary, self-vaunting courage,” he quipped. The second lesson was about the need for fellowship. The entire time he was detained, he never contacted anyone, nor did anyone try to contact him. The police told him to not tell anyone about the detention, and their seemingly-complete knowledge of him and his friends spooked him into believing that they would find out if he did. So he told no one – and no one even noted his absence. This gave him a powerful sense of aloneness. He realized that he could disappear for weeks and no one would notice. If he were to die, it would likely be alone, unless he deepened his relationships with believers (a dangerous option). His experience highlighted the importance of fellowship, but also its cost and risk in a society that is not free.

One final note before I close this report. It has been an immense pleasure to see how the Koreans and others from the Far East have welcomed and honored former ACCTS staff member Don Snow, who attended MEO. He was bathed in honor, respect, love, and friendship, and has been profusely thanked

by many who were blessed by his pioneering work in this region. Don wasn't sure that he should attend at first, but he was overflowing with thanks that God led him to say "yes" to the Koreans' invitation to attend.

Thank you to all who support ACCTS' ministry, and who pray for all military Christians – especially those who come from nations where there is not full religious freedom. Please keep praying for them, asking God to give them safety and wisdom.