

Article

# Postcolonial Reflection on the Christian Mission: The Case of North Korean Refugees in China and South Korea

Shin Ji Kang

Department of Early, Elementary & Reading Education, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA 22807, USA; kangsj@jmu.edu

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to challenge the dominant narrative of Christian service providers working for North Korean refugees' welfare, and to articulate the perspectives of non-Christian aid recipients, especially North Korean refugees in China and South Korea. Drawing upon postcolonialism, I will unpack dysfunctions of Christian missions and ministries while relating them to anthropological insights and ethnographic research data. As a Christian scholar, I attempt to invite Christian leaders and field workers to engage in critical reflections on their goals, dispositions, and strategies in relating to the culturally, politically, and economically marginalized. This paper is aimed to offer opportunities for Christian missionaries to critique their colonial models and to reclaim their missions that decolonize both missionaries and the missionized.

**Keywords:** postcolonialism; refugee; North Korea; missionary; Christianity; humanitarian aid; China; South Korea; justice

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## 1. Introduction

Christian missions and ministries have engaged in serving communities and people in need worldwide. Such motives have been manifested in providing charity to the poor, medical services to the sick, hospitality to the disliked, and places of refuge to the persecuted [1]. These humanitarian responses are well grounded in the Christian mission for justice, as Scripture reflects:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison, and you came to visit me...I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine you did for me (Matthew 25: 35–40).

In the context of Christian humanitarian activities worldwide, justice is practiced by “the haves” (the powerful) giving their resources to “the have-nots” (the marginalized). Such activities are regarded as well-meaning deeds since they are non-profit and humanitarian, and thus tend not to be challenged or questioned. In fact, Ferris [1] raised concerns regarding the pressure created by Christian organizations' relief activities conducted in the tsunami-affected Muslim community in Indonesia: The local community felt intimidated and offended by the humanitarian workers who promoted religious conversion. Ferris' research called for improvement in the ethics of the benefactor.

As a Christian scholar and educator, I have collaborated with many passionate South Korean Christians committed to peace and justice for North Korean refugees. Through my fieldwork with North Korean refugee youths, I have noticed a problematic paradigm in South Korean missions to North Korean refugees. I have encountered stories that have been seldom reflected in the grand

narratives of today's South Korean missionary enterprise: the testimonials of victory and triumph of missionaries in the wasteland. The voices missed in the Christian mission narrative are those of the people to be missionized—stories of oppression, exploitation, and coercion brought by the Christian workers in China and South Korea. North Korean refugees have their critical and legitimate perspectives, which warrant major attention in the missional discussions. They tend to be marginalized because of their vulnerability as refugees. South Korean Christians could learn from the margins, as Jesus and his disciples actually came from the margins and challenged the dominant religious leaders.

A common Nigerian proverb is “don't let the lion tell the giraffe's story,” which may apply to today's Christian missionaries. By listening to the giraffe's story—North Korean refugees' story—Christian missionaries could keep themselves in check and engage in genuine learning from those targeted in their mission. The purpose of this paper is to challenge the dominant narrative of Christian service providers working for North Korean refugees' welfare, and to articulate the perspectives of non-Christian aid recipients, especially North Korean refugees in China and South Korea. Drawing upon postcolonial theory, I will unpack some dysfunctions relevant to South Korean Christian missions and ministries, which will be supported by anthropological insights and ethnographic research data of other field researchers and myself. The purpose of the paper is not just to condemn the colonial attitude of missions, but to invite Christian leaders and field workers to engage in critical reflections on goals, dispositions, and strategies in relating to the culturally, politically, and economically marginalized. This paper may enable many Christian missionaries and ministers to find the blind spots that have been hidden in the stories told only by the Christians.

## 2. Postcolonial Theoretical Perspective

The history of colonialism has brought with it many difficulties. Colonialism not only assumes military, economic, and political superiority over an existing societal structure, it carries with it implicit judgments about all other areas of social construction: gender, class, and intellect, as well as norms regarding etiquette, hygiene, work vs. leisure, clothing, sexuality, food, and, of course, religion. As defined by Geertz [2], religion is an entire cultural system, and it orients an entire worldview—it is a wholly organizing orientation to all of reality, with accompanying ethics that appear uniquely realistic to adherents. Thus, especially in spreading religious frameworks, colonial powers not only authorize sovereignty over the physical dimensions of colonized peoples, they also exert control over the social, religious, intellectual, and emotional dimensions.

This insight has led postcolonial theorists such as John and Jean Comaroff [3] to discuss the phenomenon in terms of “colonization of consciousness,” which can lead to erasure of self-identity and agency (i.e., the dehumanization of colonized peoples), by setting the conversation in terms of central symbols, expectations, and concepts framed by the colonizers [4]. “Civilizing” the native by saving his/her soul has resulted in irreversible changes to societies, heritages, and consciousness in colonized areas. As just one example of many, the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) presented to colonized peoples such as the Tswana of black southern Africa in the 1920s. They presented not only religion, but entire constructs of “civilization” through commerce and other social norms, thoroughly changing the whole social system [3]. Due to the explicit and implicit power imbalances between the colonized and colonizer, these far-reaching effects can result in brutalization that continues even when the official colonialism has ended. Only five countries (i.e., Ethiopia, China, Japan, Thailand, & Afghanistan) have never been colonized in the medieval and modern periods [5], and since all of these countries have arguably been colonized by globalization to varying extents [6], the specter of postcolonial frameworks and the “colonization of consciousness” has been vast and devastating.

Avoiding repetition of the same patterns of power imbalance requires critical understandings of how Christian missions have been shaped by colonial histories and how they still unintentionally share the marks of neocolonialism [4,7,8]. Christian missionaries, despite some having good intentions, clearly perpetrated these devastating colonial and neocolonial frameworks throughout much of the

globe. The evidence of the power and authority of the colonial power structures went hand in hand with the evident superiority that Christian people supposedly possess over non-Christians. Rieger [8] criticized this strongly, asserting that Christian missionaries committed cultural genocide, referring to the destruction of the cultural heritage of the colonized. The colonial genocide could be extended to spiritual, intellectual, and psychological domains to maintain de facto colonial power over the missionized even after the official decolonization [9].

Examples multiply of children who have suffered from unintentional erasure of their heritage, identity, familial ties, religion, language, psychological safety, and social norms in the name of Christian missionary/colonial aid, from the “lost generation” of Australian aborigines to Native American children forcibly relocated to boarding schools. As Rieger [8] explains, Western missionaries’ influence lingers in the colonies’ educational systems where Western and/or Christian values (e.g., definition of happiness), manners (e.g., western style dress code), subjects (e.g., English) and disciplines (e.g., Western medicine) serve as proof of civilization that enable upward mobility in the society. Rieger framed it within neocolonialism: “Those in power shape the lives of those without power” ([8], p. 209). Colonialism is not only a topic in a history class but has actually shaped our minds, cultures, and systems that need to be decolonized [10].

Understanding potential harms of colonialism suggests an important implication for today’s missions and Christian engagement with non-Christian. It is essential to raise awareness about Christians themselves in terms of how they relate to the others. Smith, Lalitha, & Hawk [4] summarize the usefulness of the postcolonial perspective in missions as follows:

- (1) Postcolonialism is a response to a colonial framework as residue of past colonialisms and present neocolonialisms.
- (2) Postcolonialism concerns marginalization of the powerless and attempts to disrupt domination by the powerful.
- (3) Postcolonialism invites mutual learning and growth through interactions and opposes rigid authority and homogeneity.
- (4) Postcolonialism is an act of critiquing power that dominates the metanarratives.
- (5) Postcolonialism seeks decolonization and facilitates alternatives.

Since “the cultural imposition of the missionaries continues today, even among the more sensitive and liberal-minded missionaries of our own time” ([11], p. 113), postcolonial perspectives must be considered critically and extensively in order to prevent many Christian missionaries from practicing the same abuses of the past. Geertz’s [2] definition reminds us that our religious frameworks are “uniquely realistic” to us, meaning that our acceptance of the superiority of our own religion, whatever it may be, is our very blind spot. Avoiding “colonization of the mind” [3] thus proves to be extremely difficult, particularly in a missionizing context in which the missionized are suffering physically and emotionally.

Gene Green, professor at Wheaton College, acknowledged that the “civilization” of Native Americans was in fact colonization to which the church contributed:

I was the colonist; I am the colonist. The land where I live was taken under an ill-signed treaty in 1829, and the people who lived here, the Potawatomi, were gathered and forcibly removed from this area under the Indian Removal Act of 1830. When Black Hawk resisted this ethnic cleansing, President Andrew Jackson sent General Winfield Scott through this area to suppress the rebellion. Afterward immigration to the west of Chicago spiked and new communities were founded such as the one where I now live and teach. We are established on this land because of colonialism. We are the colonists ([10], p. 20).

Although Green did not participate in colonizing the Native people directly, he recognized the violence and oppression his Christian predecessors brought to the Native Americans and the systemic benefits the descendants have been enjoying. Facing the colonial history is not easy since it may cause a

sense of guilt. Green also warned that some conservative evangelicals might “react against the critique of Christian mission, a centerpiece of evangelical life and theology” ([10], p. 21). Christians will need to examine themselves concerning their own privileges and power and to develop awareness for what God does rather than celebrating too soon what they do.

### 3. Sources of Data

#### 3.1. *Missing Voices of North Korean Refugees in Christian Missions*

Since China and South Korea established diplomatic relations in 1992, South Korea has exercised great influence over the Korean-Chinese community in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Northeast China. The influx of South Korean industrial capital to this area allowed growth in the economy as well as church, university, and hospital development in Korean-Chinese communities. South Korean mega churches often served as financial, intellectual, and spiritual resource providers in the development, and thus shaped a powerful image among Korean-Chinese communities that the South Korean Christian identity is culturally and economically superior [12]. This set a perfect stage for missions and relief activities for North Korean border-crossers, where Korean-Chinese Christians act as local agents who are bilingual and familiar with the socialist system, and the South Korean church functions largely as a sponsor to drive the mission directions.

In this section, representative mission strategies—safe houses and alternative schools—will be described from the North Korean beneficiaries’ viewpoint. I will make the North Korean border-crossers’ positions visible by highlighting the power imbalance in safe houses and alternative schools as evidence of the colonial mission. The data is drawn from ethnographic research published by other scholars and my original research. I conducted a needs assessment in 2013 with the South Korean teachers of an alternative school that served North Korean refugee students only. I also interviewed the North Korean refugee graduates of the same South Korean alternative school in 2015. Interviews were conducted in the Korean language, which were transcribed in Korean and then translated later in English. Pseudonyms are used for the research participants throughout the paper to protect their identities.

##### 3.1.1. Safe House in Northeast China

Christians in Northeast China have been passionate and diligent in ministering to North Korean border-crossers who left their country to escape starvation since the great famine in the 1990s. Most North Koreans in China have been undocumented, having no official status or rights, and thus have been exposed to the risk of exploitation or deportation [13]. In response to their needs, safe houses or secret shelters have emerged as a way to minister to North Koreans and spaces where North Korean residents, South Korean sponsors, and Korean-Chinese caregivers engage each other. As the political tension around North Korean refugees created a hostile environment in this region, safe houses began as a type of temporary and secret residence for those attempting to seek asylum in South Korea [12,14–16]. One of my interviewees, Kate, recalled her distress associated with the security risk in China:

I was not willing to go to South Korea at first because of an arduous process of entry, and most importantly, I had to risk my life. I hated the constant fear of getting caught by the Chinese authorities, who were notorious for their human rights violations toward North Korean refugees and sending them back to North Korea. The fear of being sent back to North Korea was very excruciating for me, since I had been repatriated back to North Korea after getting caught in China in 2003. Because of such experiences, whenever I heard the sound of a police siren, I assumed that the Chinese police were hunting me down and I just ran for my life. If I saw the police ahead, I used to make long detours [17].

Safe houses are mainly middle-class, residential apartments with three to five bedrooms in urban or rural areas and are usually hosted by a mother- or grandmother-like caregiver. Safe houses

accommodate mostly youths who crossed the border unaccompanied. The residents are confined, silenced, and cannot be allowed to go out freely due to security reasons. They are expected to follow a fixed daily schedule to participate in prayers, hymns, and Bible studies. If they do not comply, harsh penalties and corporal punishment may follow as consequences [14,15]. Young North Korean residents may stay in safe houses for months until they have their opportunity to seek asylum through the Christian underground support network. Some caregivers would even tell the residents that opportunities to seek asylum might be given first to the “good Christians” who are diligent in Bible reading and prayer [18]. Thus, the residents are in competition to prove their conversion through religious performances to earn a faster chance at asylum. The hegemonic realities of colonialism are deeply embedded in the attitudes and policies of safe house missions.

Han [15,19] provided comprehensive description of a safe house in Northeast China where she conducted an ethnographic study on missionary custody. North Korean children in that safe house, because of their undocumented status, could not have access to public education. Instead, they did household chores and studied the Bible without making noise or trouble. Unequal power relations between the Christian care providers and the North Korean residents generated an oppressive and controlled environment in the safe house. The safe house residents’ narratives contextualize how Christian missionaries in the field dominated the course of lives and beliefs under their protection or counsel.

The following interview summaries with three North Korean residents accompanied by the Christian caregiver highlight the nature of their relationships: Seventeen-year-old Grace was coerced to return to North Korea as a missionary not by her will but by “God’s will,” as her Christian caregiver framed it. When the researcher asked Grace about her future plan, the custodian volunteered to explain Grace’s dream on her behalf: “[Grace’s] destiny is to return to North Korea as a missionary so she can build a church in her hometown, She has had a vision from God, who showed her a church painted in white with a cross on top, near the place where she grew up” ([15], p. 548). Before coming to this safe house, Grace had been repatriated to North Korea, where she was beaten and imprisoned because she had been previously exposed to Christianity. Her safety depended on the Christian caregiver in China, and her dream appeared to be taken over completely by the caregiver. It is remarkable how little Grace was allowed to speak about her future. Grace does not have any power to shape her own life.

The next interviewee was Sarah, a woman who left her husband and children behind in North Korea. She crossed the border simply to find food. As soon as she crossed the border, Sarah was tricked and sold to a poor Chinese farmer as his bride. Sarah pleaded with South Korean missionaries in the farm village for help, but they counseled her not to run away. And Sarah was advised to accept the reality and be obedient to her Chinese husband. She was told by the missionaries that “the Bible says that divorce is bad...[S]tay married and try to be happy” ([15], p. 549). Later, Sarah ran away to the safe house managed by the same missionaries, who defended the rationale of their “godly” counsel: “There was no reason for [Sarah] to risk everything to leave that marriage! God had other plans for her. God planned for her to come to China, marry that Han Chinese man, and survive, so that she could later go back to North Korea and spread the Gospel there.” ([15], p. 550). The South Korean missionaries’ authority over Sarah’s life was inextricable from the theological authority by claiming that it is God’s will for Sarah to become a missionary to North Korea. Christian missionaries attempted to colonize the non-Christian North Korean resident’s mind by implying that their ideas were legitimized by God and by not allowing her voice at all.

The last interviewee, a 16-year-old girl named Esther, shared mixed stories regarding her experiences with multiple Christians during her transnational journey. While Esther had several “good Samaritans” on the way, she also met a Christian missionary who was a human trafficker. The safe house caregiver purchased Esther and her brother, in fact, from that Christian missionary dealer. Esther questioned whether “she was being sold or rescued” ([15], p. 553). Han confirmed that missionary rescue networks were intimately tied with marriage, migration, and trafficking brokers. The North Korean migrants were treated as commercial goods with price tags while being expected to

give absolute submission: “[The Christian caregiver] scolded a misbehaving North Korean preteen boy in front of the entire household, reminding him that she could have bought a new television set for the price of his rescue” ([15], p. 554). This raises a concern of the moral ambiguity of colonialism. Christian mission for North Koreans was well intended but it easily becomes problematic when the missionaries get involved in human trafficking. There was a lack of transparency in the process of what the custodian claimed as “rescue,” which in turn led the North Korean residents to be confused and suspicious. There was no clear negotiation or communication between the Christian seller/buyer and the North Korean resident. It is an obvious example of dehumanization and violence under the name of what the colonizers would frame as “rescue.”

Jung’s study also reveals the politics of Christian missions in the border area. Jung criticized safe houses as “an ambiguous or often contradictory space as the caring system tended to put absurd restrictions upon the refugees as prerequisites for being saved from hunger and the potential danger of being arrested by law enforcement” ([20], p. 152). Jung observed a particularly problematic safe house noting that the North Korean residents’ vulnerability put them in a position not to question or refuse the conversion to Christianity. This power imbalance between the North Korean refugees and Christian workers manifested in strict rules and discipline applied to the residents of the safe house with minimal freedom of mobility. In the safe house, Bible study was enforced in a rote memorization style as a process of “purifying” their mindsets “completely contaminated by Kimilsungism,” ([20], p. 158) which is a casual name for the political ideology formed by the former North Korean leader Kim Il Sung. North Korean residents were being treated as objects of Christian missions and humanitarian aid without being able to exercise their free will at all. They were under another form of indoctrination: this time, by Christianity. North Koreans were not understood or acknowledged as equal human beings having their own knowledge, wills, skills, and dreams but only as pitiful victims to be rescued and changed into “better” beings.

Pilkington’s [16] interview adds another account of the arbitrary power of Christian workers shaping a North Korean’s journey and identity. Joseph, originally called Kwang Jin, later confessed that he was hesitant about adopting a religion in exchange for food and shelter but had no alternative, although he definitely had internal pressure. Kwang Jin recalled, “If I didn’t believe in God, would [Christian missionaries] still be helping me?” ([16], para. 29). Joseph, his new name, was in fact given by a Christian missionary against his will. Joseph said, “It was a mixture of anger plus sadness. I literally gave up everything I had to survive. I gave up my personality. I gave up the pride of being human. I had nothing to tie me to my parents and my past life. The only thing that identified me was my name—and now I was being told to give that up too” ([16], para. 23). Conversion of his religion and identity did not happen voluntarily but was a cost that Joseph had to pay for survival. This missionary might have done it hoping for Kwang Jin to live a new life as Joseph, the biblical figure, who was once abandoned by his brothers but became a prime minister and later reconciled with them. However, the missionary turned Joseph against his own heritage, and imposed an alien identity on him resulting in a sense of low self-worth. Ngugi’s remarks illuminate this problem:

The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism...is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people’s languages rather than their own ([21], p. 3).

Joseph’s account suggests that he felt a moral dilemma at the moment of conversion, which parallels with Ferris’ findings on Christian organizations’ relief activities that brought pressure to the tsunami-affected Muslim community in Indonesia [1]. Humanitarian aid cannot be paid by the beneficiaries’ souls. People are not just passively indoctrinated into another religion; instead, they critically evaluate the significance and effects involved in conversion. Being aware of the exchange

that some Christian missionaries want, people could even perform the Christian faith in a way that entails inauthentic and distrustful relationships.

In addition, safe house residency may add another layer of trauma to the North Korean refugees. Being confined during a prolonged period of time under a strict atmosphere while doing something they did not choose and were not familiar with (e.g., Bible study) can be traumatic [22]. Living in such a condition overwhelms the usual capacities of human coping. Ironically, safe houses are psychologically unsafe and socially and politically unjust from the residents' perspectives.

### 3.1.2. Alternative Schools for North Korean Refugee Youths in South Korea

As of 2010, 80% of all North Korean refugees settled in South Korea were school-age children. Typically, these children were culturally and academically disadvantaged. Many were from poor border districts of North Korea, where most schools collapsed during the famine between 1994 and 1998. In that time, teachers and students left their classes and communities to search for food and money. Because of their interrupted schooling, many young North Korean refugees fell behind academically in South Korean public schools. Some of them dropped out of South Korean public schools not only because of failing grades but also because of a hostile and unwelcoming atmosphere for the newcomers. For instance, a North Korean young adult seeking a part-time job in a well-known mega church's bookstore was denied a position because of his North Korean accent [18]. After they have suffered hostility and discrimination by the South Koreans, including Christians, certain North Korean refugees decide to seek refuge in Western countries.

In the early 2000s, some Christian churches began alternative schooling in order to provide special educational and boarding services. Alternative schools for North Korean refugees are not government sanctioned in most cases, and thus operations and outcomes are not held accountable. These schools rely on private funding and volunteers mostly through church sponsors and are staffed by passionate South Korean Christian teachers, who feel called to serve in this field. However, good intentions do not always unfold as originally intended. When school operations are not transparent, it causes distrust and possibly corruption. Kate, the interviewee mentioned earlier, commented on the ethical concerns for the alternative school she went to:

Evangelical organizations that pursue North Korean missions sponsor alternative schools that serve only the North Korean refugees. These organizations sponsor schools because they believe North Korean refugee youths should be educated to become the leaders of Korean reunification and Christianization. However, reality is a little different. When I was in school, I thought teachers and staff loved and cared for students so much. Later, after graduation, I became aware of a different reality in a horrible way. These alternative schools were once featured on TV as generous benefactors, which was very different than I experienced as student. Outwardly, they talked as if they had so many things to pour into students, which invited my resistance and suspicion. I am not sure what schools have done with the donated goods. Sponsored goods are for students not for the teachers. Of course, I understand money is needed to operate the school. But, donated goods were intercepted and not given to the students. In their school home pages, they advertise themselves as caring mothers and fathers accepting us unconditionally, healing wounds and trauma, and giving everything away to the students. Activities and field trips are updated promptly in their home pages. I am not saying that they are all lies, but I know that some donations disappear. For example, a company donated shoes to the school, but the students never saw or heard of these shoes at all. Something like that... You know, there are really dedicated people with good hearts, but some of them become corrupted. Running alternative schools for North Korean children is now becoming a business for profit, a really good business both for reputation and money. So upsetting! Children are utilized as instruments! [17].

Another current situation among the Christian social services for North Korean refugees, including alternative schools, is that they compete with each other over available funding. Instead of collaborating and learning from one another, Christian workers fight over students and beneficiaries in order to keep their status quo. This confirms Kate's statement above regarding Christian missions as for-profit businesses that utilize North Koreans as instrument.

### 3.2. *Damage to the Christian Missionaries and Ministers*

A large number of mission-minded service providers in North Korean refugee missions are devout and passionate Christians. Although it is a demanding and high-risk endeavor, they serve North Korean refugees with minimal support or wages. For example, China has been an unsafe and threatening place not only for the North Korean migrants but also for the foreign Christian fieldworkers with some cases of harsh prison sentences involved [23]. Running private schools with boarding services in South Korea is never easy with inadequate funding, staff without appropriate training, and a student body with special backgrounds and needs.

In 2013, I conducted a needs assessment at an alternative school for North Korean refugee youths. The study indicated that the teachers found it difficult to work with the students who have psychological and behavioral challenges. They felt tension when managing a wide array of roles beyond being teachers: being parents, counselors, fund raiser/managers, nurses, social workers, and friends. Because of the students' special needs, the teachers also had to push the students as hard as they could to prepare them for high-stakes testing for GED certification and college admission. The school curriculum operates quickly without breaks and not even a minute can be wasted to raise students' academic skills to the level equivalent to their South Korean peers. Teachers and students in the alternative school stayed in the school building from 7:30 a.m. to almost 9:00 p.m. to help the students succeed in South Korean society.

While their responsibilities were great, teachers were not provided with necessary resources and opportunities for professional development. As a result, their teaching efficacy and sense of well-being were at risk. Many teachers indicated that they had little or no training in working with this special group of students, and readily available in-service trainings were often irrelevant. Some of these alternative school teachers, like Stephanie, quickly burned out. She stated, "This isn't what I expected. I feel that I am growing restless and just plain unhappy working for something that has no clear end. I'm pouring in my 200%, but it never seems to be enough" [24]. The teachers were expected to carry unimaginable burdens and responsibilities. Passion and devotion are not enough to continue serving in such conditions. In fact, some teachers felt blamed and judged when they discussed their needs and struggles. Administrators judged teachers by the strength of their faith and believed that complaints about challenges were because the teachers' spiritual faith had weakened or failed. They were expected to cope individually by praying more and to persevere with their services. Their faith, once the source of energy and motivation, was becoming the source of guilt and burden.

The Christian service providers suffer from colonial mentality. Christians operating the alternative school assumed great responsibility to "save" the refugees as if they were the messiah. Rieger criticized such colonial missionaries by saying, "The proof of the power of the colonialist nations was ultimately seen as stronger than the reference to the authority of the miracles of Christ" ([8], p. 204). Christians must allow room for God to minister both themselves and the service beneficiaries. This could happen when Christians become conscious of the colonial system they have supported and are willing to learn from those they have attempted to colonize.

## 4. **Implications of the Christian Mission**

During the course on diversity and justice issues in education for the pre-service teachers, my students and I spent a great amount of time working to understand who we are: Who am I as a member of society? How do I identify myself in terms of race, culture, language, social class, gender, and religion? How does my social membership give me power and privilege? How does this power



and privilege impact my engagement with others? Everyone is unique and has a complex upbringing and experiences that shape one's own worldviews, values, and stereotypes, which ultimately drive one's decisions and actions. And often, we get to understand ourselves better by listening to others since it could expose our own positions and assumptions.

Christian leaders and fieldworkers can have benefit from this critical self-examination: Who am I as a Christian? What are my missional purposes? How does my Christian identity overpower my Christian action? In order to obtain meaningful answers, missionaries or anyone hoping to do good in the world need to be willing to be challenged by hearing and learning from others. As Wheatley insists, "we have to be willing to admit that we are not capable of figuring things out alone. If our solutions don't work as well as we want them to, if our explanations of why something happened don't feel sufficient, it's time to begin asking others about what they see and think" ([25], p. 39). Listening to the accounts introduced in the paper is painful, which should not be the final destination. There must be opportunities for Christian missionaries to critique their colonial models and to reclaim their missions that decolonize both missionaries and the missionized. Critical self-interrogation could bring powerful and authentic growth for those who are willing to engage in such a process.

Byler's [26] reflection on the history of Mennonite mission offers three lessons for Christian engagement with non-Christians in the world. Byler currently serves as the executive director of the Center for Justice and Peace-building at Eastern Mennonite University. His work can provide a useful way to reflect upon the North Korean refugee mission. First, he suggests that the spirit of Christian engagement must be humility. Byler humbly acknowledges the Mennonite Christians' passive acceptance of anti-Semitism during the Holocaust. U.S. attacks on predominantly Muslim countries are hurtful episodes in history. Plenty has been done abroad in the name of religion without considering the counterparts' perspectives. Christian missionaries may "assume [they] are coming with the best intentions, but that may not be what [their] hosts perceive" ([26], p. 5). Christians will need to recognize themselves in relation to God and accept their own shortcomings. When humility is practiced consistently and genuinely by acknowledging past error and "thinking of others as better than yourself" (Philippians 2:3), reconciliation will be brought. South Korean missionaries should maintain respectful manner and be willing to learn from North Korean refugees in order to create peace and justice together and decolonize the old missional models. Failures to admit colonial heritage may lead to the same fault in today's missions.

Second, the basis of Christian engagement is common humanity. Byler [26] appeals that Christians should first learn to see each other as human beings equally beloved by God regardless of religion, race, class, or culture. Christian humanitarian workers especially must remember that they have a duty to respond based on human need, not on whether or not they like the beneficiaries. Horstmann [27] emphasizes the same attitude in his study of faith-based humanitarian organizations in the Karen refugee crisis: Humanitarian aid should not privilege Christians against other ethnic groups including the Buddhist Shan, Buddhist Burmese, or Indian Muslims, nor should they imply any direct or indirect pressure for conversion. Likewise, South Korean missionaries must be sensitive to the vulnerability of North Korean refugees and stop exploiting their human needs in missions.

Third, the purpose of Christian engagement is greater faithfulness and mutual transformation. An anecdote of an Iraqi Muslim speaker and a former U.S. marine demonstrates an example of mutual transformation [26]: The Iraqi speaker's story of fleeing his native country due to the war made the former U.S. soldier feel sorry and regretful, and the speaker came to recognize the cost that the war had not only for his family but also for the U.S. soldiers. This time, the speaker extended forgiveness to the former soldier who was Christian. Allowing others' stories to challenge one's own current faith, knowledge, and understanding is a critical disposition to cultivate in order to reclaim a renewed self in God. The South Korean Christians' engagement with North Korean refugees has mainly followed the colonial model concerning conversion of non-Christians. The paradigm shift to postcolonial missions is necessary: South Korean Christians now should remember that their missions should allow growth

both for the missionaries and the missionized. Meaningful transformation could be undertaken by both parties when each approaches a common ground with respect, humility, and willingness to learn.

Privilege and power could easily lead us to be oppressors or colonizers. We make mistakes sometimes by abusing privilege and power. Scripture describes that “[Jesus] set aside the privilege of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human...He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death” (Philippians 2:6-8). If South Korean missionaries “think of [themselves] the way Christ Jesus thought of himself” (Philippians 2:5), they will be able to figure out ways of decolonizing the established colonial remnants South Korean Christians planted through safe houses, alternative schooling, and other social and religious services.

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