



## SMALL STEPS TOWARDS REOPENING

As we approach four years since the start of the Covid pandemic and related lockdowns in January 2020, hope for a full border reopening is still uncertain. We are grateful for positive internal developments in 2023 by the DPRK to relax some of the most draconian Covid control measures. In June 2023, the border was reopened to high level delegations visiting from Russia and China to join major North Korean holiday celebrations. Soon thereafter, the border was reopened to allow North Korean citizens stranded outside the country for the duration of Covid to return home, and in connection with this, some flights, passenger train and bus transit was restarted. Government sanctioned and directed trade has nearly rebounded to pre-2019 levels.

While these are hopeful signs, they fall well short of full re-engagement with the international community. During Covid, many foreign embassies in Pyongyang withdrew their staff and were forced to close, and international staff have still not been allowed to return. Resident UN and European NGO offices also closed, and their international staff also have not yet been allowed to return. Neither humanitarian nor tourist travel has restarted. Meanwhile, North Korea has strengthened diplomatic and security relations with Russia and China through high level visits, while relations with the US and South Korea have remained on ice since the failed summit in Hanoi. We remain in a time of watching, praying and waiting.

2023 has also been a bittersweet year of personal loss of lifelong Korea missionaries who were tremendous encouragers and supporters of CFK. In this issue, we feature two of a long line of truly remarkable and gifted people who gave so much in the twilight years of their lives to help mentor the next generation in establishing Christian witness and ministry in North Korea. In this time of pause and reflection, we wanted to give thanks to God for them and honor their contributions.

**“The righteous will flourish like a palm tree...They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, “The LORD is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.”**

Psalm 92:12a, 14-15

## FOR ALL THE SAINTS...

By the early 1990s, it had already been a very long season of absence, deferred hope, of loss, and fervent prayer. For many, it had been nearly five decades since they or their family members were forced to leave what had been extremely fruitful Christian endeavors in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. The pressures of increasingly authoritarian rule under Japanese occupation (1910-1945) soon devolved into the devastation of World War II, followed by its aftermath that established opposing forms of government in the two halves of the Peninsula - communist rule in the northern half and democracy in the southern half.

These lines were only carved more deeply in blood and barbed wire during the fratricidal Korean War. Finally, the painful conclusion of that conflict into an armistice – a cease fire – left the Peninsula more or less permanently divided, with the northern half completely isolated from direct Christian endeavors. Yet prayer continued.

Hope was rekindled with the visits in 1992 and 1994 by evangelist Dr. Billy Graham and his team to North Korea, where he met President Kim Il Sung. These visits helped to establish fragile trust and relationships, and soon thereafter, in 1995, North Korea cracked open their border to welcome outside help following catastrophic flooding amidst a silent famine that was already well underway. This unexpected reopening of the northern half of the Peninsula to humanitarian efforts and Christian engagement was deeply embraced by the Korea missionary community. When CFK was first getting started, there were scores of former missionaries to Korea who had retired to the mountains of Western North Carolina. Despite their advanced age (most were in their 70s or 80s at the time), the opportunity to re-engage with the North Korean people who were cut off from mission activity and the outside world for decades, was a long-awaited and deeply felt answer to prayer. They were eager and willing to help – in whatever ways they could - and they shared their time, talents, expertise, experience, and enthusiasm in countless ways.

Many of them were alumni, or spouses of alumni of the Pyongyang Foreign School – a boarding school founded by missionaries in 1900 serving the missionary and business communities in the Far East until its forced closure in 1940. These alumni spent their formative middle and high school years in Pyongyang. They knew and loved Korea and her people before it was divided, before there was a north or a south Korea, and they had deep bonds of friendship between them that spanned most of their lives.

As CFK began working in the North, these retired missionaries were eager to help out – and help they did. Despite their advanced age, they dived right in, year in and year out – writing letters, stuffing envelopes, developing greenhouse plans, advising on tuberculosis, advising on medical shipments, knitting hats, speaking in their churches and raising prayer and donor support. Some traveled with our teams to North Korea – even in the heat of July or the bitter cold of January - to build relationships, deliver medicine, support medical and dental training and treatment, and learn how we could better help. They were living examples of faithfulness to the Lord through hardship, war, sickness, loss and adversity.

Two spouses of this alumni group, very special people to CFK, joined the great cloud of witnesses this year:

Dr. John N. Somerville, Sr. on May 10, 2023, and Lois (Betty) Linton on September 7, 2023. Their lives deeply influenced and encouraged CFK and we wish to give thanks to God for them.

**John N Somerville, Sr.** – “Uncle John” or “Dr. Somerville” (January 13, 1928 – May 10, 2023)



It was such a privilege to travel with Uncle John nearly a dozen times to North Korea (1997 – 2013). He was always eager and willing to go – despite his advancing age, the long flight, time changes, weariness and hassles that came with international travel. Those were just some of the necessary “costs” to be taken in stride for the privilege of being there. Our visits were always full of challenge – some expected, some not so expected. Dr. Somerville, professor of history, ordained pastor, and a student of Korea, could always be counted on to lead us in prayer no matter what we faced, to offer a helpful scripture or historical perspective, and to speak a fitting word – in Korean or English, and often, in both. I will never forget the words of comfort and reassurance he brought after a long cold night of fear. I had awakened at midnight from a sound sleep to find my bedding on fire and the room filled with smoke – an unexpected circumstance



Dr. Somerville, Betty Linton, Virginia Somerville show a handmade quilt.

that left me shaken and in dread the rest of that long night about the trouble it might cause to our work, and to our colleagues. As we gathered the following morning for our devotions, he shared Psalm 91 – the same psalm I had memorized as a very young girl – “He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High will abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and strength, my God in whom I trust.” His reminder of God’s reassurance and protection washed over all of us in that moment, and helped us through the later discussions and graceful conclusion of the matter with our local colleagues.

He was a wonderful ambassador for Christ – he could talk with anyone, anywhere. He always met people, regardless of their position or station, with a spring in his step, an outstretched hand, a warm and engaging smile, and genuine curiosity. He asked questions, and he listened to the answers. His love for people, and his deep interest in history, especially each one’s unique family history [“Where is your Chok’po (family ancestry record)?”] allowed him to forge meaningful connections with just about anyone, whether a timid patient, a driver, or a top official. He was a man of respect – respect for faith, for history, for learning, for tradition, for beauty. He especially had deep empathy for the pain of others. Especially in the extremely complicated historical and political context of North Korea, even if agreement could not be reached on the full circumstances and causes of that pain, the respect he showed for the pain of others was an expression of grace, a humble acknowledgement that was disarming - that in and of itself was often the first step towards healing. His presence mattered, his listening mattered, his visit, from half a world away, truly mattered. So often there was a sacredness in these moments that was palpable, if unspoken.



Dr. Somerville shares a donor list at a TB care center.

He taught by example that no matter what the specific task was, or how important something was to the schedule, the truly loving thing to do was to be present for each and every person we encountered. He reminded us that all things worth doing take time – sometimes lots and lots of time. God used him, especially in the key early years of our work, to help us stay focused on the most essential things – to listen well, to love well, and to do the hard work of building trust by building relationships – one person, one place, one often difficult situation or conversation at a time.

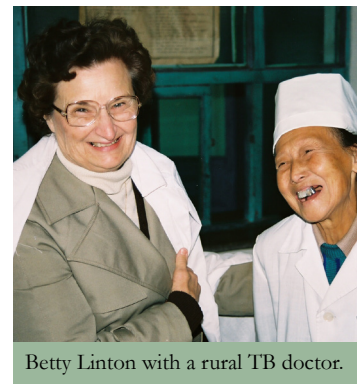
He had a great sense of humor, and often our guides or various officials would be disarmed by something funny he said. They weren’t quite sure what to make of a man of 85 years young wearing a black beret, penny

loafers and a wool suitcoat, and who, in fluent Korean, joked about coming back to visit again in 15 years... “When I’m 100!” He made many friends in the DPRK who will be sad to learn that he no longer walks this earth. Yet the pastors at the churches we so often attended there will rejoice at his home going, while giving thanks for his life of love for the Korean people.

**Lois (Betty) Linton** – “Mother” or “Aunt Betty” (January 7, 1927 – September 7, 2023)

Mother was larger than life in so many respects. She was gifted with hospitality and warmth, and a part of the Linton family’s third generation of life-long missionaries to Korea. She was the family matriarch and historian to a large and extended family, a TB clinic and rest home director, English Bible teacher, wife, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and friend.

She faced many challenges in her early years in Korea. Korea was rebuilding after the Korean War, and there was great poverty, sickness, and many overwhelming needs. She raised her six children in South Korea, and nursed them through various serious



Betty Linton with a rural TB doctor.

illnesses. Her work in tuberculosis (TB) grew out of visits she made to rural households in the 1960s to check on TB patients. She found many living in very difficult conditions, and unable to go to hospitals for treatment. Working with missionary and local doctors, and supported by her husband's practical skills, she raised funds for and established a TB treatment center in Suncheon, and a TB sanatorium. Later, she also founded a hospice for TB patients, serving on-call for many as they died. Her TB work was recognized by Samsung's Ho-am Award in 1996, and this helped open a path for CFK to engage in tuberculosis and other medical work in North Korea thereafter.

Her husband, Hugh, himself a church planter and rural evangelist, was killed in a car accident in Korea in 1984. Yet she continued her work in Korea for another ten years, retiring to North Carolina in 1994 to care for her elderly mother, and to provide a place where her large and extended family and friends could gather. Around this same time, North Korea was just opening to humanitarian engagement, and she was eager to help, writing some of the first thank you notes to donors. She hosted many a rousing hymn-sing of the Korea missionary group, and also warmly hosted multiple delegations over the years of visiting North Korean diplomats who called her "Uh-muh-nim (Mother)" and said that her home, decorated as it was with Korean art and memorabilia, felt to them like their home away from home. She visited North Korea twice, part of the invaluable Korea missionary contingency who demonstrated by their words and actions God's unconditional love for the Korean people shown through their lives of sacrifice and service, genuine warmth and kindness, and testimony to the grace of God.

While mobility was challenging for her in her latter years, her door remained open to family, extended family, friends, and visitors, including many Koreans eager to "meet the missionaries." She loved meeting people and learning where they were from. She loved to encourage people, and she would often get phone calls in the middle of the night from lifelong Korean friends and colleagues who had likely forgotten about the 12-13 hour time difference. Most of all, she faithfully prayed, encouraged, and loved, with a twinkle in her eye and a resolve that comes by facing the trials of life while faithfully trusting and walking with the Lord.

Our hearts are full of gratitude to God for the previous generation that has now mostly passed on to Glory; for their hope in the Lord that never wavered, for their faith that withstood disappointment, war, tragedy, illness, and for their fruitfulness even in old age. Even as we continue to watch and wait for the opportunity to restart Christian engagement in North Korea, may we learn from their example, and continue to hold fast in faith, joy and prayer to the One who sustained them through hardship and difficulties. There is a hymn that encapsulates the beauty and DNA of the Korea missionary family who helped form Christian Friends of Korea, one that echoes down through the years, sung at many a missionary hymn sing both with gusto and with a lump in the throat at the memory of those in the greater Korea missionary family who had already graduated to glory:

*For all the saints, who from their labors rest, Who Thee by faith before the world confessed, Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest. Alleluia! Alleluia! Thou wast their Rock, their Fortress, and their Might; Thou Lord, their Captain in the well-fought fight; Thou in the darkness drear, their one true Light. Alleluia! Alleluia! O may Thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold. Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old, And win with them the victor's crown of gold. Alleluia! Alleluia! O blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they in glory shine; Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine. Alleluia! Alleluia! And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long, Steals on the ear the distant triumph song, And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong. Alleluia! Alleluia! From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host, Singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Alleluia! Alleluia!*



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