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November 30, 1989

89-170

El Salvador fighting forces
missionary couple to leave

By Donald D. Martin

N-FMB

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador (BP)--Southern Baptist missionaries John and Peggy Alums planned to leave San Salvador Nov. 30 because of renewed rebel attacks in the capital city of El Salvador.

The Alumses and their two children, John Jr., 15, and Kelly, 6, were to drive to Guatemala City, about 100 miles northeast of San Salvador. Alums is from Mobile, Ala. Mrs. Alums is from Birmingham, Ala.

Rebel and government troops fought all night Nov. 29 in the area where the family lives, Alums reported. Many times the fighting or troop movements came within a block of their home.

"It's a tense time, an uncomfortable time for us," he said.

The Alumses live in the western neighborhood of Escalon, where the latest fighting broke out. Fighting in the Escalon and San Benito neighborhoods destroyed a U.S. official's home, trapped two American families and forced more than 100 Americans to seek shelter, according to press reports.

Alums said electricity in their area of San Salvador had been cut off, and traveling to food markets had become more difficult because of the new guerrilla attacks.

The other Southern Baptist missionary couple in San Salvador, Bill and Libby Stennett, planned to remain in San Salvador because the area where they live was relatively calm, although periodic gunfire kept them inside at times.

Stennett, of Richmond, Va., and Mrs. Stennett, of Washington, D.C., planned to continue operating the Baptist bookstore, situated in the center of San Salvador.

The renewed fighting prompted U.S. officials to charter a jet to evacuate Americans wanting to leave the country. The U.S. Embassy said 8,000 to 10,000 American citizens live in El Salvador.

If the Alumses have to stay more than a few days in Guatemala, they temporarily will be assigned to the Christian literature ministry at the Baptist seminary in Guatemala City, said Joe Bruce, Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board area director for Middle America and Canada. They may move into one of the apartments at the seminary if their stay outside El Salvador is prolonged.

The other Southern Baptist missionary couple in El Salvador, Sam and Margaret Drummond of Camden, Tenn., and Louisville, Ky., respectively, said the city where they work, Santa Ana, remains calm.

Court hears arguments
in 2 abortion cases

By Kathy Palen

N-BJC

WASHINGTON (BP)--Two state laws that require minors to notify their parents before having abortions were at issue during oral arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court Nov. 29.

The justices heard back-to-back arguments in two cases, both of which test the constitutionality of parental-notification laws. Also in question was whether such laws must include a judicial procedure allowing minors to bypass the mandatory parental notice.

One of the cases involves a Minnesota law that mandates notification of both parents 48 hours before their minor daughter has an abortion. The other deals with an Ohio law that requires that one parent or guardian be notified at least 24 hours before the abortion.

The Ohio statute includes a judicial bypass mechanism that allows a minor to avoid notifying her parents if she can convince a judge that she is mature enough to make the decision on her own or that having an abortion would be in her own best interest. The Minnesota law includes a provision that allows implementation of judicial bypass if the statute is found unconstitutional without it.

Both laws have been invalidated by lower courts.

Attorneys for Minnesota and Ohio argued their parental-notification statutes are constitutional since each law promotes its state's interest in protecting the health of minors, ensuring parental involvement and encouraging family communication. Each also contended such laws -- unlike statutes requiring parental consent before a minor's abortion -- do not have to include a judicial bypass procedure.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, the court's pivotal vote on the abortion issue, expressed concern over the Minnesota requirement that both parents be notified. The law makes no exceptions for parents who have left the family or have been judged unfit or abusive.

"The statute just doesn't provide for any exceptions on the notice even though clearly there are some circumstances where it would not be in the best interest of the child to notify one of the two parents," O'Connor said.

But John R. Tunheim, Minnesota chief deputy attorney general, argued that even a non-custodial parent is "still a parent with rights and responsibilities."

Opposing attorney Janet Benshoof of New York called the requirement "out of step" with current family patterns, adding that it "steps on the integrity of many families" by insisting that both biological parents be notified regardless of the particular circumstances.

O'Connor also questioned a provision in the Ohio law that requires a minor to produce "clear and convincing" evidence that she should be allowed to have an abortion without notifying her parents. She said mandating that heightened level of proof increases the "risk of erroneous deprivation" of an abortion in the judicial process.

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Although Ohio Assistant Attorney General Rita S. Eppler argued the Ohio statute fairly balances parents' rights with minors' rights, Cleveland attorney Linda R. Sogg said Ohio has singled out abortion for parental notification. Sogg said other state laws prohibit physicians from notifying parents when minors seek treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, drug-related problems and psychological problems.

The high court is expected to issue opinions in the two cases before the end of its current term next summer.

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Southwestern professor helps
students improve their aim

By Pam Alewine

F-50
(SWBTS)

Baptist Press
11/30/89

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--When Tom Urrey encourages students at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary to "aim for the mark," he knows what he's talking about.

For Urrey, professor of New Testament, the mark is "the upward call of God in Christ." And as an expert marksman with a bow and arrow, he knows how to get the point across.

And although Urrey may not fit the mold of a professor, he loves to teach.

"Some day I may be a scholar, but I would much, much rather be a minister in the field of teaching," he said.

Urrey has taught at Southwestern since 1961. In that time, he has used the New Testament to teach students lessons on life.

After nearly 30 years of teaching seminary students, Urrey said those lessons remain unchanged. And he encourages students to "minister to people."

Urrey's pilgrimage in the ministry began when he graduated from high school in Camden, Ark. He had two loves at the time which influenced his college choice -- football and a girl friend.

The girl friend became his wife, Helen, who has worked as director of alumni records at Southwestern for 26 years. Football was replaced by the need to make the most of his time at Ouachita Baptist University in preparation for ministry.

Urrey came to Southwestern in 1956 intent on pursuing a ministry in the pastorate. "My heart has always beat for churches and people," he said.

A place very close to Urrey's heart is Pastoak Baptist Church, where he was pastor during his seminary days. "I learned so much there," he said. "It was a big, little church."

As Urrey prayed about future ministry, he was offered a position on the faculty at Southwestern, he said.

Urrey becomes emotional when he talks about God's leadership in his life.

"Even a casual reflection upon the use of God's grace moves me to emotion," he said. "I think I've been graced by having a tender heart. It's a way of relating to hurts and griefs of others."

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Along with a tender heart, Urrey has "a love for life and living" which is evident in his outdoor activities.

"I've always loved outdoor sports, and I still play my trumpet," Urrey said. Both hobbies are from earlier days.

But a far greater love is his family.

In the midst of all his activities, Urrey still has a desire to teach, a vocation and calling he now views as his ministry.

"It's my goal that when the student goes out from the seminary he has in his heart, in his mind and in his life the tools that he will need to be a good minister of Jesus Christ, wherever the Lord leads," he said.

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Southwestern Seminary

Winfred Moore named
Baylor religion prof

N- CO

Baptist Press
11/30/89

WACO, Texas (BP)--Winfred Moore, pastor of First Baptist Church of Amarillo, Texas, has been named Visiting Distinguished Professor of Religion at Baylor University, Waco, Texas, effective Jan. 1, 1990.

Moore, a leader in the moderate faction of the Southern Baptist Convention, will retire Dec. 31, 1989, from the Amarillo pastorate he served 30 years.

Baylor officials said his responsibilities will include teaching practical studies and New Testament survey courses, assisting faculty and students through the ministry guidance program and "working with Texas Baptists and other constituencies to enhance the purpose and goals of Baylor," affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Moore, former president of the Texas convention and former first vice president of the SBC, is chairman of Baylor trustees. Baylor spokesmen said Moore would not be required to resign from the board because his position, while salaried, is in the category of a temporary appointment.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Asia correspondent Michael Chute and photographer Warren Johnson accompanied a Southern Baptist delegation which visited North Korea in November.

Baptists visit North Korea,
discuss possible projects

By Michael Chute

N-FMB

Baptist Press
11/30/89

PYONGYANG, North Korea (BP)--A Southern Baptist delegation has returned from North Korea expressing cautious optimism about contacts with health and education officials and the possibility of limited involvement in the country.

The seven-member delegation, which visited the communist nation in November, represented Cooperative Services International, a Southern Baptist aid organization that sponsors teaching, health care and other programs.

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In high-level discussions with the delegation, North Korean health and education leaders repeatedly pointed to the lack of diplomatic relations between their country and the United States and wondered how that might affect contacts with the Southern Baptist organization.

Those concerns must be addressed as Southern Baptists become involved in projects in the nation, acknowledged CSI Director Lewis Myers. Myers led the delegation to North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

"I hope it can be resolved on a people-to-people, personal kind of level," said Myers. "We don't have a political agenda and wouldn't want to wait until there's official governmental recognition" before beginning projects with the North Koreans.

Beyond that concern, the team "felt very good about conversations with persons who are key actors in international liaisons," Myers said. "They are very open to helping" put together possible CSI educational and health liaisons in North Korea.

The North Korean education and health ministers assured the team they would investigate ways foreign teachers, doctors and students could become involved in specific projects in their country.

Li Yong Bok, chief of the Education and Science Institute, told the Southern Baptists that his meeting with them was the first he had ever conducted with Americans. Kim Yong Il, an official of the North Korean Education Commission, also participated in the dialogue.

"It's difficult for us to solve all these problems at once, but it's been a good time for us to understand each other," Li Yong Bok said during the meeting. He told the delegation he would study CSI and "try to find out ways to exchange" teachers and students.

Li Yong Sun, vice minister of public health, also agreed to study a method for allowing doctors to come to North Korea from the United States. American tourists are welcome, he pointed out, and doctors and students could come on that basis. He said he would need to investigate other possibilities.

Myers will supply North Korean officials with information about CSI, particularly the organization's work in China, Mongolia and Vietnam -- countries that have diplomatic relations with North Korea.

CSI officials say they will know more about prospects for work in North Korea by the end of the year. Myers and Jack Shelby, CSI's Hong Kong-based administrator, will correspond with the education and health ministers, presenting preliminary proposals about CSI involvement.

Throughout the meetings, Myers stressed that CSI is a private organization, not a government entity. CSI is "not government-to-government, but people-to-people," he said.

The North Koreans "had no experience by which they could understand who we are, and that was a puzzle to them -- that there are organizations not related to government in any shape, form or fashion," Myers explained. "But we broke through that, and they started to understand that we're not related to government."

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Myers told government ministers that CSI tries to create good will as an understanding to promote peace. "Ours is a Christian organization, and our motive is to provide a service" where it is needed, he said.

North Korea, a country devastated by Japanese occupation and the Korean War, has made major educational advances, officials said. They reported a 100-percent literacy rate and development of a university system. Before liberation from the Japanese in 1945, no colleges or universities existed in the northern half of the Korean peninsula. Today, officials said, 266 universities operate throughout the country's eight provinces. More than 1 million students reportedly have graduated from the universities in the past 40 years.

"After liberation, we put education ahead of our other problems," said Li Yong Bok. "Our country is not rich, but we put importance on education of the children because they are the future of the country. Our children are called 'kings of the state,' so for them, nothing is spared."

The state controls all health care in North Korea, including environmental protection, public nutrition and health training, hospitals and medical schools, and even the preschool health program for children. A medical university operates in every province, and hospitals or clinics are built wherever people live and work, officials said.

Although North Korea is a developing country, levels of disease control compare favorably to those in the developed countries, according to government statistics. The country's annual death rate reportedly is five per 1,000 people, compared with a worldwide death rate of nine per 1,000. The birthrate exceeds the world average at 22 births per 1,000 population.

Last spring 14 Korean-American Southern Baptist pastors witnessed North Korea's first public Easter celebration in 43 years during a visit to Pyongyang, North Korea's capital city. Although the CSI team was the second Southern Baptist group to travel to North Korea this year, it was the first to discuss the possibility of an ongoing relationship.

"We laid out some anticipated interaction with these government people that was obviously a first for them," Myers related. "The fact that we wanted some exposure to education and health-care institutions and persons who made policy decisions about health care and education was a first for them.

"They were obviously going to move very carefully in any kind of new ground they hadn't touched before. I hope we responded well to their initiatives to open some of those new doors. Perhaps it will be a little easier next time."

CSI officials anticipate involvement in North Korea may run the same course as similar efforts in Mongolia and China, probably beginning with a series of individual projects before developing into long-term relationships with hospitals or universities.

Students study Russian and English in every North Korean school, so possibilities may exist for Southern Baptist CSI personnel to teach English. English courses in primary and middle schools are taught by Koreans, but CSI personnel may have opportunities to work with the Korean teachers.

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As was the case in Mongolia, CSI may experience delays in developing an official educational relationship with the North Koreans because they have not worked with religious groups in the past.

Myers explained to the North Korean leaders that CSI's agenda -- regardless of the country involved -- is to respond to needs expressed by the host country in ways which are beneficial and fulfilling to both parties.

"It begins at the point where they identify their needs, whatever they are," Myers said. "If personnel is involved in meeting those needs, they would come from a Christian constituency. We try to explain that each time."

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BP photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Richmond bureau of Baptist Press

News Analysis

'Juche Idea' powers
North Korean machine

By Michael Chute

F - FMB

Baptist Press
11/30/89

PYONGYANG, North Korea (BP)--The 23-story Tower of Juche Idea maintains a silent vigil over Pyongyang, North Korea's shining capital.

Seen from any point in the city, the tower constantly reminds North Koreans of the ideological force driving their society: man is the master of everything and decides everything.

The "immortal" Juche, a watchword for national development, is the guiding idea for the country's working class as handed down by Kim Il Sung, leader of North Korea since 1945. This man-centered philosophy is the essence of North Korea's own brand of communism. North Korean communists rank Kim's Juche as the equal of Marxism.

"Long live Kimilsungism" declares a plaque in honor of Kim Il Sung tucked in a recessed shrine at the tower's base. Nestled among a hundred similar plaques sent by communists from around the world, it honors the main tenet of Juche: self-reliance. To North Koreans, the Juche idea embodies independence, creativity and ideology.

Over the past 45 years, all aspects of social life -- all things North Korean -- have been transformed into Juche-types. If something in the arts or sciences slips through that's not Juche-oriented, it's quickly changed to conform.

Kimilsungism is, in fact, the state religion if not officially designated as such.

Children on their way to school in Pyongyang place flowers at the feet of the statue of Kim Il Sung and bow as they back away from the monument. The bronze figure watches over the city from its perch atop Mansu Hill. Similar statues, on a smaller scale, stand on the highest hills of many cities, towns and villages.

North Koreans' fanatical devotion to their "Great Leader," as Kim is called, borders on cult worship. Placed over their hearts are small, enameled pins bearing Kim's image. They never point -- and instruct visitors not to point either -- at any of the 10,000 or so likenesses of Kim placed strategically around the country.

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The only leader most North Koreans have known, Kim is the center of a personality cult that rivals those of Stalin and Mao. Everything revolves around Kim, although he is beginning to shine the spotlight on his eldest son, the heir apparent, Kim Jong Il.

Giant billboards at major intersections and neon signs atop tall buildings laud Kim's leadership. His role as virtual father of a nation is evident in place names: Kim Il Sung Stadium, Kim Il Sung Square, Kim Il Sung University, Kim Il Sung Avenue.

The people see their leader as the ardent anti-imperialist who fought to victory over Japanese colonialists. He still is seen by them as standing up to America and South Korea in a quest to unify Korea under socialism. North Koreans praise Kim for building their country into a self-proclaimed "socialist paradise."

North Koreans appear well-fed on a diet of rice, noodles, eggs and kimchee, the national dish of spicy cabbage served with every meal. Since mountains cover four-fifths of the country, North Koreans cultivate every available inch of even semi-flat soil. Farmers live on high ground, conserving lowlands for crops. The West Sea Barrage, the world's largest dam, is one of many massive projects to reclaim arable land from the sea.

Unemployment does not exist, North Koreans say. Everyone above 16 years of age not studying in a university has a job, although students make up one-fourth of the population. Men and women work side by side in the spirit of "Chajusong," the catchword for complete equality and mutual benefit.

Education and health care are guaranteed free of charge. Schools and clinics are located throughout the country, even in workplaces. Nearly every adult is in a work-study program. The government aims to make intellectuals of everyone in the working class and claims all adults are literate.

Housing is provided at low rents. Utilities fees are nominal. But it's impossible to live outside the government's watchful eye. Every North Korean apartment building or farm cooperative forms a neighborhood cell of about 30 families. The chief of the cell distributes ration tickets for food and other consumer goods. The cell disciplines its own members to keep everyone on the path of Juche.

North Koreans say that besides all this, or perhaps because of it, the nation has no begging, pollution, prostitution, drug abuse or crime. The people seem outwardly content. No visible discord exists among the three classes -- intellectuals, workers and peasants -- who spend a lot of energy building up the country devastated by the "Fatherland Liberation War," or Korean War, that claimed more than 1 million lives.

In short, a North Korean's world seems to be filled with order, discipline and predictability.

Yet North Koreans admit theirs is a developing nation with problems. Retail sales are slow, as government stores stock only basic items for consumers. Many goods are made of tin and plastic. Everyday clothes look like uniforms. State farms labor under intense pressure to produce food for a growing population, buoyed by a birthrate substantially higher than the worldwide average.

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The annual per capita income of \$1,000 is relatively low compared to other nations in the region besides China. A \$5.2 billion foreign debt hangs over the country, draining the economy. No one is calling North Korea the next "tiger of Asia."

Still, Pyongyang is a showplace. Impeccably clean with neither street people nor street vendors, it has earned the reputation of being a "city in the park." No dogs and cats are allowed. Neither are bicycles. It is a city of wide boulevards, but cars are scarce. Few of Pyongyang's 2 million citizens are on the streets at any one time. Bus stops, the train station and the subway are the only places even remotely congested.

The capital's skyline is filled with towering skyscrapers. The city boasts Asia's tallest hotel, its pyramid shape climbing 105 stories. Parks are spacious and plentiful and full of revolutionary statues and monuments. The government has even provided amusement parks complete with thrill rides, as well as ice rinks, gymnasiums, swimming pools and sports stadiums.

North Koreans are courteous and friendly yet curious about foreigners. They respond to a smile with a smile. They also are immensely proud of their political independence and economic growth. All of this is true to the Juche idea. Socialist allies' recent turmoil apparently has bypassed North Korea, and the changes in the Soviet bloc don't appear to concern government leaders. The merits of their brand of communism continue to be lauded in all mass media.

But one of the world's most reclusive nations appears to be altering its longstanding, self-imposed isolation. Signs of a new openness to the outside: more tourism is allowed, even nurtured, and limited foreign investments are sought.

As with many socialist nations, North Korea now courts international business and aid organizations in a bid to step up modernization. The government is expanding economic relations with countries in both East and West, even though North Korea has no diplomatic relations with most Western governments.

North Korea has emerged from the backwardness of the Japanese colonial period and raised itself from the ruins of the Korean War. How far it will advance -- or open up -- is anyone's guess.

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Richmond bureau of Baptist Press

Improved church-state
ties seen in North Korea

By Michael Chute

F - FMB
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PYONGYANG, North Korea (BP)--The Bongsu Christian congregation celebrated its first year in the only Protestant church building in all of North Korea in November.

Its sole Catholic counterpart is located in another section of Pyongyang, the nation's capital.

The communist government built both churches in 1988 with funds collected by the church in North Korea and Christian organizations located primarily in the United States and Japan. The two church buildings are the first to stand in the north since Korea was partitioned in 1945.

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Many house churches also meet in North Korea, a substantial number of them in Pyongyang, according to Ko Gi Jun, secretary of the government's non-denominational Korea Christian Federation.

The churches offer evidence that Christianity was not completely eliminated in North Korea by President Kim Il Sung's government, as rumored in the West over the past four decades. Until recently, little communication had occurred between the North Korean church and foreigners since Kim consolidated power in 1948.

Ko said, "Believers gave the money to build the (Bongsu) church building," a state-sanctioned, nondenominational church. The 350-seat church building, which cost \$250,000, usually is full for its one worship service each week.

"All land is owned by the state," Ko explained. "But if a congregation wants to build a church, the state gives the land free of charge. Also, the believers buy building materials from the state at a reduced price and the state builds the building for them."

Ko said a second, 100-seat Protestant church building is under construction in another part of Pyongyang. A congregation will move in early in 1990.

"Not all believers in Pyongyang come to this church to worship," Ko said on the steps of the Bongsu church. "In Pyongyang and in other cities, believers meet in houses. If the people get enough money, then maybe they can build a church in other areas."

Two types of house churches reportedly exist in North Korea. Some congregations apparently meet in homes because they have not yet proved a need for a building or lack the financial resources to build one. North Korean Christian leaders say that Pyongyang congregations are trying to develop a building fund and encourage foreign Christians and organizations to invest in it -- a pattern followed in other cities.

Other Christians reportedly meet in homes because they are not sure of their freedom to meet. They do not want to subject themselves to government control, so they meet secretly.

Ko claimed 10,000 Protestant Christians now live in North Korea, which is double the figure he reported to a Christian delegation visiting Pyongyang in 1985. The 10,000-member figure is confirmed by a number of independent sources, including U.S. Presbyterian mission leader Syngman Rhee, a native North Korean who has visited his homeland several times in recent years.

About 2,000 Catholics also worship in the communist nation. Kim's government has been more accommodating than China by allowing Catholics to re-establish contact with the Vatican.

Although 12,000 Christians may worship regularly in North Korea, that number is low even by Asian standards. The total is tiny compared to that of South Korea, where government figures show 29 percent of the population proclaims Christianity.

North Korean Christians total 0.05 percent of the country's 19.3 million people -- the lowest per capita total of any Asian country except Mongolia, which has less than a dozen known Christians. It falls far below the region's traditional Christian lightweights -- China at 0.8, Japan at 0.9 and Thailand at 0.5 -- in the percentage of Christians in the population, according to government and church estimates.

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Surprisingly, the northern part of the Korean peninsula once was the showpiece of Christian missionary work in Asia. When Korea opened its doors to foreigners in the late 1800s, missionaries found Koreans exceptionally responsive to the gospel.

Despite hardships of the Japanese occupation in the early decades of this century, Christian numbers in Korea grew until the country ranked second only to the Philippines among Asian nations. Estimates placed 500,000 believers in Korea prior to 1945. Approximately 13 percent of Pyongyang's population alone was Christian. The city was often called the "Jerusalem of the East."

That changed when the government began controlling the church shortly after Kim consolidated power in 1948. Informed sources say many Christians were imprisoned and some martyred during this period. The Marxist regime also closed all churches and banned the Bible. Any Bibles found reportedly were burned.

In addition, many Christians were among the 1 million Koreans who died in the Korean War, 1950-53. During the fighting, the vast majority of Christians remaining in the north sought refuge south of the Military Demarcation Line.

Today, a thaw in church-state relations may be occurring in the north. The Korea Christian Federation, similar to China's Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement, has operated for the past five years. The country's first public celebration of Easter in 43 years was held last spring in the Bongsu church, with news media from the Soviet Union, China and North Korea attending.

Since the North Korean church does not operate a printing press of its own, the government printed 10,000 copies of the Bible in 1983. A year later it printed Scripture portions of the Old and New Testaments. Hymnals also have been printed in recent years. Soon the church will ask for more Bibles to be printed.

"Believers" give money to the state for the purpose of publishing Bibles," said Ko. "It will be necessary to publish more Bibles because the believers have increased." He added that Christians in other countries, such as the United States and Japan, have sent Bibles to North Korea: "We can receive them, no problem." Some of the believers (in Bongsu church) are using Bibles from other countries."

Ko indicated that the government prints Bibles only for believers and that the church is responsible for verifying the number of Christians. Apparently government regulations restrict Bible totals from exceeding the number of Christians. Bibles are distributed through the Bongsu church free of charge since church donations pay for the printing.

The Bongsu church also operates a seminary in one room of its educational building. Eight students -- six men and two women -- study theology in the school. They attend classes after completing their work assignments.

Five of the students come from Pyongyang, Ko said. The other three come from rural areas and live in a dormitory the church operates. They attend classes daily. The seminary needs books for its library. The school has books from other countries, but not many. No theological books are published in North Korea.

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11/30/89

Page 12

Baptist Press

Baptist pastor finds
home in North Korea

By Michael Chute

F-FMB

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KAESONG, North Korea (BP)--Tears streamed down Tommy Sohn's face as he stepped off the tour bus.

His boyhood home still was here. So were old family friends.

It took Sohn more than 40 years, and a journey halfway around the world and back, but he finally was home -- a small village just a stone's throw from Kaesong, North Korea.

But he almost didn't find it.

When the plane carrying Sohn and other members of a Southern Baptist delegation touched down in North Korea, the Korean Southern Baptist pastor from Dallas could not mask his excitement. He and his family had left North Korea for the south shortly after the 1945 partition of the country.

He wondered if the tour guides would deviate from the 10-day tour schedule, carefully planned for the seven-member Southern Baptist group. Although many names had changed in four decades, he just had to find the village.

Anticipation began to rise when the guides finally stopped the bus so Sohn could ask two elderly women directions to the village. Tears welled up in his eyes as he stepped back on the bus. They didn't know his village.

Lunch in Kaesong brought Sohn a little closer, or so he thought. The waitress shared his family name, not a very common one in Korea. Convinced he had found a long-lost relative, Sohn unloaded his bag of "goodies" -- chewing gum, candy, a Bible. Others in the tour group were sure he would soon empty his wallet too. But the young waitress had never heard of the village.

Back on the bus and heading toward Pyongyang, North Korea's capital, the group felt Sohn's anguish. But they could not fully understand it because they had not experienced such long-term separation. Chinese in Taiwan and China understand. Germans, separated until recently by the Berlin Wall, do too. So do Koreans on each side of the 38th parallel.

That arbitrary line was drawn across the Korean peninsula in 1945 by U.S.-Soviet agreement. After 2,500 years of defending their homeland against neighbors -- the Chinese, Mongols and Japanese -- Koreans were divided as a condition of the Japanese surrender after World War II. The imaginary line separated 10 million Korean family members.

By the time the tour group stopped to see Pagon Falls, one of the guides had decided to help Sohn find his home village. The guide knew the general direction, and they set out to search once again. Two women they passed on the road were from the village and showed them the way.

When the bus finally pulled into the village, emotion overcame Sohn. Against all odds, he had come home again. Curious villagers who surrounded him remembered his family. He soon found old friends of his parents.

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11/30/89

Page 13

Baptist Press

Sohn will remember that brief day the rest of his life. Perhaps other Koreans may soon have the same opportunity.

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