

Summer 2019



CHRISTIAN FRIENDS OF KOREA

조선의 그리스도인 벗들

Bringing Hope and Healing to the People of North Korea in the Name of Christ Since 1995

"LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, LORD.
Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy."
Habakkuk 3:2 (NIV)

CFK TEAM RETURNS TO DPRK FROM MAY 20 - JUNE 7

A CFK team of 10, including 8 Americans, and citizens from Norway and Poland returned to DPRK from May 20 – June 7. The primary purposes of the trip were three-fold: to do rough-in utility installation prior to full-fledged renovations planned for later this year at the South Hwanghae #2 Hepatitis Hospital laboratory (after a two-year hiatus due to unintended sanctions impacts), to continue diagnostic support and treatment for hepatitis patients, including opening treatment for the first time to patients in North Hwanghae Province – our fifth treatment site, and to confirm the arrival, distribution and use of shipments at several tuberculosis (TB) care centers that we were not able to visit in March due to time constraints.



The HOPE clinic team at Sariwon with local colleagues.



The technical team at Suan TB Rest Home.

CFK GRANTED CRITICAL OFAC LICENSE

Provisionally, the day before we departed the US for DPRK, we were granted our long-awaited OFAC license from the US Treasury Department that now gives us legal permission to resume critical aspects of our work, including renovation activities at care centers, and essential purchases of related project materials (from third countries), as well as purchases of greenhouses, small tractors, and other related goods. Of course, we must still navigate UN sanctions requirements, and there are still many challenges in procurement, logistics and banking, but the legal clearance provided by the newly issued OFAC license is the most essential first step.

RENOVATION TEAM INITIATES LAB RENOVATIONS IN HAEJU

Before sanctions were significantly strengthened beginning in 2017, we had already shipped various project materials, and these supplies were kept in secure storage in DPRK. We were grateful that the license came through in time so that these materials could be installed by our qualified team on this trip, as was planned months ago, in faith. The more technical aspects of these renovations require the skills of our volunteer team, and then the local staff will complete other work before we return so that the limited time we have in country can be best utilized. We are now working to reapply for a UN Sanctions Exemption (they are only valid for six months) and we will also be working over the summer on the banking and other logistical challenges so that we can send the additional project materials needed for the work that is planned for August/September 2019. Certainly, the administration of humanitarian work is much more complex than ever before, and much attention has to be devoted to making sure we are in full compliance of all the sanctions requirements – but we are grateful for the progress made thus far, and for being able to legally resume work to rebuild this laboratory – the third one related to our HOPE hepatitis diagnostics and treatment program.



CFK volunteer in Haeju during lab renovations.

Our technical team also spent time reorganizing the sea containers that we use for secure storage in the DPRK, sorting tools and supplies, and taking inventory. Similarly, our treatment team was limited to two doctors, which by definition limited the number of patients that we could see this time. Even so, we were able to complete blood diagnostics on 362 patients, see 330 in our clinics, and start 233 on treatment.

Also, due to a somewhat reduced patient load, this allowed Terry, our database specialist, to have some concentrated time to streamline various aspects of our patient database. This has been an ongoing work in progress and is truly foundational to our hepatitis B treatment project. We are excited about breakthroughs and changes that were realized this time, and we believe they will lead to greater efficiencies in the program going forward.



CFK technical team reorganizing sea containers.



CFK & local staff check in Kaesong patients during the HOPE clinic.

PATIENTS COMING FROM NEAR AND FAR FOR HEPATITIS TREATMENT

Our work at the South Hwanghae #2 Hepatitis Hospital is drawing patients from many far-flung communities. Patients (or in the case of those too sick to travel - their doctors) have come from 65km away or more to access care. Considering the complications and difficulties of traveling such distances in DPRK, particularly when sick, this is remarkable. Despite all the challenges we face every day in the course of our work, it is truly a privilege to love and serve many very sick people in the name of Jesus.

In our morning devotions this time, we worked through Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, Timothy and also through the small Old Testament book of Habakkuk. Our time of morning devotions is a special time of reading the Word together, of worship, of lifting up our day in prayer, and centering our hearts in His grace and truth. We also remember and give thanks for you, our families, supporters and prayer partners, for joining with us so faithfully in this work. You are all a very real part of this ministry, and we thank you sincerely for your partnership, love, prayers and support as we walk in faith.

CFK OPENS HEPATITIS TREATMENT CLINIC IN SARIWON

In addition to treatment clinics held in Pyongyang, Kaesong, and Haeju, we opened for the first time a diagnostic and treatment clinic in Sariwon – the capital of North Hwanghae Province. This marks the fifth location of treatment now offered for hepatitis B in the country (in March we opened our fourth clinic in Pyongsong, the capital of South Pyongan Province). We began the clinical treatment day by providing interactive training to the staff of the hospital to help them understand the care being offered to their patients, and then we began the work of registering, interviewing and treating many patients, side-by-side with the local staff. What a special privilege it is to bring hope into this otherwise hopeless space! Not only were we able to offer modern medicine that opens the possibility of health and a normal life to people who might otherwise face significant suffering and death within five years due to the complications of chronic hepatitis B, but we could also offer critical nutrition to very sick people thanks to the provision of Thrive – a specially formulated high protein drink mix provided through our partner, Rise Against Hunger.



Dr. Christine Jun works alongside local staff during clinic.



Dr. Marcia Kilsby teaches staff on blood draws.

We have been somewhat surprised by the significant interest and strong desire for Thrive to be made available to more people. What we have heard in many places is that everyone could benefit from Thrive – which is an easily-prepared, easy to digest high protein drink mix that also includes a full complement of vitamins/minerals. Due to a limited supply of the product, however, we have had to restrict its distribution to those in particular need and whom we feel would benefit most from it – patients suffering from advanced liver cirrhosis – and who otherwise have a hard time digesting ordinary food.

We have several medical diagnostic indicators that help guide who would most benefit from Thrive. What a joy it was to see needy patients leaving with arms filled with life-giving food and medicine, and hope in their eyes and hearts. Please join with us in praying that these patients will not only gain physical strength and healing from the food and medicine, but that their hearts will also be touched by the love, grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.



Hepatitis B patients receiving Thrive.

These visits are not without challenges. Despite every care by our hosts, members of our team suffered from severe allergies, GI upset, short nights of sleep and other challenges. Sometimes there are misunderstandings, miscommunications, and even more serious breaches of trust. In these times, we pray especially for patience, wisdom and understanding on all sides. Above all, we pray that God will give His grace, reveal truth and provide His love that can and does cover over a multitude of sins.

Our work among them brings hope, healing and understanding. While critical foundation stones have been laid, there is still so much that is fragile, still so much work that is yet to be done. Our days are filled with both encouragement and despair, joy and sorrow, gratitude and deep disappointment – yet we see that His hand is at work – in our lives and in theirs, and at the same time we long for more of His touch, more of His healing, more of His reconciliation, more of His making all things new. May we never grow weary in doing good, because we know we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. (Gal. 6:9)

A REFLECTION BY DR. SISSEL TOPPLE

*“Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall!
My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me.”*
Lamentations 3:19-20 (ESV)



Dr. Sissel Topple with her North Korean colleagues in training.

My heart is weighed down with the pictures of suffering that are embedded in my mind from our most recent trip for the Hope project. The suffering is intense. How long, O Lord? It is staggering how this tiny virus ravages bodies. Decompensated cirrhosis is manifested with ascites (extensive fluid in the abdomen), low platelets (which result in bleeding from various parts of the body), and even encephalopathy, which means cloudy thinking. The person is so weak they can barely sit, much less walk. And as if this disease were not enough for the one bearing it, it breaks the hearts of loved ones. It is in a sense like stepping into a war-zone - the war of viruses on health. It is gradual, not sudden like a gunshot or bomb, but the effects are devastating.

One can easily become numb to the pain as person after person sits in front of you describing their struggles and the losses of various family members with the same illness. But for each person the pain is fresh and real. I think of how Jesus healed person after person. Each person was an individual. He reached out to each one. So I come away praying that somehow we would have communicated God's love to each individual. I pray that those who are dying would be met by our Savior in their dreams. May they know the true source of healing and have eternal life where there is no suffering. Please join me in praying for them.

One can get discouraged easily if one focuses on the problems and struggles of working in this country where the needs are so great. So it is paramount that we focus not on what we see, but on what we cannot see. God is accomplishing His good works somehow despite the struggles and seemingly “wasted efforts.” We must remember that it is not so much what we DO but that He is there with us. He has called us to this work.

So let us continue in Lamentations chapter 3, with verses 21-23: *“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”* (ESV)



Dr. Topple and North Korean doctors together care for a patient at the HOPE clinic in Haeju.

CONFIRMING VISITS TO SEVERAL TB CARE CENTERS DESPITE TRAVEL CHALLENGES

We visited several TB care centers that we were not able to visit in March, including some that the Ministry of Health has asked us to transition away from helping since they have made so much progress through their partnership with us over many years. These are places that have been transformed by the provision of roofing materials, windows and doors, greenhouses, small tractors, clean water, and many shipments of food, medicine, hygiene kits and blankets. Of course, in our opinion, these places still need help – but relative to other places that have never worked in partnership with us, they are

much better off than they were before. These places and their staff have become very dear to us. It was humbling to hear on your behalf their sincere thanks, and we hope that at least a baseline of support can be maintained as times continue to be hard for many places, and there are still many patients that need care. We have also been reassured that as water systems need repair and maintenance, we will be allowed to visit and provide necessary future repairs.

Getting to some of these very rural care centers remains a significant challenge. For example, we tried very hard this time to return to Chongdan TB Rest Home to check on the drilling of a well and installation of a hand pump that was completed a couple of years ago. After finishing our hepatitis diagnostics clinic in Haeju, we set out determined to visit Chongdan on our way to Kaesong. We had to detour three times due to road or bridge washouts (or big trucks stuck in the middle of running rivers while bridges were being rebuilt). We also lost two hubcaps (we found one in a rice-paddy water supply channel), had a flat tire, and finally were stopped completely by an impassably deep breach in a narrow road surrounded by flooded rice-paddy fields. By this time, we were only about 1km from the rest home, but we had lost so much daylight to all of the road troubles that we could not take the time it would have required to walk the remaining distance to and from the facility. Instead, after a call by cell phone, the director came to us on his CFK-supplied motorcycle, and we met with him on the narrow road, while our long-suffering driver cheerfully changed the tire. We had a meaningful conversation with the director by the side of the road, received his sincere thanks for many years of longstanding support to his rest home, demonstrated the use and maintenance of water filter buckets, and left him with five filter buckets (for distribution to needy patients) and five solar lanterns before continuing our long journey to Kaesong.

The director of Chongdan TB Rest Home drove out to meet the CFK team, prevented from visiting by a road breach.



While the weather was largely pleasant during our 19 days in country, the lack of rain is deeply concerning. Riverbeds and agricultural fields in many places were completely dry, and travel on the roads raised billows of dust in our wake. Access to clean drinking water remains a significant challenge for large segments of the population – especially people in the rural areas, although many in urban areas are also affected. We have a shipment of 3,500 water filter buckets enroute now, and we are looking forward to rolling out delivery of these filter bucket sets later this fall. They have the potential to transform many lives and significantly improve the health of rural communities.

SPRING PLANTING SEASON

God shows His grace in many unexpected ways – driving through the countryside, his handiwork was on vivid display in a multitude of beautiful sunrises and sunsets, spectacular and majestic cloud formations, the faces of children and *halmonis* (grandmas) by the roadside, smiles and waves from farmers, a welcome push from soldiers when our car was seriously stuck in a detour through a rocky streambed, and many other moments along the way. To the fullest extent that we are allowed, we engage in daily life with many people in the DPRK – and in that, both our hearts and theirs are changed.



Workers in the rice fields wave back joyfully at our passing team despite their long days of backbreaking toil.

While the landscape was beginning to look lush with the green of early summer, it is still the barley-hump season – the time of year when the main harvest has been depleted, the heavy spring planting work is well underway, but the main fall harvest is still many months off. During our travels, the stripes of winter barley and winter wheat went from brilliant green to gold, and the potato fields were starting to bloom – giving promise of the smaller spring harvest to come in late June. Meanwhile, fields that mirrored the sky were painstakingly clothed, row by painful backbreaking row, by the faint green of rice seedlings. But for many, it is a season of leanness, of long days and hard struggle while they wait for an uncertain harvest. Without a doubt, the people of the DPRK continue to face significant hardship.

SIX CONTAINER SHIPMENTS ENROUTE NOW

In April/May, six 40' High Cube containers left the US bound for DPRK. These shipments included food, medicine, blankets, hygiene kits, and water filter bucket sets intended for distribution at TB and hepatitis care centers. We also sent renovation materials needed for the South Hwanghae #2 Hepatitis Lab renovation project. We are grateful for the faithfulness of our long-time partners, the Mennonite Central Committee, Rise Against Hunger, and you, our donors, who made these shipments possible.

CFK TEAMS PLAN TO RETURN TO DPRK IN AUGUST

As we look ahead to returning to DPRK in late August, we hope to make significant progress on renovating the lab in Haeju, doing hundreds of follow up consultations with patients already on treatment for hepatitis B, opening treatment for hepatitis C sufferers, and delivering water filter buckets to multiple care centers. Please be praying over many complex logistics, banking, and other challenges that we need to work through this summer. Please also pray for our staff and our North Korean colleagues as we take some time to be with our families this summer, and also continue to address the many complicated challenges we face in this ongoing work – on both sides of the ocean.

Thank you for faithfully walking this road together with the people of the DPRK. Thank you for trusting in our Savior's love and provision, and for believing that His mighty hands will multiply these small loaves and fishes that together we offer up in praise and thanksgiving and faith to the glory of His name and the building up of His kingdom. He is faithful, and He will do it. Praise be to God.



The CFK team and local staff at Unryul TB Rest Home.



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