

Pilgrims of Peace, Trust and Hope

A Reflection on the 2026 International Ecumenical Peace Convocation, Seoul

Rev Dr Paul Goh, President-elect

As a Korean Australian minister of the Uniting Church in Australia, it was a profound privilege to represent the President's Office at the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation, held in Seoul from 9–13 September 2026. Christians from across the world gathered to discern what it means to be Christ's people amid war, division, displacement and deepening geopolitical conflict. For me, it was more than a conference – it was a pilgrimage, ecumenical, ecclesial and deeply personal.

Returning to a journey begun long ago

The convocation marked the 40th anniversary of the historic Glion Consultation, where Christians from North and South Korea met during one of the most divided periods of modern Korean history and dared to imagine that their Christian identity could transcend political division. It also took me back to 1988, when as a university student I attended the service adopting the Korean Church's "88 Declaration" on national reunification and peace – an experience that shaped my understanding of the Church's vocation as a ministry of reconciliation.

Returning 38 years later, I realised I had not simply come back to where I began; I had been travelling all these years. This resonates with the Uniting Church's *Basis of Union*, which describes us as "a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal". The pilgrimage of the Uniting Church and the pilgrimage of the worldwide ecumenical movement meet whenever Christians cross boundaries to listen to the wounds of the world and seek together the things that make for peace.

The vocation of the Church in a divided world

Rev Prof Dr Jerry Pillay, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, opened the convocation with a sermon, *The Kingdom of God Has Come Near*, recalling how North and South Korean Christians at Glion bore witness to an allegiance deeper than competing political systems – their allegiance to the crucified and risen Christ. That proclamation remains urgently necessary today.

Since the Korean Peninsula was divided after liberation from Japanese colonial rule, the Korean War brought devastating loss and separated countless families. Though hostilities ceased with the 1953 Armistice, the war has never formally ended, and for more than seven decades people on the peninsula – and throughout the diaspora – have lived with militarisation, insecurity and the pain of separated families.

The Uniting Church confesses a unity of faith and life in Christ that transcends cultural, national and racial boundaries. As a Korean Australian, these are not abstract words for me. The 17th Assembly theme, "Weaving Christ's love across cultures and

boundaries”, expresses this vocation beautifully: our cultures, histories, memories, wounds and hopes can become part of something none of us could create alone. Peacebuilding is part of this weaving.

Touching the wound

One of the most confronting experiences of the convocation was our visit to the National Museum of Korean Democracy, a former Anti-Communist Interrogation Office where democracy activists were detained, interrogated and tortured. In one room was the photograph of a university student, almost exactly my own age, who died from torture there 39 years ago. Standing where he had trembled in fear, the thought was almost unbearable. Division had taken the life, future and hope of a young man in his 20s – and what happened in Korea continues, in different forms, elsewhere today. During the panel discussions we heard of communities in Colombia facing military violence, and of disappearances in the Philippines amid counter-insurgency policies. The countries and ideologies change; the wounds remain.

In his keynote address on the first day of the convocation, Rev Dr Mitri Raheb, speaking from the experience of Palestine, had challenged the gathering to recognise the danger of speaking about peace without “touching the wound”. Christians can write covenants about peace while still failing to touch the actual wound. His challenge stayed with me: Christian peacebuilding cannot remain safely at the level of conferences and declarations. Reconciliation without justice can become another way of asking wounded people to remain silent.

Walking the DMZ

Before the convocation reached its final closing service, we undertook a peace pilgrimage along the Demilitarized Zone, walking with this intention:

“Today, I walk for myself, for my brothers and sisters, and for my neighbours. Above all, I walk in solidarity with all who suffer from war and climate disasters.”

I was one of four participants who walked the Peace Trail, while most others walked the Eco Trail alongside us, separated by a barbed-wire fence – one path through a military-controlled area, the other civilian. Yet we shared the same sky, the same breeze, the same golden fields ripening towards harvest. As we waved to one another across the fence, anticipating the lunch we would soon share, the whole situation suddenly seemed absurd. The fence could determine which path our feet were permitted to walk, but it could not divide the sky, the wind, the fields, or the table towards which we were walking. Perhaps there was a glimpse of God’s peace in that moment.

A local resident who had composed a pilgrim’s song for the DMZ trail told us that our footsteps along that path could become a source of healing for all who long for reconciliation. That image has stayed with me: our footsteps can become healing. We

do not know when reconciliation will come, and sometimes all we can see is barbed wire. Still, we walk.

From the Korean Peninsula to the world

After we returned from the Demilitarized Zone, the convocation reached its official close with an Ecumenical Joint Worship for Peace and Reconciliation, building on the 2026 Seoul Peace Declaration adopted on Day 3, under the theme, “From the Korean Peninsula to the World”. Rev Philip Vinod Peacock, General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, called the churches to practise the things that lead to peace, reminding us that peace begins with doing justice – peacemaking requires honest reckoning with irreversible loss and closeness to those who have been wounded.

Dr Mitri Raheb’s plea for justice and peace in Palestine, from Day 1, and Melissa Parke’s challenge on Day 2 as Executive Director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, reminded us that peace on the Korean Peninsula cannot be understood in isolation. Korean peace is connected to peace in Palestine, Ukraine, Colombia, the Philippines and every place where people live with war, occupation or political violence. Our pilgrimage towards peace must always move from the local to the global – and back again to the particular wounds of people and communities.

A journey shared with the Korean Church

The Uniting Church in Australia has been walking with the churches in Korea for many years – from early missionaries who helped establish hospitals and schools and became involved in the Korean liberation movement, to journeying alongside Korean churches in their struggles for democracy and human rights under military dictatorship. Today, churches in Korea are seeking international ecumenical solidarity for peace on a peninsula that technically remains at war, and attending this convocation felt like responding to a call arising from that long relationship.

At the 15th Assembly in 2018, the Uniting Church resolved to support a peace treaty between the two Koreas, recognising that a formal end to the Korean War could become an important circuit-breaker in the cycle of hostility. Our participation in gatherings such as this convocation is not peripheral to our life; it belongs to our ecumenical vocation – mission becoming partnership, partnership becoming solidarity, and solidarity becoming mutual accompaniment. The churches in Korea are asking us to continue walking with them.

A leaven of hope for a wounded world

Bishop Jonas Jonson, in his keynote Just Peace and the Vocation of the Church, offered words that gathered together much of what I had seen and experienced:

“The vocation of the Church, today and tomorrow, is to live the faith as a leaven of hope and as a sacrament for the wounded world. The pilgrimage continues.”

To be a leaven of hope is not to accomplish spectacular things — leaven is small and often unseen, yet quietly transforms the whole. A conversation across a boundary, an act of solidarity, footsteps taken together along opposite sides of a barbed-wire fence: these may appear small against the forces of war and nationalism, yet they can become signs that another future is possible. To be a sacrament for the wounded world means the Church cannot stand at a safe distance from the world’s wounds. We must touch the wound, listen to painful memories, stand beside those who suffer, seek justice, and allow ourselves to be changed by what and whom we encounter.

As the Uniting Church journeys from the 17th Assembly towards the 18th, I find a beautiful connection between “Weaving Christ’s love across cultures and boundaries” and the proposed theme, “Pilgrimage of Trust and Hope”. Weaving describes how we belong to one another; pilgrimage describes how we move together. Trust requires us to touch the wound and tell the truth; hope is grounded not in optimism but in the crucified and risen Christ, who enables us to walk beside a barbed-wire fence and discover that, despite everything it represents, it cannot divide the sky, the wind, our friendship, or the table towards which we are walking.

The prophet Micah gives us an image of the future towards which we journey:

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”
(Micah 4:3)

Walking beside the barbed-wire fence of the DMZ, that ancient vision no longer felt like a distant metaphor. It became a prayer: when will these fences come down, when will separated families embrace again? I do not know. But perhaps pilgrimage means we do not need to know when we will arrive in order to take the next faithful step.

Thirty-eight years ago, as a Korean university student, I stood among Christians praying for peace and reunification. In 2026, I returned as a Korean Australian minister of the Uniting Church, walking with sisters and brothers from around the world for that same peace. We walk not because we can already see the destination, but because we trust the One who calls us – because, in Christ, enemies can become friends, wounds can become places of healing, and walls need not stand forever. We walk as God’s pilgrim people, weaving Christ’s love across cultures and boundaries and becoming, by God’s grace, a leaven of hope and a sacrament for the wounded world. The pilgrimage continues.

Rev Dr Paul Goh
President-Elect
Uniting Church in Australia