

A Debt of Grace to North Korea: From a 14-Year-Old Country Boy to a Mission Leader

David Joung · October 15, 2026

AI summary

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Coincidentally, the gathering period overlapped with the birthday of Tavna, the leader of the base. DTS students and staff wholeheartedly celebrated his birthday and blessed his journey. It was a moment where prayers for missions and celebrations for an individual harmonized in one space. But how did Tavna become a mission leader embracing the nations? The story begins 29 years ago, in a small village nursing home.



1997: Unfamiliar Guests Arrive at the Nursing Home

In 1997, Tavna was 14 years old. In his small village, there was the largest nursing home in Mongolia, a place where elderly people with mobility issues lived. One day, a missionary from Ulaanbaatar Banseok Church came to this nursing home with a vision. Tavna's father, who was the director of the nursing home, did not know Jesus but readily offered a room. His reason was, "They seem like good people." He helped in various ways so that they could hold worship services. The missionary, named Joseph, did not come alone. Young people from Banseok Church came with him, leading praise and interacting with the village children. The boy, who liked their kindness, began to look forward to going to church. At 17, he moved to Ulaanbaatar, attended Banseok Church, and began his ministry. This was a period when he first seriously asked, "Who am I, and how should I live?"

A Night Spent in the Prayer Room

Around that time, a dream took root in his heart. However, he didn't know what it was and let two years pass without obeying. When he came to church, he was filled with joy. When he went to university, the joy disappeared. The feeling that "I am going down a path I don't want" tormented him. Eventually, he went into the prayer room alone and spent the night there. The scripture that shook his heart that night was Acts 16:31: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." He was concerned about his family. Although he believed in God, he hadn't been able to share the gospel with his own family. When he decided to obey, change began. His older sister came to church, his older brother followed, and his younger sibling also came to church. Now, his entire family believes in Jesus. His younger sibling has been ministering with him for 15 years.



Pioneering Darkhan, Starting from a Dilapidated Building

At the age of 19, he committed to YWAM ministry. In early 2003, YWAM Ulaanbaatar was planning to move to a building beyond the airport. The task for a newly joined young man was to repair, fix, and move belongings. In January of the same year, a new base was pioneered in Darkhan, a city to the north. Tavna, who first set foot in Darkhan to help with the move, felt a strange pull in his heart. A month later, he was convinced that God was calling him to Darkhan.

In May 2003, he became a pioneering member of the Darkhan base. It was a work that began with a few pioneering members praying together in a missionary's car. They pioneered a church alongside the base and also established the King's Kids kindergarten. The purchased building was 80% demolished and rebuilt. In September of that year, he returned to Ulaanbaatar to complete DTS and the Intercessory Prayer School. He studied the Word for a year and a half under the missionary who was then the DTS school director, and then returned to Darkhan.



Sunday Afternoon Border Evangelism

In the early days, Darkhan always lacked manpower. On Sunday mornings, they held worship services at the Darkhan church. In the afternoon, they split into two teams and went out for evangelism. Tavna headed to Altanbulag, a Russian border village, with a Mongolian brother staff member. They sometimes took a van and sometimes a taxi. He recalls that at the time, "there were few people but much ministry."

Their first ministry was, unexpectedly, family ministry. Many church leaders were living together without having held a wedding ceremony. The Darkhan base held home gatherings for them, performed wedding ceremonies, and officiated them. Among the couples whose families were established in this way, several came forward to commit to ministry together.

The Voice Heard After Laying Down the Microphone

The first year or two were enjoyable. It was enough to do what he could and help. But as time passed, a question arose: "What am I doing here as a young man? I want to learn and study more." He was a popular worship leader. Frankly, that position was also a recognized one. But God told him to lay even that down. He was afraid that if he put down the microphone, no one would recognize him. One day, on his way to church, he recalled his mother's words from long ago. As a child, Tavna used to make his friends do chores. Even though he didn't help with his friends' chores, the children liked him and followed his words. His mother smiled and said, "You really have a leader's disposition." Along with that memory, God's voice resonated in his heart: "You have been appointed as a leader since you were young. Now, become a leader."

'Yes' Instead of Going to America

In 2010, Missionary Park, who had returned from the United States, asked Tavna to take on the role of base leader. He asked for a month to pray. It was just over a month after he got married. An

opportunity for him to study in the United States was open. He wanted to have his first child in America, and America also wanted him to come. During prayer, he said he heard God's clear answer: "That is a path recognized by the world. I have a different path that I recognize." He answered 'yes'. In December of that year, he became the first Mongolian leader of the Darkhan base. "I have never regretted it," he says. The reason he gives is people. Because he has seen young people who grew up without fathers become disciples, get trained, go to other countries, and bear fruit.

"How's Your Heart Lately?" The Question No One Asked

The first thing he recalled after becoming a leader was the loneliness he felt during his staff years. There was always a lot of work. However, hardly anyone asked, "How are you doing these days, how's your heart, are your parents healthy?" *"Most missionaries are really good at their work. But I felt there was a lack of relationships that nurture people, and mentoring."*

He used that experience as a cautionary tale. Where does the power to move people come from? To find that answer, he delved into leadership books and underwent John C. Maxwell leadership training for 3-4 years. Therefore, the driving force of his ministry is one-on-one discipleship. When he has to go to the provinces, he takes male staff members in his car. On the way there and back, they discuss ministry stories, peer relationships, and financial situations. *"I don't have money, you see. So we pray together, asking God to connect us with someone who can help this staff member."* It's like following Jesus' method of taking disciples with him and teaching them.

Knocking on the Doors of 20,000 Households

He is wary of the base becoming a place that is 'only spiritual'. He is not ashamed of the gospel but does not force it. The principle is to share it in a way that positively influences people. From church planting, evangelism, Bible distribution, North Korea ministry, to counseling ministry, the destination of all ministry is missions. He meticulously checks the results. In the past five years or so, they have visited 20,000 households for evangelism and Bible distribution. Among the nomadic families they visited, 65 families accepted Jesus.



They also ran a two-year long-term training team twice in Mongolia. Through four years of training, ministers emerged who could help not only themselves but also others. He has also continued to translate faith-based books necessary for ministry. Books like "God's Book That Transforms Nations" have been translated into Mongolian.

"Repay the Debt of Grace to North Korea"

He first embraced North Korea in his heart in 2007 at the University of the Nations in Jeju. During the three months he served as a staff member at the Intercessory Prayer School, the focus of prayer for the school was the Korean Peninsula. While listening to lectures and praying daily about North and South Korea, one sentence was etched in his heart: *"Repay the debt."* At first, he didn't understand what it meant. Soon, understanding came. Mongolia was also once a communist country. But Mongolia received the grace of the gospel before North Korea. That grace was a debt to be repaid.

His conviction solidified in September 2010. A few months before becoming a base leader, a week-long North Korea mission seminar was held at a seminary in Ulaanbaatar. Several missionaries from overseas came as lecturers. He clearly saw his role there. *"God did not tell me to go directly. He*

entrusted me with mobilizing, training, and sending people to North Korea." He calls this network ministry. This is why the Darkhan base has consistently participated in North Korea ministry. This NK Gathering is also an extension of that.



3.5 Years of Pause, and 'Mongolia's Antioch'

In the first week of November 2019, he received a prompting during prayer: "Do not move." He didn't know why or for how long. By the end of that month, COVID-19 began in China. He did not go anywhere for the next 3 years and 6 months. The task he received during this time of pause was "make disciples," and that too, one-on-one. His first disciple was, unexpectedly, his son. Subsequently, he chose four male staff members, exercised with them, shared heart-to-heart conversations, and built them up one by one. As that time drew to a close, a new vision emerged: *"Raise the Mongolian church to be like the Antioch church."* This meant becoming a church that moves and does missions, not just a church that enjoys grace.

He focused on two aspects of the Antioch church: collaborative teamwork, like Barnabas seeking out and bringing Paul, and partnership, like solving major problems together with the Jerusalem church.

"Then where is our Jerusalem?" he asked, and found the answer in the history of Mongolian missions. About 80% of the missions that brought the gospel to Mongolia were carried out by Korean missionaries. For him, the Jerusalem church of Mongolia is the Korean church.

A Mission Base, Not Just a Training Center

"We strive not to be just a training center." The purpose of training is to go to places where the gospel is unknown, proclaim it, and make disciples. "When are we ever 100% ready? We learn and mature as we go and take responsibility."

As he says, the Darkhan base is a moving center. The 12-year-old Vision Church has planted churches in three regions, and a fourth church is being planted in less than two years since the pandemic. The base supports Mongolian missionaries serving overseas with even small monthly amounts. During DTS, missionaries from the field share updates online, and students pray for them. His next challenge is youth. While the number of young people in Mongolian churches is growing, there is a severe shortage of ministers to lead them. His goal is "not to stop at the current ministry but to raise future leaders." The interviewer suggested connecting counseling and coaching to him. The idea was not to stop at healing wounds but to move on to coaching that helps individuals grow into leaders. Tavna resonated with this and showed interest in leadership coaching. For him, who has been doing one-on-one discipleship, it is a welcome tool.

From a Russian Military Barracks to a Departure Point for Spiritual Soldiers

The Darkhan base building is where old Russian soldiers used to stay. Tavna hopes that this place will now become a departure point where "God's soldiers" are trained and sent out to the places they are called.



To achieve this, there are challenges to address. Classrooms and accommodation are insufficient. This is why only about 30 people could be invited to this NK Gathering. Holding gatherings in the city center reduces concentration, and venue rental fees are considerable. Nevertheless, the base is vibrant. Couples currently undergoing DTS entrust their children to the base's King's Kids kindergarten and focus on their training. It's a picture of families walking the path of missions together.

When asked for a prayer request, he answered without hesitation: *"I hope the Mongolian church becomes like the Antioch church, proclaiming the gospel to Gentiles and moving under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Don't you think the Mongolian people, who have lived as nomads, have a DNA given by God for this?"* He dreams of Mongolia's Antioch.