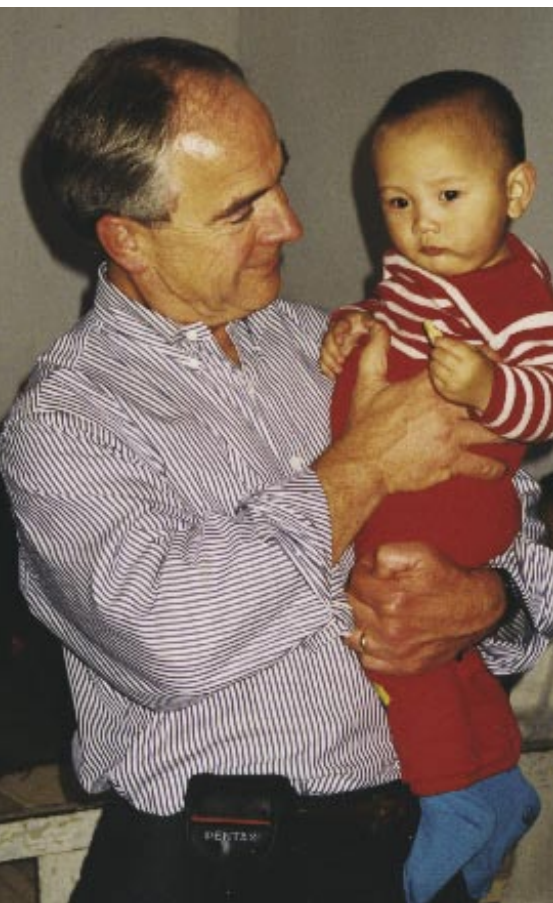


# CASTING OUT FEAR

Covenanter Don Mowat has found hope at the cruel edges of the world.

BOB SMIETANA



Don Mowat holding a North Korean orphan

**DON MOWAT** believes in the importance of being foolish. Even in North Korea.

So when he had the chance to play basketball with school kids during a visit to Pyongyang, he jumped at it. The chance to connect with the kids was worth the risk of nearly giving his North Korean overseers a heart attack.

A member of Bethany Covenant Church in Mount Vernon, Washington, Mowat has been traveling to North Korea as a relief worker for the past eight years. During an early trip, he was head of a delegation from World Concern, a Seattle-based charity. Mowat and his colleague Al York were touring a Pyongyang junior-high school with several North Korean officials when he caught sight of the basketball court.

As the rest of the delegation started up a set of stairs, Mowat paused, drawn to the sound of children playing. He left his hosts behind, walked out on the court, and held up his hand for the ball.

“Here,” he called to one of the kids.

“The kid kind of knew what I was saying, so he threw me the basketball, and I started shooting hoops with these kids,” says Mowat, a soft-spoken grandfatherly type with an impetuous side.

In a country run with military precision—where every minute of their visit was precisely mapped out—Mowat had committed a major faux pas.

“When you break out of the predictable with the North Koreans, they panic,” he says. “They wonder, ‘What’s this crazy American going to do?’”

Anxiously, Mowat’s black-suited North Korean overseers stood on the steps and watched. When it came time to leave, he walked off the court to cheers from the school kids.

“I looked at my hosts and they were delighted, just delighted. Not in the way of, ‘Let’s do more of this,’ but the whole tone of the visit had changed,”



A young refugee of the Balkan War

Mowat says. It was as if the whole group breathed a sigh of relief.

Sitting in the living room at his home in La Conner, Washington, Mowat, an unassuming man in his sixties, smiles as he recalls that basketball court in North Korea. For a few minutes, he says, it was like shooting hoops in the driveway with his grandchildren. At one point, he knelt over and tied the shoes of a Korean child.

Earlier that day, those same children had been in a government indoctrination course, where they were told that outsiders, especially Americans, were evil and not to be trusted. It was part of North Korea's philosophy of Juche (self-reliance) and the country's long history of isolation.

Mowat was likely the first non-Asian the children had ever seen. "I might as well have come down from Mars," he says.

He wanted the children to have a different impression of outsiders, based on a face-to-face encounter. It's something he wishes there was more of, instead of the political maneuvering so

common in international relations.

"We get into these postures, these inflexible positions. Look at the conflict in the world—it's all about posturing, it's all about threats and fear and being intimidating," he says. "We can even do that in our churches. It gets in the way of our ability to live out the message of Jesus.

"For a moment, those kids identified with me in my humanity—I was just another guy shooting baskets with them. I'd like to shoot baskets all over Pyongyang."

### A long road downward

Mowat's journey to North Korea began about thirty years earlier, when his family lived on Bainbridge Island near Seattle, about seventy-five miles south of La Conner. At the time, he and his brother-in-law ran a company called Swiftsure Fisheries, which operated canneries and cold storage in Alaska and marketed seafood from Seattle.

The Mowats—Don, his wife, Molly, and their children Steve and Kathryn—lived in a five-bedroom wa-

terfront home that overlooked Puget Sound. Molly, who was on the board of a non-profit organization serving Seattle's street kids, became interested in foster parenting. The Mowats had room to spare, and Molly felt that she and Don could help kids in need. Don went along with the idea and the two were licensed.

Over the next few years, the Mowats would care for about a dozen foster kids, primarily teens in crisis. Most had been abused. "These kids were pretty banged up," Mowat says. "They were angry, distressed souls."

The foster experience stretched the Mowats to their limits. For Don, a natural entrepreneur, it was the first time he had encountered a problem he couldn't handle with his own wits and hard work. He had to rely on faith for energy, patience, and wisdom to help their foster children start putting their lives back together. Before that time, Mowat had seen Christianity largely as a project, a spiritual checklist of

Bob Smietana is features editor for the *Companion*. Bosnia photos Courtesy of World Vision

things to do for God: read the Bible, volunteer at church, put money in the collection basket. But his faith “had no wheels on it,” as Mowat puts it. All of that changed when the Mowats became foster parents.

“It was the beginning of a real understanding of God’s presence in our lives,” says Mowat, “where it wasn’t just something you read about or heard in a sermon. If God hadn’t been there with us, we would not have had a prayer.”

In 1993, the Mowats took another risky step of faith. The fish business had been sold off, and Mowat had gone

there,” he said. “And I know someone who can get you there.”

“I’ve given that speech to maybe 150 people,” says Hammon, now executive vice-president of the relief group Cure International. “But Don is the only one who followed up.”

Hammon introduced Mowat to Peter Kuzmic, a prominent Eastern European theologian who teaches at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary and directs an evangelical seminary in Osijek, Croatia. With the outbreak of war, the Croatian seminary had been transformed into a relief organization

Less than two weeks later, after several flights and an all-night drive through Croatia—often speeding past snipers—Mowat was in Osijek.

The next morning, he crossed the Sava River into Bosnia. What he saw was overwhelming—a literal sea of refugees. Kuzmic says that nearly a million and half people were displaced during the Balkan War, which created anarchy across the Balkans. While Mowat had learned much about the conflict, seeing refugees face to face humbled him.

When he first agreed to go to Bosnia, Mowat says he had visions of fix-

## “There is no greater poverty than having nothing to give.”

on to start a small biotech company. After several years of working sixty- and seventy-hour weeks, Mowat was enjoying some time off. He took over the cooking chores from Molly, puttered around the house, and played a lot of tennis. “It was a good time,” he says.

While at home, Mowat also began paying attention to current events, especially the Balkan War. A civil war had broken out in the former Yugoslavia, between the mainly Orthodox province of Serbia, led by Slobodan Milosevic, the mostly Roman Catholic province of Croatia, and the mostly Muslim province of Bosnia. All sides practiced “ethnic cleansing”—the forced removal of other ethnic groups from their territory—creating a refugee crisis.

The more he learned about the refugee crisis, the more Mowat wanted to respond. He began to contact relief agencies to see how he could help.

“I had this desire to write a check,” he says, “but also felt compelled to do something more hands on.” He thought of going to the UK and packing relief supplies for an agency there.

Around this time, Mowat’s friend Craig Hammon came to visit. Mowat mentioned his interest in Bosnia, and how he felt God was calling him to respond. Hammon, then a Gordon College administrator, told his friend it was time to stop thinking and praying and asking God for directions, and instead do something.

“The best thing for you to do is go



A young boy holds a leftover shell in Bosnia.

called Agape, which distributed food and other necessities to refugees across the border in Bosnia.

Kuzmic invited Mowat to come with him to see the work firsthand. “From the first time we met, I knew this was a man you could trust,” Kuzmic says.

After hanging up with Kuzmic, Mowat held off for a day before talking to Molly. Then he walked into the living room, where she was sitting, and said, “I’ve been invited to a war.”

Molly told him to go—and agreed to accompany him as far as London.

“I was hoping she’d say, ‘No you can’t,’” Mowat admits.

ing the problems he encountered. He had made a career doing that—now he had no idea where to start. He had supported Agape’s work financially, but this crisis was beyond his means, or the means of anyone he knew.

“I had come with the idea that we could fix it, make it go away, make it better,” he says. “Suddenly I realized that wasn’t going to be the case.”

He was, in effect, useless. Before he could be useful, Mowat came to learn, he had to enter into the presence of suffering people; to listen and to learn from them instead of rushing in to save them.

“We were later able to follow through and advocate for material assistance,” says Mowat. “But the first step was to be quiet and absorb the suffering.”

Walking into the Agape feeding station—a kitchen set up in an abandoned building across the border from Osijek—Mowat was struck by the silence. Outside it was cold and miserable, with mud everywhere. Inside, dozens of refugees sat at long tables, eating without speaking.

“I felt like I had almost violated their space,” Mowat says. “I remember sitting there eating off a metal tray and looking over at an old man and thinking, ‘I get to leave this place. You have to stay here.’”

From Osijek, Mowat made his way to the Croatian coast to meet a Protestant pastor named Stevo Dereta. Dereta ran a center for refugees and invited



Mowat to hear some of their stories. At the center, Mowat joined a circle of refugees, mostly women, and listened as Dereta translated.

One woman, Anna, was a doctor from Vukovar. One night, Serbian soldiers came to her family's house and forced everyone out. Then they forced Anna to watch as they slit the throats of her husband and their two children, and then burned her home to the ground. She was spared and taken prisoner because her captors needed her medical skills. But she was too devastated to be of any use and eventually escaped. Anna was wandering with nothing but the clothes on her back when Dereta found her and took her in.

When the refugees were finished sharing, Dereta asked Don if he wanted to say anything. At first he hesitated, then he said, "Thank you."

"I will get back on an airplane and go back home to a very different world," he said. "Thank you for the gift that you have given me and the trust you have showed to allow me into this circle."

As the circle broke up, Anna came up to Mowat and looked him in the eyes. She then turned to Dereta and spoke to him. When Mowat asked what Anna wanted, he said, "She wants to embrace you." Mowat held Anna as she began to weep uncontrollably.

"I just stood there like there was no one in the room," Mowat says. "When she broke away she put her hand on my face and kind of held it there, before walking away."

Afterward, he turned to Dereta, "What was that all about?"

"She has lost everything," Dereta told him. "She feels as though she has nothing left to give. When you thanked her for the gift that she had given, you blessed her. There is no greater poverty than having nothing to give."

### The power of grace

Over the next few years, the Mowats would work closely with Dereta, bringing resources from the States to help with rebuilding and reconciliation after the war. Molly—who went to Croatia with Don not long after his first visit—became involved in relief work

as well, especially with women and children.

When the war was over, the Mowats would eventually help host two major gatherings of leaders from the Balkans—including many parliamentarians and several future presidents—focused on postwar reconciliation.

The Mowats stayed in the background and took care of logistical details so that the work of the conference could go forward. "Don is a servant leader—we need more of that kind." Kuzmic says. "He never said, 'Here I am and I will do something great.'"

Before going to Bosnia, Mowat, a former soldier, says he was a "real God and country" believer—and felt it was vital for America to be identified as a "Christian nation." Now that idea makes him nervous, after seeing the way religion was twisted for destructive ends by governments in the Balkans.

"You could not separate the two in that culture and it was very destructive," says Mowat. "When the highest religious authorities put their faces on the government—it poisoned their religion. I am concerned about the same thing in America."

Mowat says he learned one other lesson in Bosnia, one that carried over to his work in Korea. This came from a Protestant pastor named Karmelo Krasonia who lived in the city of Mostar. A river divided the city in half—with Catholic Croats on one side and Muslim Bosnians on the other. After the war, Krasonia, who lived on the Catholic side, wanted to start a food and clothing center on the Muslim side. He met with Bosnian authorities, who agreed to let Krasonia set up his center, if he would also take care of the city's gypsies. Krasonia agreed and set up temporary housing for the gypsies, and opened his center, which



One of thousands of war-affected children in Bosnia

also served as a church.

He also set up a basketball court near the center, located in a bombed-out building. Not long afterwards, some Mujahideen—bearded Islamic soldiers—came to him with bad news.

"Pastor," they said, "we will have to blow up your church."

Thinking quickly, Krasonia asked what he could do to save the church.

"Let us use your basketball court," said the Mujahideen.

Krasonia realized that violence had become the standard way of getting things done in Mostar. Instead of arguing, or trying to find armed guards to safeguard the church, he said, sure, you can use the court.

Now Mujahideen and Catholics, enemies during the war, share the court, says Mowat, adding that, "I've even shot a few baskets there myself."

"It's these tiny acts of grace that change things," he says.

### On to Korea

In his book, the *Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell describes people he calls "connectors" who get things done not

because they have great resources, but because of their extraordinary interest in other people and their ability to make friends wherever they go.

That term fits Mowat, who always seems to be running into someone at just the right time. Those kinds of spontaneous connections landed him in North Korea.

While back home from one of his Bosnia trips, Mowat ran into an acquaintance who served on the board of World Concern. His friend mentioned that the charity was looking to respond to the needs of Bosnia. Before long, Mowat was facilitating World Concern's work in Bosnia, and would eventually chair their board.

While on the board, he got to know Al York, the organization's director of international programs. In 1999, York mentioned that he was headed to North Korea and then on to the North Korean-Manchurian border to work with refugees. A devastating famine in North Korea had forced the country to



Don Mowat with his North Korean translator

open its door to aid workers.

On the spur of the moment, Mowat asked to go along. York said that the chances of doing that were slim. There was no way of knowing ahead of time if Mowat could get a visa—those were handled at the North Korean consulate in Beijing. Mowat, who had contacts in China, was willing to take the risk. Even if he couldn't get into North Korea, he could visit his friends in China and then go with York to the border.

A few months later, the two met up in Beijing. They had arrived a couple of days before the next scheduled Air Koryo flight to Pyongyang. (North Korea's official airline operates one weekly



A young girl from North Korea

flight from China.)

At the embassy, York learned there was a delay in his visa and he was told to return the next day. He also found out there would be no visa for Mowat. The next day, when they returned for York's visa, they got a surprise. A visa had also been approved for Mowat and would be ready in a few hours.

The next morning, visa in hand, Mowat joined York on a Soviet-era Tupolev-154 airliner, headed for Pyongyang. Entering North Korea is almost like vanishing off the planet—no phone contact, no email, no TV, no radio, and no way out of the country for at least a week.

When they arrived, York was cleared by security officials. But Mowat's name wasn't on the list. Despite the visa in his hand, the officials took him into custody and locked him in a windowless room to wait for further instructions.

"I had a strange sense of peace," Mowat says. "This was kind of an adventure—God was with me and I was there for a purpose."

A few hours later, the security officials let him out, still puzzled on why the Beijing embassy had granted the visa, but willing to let him in.

During their long ride to Pyongyang from the airport in a government car, Mowat and York saw few other vehi-

cles, despite riding on a six-lane highway. Even in the capital itself, they saw only government cars, along with the occasional military truck loaded with civilians—the North Korean equivalent of a mass transit system.

"The impressions going in are of these wide, manicured boulevards with no one on them," Mowat says. "Pyongyang is like a movie set." When they did see ordinary North Koreans, it was usually school children, all marching in a line, with military precision.

The first stop on any official trip to Pyongyang is to the great bronze statue of Kim Il Sung, known as the Great Leader, who died in 1994. (His son, Kim Jong Il, North Korea's current ruler, is known as the Dear Leader.) Out of courtesy, Mowat and York bought flowers and stood before the statue—unlike their Korean overseers, they were not required to bow before the statue as a sign of the Great Leader's supposed divinity.

During his first visit, Mowat joined York in monitoring supplies that World Concern had shipped in—medicines, farming supplies, soybeans to make soy milk (used to feed orphans), and high-value food items like oil and rice, given to children leaving the hospital after being treated for malnutrition.

Since 1999, Mowat has returned to North Korea repeatedly on monitoring trips. It's a hard process. Without Western assistance the country cannot feed its people. The Juche philosophy and a cultural need to save face make working in the country difficult. And making sure aid gets into the right hands is difficult in a country with as many needs as North Korea.

Mowat has since left the board of World Concern, but continues working in North Korea, bringing resources to feed orphans and support schools and hospitals. Wherever he goes, he tries to make a personal connection—with doctors and nurses, or the caregivers in orphanages or hospitals. That can be as simple as kneeling down to speak with parents and their children, who are dying from malnutrition.

Because of the secretive nature of the North Korean government, no one

“I had come with the idea that we could fix it, make it go away, make it better.... Suddenly I realized that wasn’t going to be the case.”

knows the full extent of food shortages in North Korea. According to a 2004 report from the World Food Program (WFP) and UNICEF, children in the country are in dire need. The report’s details are haunting: “37 percent of children under six were stunted, 23 percent were underweight, and 7 percent were wasted. One third of mothers with small children were malnourished and anaemic.” The country has limited arable land, and an ongoing energy crisis means that fuel for farm equipment, and other essentials such as fertilizer and seeds, are in short supply. The WFP estimates that in 2006, the country fell 800,000 metric tons (or 15 percent of the country’s need) short in its rice and maize harvests.

During his visits, Mowat is expected to maintain a certain distance, out of decorum. Instead, he often holds babies or gets down to their level. When children are close to dying in the hospital, often their mother will come and stay with them.

“If I can,” he says, “I will get down on my knees on the mat and I will take the mother’s hand or take the baby’s hand or touch the baby’s face. I will speak to them in English—something like, ‘God bless you,’ or ‘I am praying for you.’”

That connection to suffering people sustains Mowat when he is at the negotiating table with North Korean officials. Because of the government’s Juche ideal, often officials put up roadblocks on projects designed to help their own people. At times Mowat is tempted to throw up his hands and walk away, frustrated with a country run on intimidation and fear. When that happens, the words of Jesus, “Love your enemy,” come to mind.

“My greatest threat to the North Koreans is that I will break down their fear,” he says. “There is no greater threat to them than love. It is the only thing that will break down that fear.”

With conflict flaring in Iraq and Afghanistan, and international tensions brewing in North Korea and

Iran, Mowat hopes that Christians in America will pay attention to Jesus’s words, instead of dismissing them as impractical.

“People ask how I deal with the North Koreans,” Mowat says. “It takes all I’ve got. I take very literally the fact that I see them as being created in God’s image. Loving the enemy takes us to a whole new place in our faith. We can dismiss Jesus’s teaching as just sentimental words—or we can believe that they are true. We have to make that choice—and I have seen the potential

everyone listened.”

Negotiations for the hospital broke down this past fall, after North Korea’s latest missile test, and recently restarted, with hopes that CURE may be able to rehab an existing hospital.

Mowat hopes that one day, change will come to North Korea, and with it, wholesale improvements in the lives of people he has come to love. Until then, he will keep working, convinced of the power of small acts of faithfulness and unconditional love.

This month he goes back to North



Children of a North Korean orphanage

for love to cast out fear.”

Mowat’s persistence in loving North Korean officials has begun to pay off. Because the government trusts him, he was asked to help negotiate an agreement for CURE International, an international non-profit that builds pediatric orthopedic hospitals in places like Africa, Vietnam, and Afghanistan.

CURE is partnering with a number of Korean American relief groups on the hospital project. Last year, Mowat went to North Korea with Craig Hammon and Timothy Park, a Korean American Covenant pastor from southern California and director of Global Assistance Partners, one of the groups working with CURE.

“During the negotiations for the hospital, Don said very little,” Hammon says. “But when he did speak,

Korea and then to the North Korean-Manchurian border, with his new friend, Timothy Park. In the winter, many North Korean refugees come across the Yalu River, where they are taken in by Chinese Christians, who feed and shelter them.

“North Koreans have been told all their lives that Christians are evil, that church is evil,” says Park. “But they have also come to know that Christians are the only ones who will help them without condition. We have to show them the amazing love of God with food and medicine before we can tell them about that love.”

And somewhere in the background, as he listens and worships with refugees and Chinese Christians, Mowat will be smiling and thinking of shooting baskets in Pyongyang. □