

Commentary: Praying for some snowboard diplomacy

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(RNS) — The Washington Post reports that one of Vice President Mike Pence's key goals in going to the Winter Olympics in Seoul is "to ensure that the Olympics don't turn into an opportunity for North Korea to burnish its image on the world stage."

I am inclined to indulge in some sarcasm about that. Imagine — a nation sending its athletes to the Olympics for the purpose of image-burnishing! It certainly isn't the kind of thing *our* government would do. We can only hope that Mr. Pence will bear witness to the fact that all of the money we spend sending our athletes to Seoul is simply out of a love for healthy competition among talented individuals from many countries.

Seriously, though. I understand the concern about North Korea's involvement at Seoul. Kim Jong Un is a wickedly corrupt dictator who has caused immense suffering among his people and is a serious threat to life on this planet. I am not sanguine about his motives for sending his delegation to the Winter Games. But neither should we see the participation of North Korean athletes simply in terms of the political motives of the government that is sponsoring them.

When I was in China last year an academic friend there made some critical remarks about President Trump. Then he added a remark that caught me up short: "We sure wish he was more like President Nixon!"

It had been a long time since I had heard a positive word about Richard Nixon's presidential leadership. The word of praise from a Chinese perspective should not have surprised me, though. The friend who made that comment to me is a Christian whose parents had suffered much for

their faith during the decades when China was closed to the West.

In spite of all that we hear in the American Christian community these days about restrictions on religious practice in China, my friend — and many other Christians like him — sees the present situation as being much more favorable for the practice of their faith than was even conceivable a half-century ago. For his generation of Christians, President Nixon's positive engagement with China's political leadership was the beginning of good things for the life of the church in their country.



Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong, left, and U.S. President Richard Nixon shake hands as they meet in Beijing on Feb. 21, 1972. (AP Photo, File via RNS; caption amended by RNS)

And competitive games had much to do with that opening-up. In 1971 the

United States sent pingpong players to an international table tennis tournament in Tokyo, where, as a result of contacts with the Chinese team also present there, the Americans were invited to visit China later that year. In 1972, when Nixon made his historic trip to China to meet with Mao Zedong — a brutal dictator in his own right — the president was accompanied by American table tennis players. Thus the phrase “pingpong diplomacy.”

I have been reading glowing articles about Chloe Kim, the teenage snowboarder from Southern California who will be representing the USA in Seoul. She is a gifted athlete from a Korean-American immigrant family who is expected to star in these games. She will also, undoubtedly, burnish our image in Seoul. I don't have to approve of the policies or the motives of our government in order to cheer her on.

I also hope that the North Korean athletes have a good experience in Seoul. I am happy that they will be there. I hope Pence meets them and wishes them well. I hope he also has some private conversations with the high-level North Korean government officials who are accompanying their athletes. If so, there may come a day when some Christian in North Korea praises Pence for his leadership. Maybe they'll call it “snowboard diplomacy.” I'll be praying for that.

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