

Letters from Overseas

Rob and Keiko Witmer Write from Japan

Greetings to family, friends and co-workers in Japan, Canada, and around the world

December 2009

As I sit before my computer to write this letter, the snow lies thick and white upon the ground. It is good to take time to remember all of you and to offer you our deepest thanks for being together with us in this time and place that God has given to us. 2009 has been a bit of a milestone for me, since it has now been more than 40 years since Japan has been such a big part of my life. I arrived here September 8, 1969.



The Dohoku Centre has had a busy year in 2009. I cannot begin to go into details but I will share with you two major events, one joyful and one sad. In May, we were pleased to welcome a group of seven women from four different provinces across Canada for a period of 10 days during which time they visited the centre as well as all 10 churches in the Dohoku (northern Hokkaido) Sub-district.

This trip was arranged through Calling Lakes Centre in Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, a United Church education centre with which we have a special relationship. It was a memorable time of sharing and growing together for all who participated. Our sub-district is already thinking of a possible visit to Saskatchewan and Calling Lakes Centre in 2011.

The sad event was the passing of our very dear and close friend Megumu Ono. I know very few of you even know him, but his sudden death in June of the very rare disease mesothelioma was a great shock to us. He was only 58 and died after less than a week in hospital. We had worked together for more than 20 years. His wife died of cancer in 2000 in her early 40s and they leave two sons, both studying for the Christian ministry. They have become part of our "extended family."

For the rest, with our co-worker Kuriko Fujiyoshi, Keiko and I continue to plan and participate in Three Love (love for God, love for humanity, love for the soil) Seminars held twice a year at the centre. The Three Love Seminars look at issues and concerns of rural life and community as well as directions for the future. In addition, we conduct workshops on hunger and food security, hold an annual event that looks at the Bible from the perspective of agriculture, facilitate rural experiences for young people living in urban areas, and visit farm people all over Hokkaido to strengthen and expand the network of those who share Three Love values. This year the odometer on our car passed the 240,000 km mark.

Along with the work around rural issues, centre staff continue to work with the churches in the sub-district. One of those churches, the Bibaushi Gospel Church, which has only two members, built a new sanctuary this year. Needless to say, this was only possible through the support of the entire sub-district and churches and supporters throughout Japan (as well as some in Canada). On August 23, the day of the dedication of the new sanctuary, a double rainbow appeared right above the cross on the roof of the new building. We believe that this is a sign expressing God's blessing and promise that even a church with only two people has a role to play in God's plan.

The pastors in the sub-district have made hooded sweatshirts and T-shirts that have been sold to raise money for the church, and some of us have written campaign songs. One of the pastors and I have teamed up to visit several churches in Hokkaido and raise money for the church. There is a good feeling, a lot of laughter and excitement in the air.

Besides the centre and sub-district work, I have been very busy this year with more speaking engagements than ever before on topics ranging from the social rehabilitation of people under psychiatric care, agriculture and rural life, Christian education, and Christian faith. Many of those listening to me were not Christians and I hope that, in even a small way, I was able to point people in the direction of God's love and the gospel of Christ that calls us to choose life.

I also chair the Ainu Issues Committee of the Hokkai District. The Ainu people are the Aboriginal people of northern Japan and their history has been very similar to that of Aboriginal people in Canada. In fact, it was only last year that the Japanese government finally recognized them as Aboriginal people. Each year, our committee plans a study tour to some part of Hokkaido where we can meet with Ainu people and hear their stories.

We are not trying to "evangelize" Ainu people but to build a new relationship and find ways of working together as they seek to reclaim their dignity and their rights. This year we heard terrible stories about how the graves of Ainu people has been desecrated and robbed as late as the 1960s and the bones carried off to Hokkaido University for "research" purposes. Please remember the Ainu people living and struggling in Japan.

Keiko continues to be deeply involved in the Nayoro church, which celebrated its 100th anniversary this year. After several years with no young children, this year there are suddenly seven, all under the age of five. It's almost impossible to measure the joy and expectation this has given to older members of the congregation. They just love all the noise that these children make.

The two recipe books that were put together by Three Love women, including Keiko, in 1998 and 2001, are still being reprinted every year and have now sold more than 10,000 copies. The national church newspaper, "Friend of the Heart," has decided to do a year-long feature on them introducing not only the recipes but also the problems and the possibilities that exist in rural Japan. Not bad for a little book they expected to staple together and simply share with friends.

In our family, Manna (33) continues to work as an elementary school teacher in Dubai. This is her third year there and will likely be her last (I think that's what I said last year too). Nathan (31) and Minori continue to operate the Farmer's café in Nayoro. Nathan is in his fourth year now and has built up a clientele of regular customers. Martin (28) continues his work in Yokohama and has been to various places in the world again this year.



Japan has a new government that is in difficulty, probably because they have had so little experience governing. It is not clear where they are really trying to go yet. The yen remains strong, which is not good for an export economy like Japan's. The suicide rate remains high and the vacuum in values continues. People are not looking for hope in established religions, including the Christian church. Remember this country in God's plan.

I am coming to the end of the page. I guess this is as far as I can go this year. We are here, doing what we do, only because of your prayers and your continued support of our work. We thank you all and we ask that you remember the church in Japan. May we, together, turn to God, believing in the truth of God's love and grace. May we proclaim life. May we seek peace. May we find healing. May we hold one another's hands. And may we walk with God into the future planned for us. May we break bread together at the great banquet.

God's richest blessings to you all during this season of celebration and throughout 2010.

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***Rob and Keiko Witmer** are United Church of Canada global mission personnel serving with the United Church of Christ in Japan. The work of this global partner and the work of overseas personnel is made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.*

