

# Letters from Overseas

## Robert and Keiko Witmer Write from Japan

Greetings to all and thank you so much for your concern and prayers! I am writing to say that we, our children, and Keiko's family and relatives are all fine at this time.

There has been very little damage to either human beings or buildings in Hokkaido so far. There were some tsunami in Hokkaido that reached a height of close to three metres and there are still tsunami warnings in effect for almost all of Japan.

The greatest damage has been in Northern Honshu where earthquakes are continuing to occur and where the tsunami has caused the most damage. Estimates of damage and loss of human life are, at this point, nothing more than estimates because it is impossible to get into many areas to actually confirm how much damage has taken place. It may take many more days before the picture becomes clear.

In northern Hokkaido we have very few earthquakes that can actually be felt. But yesterday, we were in another city in Hokkaido and felt the shock of yesterday's quake. It was stronger and longer than any quake I have experienced during my time in Japan. This quake is very serious not only because of its magnitude, but also because of the accompanying tsunami. This is something that did not happen in the Kobe earthquake of 1995.

Apparently there is news in Canada about the possible meltdown of a nuclear reactor. This is a possibility as there are several reactors near where the quakes are taking place. However, it has fortunately not happened yet.

Please remember the people in Japan and the church in Japan as, together, we go through this difficult time.

### **March 13, 2011**

Hello to you all! Let me begin by saying again that our family and all of Keiko's relatives are safe and fine. There was some damage in Hokkaido caused by tsunami and one person in Hakodate (a major harbour in southern Hokkaido) died.

Most of the damage has been in coastal towns and cities along the east coast of Honshu, Japan's largest island. This has been caused primarily by the tsunami and some communities are still entirely under water, hindering rescue efforts and making it impossible to get accurate information about what damage has actually taken place. In many places it is impossible to confirm whether people are safe or even alive. The tsunami warnings have ended for now, but aftershocks, some of them quite strong, as well as the separate but connected quake that took place in Nagano prefecture, continue to occur at the present time.

Japan's Self Defence Forces and rescue teams from many countries (including Canada?) are now hard at work trying to rescue people and deliver food and clothing, etc. to those in need.

There was an explosion at a nuclear reactor but there has not been a meltdown at this point. There is fear that there may be another explosion but it is not clear how much radiation would be released. Information around the reactors here is quite ambiguous. Actually, you may have more accurate information there than we do. People around the reactors have been evacuated and the distance from the reactors has been increased.

There has been absolutely nothing on Japanese TV for the last three days except news about the earthquake. Now that we are into the third day we are seeing more interviews with people who have been rescued and reunited as well as visual images of the tsunami approaching and the damage which it caused taken by ordinary people on the ground.

There are many places where the the transportation system is at a standstill, where mail service is stopped, where people are being asked to limit their use of electricity, and where there are limits on the amount of gas you can put in your car.

As I said in my earlier e-mail it will be several days at least before we have anything close to an accurate idea of the extent of the damage and the number of lives lost. This earthquake has been upgraded to magnitude 9 and is the strongest ever experienced in Japan (for at least as long as records have been kept). However, it is not only the magnitude but the geographical extent of the quake and the accompanying tsunami that have been most striking and that make it impossible to calculate the damage and loss of life at this time.

For those of you who may have friends or acquaintances in Japan where the damage has been most severe let me add that we know of no serious damage to schools, churches, or to people with whom we have a direct connection in those areas.

Thank you again for your prayers and solidarity. There is always strength in knowing that we are not alone. Please remember those going through great pain and loss at this time, and all of Japan as it seeks to find a way forward despite deep shock and devastating sadness.

### **March 15, 2011**

Greetings to all! What kind of update can I give you? So many things are still unknown. I'm thinking now it make take a month or even more before we have any accurate idea of either damage or loss of life. But loss of life looks to be well over 10,000 at this point. All television stations continue to focus on the earthquake and the continuing devastation.



Today, there has been a lot of time devoted to the nuclear danger. Two reactors in Fukushima prefecture north of Tokyo have experienced hydrogen explosions and this morning a third reactor, which is part of the same complex, experienced a different kind of explosion. The fuel rods were exposed and the water they were trying to put into the reactor to cool them off was inadequate. They believe that the inner core of the reactor was damaged in the explosion and it seems clear that radiation is leaking from the reactor.

Most workers, except those working to put more water into the reactor have been evacuated, residents have been evacuated, and people who have been evacuated are being encouraged to stay indoors and avoid exposure to rain. Official explanations continue to be cautious and ambiguous. I think those doing the explaining are not sure themselves of what is actually happening. Again, it will take more time to really know the situation. No one is officially calling this a "meltdown" at this point (as far as I am aware) but it must be very close and well on its way with little possibility of turning things around. Powerful aftershocks continue in several places around northern Honshu.

Again, let me say that the people we know and with whom we have any kind of direct connection, as well as churches and schools, etc., all seem to be safe at this time. If there is any change I will be sure to let you know as soon as possible. The Hoshinos, who were in London Conference from 1985 to 1988, experienced a slight tsunami but are safe and sound with no damage to buildings.

Let us only say in closing that we appreciate your prayers and your concern. We are not alone! And that in itself is a source of strength and hope!!!!

Rob and Keiko Witmer

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

