

Letters from Overseas

Robert and Keiko Witmer Write from Japan

March 17, 2011

Greetings to all:

As always, we thank you for your continuing concern and prayers.



Things have toned down here somewhat. Private TV stations have gone back to regular programming. There is more focus on relief efforts, on the disruption of the transportation system, on the lack of food and other provisions as well as on the planned stoppages of electricity, shortages of gasoline, etc.

In the midst of it all the nuclear concern goes on. I'm sure you are all probably aware that there has been extensive damage of different kinds to four nuclear reactors (all part of one complex) in Fukushima prefecture. Constant efforts are being made to cool down fuel rods and keep emissions of radiation to a minimum. They may have achieved some modicum of success but at this point it is still very unclear where we are headed. The media is calling for people to remain calm and get accurate information before panicking, and telling us that the radiation is not at a level that can cause serious harm. People in the areas most affected have been moved to a distance of more than 30 km from the reactors but many, especially those with small children, are trying to find refuge further away and are moving both north and south in an attempt to do so. We have actually been receiving inquiries at the Dohoku Centre and, of course, we would be willing to take people in, if necessary, but, since we are not an apartment building, we could only do so in an emergency and for a short period of time.

Rescue teams from the U.S., the U.K., South Korea, and France have all pulled back further. The U.S., U.K., and South Korea have pulled back 80 km and the French have pulled back as far as Sendai, according to today's paper.

Our program with people under psychiatric care includes a dormitory and is open to receiving people from the affected areas. We also expect to send staff from this program to work in the places where people have taken refuge in order to help provide mental care for those under extreme stress.

One problem hindering relief efforts is the geographical scale of the damage. Although the number of people who have taken refuge is actually less than

the number at the time of the Kobe earthquake in 1995, they are scattered over a much wider area in twice as many locations as there were in Kobe and the transportation system is still not functioning in some areas. We are getting, bit by bit, news of damage to houses, churches, and other organizations. The chapel and cafeteria of the Asian Rural Institute (a United Church partner in Japan) in Tochigi prefecture was apparently heavily damaged. We also hear concerns about the state of the Japan Christian Center in Waseda, Tokyo. This is where the United Church of Christ in Japan (Kyodan) headquarters, as well as the "shadan" office, which manages property in Japan on behalf of five North American denominations are located. A meeting of the shadan board (of which I am a member) planned for March 22 has been cancelled.

Strong aftershocks continue to take place and will continue for at least a month, we are told. Meanwhile, in Hokkaido, things are calm and we are not experiencing shortages of any kind at this point.

Our son Martin, who has been in the Czech Republic the last two weeks, comes back to Tokyo and his home in Yokohama today. We hope he arrives safely and that his apartment will be in a good state and that he will be safe there while this momentous disaster continues to play itself out in our midst.

Please feel free to share any information here with anyone that you feel might be interested. It is interesting to see how people in the areas most affected are responding.

Listening to people's comments, 1 Corinthians 13 really seems to come alive when people experience crisis and disaster. There is such an outpouring of gratitude, patience, kindness, humility, generosity, and solidarity. Each day we hear these comments from people who have lost almost everything but who know that there are others who have lost even more. And those comments, filled with love, call us to have faith and to know the power that comes from not losing hope. What a privilege to hear such comments and to have the chance to remember such people in prayer.

Rob & 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.

