

Letters from Overseas

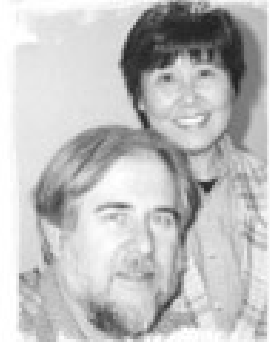
Robert and Keiko Witmer Write from Japan

Greetings to friends in Canada and around the world.

April 8, 2011

Thank you for your continued concern and prayers for what has happened and is happening in Japan.

It is now four weeks since the March 11 earthquake and tsunami and what has happened over that period of time is that what was thought to be one disaster has actually become two separate disasters, one the work of nature and the other brought about by human hands.



On the one hand, there is the continuing devastation caused by the earthquake and the tsunami. It may have been reported where you are, but we now know that the worst tsunami were as high as 38 metres. Strong aftershocks occurred daily, hindering relief efforts, cutting off electricity, and placing people under unimaginable stress. We hear stories of people who are in a constant state of trembling wondering when the next aftershock will come. I'm sure the very strong aftershock that occurred in northern Honshu late at night (Japan time) on Thursday April 7 has been reported where you are.

Nayoro, where we live, is a "military town" and the Japan Ground Self Defense Forces base here is not only the largest employer but also provides the major part of the economic base on which Nayoro stands. More than 100,000 Japanese soldiers nationwide have been sent to the disaster areas to engage in relief work, including most of those who live and work here. One of them is a member of the Nayoro church and he has been sending regular e-mails to us about what he is experiencing.

I believe his e-mails are not just information for us but that, for him, they are a form of prayer, confession, and healing. He writes about the dead bodies he has recovered, about families that have been torn apart by this disaster, and about families that have been miraculously saved. He writes about the smell of death, of wreckage, and of scum left over by the tsunami. He writes about politicians who visit the disaster areas for photo opportunities but in fact pay little real attention to those who are suffering or to those who are attempting to provide relief to those in need.

He writes about the snow that has melted since he went to the area four weeks ago and how spring flowers are beginning to bloom amid the devastation, heralding new life and a new beginning, like light shining in darkness, like the dawn of a new day. He writes about his work there as the greatest "mission" he has ever been involved in as a member of the Self Defense forces. And I, for one, am glad that his greatest mission was as part of a rescue and relief team rather than as a soldier fighting in combat. He does not know when he will be coming back to Nayoro and, so, finally, he asks us to remember and to pray.

Two pastors from our Northern Hokkaido (Dohoku) Sub-district are also in the disaster areas. One of them has been there for three weeks and another went only recently for a period of 10 days. They are both there working directly with churches that have been damaged and with pastors who are under a heavy burden of stress, trying in even a small way to be a source of comfort and support.

Contributions and relief in a myriad of forms continue to flow into Japan from all over the world, including Canada, and The United Church of Canada, and people here continue to be overwhelmed and grateful.

But what I have written above is not what is in the news now. As I'm sure you well know, focus on the relief efforts has given way to what is happening with the nuclear reactors in Fukushima. And here there is still no end in sight. Many people of other nationalities have already returned to their own countries. And people (especially tourists) are just not coming to Japan. Fish and agricultural produce of all kinds from the area around Fukushima can find no market. And this situation will not change tomorrow even if it can be shown that levels of radioactivity are low. Every time they think they have solved something, a new problem seems to emerge. The work goes on step by step, but even if they are successful in bringing the reactors under control (and there is no guarantee that they will be at this point) the effects of this nuclear accident will go on for decades at least. We have many farmer friends in Fukushima and we remember them and hold them up to God.

And so here we are.

Looking for the light and believing that the light surely does shine in the darkness. And that the darkness does not and will not overcome it.

Thanks be to God that we are not alone.

Thanks to you all.
Rob and Keiko Witmer

Robert 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.

