

Letters from Overseas

Rob and Keiko Witmer Write from Japan

April 23, 2011

Greetings to friends in Canada and around the world,

Thank you for your continuing concern and prayers for Japan and the people of Japan.



Things have very much quieted down here although the drama of the nuclear reactors in Fukushima continues unabated. The Tokyo Electric Power Company is now suggesting that it will be perhaps nine months before the fuel rods in the reactors can be cooled and the reactors themselves shut down. This seems a very arbitrary timeline and we know from both Three Mile Island and Chernobyl that it will be many years before this whole matter comes to an end, if it ever does actually come to an end.

We are hearing new, and much higher, figures about the amount of radiation that has been released into the sea and atmosphere. Farmers and fishers continue to face restrictions on what they can ship to market and consumers continue to shy away from any food product that comes from anywhere even close to Fukushima, despite assurances of low levels of radiation. The area within a 20 km radius of the reactors is in the process of being sealed off completely and indefinitely. Hopefully, this tragedy will make us more aware of some of the dangers inherent in nuclear energy and provide opportunities to reflect on our lifestyles and also to consider new and other sources of energy.

In the areas hit hardest by the earthquake and tsunami, the work of looking for those missing or dead, of moving debris, and of hauling and distributing necessary goods to those living in shelters goes on quietly and inconspicuously. The cherry blossoms are blooming and there are stories of how evacuees found strength just by having the chance to view them. The school year in Japan begins in April and there are stories of how happy children are to be able to go back to school, although some are going to new schools because their old school was destroyed or damaged in the earthquake and tsunami. There are stories about how happy the children are to have the lunch provided by the school although, at present, it consists of only a bread roll and a small carton of milk.

There are stories about small numbers of people moving into the temporary housing units that have been erected, but also stories about places where they have had to stop work on temporary housing because of huge fissures found in the earth that make construction unsafe. There are stories about people who have gone back to their town with the intention of cleaning up their house and shop to get back in business, but also stories about people for whom that is not an option, people who don't know where to turn or what to do next. It has become clear that more than 90 percent of those who perished died by drowning, in contrast to the Kobe earthquake of 1995 when over 80 percent died in collapsed buildings.

As the days pass, and, even though, little by little, progress is being made, more and more the people of Japan everywhere become victims to what one Japanese psychiatrist has called *kyokan hiro*. Here I go, teaching you some Japanese again. *Kyokan* is a word that means "shared feeling". *Hiro* means "fatigue." The people who experienced the earthquake and tsunami, the people near the nuclear reactors who have had to leave their homes and are unable to market their produce, the people working hard to provide relief and assistance in a multitude of ways, the people exposed to this reality daily either on television, radio, or reading about it in the newspaper all experience, at perhaps varying levels, what might truly

be called a "shared feeling of fatigue." The Dohoku Centre English School started this year on April 6 but attendance at adult conversation classes has been lower than at any time I can remember. It is true that, with the Japanese fiscal year beginning in April, it is a busy time for many people but, this time, I believe it is more than that. I think many people are just being so worn down mentally by the situation here that they don't have the energy to come and study English even once a week. We sense this fatigue, to some extent, within ourselves and within those with whom we work. We have heard one story of a soldier who came back from the disaster areas and took his own life. I believe there will be more in the days ahead. The mental and spiritual care of people will be of the utmost importance over the long term.

Tadao Miura, who visited Canada during our period of home assignment and travelled with us in Saskatchewan and Manitoba for two weeks, is a minister working in northern Hokkaido, but he has spent the last three weeks in Iwate prefecture, one of the areas hit hardest by the earthquake and tsunami. When he got there he found that some of the people involved in the relief work were working 24 hours a day. He was able to put in place a system where the people in the area where he was took time to share openly and honestly about what they were going through each morning and evening and limited themselves to two hours of relief work in the morning and another two hours in the afternoon. It has given people much-needed space and time for reflection and renewal. He will be returning to Iwate after Easter for an additional three weeks. My role during his time there will be to help fill in for him at his church in Hokkaido.

We have received numerous cards and prayers this week from people in different parts of Canada. These prayers are a great source of strength and we are working on ways to share them with as many people as we can. I have all the prayers and cards up on large sheets of paper which we can take around to churches in our area and share with the people there. But we are looking for ways to share them with people all over Japan. Japan is going through a period of *kyokan hiro*. This cannot be avoided. It is a difficult time for everyone. But connecting with others close to home and around the world, and finding the assurance that God is still with us, can, I believe, be a source of *kyokan chikara*. *Kyokan chikara*, a word that I made up in response to *kyokan hiro*, means a "shared sense of strength" or "empowerment." I believe this can be found in the assurance that we are not alone, that we live in God's world, and that we are connected to others all over the world whose faith and solidarity hold up all the people of Japan in this time of sadness and tragedy.

Thank you all always!

At this time of year, may we know with assurance that the risen Christ, who still bears the wounds of his suffering, is with all those who suffer to share their burdens, to brighten their darkness with God's love, and to bring rest, healing, and the possibility of new life to each one.

Rob & Keiko Witmer

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.

