

# Letters from Overseas

## Rob and Keiko Witmer Write an Advent Letter from Japan

December 2011

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

It is December and the snow is falling gently as I sit down to share with you some of what we have experienced during this past year.

The most momentous event, of course, was the huge earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident that struck Japan on March 11. More than 15,000 have died, close to 4,000 are still unaccounted for, and more than 330,000 people are still displaced. Of those displaced some are living in temporary emergency housing units or whatever public housing is available, some are living with relatives or friends in other parts of Japan, some are living in communities that have welcomed people from the disaster areas, and some have even gone to other countries to live. We have many friends who farm in Fukushima. For some, high levels of radiation make it impossible for them to market their produce; for others, even though levels of radiation may be low, consumers shy away from products as soon as they hear the word "Fukushima." Reconstruction will not come in a year or two. People will need prayerful support over a long period to sustain hope and to keep moving forward toward a new day. We thank you all for your concern and prayers for the people of Japan since March 11 and ask that you will continue to keep them in your hearts in the days ahead.



For us, this year in Japan has been made busier than usual through several unexpected events. Since April, I have become the "chaplain" of Nayoro Kindergarten, a private kindergarten related to Nayoro church. The main part of my work is having a monthly Bible study with the staff. Since they are not Christians but are expected to do Christian education through the kindergarten program, they are eager to know more about the Bible and to share Biblical values with the children and to incorporate them into their own lives. The sudden resignation of the minister of Nayoro church at the end of July has meant that I have also become the interim minister as of August. Nayoro church is a very welcoming and community-involved church but, needless to say, it places new constraints on time for other, especially Centre, activities. My main responsibilities are preaching at least twice a month and arranging Bible study and sharing with those who wish to know more about Christian faith. Keiko is on the steering committee of the kindergarten and the board of Nayoro church and so we are both deeply involved in both of these areas of work.

The gifts of our co-worker Kuriko Fujiyoshi have been recognized by a large church in Asahikawa (about 75 km south of Nayoro) and she has been asked to help with youth programming there twice a month. She is having a very positive influence in this church but so much church involvement for all of us has made it more difficult for all of us to engage together in Centre activities.

Still, we have held our Three Love Seminars winter and summer, hosted our annual event on the Bible and Agriculture in March, put out our newsletters on time, hosted a variety of groups at the Centre (including a group of indigenous theological students from Taiwan), organized or participated in events around peace and/or nuclear energy issues, and visited farms throughout Hokkaido. Overall it has been a very intense but fruitful year.

A highlight for us was receiving a number of guests from The United Church of Canada. In late September we were pleased to first welcome Pat Elson, Program Coordinator for Asia Partnerships. Pat met with the Centre board members to talk about the future of the Dohoku Centre as well as discuss possibilities for continuing partnership. The day Pat left Hokkaido to go to Tokyo, we welcomed Cory Bentley, Wanda (Masumi) Yamamoto, and Matthew Stevens. Cory is a student at Queen's, Wanda works with refugees in Winnipeg, and Matthew is the Stewardship Education and Justice Minister of London Conference. While they were here they visited churches and farms, connected with the Ainu aboriginal people of northern Japan, and learned about the work of the Dohoku Centre Fukushima, a program seeking the social rehabilitation and participation of persons under psychiatric care. Matthew preached in Nayoro church on October 2, World Mission Sunday, and the worship offering from every church in the Dohoku Sub-district on that day will be sent to Calling Lakes Centre in Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan. Matthew's sermon has been translated into Japanese and will appear in "Noya," the newsletter of the Ainu Peoples Resource Centre.

Some of you may be surprised to know that, since our return from Home Assignment in Canada last December, I have been asked to make numerous presentations on what is happening in The United Church of Canada. There is a genuine interest in the cooperative relationship that we share and church people here are especially hoping to learn new ways of involving laypeople and are stimulated by the notions of Designated Lay Ministers, Licensed Lay Worship Leaders, and Sacraments Elders. It is a good time to be in partnership with the churches in Hokkaido.

It has been a year for natural disasters. It was a shock to learn that the tornado that struck Goderich in August completely destroyed the house and restaurant where I grew up on West Street. A small disaster perhaps compared with Japan, Thailand, and many other places in the world, but nevertheless painful. It helps me imagine an even more unspeakable pain that so many must be experiencing. I have many friends who find themselves unable to say "Merry Christmas" this year.

And yet in the midst of so much pain and suffering, of loss and uncertainty we seek the light in the darkness, we seek the assurance that we have not been abandoned, and we look to a day when we shall be able to sing a gentle hallelujah not because everything is perfect but because somewhere deep in our hearts we have understood that God is with us, shares our suffering, and that, in spite of everything, God's love is real.

May the God whose love is real be with us all, now and forever!

Rob & Keiko Witmer

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Visit our global partnership photo site (<http://unitedchurch.smugmug.com>) to see photos of Japan.

**Rob and Keiko Witmer** are United Church of Canada overseas 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.

