

English Presbytery Japan Tsunami Recovery Team (8-21 July 2011)

Trip Report

On 8th July, 11 of us from 6 different churches arrived at Narita airport in Tokyo as part of the July missions team sent out by the English Presbytery to support the tsunami recovery work in the Tohoku (north-eastern) region of Japan under CRASH Japan (www.crashjapan.com).

We were assigned to work with the CRASH Sendai base at Morigo camp but apart from this and knowing that we would be involved in “cleaning” work, none of us really had a clear idea of what we would be doing or how or where we would be working during our time with the base. Doubtless, we each had our own fears of not knowing what to expect and it was helpful that at our first meeting with the Sendai base camp leader, Mayumi Matsushita, she asked us to share our fears and to release them in prayer to the Lord. This helped to set the tone for our next 2 weeks, as the Lord would repeatedly remind our team and volunteers from other teams that HE is the One doing the restoration work in the hearts and lives of the Japanese people in the Tohoku region. What a privilege for us to be channels of His blessings to the people as we obeyed His call to love and serve them.

As I reflect on the 2 weeks in Miyagi Prefecture, I realized how easy it is to see and hear with human eyes and ears and to feel overwhelmed or apathetic, because we think our little efforts won't make much of a difference. So I thank the Lord for the many devotions and testimonies that were shared at the start and end of each work day that kept our focus on Him. Although words cannot fully describe what we saw, heard and experienced, this article seeks to capture some of the precious experiences and learning the Lord has blessed our team with.

What we saw...widespread devastation



Many people have seen photos and videos of the huge tsunami waves and the destruction caused. But the feeling on the ground was a totally different experience.

The day after we arrived, 5 of us were assigned with a CRASH staff to work at a fisherman's house in Ishinomaki. We didn't know what to expect and as we were near the location of the house, someone suggested that we stop at a public toilet in case there wasn't a toilet facility at the house that we could use. So we drove on thinking we could find somewhere suitable along the main street. However, as we continued for over 10 minutes, all we saw were horribly damaged houses, petrol

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stations, convenience shops and other buildings. Everywhere was a mess and we also saw a large pile of trash that appeared to be close to 10 metres high. The roads were deserted, apart from the cars that appeared to be just passing through the town.

Finally, we realized that our search for a toilet was futile, so we turned back and headed to the fisherman's house. His neighbourhood is around 3km away from the coast, yet all around we could see homes substantially destroyed. Many appeared uninhabitable without major restoration work (assuming they can be restored) and the whole neighbourhood was quiet and devoid of people.

It felt a little eerie to see so much destruction all around and to wonder what happened to the people who used to live here. It was also difficult to imagine how and when this neighbourhood can return to what it was, or close to that, before the disaster struck.

Over the next 2 weeks, we visited other areas in the Miyagi Prefecture that also suffered massive destruction. In the farming and industrial areas nearer the coast, we saw factories and farm lands that have been completely "washed out" and huge debris of trees, houses and motor vehicles stuck in the middle of open fields. We also noticed a school (Nakano Elementary School – more on this school below) near the Sendai harbour that had been in the path of the tsunami waves. As we drove past, I felt shudders down my spine as I thought of the children at school as the waves rushed in.

What God sees ... sheep without a shepherd!



My desire to come to Japan to help with the post-tsunami recovery work grew out of the simple prayers I started to make for the country soon after the earthquake and tsunami. As I prayed, I felt the Lord reminding me that He is the Creator who does not desire that any man should perish (2 Peter 3:9). Over time, I realized that if the horror of the disaster can cause me to feel sadness and compassion for these people who are strangers to me, then how much more it must have grieved the Father's heart to see those He created perish forever as the tsunami waves rushed in.

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A song that we learnt in Japanese during our trip was entitled “You are born to be loved”. We learnt this song in order to present it at the Seaside Bible Chapel’s café during the “Singapore Day” we held on 13 July. The meaningful lyrics of this song reminded me of John 3:16-17 and reinforced my earlier impressions that the Lord is looking on the people of Tohoku and the entire nation of Japan with love and compassion, calling their attention to Him in this time of sorrow and mourning.

As I saw the destruction around me and learnt that many people were generally left to fend for themselves as government assistance was limited, I started to understand what Jesus meant about people without Him being like “sheep without a shepherd”. I can just imagine Him wanting to carry and cuddle these people as a shepherd would his sheep that are lost, hurting and frightened.

What we heard... stories of loss, guilt, frustration, fear ... being slowly transformed into stories of hope

From our interactions with the Japanese Christians we met at Morigo Camp and through the Japanese/Japanese speakers in our team, we heard stories of people who have lost family, friends, possessions and their means of livelihood. One family from Tona district of East Matsushima city lost 11 relatives in the disaster and it was only during the time we were working in that area that they were able to arrange for the funeral rites. This would be over 4 months after the disaster, so we can imagine the grief of the remaining family members as they recount their loss.

We also heard that many who lost family members and friends in the disaster felt a deep sense of guilt that they could not save or help them. In particular, a story of how a lady was so overwhelmed by the sight of the oncoming tsunami wave that she let go of the hand of a neighbour’s child who was swept away and never found helped us understand to some extent why many here appear outwardly calm but are inwardly hurting.

Four months on, the trauma of the disaster weighs heavily on many hearts in the Tohoku region and the uncertainty of their future continues to be a worry. News reports and stories from the ground confirm that very little of the aid that has been donated from around the world has reached the hands of the people in need, particularly through government channels. The fisherman from Ishinomaki explained that he had to ask for help to restore his house as the offer of government assistance for demolition and rebuilding of a new house was way too little to enable him and others in a similar situation to consider this option. He had also gone to several financial institutions to try to obtain a loan to rebuild his house but was turned down at every single bank due to his age. A CRASH staff also shared that many people who lived in the shelters were afraid to leave even if there was a possibility of going back to their homes as they would need to provide for themselves in terms of basic necessities once they leave the shelter. This would be difficult for many who have lost their jobs and means of livelihood and who would also need significant amounts of money to repair and restore their homes.

Against this bleak picture of the immense needs in the disaster areas, we heard stories of hope as those who are suffering receive help and comfort from volunteers from within Japan and all over the world. More than these, we heard stories from Japanese believers of how the Lord is uniting the Church in Japan to shine His light in the Tohoku region and of an increased conviction among local believers of the need to bring the hope of Jesus Christ to their people.

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One amazing story that was of great encouragement was the testimony of the school principal of Nakano Elementary School near Sendai Harbour. He shared of how the Lord had been preparing him for the recent disaster since he became the principal 3 years ago and how the Lord answered his prayers which started long before the disaster and allowed all 600 of the evacuees under his care to be saved. The 600 included students, their parents and those living in the district because the school had been pre-designated as the evacuation zone.



In one of my morning devotions during the 2 weeks, the Lord reminded me from Mark 4:26-29 that our role was just to scatter the seed and when the harvest is here, we can proceed to gather in what He has caused to grow. This passage gave me much comfort and hope as it taught me not to focus on my feeble efforts but to trust in the One who can and will give the growth to the seeds that we scatter for Him.

What God hears...the cries of the sufferers and the prayers of His children!

Just as the Lord sees the suffering of the people in Tohoku, I know that He has also heard their cries (spoken and unspoken) from the way He is gathering His children from all over the world into this land to bring His salt of healing and His light of life.

At the same time, I know that He is hearing the prayers of His children for this nation, especially the Church in Japan as they cry out for His mercy and healing of their land that has long been difficult to sow and reap in.

It is so wonderful to know that our God is a God who hears our prayers and takes them seriously. During our team debriefs, we heard how He answered many of our prayers for physical strength and sustenance through previous injuries or health discomforts as we worked. Even when we felt helpless as we saw the extent of the devastation, He reminded us that we could still help through prayer. We've realized that heartfelt prayers are the best thing we can give the Japanese people and that the end of our 2 weeks in Miyagi prefecture was not the end of our involvement with Japan, but actually the beginning. May He find us faithful in continuing to pray for this nation.

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What we did...restoring homes, gardens, fields ... and Hope!



Most of our time during the trip was spent doing physical labour to help affected families restore their homes, gardens and for those with farm land, their fields. Apart from destroying everything that were in their path, the tsunami waves brought along all kinds of debris, mud, sand and seawater into people's homes, their gardens and fields.

At one field in Sendai-Wakayabashi belonging to a vegetable farmer, we were requested to pick up rocks, pipes, plastic, and debris – anything foreign to the soil from the field that he had earlier plowed with his tractor. This was a process that had to be repeated for more than 5 times, so that all the foreign things that have become embedded in the soil can be removed as much as possible before the land can be used for planting again. Around this time, my personal devotions were on the parable of the sower, so I found it easy to appreciate what this farmer was talking about since the Bible already teaches that a good crop can only come out of good soil!

What God is doing...restoring hearts to Himself

As we went out to work each day, we did not always know which house or field we would be working in. This was especially so in Tona district, which is an area close to the beautiful seaside town of Matsushima, whose famous bay is one of the “Three Views of Japan” (日本三景 Nihon Sankei).

The work in Tona district was coordinated by the East Sendai Church (ESC). The days we worked there as CRASH volunteers, we would only find out where we were being assigned to work during the morning briefing ESC held for all volunteers. Initially, as I looked around and saw so many houses in need of repair and restoration (not just in Tona but every town we worked in), I couldn't help wondering why certain families were receiving help from us whilst others did not. But over time, as I heard of the stories of what the families we were working with went through and how the Lord was opening their hearts to the Christian volunteers from local churches and Christian relief organizations like CRASH, it dawned on me that the homes we went to were those that the Lord had chosen to show His favor to.

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Through Christian volunteers, the Lord was not just sending practical help to those in need, but He was preparing to enter these Japanese hearts through His children's acts of love. One particularly encouraging story was that of the farmer from Sendai-Wakayabashi. Before the tsunami, he was a vegetable farmer with many fields and also a local volunteer fireman. As CRASH worked with him by sending different volunteer teams to his house and fields, he has become increasingly open to Christians. He has even agreed to let his mother who was very traumatized by the disaster receive counseling from a local Christian pastor. I later heard that this was clearly something the Lord had ordained as this pastor had initially told CRASH that he was too busy to offer much help to them but if there was someone living in the area where he was in who needed counseling just once a week, he would be able to help.

CRASH has sent over 100 local and international volunteers to support this farmer and his family in this time and he has continued to be open to the help as well as the offers of Christian tracts and prayers with the volunteers. Considering his previous community involvement, the CRASH Sendai base staff feel strongly that he will be a leader in the transformation of his community for Christ once he comes to faith, so many are continuing to pray for his and his family's salvation.



Through the partnership of CRASH and the Japanese churches throughout the country, we can see that the Lord has awakened the church in Japan through what has happened and is equipping and strengthening them for the harvest to come.

At the same time, the Lord is gathering His children from around the world to this land to be a united witness for Him, because He has commanded us to love one another and to let this love testify to the world that we are His disciples.

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It has been a great joy and privilege to be a part of this mission team and of what the Lord is doing in Japan. Undeniably, much remains to be done, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Let us continue to ask the Lord of the harvest to raise up and send forth more labourers into this harvest field, for **NOW** is indeed the time for Japan to experience the Almighty God like never before.



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