

English Presbytery Japan Tsunami Recovery Team (5-18 Aug 2011) Trip Report

So much to share, I wish I can replay what's in my head. God wants us to be His voice for those who make it for this mission so that others may follow.

Expectation

Ichinoseki base camp started only this month. Camp leader and three staff are quite new to the camp. Crash Japan is trying to partner churches in Kesenuma and Rikuzentakata (most severely affected and nearly nothing left, 70,000 trees wipe out except lone pine tree).



To help in the relief work, Crash Japan has to go through the volunteer centre in these two towns. Other than our off days, every morning we leave before 8.00 am for the volunteer centre in this two towns.



We came expecting to help victims, console them and ultimately planting the seeds. Turns out, God plan was more than that. We met only a few of them, as many moved to temporary shelters, relief centres and relative houses. However, we found a pool of volunteers mostly youth and university students that God has directed us to minister. We learn to be pro active, and started sharing things with them to open up their heart. We took every opportunity to invite them to pray with us.

Before leaving for Japan, we were warned to expect some negative response and not appreciation all the time due to frustration with the authorities and inability to accept loses. Yet, we received mostly wonderful hospitality. Ryoku San (Mrs Saito) made onigiri, gave us mountains of tidbits and drinks from vending machine despite the little she has. Honda San makes spaghetti for Alan team and giving one of them a hat to shield against the sun. The old lady who gave us iced cold energy drinks and home grown peaches. Cold bottled drinks for the tens of us in the farm land owned by Onetera San. The weeping ramen restaurant lady in one local town knowing we were leaving Japan.

Volunteers, staff, passersby and strangers that came up to us, thanking us for coming and helping Japan.

Sorrowful sites we worked (picture them in your mind)

Huge burial ground of victims trapped in their cars in a forested area jammed up trying to drive up the road to high ground.

Evacuation area not high enough that turns out to be death zone.

Gym in school, cleaning photos, books, memorabilia, laying them up for owners to claim if they: people who took the photos and those in the photos

are still alive. We do not know how many died but heard one school had 70 school bags without owners.

We observed one minute of silence on the afternoon of the 11th Aug practiced every 11th day of each month.

Japanese Society

Conformist one, where no one wants to stand out like a sore thumb. They listen or rule from the heart rather than from the head i.e. stubborn, not willing to accept facts. Some are not willing to accept help from volunteer centre. Man tends to be hard headed and not willing to show their vulnerable side.

Japanese tend to keep to themselves and within their grouping. They are reluctant to give contact no or email address to stranger. In the city, there are a lot of loners and most work long hours. There is high suicidal rate, yet there are serving and compassionate hearts in many. In the affected areas, jobs are few and many have left the towns in search of jobs leaving the old and weak to tend to what's left of their land.

Churches and missionaries

Has grown weary. Congregations are usually small and mostly either very young (Sunday school) or elderly. Where there are youth or young adults, they are usually women. Most working men leave church to focus on day to day life and work. Pastors unable to get members to actively evangelize due to past response are now overworked. Churches and missionaries are looking for help as they are unable to penetrate into the general population. Here is an opportunity but there is lack of direction and experience.

In the face of tragedy (something we can learn)

Mrs Saito or Ryoku San – one who cries out to keep a part of what memories she can recover. God hears and brought us to her, telling her: “keep a part that you treasured but take on a new page in life, start by writing that new life that is everlasting.” We carefully cleaned and restored her personal belongings that even her husband, Saito San gave a nod of approval.



Saito San – stern and traditional Japanese man, staunch believer in another faith but Ernie and Ann managed to get him thinking in Christ.

Strange carpenter – working in Saito's house, lost something and acting strangely but felt he wanted to be heard and be reached but don't know how to tell except keep mumbling. We were reminded Christ was also a carpenter and we should never to choose whom we should minister to.

The persistent housewife - very petite Meiko San (Mrs Sugimoto) all alone but daily, cleaning partially damaged six year old house, burdened with debts, a teacher husband likely to lose his job. She is spiritually drained and has a three year old son who developed asthma from the sight of the oncoming tsunami while been carried on the shoulder of the mother to safety. She reminds me of the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18). A huge container narrowly missed her house but not her neighbor in an area ravaged by water and fire. We told her she is saved for a reason. By God intervention, we as lights of Christ are brought to a housewife, whose name means child of light. God wants her to be a light and we are to light the path for her to Christ. She is recovering from the ordeal and was given a Christian literature to read.



Honda San – kindness and hospitality towards volunteers despite shop severely damaged.

Volunteer lady manning a stall at a local Tanabata star festival in Rikuzentakata – Her desire to overcome and help despite losing six members of family leaving only another sister. For the town folks, this festival is also a reunion since the March tsunami and for them to find out who survived. Chikako San and me managed to draw her to Japan Bethel Mission church nearby by showing the Pastor Morita name card given to me when we attend Sunday service earlier, praise God that He gave me one of the only two cards given out by the Pastor to our group from Crash Japan.

Unidentified man sobbing quietly in the same Tanabata star festival. He was alone and we wonder who he has lost. Many such folks are still in a world of their own and suicide rate is high in the area.

Old lady owner in Rikuzentakata who gave us iced cold energy drink and home grown peaches. Turns out she and Pastor Morita volunteer at same old folks home and know each other. Pastor Morita has been speaking to her about god. Although she is a Buddhist she was willing to pray with us to bless her and her land. She lost eight members of the family, four still missing, six generation stayed there, all three adjacent land with houses destroyed owned by her other sister and relative.

Generally, volunteers are majority youth although the oldest is 71 years of age. There is good comradeship among them and although all came out of commitment to help, there are also other reasons. Some were shown kindness by the residents eg. Naoki San at age of 21, was cycling through Kesenuma as part of his 1000 km journey through the Tohoku region, was given shelter from the pouring rain. This is his way of repaying that kindness.

His home here is the camping site where many volunteers stay. Then there are those who are very saddened and moved by this tragedy that they quit their job just to volunteer long period here and throughout the region staying in camps or trucks they drove. Others come in search of a purpose in life, some tired from the commercial world and at their prime are here to do something worthy. Yet there are others who are father and son, retirees, jobless, university students, teachers here to help and find new friendship.



Are we needed?

Absolutely.

The help is real and we are an encouragement for the victims, volunteers, Christian and missionaries here. There are too few Christian in Japan, less than 1% of the population, too few youth and young adults. Even if they are willing, they are mostly old and weak to help in this kind of relief work.

Kesennuma Baptist church received 500 sets of essentials by one Christian organization for distribution to the community. With an old and small congregation numbering around 25 members, they need help to distribute these essentials.



We can be there to guide and set new direction for the churches that in the past has resigned to keeping tradition that the community is familiar with but does not challenge them to go forth and preach the gospel actively. One middle age church member I spoke to, agreed things need to change but he is “young” compares to the others and although he is willing to adapt, there is so few of his kind. Evangelizing is mostly left to the pastors to work on and many are old. They have to also look at new ways to retain younger members who may initially come to church when the seed has been planted but would not stay long as fellowship is usually an important consideration.

David and Esther, long term missionaries who have stayed in Japan the past 40 years said it can take as long as 20 years to convert one to a Christian. Seeing what God is doing now, gave them renew strength and faith to preach the gospel when they return to Miyazaki. The time spent with foreign Christian co-workers like us is like “refreshing breath” of life in their own words.

There is high respect for foreigners coming to help. When we mentioned we are from Singapore and it is God commandment to help those in need, many open up knowing we are here out of love and compassion. Singapore and Japan has always enjoyed good relationship both at government and people level. When we mentioned we are also a multinational team including Indonesian, they are especially grateful knowing Indonesia had its own tragic tsunami not long ago. One volunteer is willing to help Indonesia when the need arises.

Light and salt for God

We were most noticeable for our friendliness, willingness to share, readily striking conversations, joyful, pray before work, food and after work. People approach us telling us they noticed we are different from other volunteers who tends to keep to themselves. As all volunteers have to report back after the day's work, some waited for us just to fellowship.



Whatever the task, we make it a point to complete it well.



In our first job in Rikuzentakata, we will assign to clear and clean the drain of sludge left untouched since the tsunami. We had trouble finding it and seems there is no one in sight when we were there. Later the owner, Mrs Kano arrived and thanked us for helping. We were able to pray with her before starting work. As it turns out, when the other teams of volunteers arrived, we found ourselves sandwiched between large groups of volunteers in full sight of them. Later, some came up to us to commend we managed to clear the

drain so well and clean. They noticed our group was always joyful at work, systematic and cooperative. God placed us there for a reason, to be His witness. We thank God for anointing us with a spirit of joy and strength to complete the task.



On our last day, we were asked by Rikuzentakata Volunteer Centre to take a job the next day which is reserve only for Crash Japan volunteers. We were told it was due to the good feedback they received. We had to turn them down as we will leaving the next day.

Other times we have Christian and non Christian coming to us asking to pray for them. The world is watching, the stage is set for God people to show a glimpse of His fullness.

Blessings and Prayers

We started with nine of us from Singapore and worried that with one member who speaks Japanese at intermediate level and another at Elementary level, we will have problem communicating with the locals. We end up with a multinational team of two British missionaries, one American Chaplain, three native/Japanese American and one Hong Kong member all of whom speak fluent Japanese. God had it all planned for us allowing us to connect to as many Japanese as possible. This is not counting the five Japanese who joined us from a church in Yokohama in between our stay.



On the hot backbreaking day, I asked God, “This is tough, can I take this?” I was aching on my back and waist from scooping endless amount of sludge from the drain of this house. I prayed for strength to carry on and relief from the aches. The next day, I did not feel any pain and was full of energy. In fact, I sleep on mostly 5 to 6 hours nightly but yet never felt tired and always look forward to what God has in store for us. The Lord is truly our refuge and strength in present time Psalm 46:1.

When some of us were not feeling too well, God bless us by letting us work under shades while other groups are exposed to the hot sun. We pray for a member who has just recovered and eager to start again, she ended up working indoors while others work under the sun elsewhere.

One member was worried for her knees that have been complaining before this trip. During her time there, there was never a complaint and she even took on some of the tough work including squatting to clean personal belongings and scooping up debris. God even “reserved” a small foldable stool in the volunteer centre that no one wanted to take and came in very handy for her relief work in the field which she took along and returned every day. What a thoughtful God we have.

To get the jobs, we have to keep an optimal team size of 6 to 10. At various periods during our stay, we have more than 10 and up to 24 of us to form two or three teams. Many times, we have to reorganize the teams due to new volunteers, leaving volunteers and staff absence due to official engagement. Each time, God never fails us. He blesses us such that no matter how we arrange the teams, each team ends with jobs that matches the gifts and previous encounter and provides impactful fellowship with both victims and volunteers.

God gave us different jobs every day to experience the full spectrum of this disaster and its impact on different people. When given repeat visit, it is to finish the task He has given us.

Each member is given gift that allows them to connect with the victims and volunteers. We seldom encounter rejection when we ask others to join us in prayers although those who are hardened would not.

Personally, God gave me the right word to say at the right time and provided a good working partner who is able to identify the person we can minister to, she starts the conversation, I followed by speaking with her translation thereafter. His word went deep into the heart and we know, the impact has been made. Sometimes, eye contacts and body language are good enough for God love transcends all understanding. At times, the volunteers who speak little English who asked his friend who speak better to communicate with me. This is their eagerness to want to know more about us.

God glory at work

The hospitable Ryoku San or Mrs Saito whose willingness for us to pray for her despite fearing the displeasure of her husband. We prayed quietly in English and Japanese for a good five minutes or so and all this time, the husband, Saito San was kept at bay by God through Ernie and Ann, our co-workers from US and Hong Kong. We know the seed has been planted.



The persistent housewife, Meiko San or Mrs Sugimoto who on own first visit, asked us to pray for her home and her three year old son who now has asthma. The night we have our debrief, we were convicted to pray for her and also for a repeat visit as we felt the work with her is not complete. Two days later, against all odds considering many volunteers would via for jobs, not knowing the addresses of each job, we found ourselves at her house again. Both volunteers and victim were so delighted at seeing each other. She shared saying she had peace from our earlier visit despite all the challenges, had her request turned down by the volunteer centre to have our team again but kept praying for us. We told her we prayed too and truly God is at work. She revealed more of her family problem including teacher's husband who will likely lose his job yet she seems to be at peace. We gave her a Christian literature to read and we ended our second visit by her telling us we should go and bless others just as we have blessed her. In the two visits we made to her house, we were joined in separate occasion by three volunteers, all prayed with us and one of them, Tsukamoto san received a bible from David, our missionary after subsequent fellowship.

Prompted by the Holy Spirit to make amend to a humorous misunderstanding with some of the Japanese volunteers, we bought ice cream for all 20 of us, 6 from Crash Japan and 14 non Crash Japan volunteers. God work through us such that the gospel was given to many of them, 10 of whom we have their contact details, 1 likely to read the Bible again and 3 would want to visit a church in their home town.

Most memorable day was when among 70 volunteers working at one site to clear debris, we boldly asked others to join the 14 of us in prayer before the start of work. More than 10, if not the same number as us joined hands forming a big circle praying in Japanese. Initially we regretted not taking any photos to capture the moment but realized later it could be that God don't want us to "bind" His power as His reign is endless. This was a beautiful picture that God allows us to see a glimpse of His Sovereignty and Glory.



Seizing every opportunities

The world is watching us and we should make the most of every opportunity to proclaim the mystery of Christ and that our act and conversations be full of grace and seasoned with salt Col 4:2-6.

As foreigner, coming from afar, no relationship with this country, we get respect that open doors and hearts. In a way, their politeness also give us a chance to use more “western” approach to warm up the friendship, like high five, pat on the shoulder, hugging each other etc. Most respond readily with amusement versus the usual muted fellowship.

The Crash Japan vest we wear always catches attention with many asking what CRASH stands for which gives us an opportunity not only to explain but to share why as Christian we are here to help.

Many times, we offered to take some of the volunteers in our vehicles and use those times to form a friendship etc.

We learn to share and be light for Christ. Passing water, fruits, food, medication and even collecting rubbish from volunteers working in same site are some of things we practices. Other times, ice cream and ice packs to cool the volunteers were used to break the ice.

We pray before/after work and before food in full view of others and always invite anyone who wants to join us.



When victims and volunteers open up and there's issues that is troubling them, we offer to pray with them.



Given the chance, we usually asked volunteers why are they here helping. From their answer, we can draw them to Christ sacrifice just as they sacrifice their time and energy, God love and compassion just as they felt a need to

help out of compassion, peace and everlasting life just as they search for purpose and answer to their own life.

Transforming us

He taught us not to complain. Each day at the volunteer centre, we have to bid for a job that we are given brief information like how many volunteers needed, what kind of job eg cleaning house. Many groups will bid but only one or combined group will get the job. We learn to trust God for our provision. Saying the Lord prayer every day and praying for good jobs becomes very resounding to us. He opened our eyes to what He plans for us against what our short-sighted sees to experience His Perfect plan unfold. We thank the Lord for that.



He taught us to listen to Him and not ourselves in carrying out task. It is not completing the job that is important, it is how we do it with love that no matter how small or insignificant or seemingly a waste of time it can be, our action can be turned into great testimony for our Lord.

He taught us to be calm and patient despite seeing the jobs disappearing one by one. One team under Noriko San, our Japanese American co-worker ended up with a job cleaning porcelains and glasses in a shop, whose owner, Honda san turns out was a distant relative of hers and have studied in a catholic school and has a Christian relative. The connection has been made and he is touched for our help and his hospitality was overwhelming.



He taught us not to choose our job when He offers us and willingly do it out of love. What seems like old junk mementos, an etched horse picture was an important acknowledgement of what Saito San has accomplished during his official work appointment. He spent a good half hour explaining to Ernie, our co-worker its origin after soil and dirt has been removed and the frame cleaned. Ryoku San or Mrs Saito childhood artwork explaining each character of her name and in a poetic phrase brought joy and a hope that things are slowly been restored. With faith but without love, we are nothing 1Cor 13:2.

He taught us not to choose who we minister to. The strange carpenter in Saito San house was constantly mumbling that don't make sense and can be quite irritating especially when we were quietly praying for Ryoku San without her husband knowledge. We felt guilty after our visit that maybe he was crying out for help. In our debrief, we prayed that others will minister to him.

He taught us not to judge people by appearance and be willing to hear their story. At this farm land, we met a 25 year old Yakuza looking man who actually quit his job to volunteer. Soon he will be a father and instead of worrying over his livelihood, work tirelessly with us. We are reminded of how Jesus sees potential in the tax collector and dying criminals.

He transformed members who are now able to pray from the heart from what they saw and experienced unlike in the past are reluctant to pray.

He transformed members who are quiet and timid but have now open up and willing to evangelize.

He transformed members who in the past would hesitate to lift a hand to help but now cannot stop giving a hand.

He raised spiritual level. One member said, before this mission it was a plateau, now there is renewed spirit and eagerness.

Enjoyable

We have our humorous moments that God provided where I have learned not to say Hai (yes) without understanding what was the question asked. It resulted in a misunderstanding that ended with me buying the ice cream for 20 of us.

We have wonderful fellowship with volunteers, Crash Japan staff, missionaries, Chaplain and Japanese church members.



At base camp with its pleasant and peaceful surrounding, we eat together, do chores together, sometime take our day off together and sightsee the local attractions. On one of our off day, we ate free flowing soba (wanko soba) for lunch, gigantic ramen/fried rice (fuku fuku) for dinner and joking said we must burn calories the next day. God bless us, it was very tough next day.

There is a strong bond and comradeship among us, not just base camp but volunteers and staff in centre. It is hard work but we encourage and look after one another. God looks after us.

Although photos on our facebook show mostly smiles and joy, there were moments of sorrow and weeping was not taken or excluded to respect those still mourning. We weep many times, openly and in the heart.

Future plan for Ichinoseki

During the next 6 weeks, Crash Japan with the approval from the local authority will embark on the Eco Management (EM) project that will help decontaminated the top soil of seawater from farm land so that the locals can start work again.

Crash Japan is considering running a café in town for emotional care that can also be used as a teaching centre for the locals during the winter months when relief work has to stop.

Pastor Morita from Japan Bethel Mission Church, Rikuzentakata said he is tired and wary trying to preach to a stubborn community. He has been busy with numerous visits by both local and foreign Christian to his church made famous because it is one of the few that survived the tsunami. His wife had a vision one week before Tsunami and had warned the town folks but few listened. Crash Japan wants to partner his church to reach out again to the community using their own volunteers which he has agreed.





Safety

We work on average four hours a day excluding an hour break for lunch. In a hot day, we will take water break every ½ hour. Sunday and Monday are off days.

At each site, we are brief on the evacuation route in event of earthquake or tsunami and certain places there are siren if not we usually carried a radio to listen for any emergency broadcast. Staff from volunteer centre comes by every now and then to check on our well being.

During our stay, there were some minor earthquake but were faintly noticeable. We have no problem with food, water or radiation since we are more than 200km from Fukushima nuclear power plant.

Type of work

Cleaning personal belongings, photos, mementos etc. Breaking walls, removing weeds from fishing nets, clearing the top soil from the farm land, removing and sludge and cleaning drains. Whatever job requested by the locals are channeled through volunteer centres before been issued out as work for volunteers. The work we do is only a part of many parts that complete the work physically as well as spiritually. We may just be planter of the seeds, someone may make sure it grows tall, others may care for its root etc. We may not see God complete work or understand the significant of our work there, only God knows and as children we should trust it is so and act upon that simple faith.

Timing

Now as so much to do with so few and so little time. Risk that old practices will creep back like rituals, worshipping of earthly gods.

Be part of God plan

I enjoyed myself tremendously and what wonders God has shown me. I thank God for his protection and privilege to serve. We chose "mighty to save" as our camp song while I chose "What a Friend we have in Jesus" as my personal song (all our sins and griefs to bear, what a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer) for the time we need Him, for the time we grief knowing He grief with us. God speak to us differently for different things at different time. He spoke to me loudly on Japan.

I thank God for showing what He can do through me and others that come alongside Him. God wants to use us, I am submitting myself to him for His will in this land that has many goodness that can be harness for His kingdom.

Meiko san said Singapore is blessed as we have no natural disaster. I said we are blessed because there are many God fearing people here who pray to the Lord for blessings. Now that we are blessed, we should bless others. If not, just the tree that do not bear fruits, the Lord can cut it off or take away the blessings He has given us Matt 7:17-20.

I am glad to be part of this exciting time the Lord has given us. The harvest is ripe and work is still in progress. For many of us, we ask how long more before we reach a stage where even if our spirit is willing, the body cannot. Take the opportunity to be part of God plan.

I would like to lead another team or let the Lord direct me on the role he wants me to take. Meanwhile, the base camp leader will be leaving soon instead of serving full 1 year as he has to take care of his wife who has suffers a relapse in her hip problem and have to return to US.

For me personally, mission gives me an intense and real encounter with God. Help Japan, be part of God work there.

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