

From Rob Witmer December 2010

Greetings to family and friends both near and far.

We are a little bit later than usual getting this letter off this year because we have just returned to Japan after a four month period of Home Assignment in Canada. And so we would like to share with you not only what has been happening in Japan this year but also some of the highlights and learnings we experienced during our time in Canada.

What Happened in Japan?

It has been another busy and fruitful year here in Hokkaido. The Dohoku Centre is celebrating its 50th anniversary and Centre staff, board members, and the executive of the District are all trying to think seriously about the future. What is the Centre's mission and mandate and how can it be sustained when there is no longer a United Church of Canada "missionary" presence here? Further, how can a cooperative relationship with the United Church of Canada be maintained in the future? In July, an initial consultation about the future of the Centre took place. Participants included the District and Sub-district executive as well as Centre board members and staff. Although progress is sometimes slow it is good to know that we are not alone as we seek to find God's way forward in a time of major changes. In January 2011, there will be another consultation of all the church related centres in Hokkaido to talk about the future of outreach ministry.

While we have been in Canada we have been very pleased to have Clarabeth McIntosh and David McIntosh helping out at the Centre, and, especially, at the English School. "Beth" and Jack McIntosh were missionaries to Japan sent by the Presbyterian Church in Canada and worked with the Korean Christian Church in Japan in both Osaka and Kyushu for many years. David is their son and grew up in Japan. Knowing Japan, the church in Japan, and having an excellent command of the language enabled both of them to make a special contribution. We have heard many stories of how people were blessed by their presence and we thank them for coming and sharing their gifts and stories.

Another highlight of the year has been the increasing interest expressed in the kind of ministry we are carrying out here in northern Hokkaido. Since March of 2010, recipes from the two books published by Three Love members in 1998 and 2001, have been introduced monthly in the nationally distributed church newspaper "Friend of the

Heart”; a special article in the same newspaper focussed on what Keiko and I have learned in our ministry over the years, and, in the national church magazine “The Layperson’s Friend” the overall work of the Dohoku Centre was featured in a four page article. In addition to this attention from “the church press”, our co-worker Kuriko Fujiyoshi has been given unprecedented opportunities this year to share with churches and other organizations about the rural outreach ministry and support for small churches that remain the primary focus of Centre activities.

But I must move on to Canada!!!

What Happened in Canada?

Where do I begin to describe the richness and the depth of our Home Assignment this year? In a four month period we visited more than 30 churches in 6 provinces. We visited United Church educational and theological centres, first nations communities, a mental health centre and a hospice and learned more than I can begin to express in words. We met many people for the first time but were also able to re-connect with old friends all over Canada. These “old friends” include high school classmates, former UCC overseas personnel who have worked in Japan, and participants in some of the exchanges between Canada and Japan that we have been involved with over the years to mention only a few. I hope you know who you are and how glad we were to have the chance to be with you, if only for a short time.

We have impressions about what we saw and experienced in Canada but few conclusions at this stage. It is clear that the United Church is going through major changes and that church buildings erected for a different time have become heavy burdens for many congregations. In some churches, we sensed fatigue and resignation. There were congregations that appeared to be floundering and seeking direction. People were struggling with words like “dying” “closing”, “final”, and the need for “clustering” or “amalgamation”. Although the church has never been a “building” we recognize that it is difficult for people to let go of an important part of their history. However, at the same time we wondered if it wouldn’t be more encouraging and empowering for people to use words like “resurrection” “renewal” and “joining together to become the church for a new age” rather than some of the language we seemed to be hearing.

On the other hand, we were impressed by the warm and welcoming spirit of congregations, by the efforts to involve all people present in the worship experience, and by the unique way in which many churches were finding ways to “stay alive” in an increasingly severe environment.

I believe people in Canada were sometimes shocked by what we had to say because

we were talking about building a new church for only two people and about keeping a church in debt and with no active members alive and active. One minister said, "I'm trying to imagine what you mean when you talk about building a church for only two people". However, everywhere we went in Canada, we received a positive response to our presentations and a plethora of questions. I believe people really became aware of the importance of the rich partnership that exists between the church in Canada and Japan and the fact that there is much for us to learn from one another.

Unfortunately, I have no more space to write about Canada if I am to tell you anything about what's happening in our family, so let's move on.

What's Happening in our Family?

After three years in Dubai, Manna(34) has moved on and is now an elementary school teacher in Bangkok, Thailand. She is teaching grade 2 and is enjoying the small class size and the spirit of teamwork among her colleagues. She was home for both Christmas and New Years during the "winter" vacation period.

Nathan (32) and Minori moved to a new location in May (still in Nayoro) and their restaurant is now called Comfort Café. It can seat far more than the previous one and there is a lot more on the menu. However, the hours are not the best. The Comfort Café is open from 5pm to 3am.

Martin (29) continues to work with a Japanese company selling a waste water management system and his work has taken him all over the world again this year. In April or May of 2011 he expects to go to Prague in the Czech Republic where he will probably be stationed for a minimum of three years.

And finally,

We remember you all with gratitude. We thank you for who you are. We thank you for your support and prayers. We thank you for your work in Canada, for the seeds that you plant and for the fruit that they bear. We thank you for the opportunity to see so many of you during our time in Canada. We wish God's richest grace and peace on those we were not able to meet during this period of Home Assignment.

We ask that you would remember Japan and the church here as it seeks to find the path that God is preparing for our future.

God is alive! God is love! God is with us! Thanks be to God!