

Letter from Overseas

Robert and Keiko Witmer write from Japan

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December, 2008

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

As I sit down to write this, Christmas is no more than a week away. It is that time of year when we stop momentarily, take a deep breath, and remember that we are not alone. We remember God's gift of light, given to us as at Christmas, a sure sign of hope and a light that no darkness can ever overcome. And, with gratitude, we remember all of you and take heart in knowing that we are part of the community of God's people around the world.

It has been another busy year at the Dohoku Centre. We were pleased to welcome visitors from Germany, Korea, Taiwan, Cambodia, Canada, and the United States. Some of these people had their first experience of planting rice; while others had their first experience of playing crokinole. Some came to share stories of their work and some came to learn about the work of the Dohoku Centre in rural ministry. Some were making a nostalgic return to Nayoro after many years away and some came to offer a vision for a more peaceful world. All of them brought rich opportunities to share and grow together.

A sad note in our larger community this year was the sudden passing of Lorraine Thompson. I had lived with Bob and Lorraine in Tokyo for several months in 1969, the year I arrived in Japan. Bob and Lorraine returned to Canada in the 70s, but, in 2005 they came to Nayoro and helped fill in for us at the English School while Keiko and I were on home assignment. Lorraine died very suddenly of a brain aneurysm this year at the age of 63. We were given a chance to share our grief and our gratitude with members of the larger parish here at a joint worship service in November.

Among the many Japanese visitors who came to the Centre this year was Miyuki Hoshino. Miyuki, along with husband Masaaki, was a missionary from Japan to London Conference of The United Church of Canada from 1985 to 1988. She was the main speaker at our summer Three Love Seminar and brought laughter and tears to all as she shared her life story as a pastor's wife in rural Canada and Japan.

I have done much less preaching than usual this year (13 Sundays) because, as of April, my three-year stint as interim pastor for the Okoppe church ended and, for the first time in 15 years, we have a resident pastor in all ten churches here in northern Hokkaido. When you consider that many of those churches are very small, this fact can only be attributed to God's grace and to the commitment of the 64 churches in Hokkaido to be God's church together by providing support for those smaller churches. Keiko continues to be deeply involved in the Nayoro church as a board member not only for the church but also for the kindergarten and day care programs that are operated as functions of the church.

Along with our co-worker Kuriko Fujiyoshi, we continue to visit churches, schools and other organizations all over Hokkaido to conduct workshops or to speak about world hunger, food security, and Japanese agriculture. There has been a growing demand for this kind of program because of the sudden rise in food commodity prices and a large number of "food scandals" (mislabelling, tainted food products, etc.) this past year. We also facilitate rural experiences for young people and visit a large number of farms in outlying areas all over the island as a sign of God's presence. One project for us this year has been to find ways of using our rural network to get food that does not go to market to those who need it most by establishing links with food banks, still very much a new idea in Japan just beginning to take hold.

We continue to be involved in peacemaking events and activities. One highlight in this area was visiting Okinawa with a group of teenagers from the Dohoku Sub-district in March. Okinawa is the southernmost prefecture in Japan and more than 20% of its area is taken up by US military bases. We were able to learn a little bit about what that means to the lives of the Okinawan people.

We work with District (Hokkaido) and Sub-district (Northern Hokkaido) committees on a wide range of issues. A big event for the Sub-district and Centre in 2009 will be receiving a group from Calling Lakes Centre (PCTC) in Fort Qu'Appelle Sask. who are coming to learn about the work of the church in Japan.

And we continue to operate the Centre English School in an attempt to broaden people's vision of the world and to share gospel values in a variety of ways. In talking about Christmas language, one student, who has no connection to either Christianity or the church, was really moved by the idea of light shining in the darkness and the angels

singing "Peace on Earth." He wrote it down repeating over and over again, "Good words. Those are really good words."

The biggest news in our family this year was the marriage of Nathan (30) to Minori Sugiyama on July 26. They were married at the Dohoku Centre and the ceremony was followed by a joyful party with lots of good food and live music. Manna (32) and Martin (27) were both able to be there along with Keiko's mother and many close relatives. Minori has a lot of experience working in restaurants and so will be a good partner for Nathan as they operate the Farmer's Café together. We welcome her as a new daughter to our family. Manna, after giving it some thought, returned to Dubai to finish out her two-year contract. Being there has enabled her to visit both Jordan and Egypt. However, when the two years are up, I think she is planning to move on. Martin's work in the Yokohama area has taken him to Thailand, the Czech Republic, and Korea so far with an upcoming trip to Finland planned for the new year. His company is selling an apparatus that separates waste material from water so that both can be reused. It sounds like something the world really needs and he is enjoying his work.

A brief word on Japan: Four Prime Ministers without an election. A strong yen in a faltering economy. A high suicide rate and a vacuum in values. A recognition of the Ainu people as the Aboriginal people of Japan with no real action since. Japan still struggling to find its role in the world. Remember this country in God's plan.

As usual so many things have happened this year that I can't begin to tell you all. This smattering will have to do. We long for your prayers and seek your continued support of our work here. We ask that you remember the church in Japan as it seeks to witness to the new world that God is planning for us. Pray that the church here might ground itself in the love of our God, the hope that we share in Christ, and the conviction that God is truly with us and acting to make all things new even though sometimes we may feel surrounded by darkness.

God's richest blessings to you all during this season of celebration and throughout 2009.

Rob and Keiko Witmer

Robert 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.

