

Hope for Japan



by Susie Fikse

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to work with power
in the nation of Japan.
We prepare for that day.

The Japanese
characters for Hope.

Only a few months prior to the March 11 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, MTW missionary Michael Oh spoke hopefully about God's work: "I'm very optimistic. There will be a time when God chooses to work with power in the nation of Japan. We prepare for that day." That hope and optimism was clearly founded in God and not in any human ability to share the gospel where less than one percent of nearly 123 million residents are evangelical believers.

Neither was it based on a hope found in Japanese culture. With nearly a million young men withdrawing from society, more than 30,000 Japanese committing suicide each year, and increasingly common incidents of teenage prostitution and child pornography—under its dignified exterior, Japanese society concealed a deep decay and brokenness.

Today, as MTW missionaries and Japanese Christians minister the gospel of Christ in the areas most devastated by the events of March 11—also the most unchurched areas of the country—they witness tender shoots of hope sprouting from the rubble of tragedy.

need. Her connection with the New Life Church was established, and it's our hope and prayer that this will be the beginning of new life for Mrs. F. ...new life in Christ."

Cultivating Beauty

MTW missionary Roger Lowther brings hope for the future in the form of music, traveling to shelters in the north with Tokyo musicians. Normally, he reaches out to the arts community in central Tokyo through Grace City Church, and appreciates how important beauty is to Japanese culture. "Probably more than any culture in the world, the Japanese



As they walk alongside the brokenhearted through the ugliness of a water-ravaged landscape, they envision gardens replacing the devastation and wonder: Is this the day for which we've been preparing?

The Sowing of Presence

In the days and weeks following March 11, MTW missionaries Wayne and Amy Newsome traveled from their Tokyo environs north to the area where the tsunami took its greatest toll. In Kamaishi, they connected with Mrs. F., a woman who courageously helped her elderly mother to safety, only to realize her husband was lost as the tsunami struck their home. At first, salvaging seemingly meaningless items from the rubble of Mrs. F.'s home seemed unimportant; however, the team eventually realized the value of presence. "Just as meaningless as the actual work may have been, the doing of that work, side by side with her, was full of meaning," Amy observed. She felt comfort, encouragement, and hope for the future, something the people of Kamaishi and other Japanese coastal residents desperately

love to be surrounded by beauty," says Roger. "Now, they are surrounded by ugliness. Everything is caked with mud. Everything beautiful was destroyed." After playing at a shelter, Lowther met a man residing there, who told him, "Thank you for the food and for the place to sleep. But thank you most of all for the music—that is what I really craved."

"As a Christian, I believe that God gave us music to show us His beauty," explains Lowther. "When I play music and talk about God as the source of beauty, there is an amazing power behind it." In the coming weeks, a gospel choir from Grace City Church—composed of Christian and non-Christian members—will be traveling to perform in shelters. "Imagine a few Christians taking a bunch of non-Christians on a mission trip!" describes Lowther, almost in disbelief. "Our prayer is that as people sing these songs and work alongside Christians, they would be brought into the community, and learn to love the same God as Christians worship."

Growing Relationships

This same outlook drove Ali Lowther, Roger's wife, to ask moms in their Tokyo community if they would be interested in helping with the relief work that Grace City Church was coordinating. "I learned the power of a woman's cell phone," Lowther told the Japan Times, saying word spread amazingly fast, from one friend to another. One neighborhood resident, Kikuko Nishimura, said, "There were many who felt the same way, wanting to do something for the disaster victims. We didn't know what to do as individuals, so it's great that someone stood up to start."

"The most exciting part is that hundreds of members of the community are involved in Grace City Relief, led by pastors and Christians," says Roger. "When you consider how rare it is for Japanese to even meet a Christian, it's amazing how many now have a significant connection with us. Our ultimate hope is for more worshippers of Christ."

Hoping in Christ

As MTW forms a long-term strategy for partnering with churches and planting new ones in the northern Tohoku region, missionaries look to Christ to nurture the green shoots of hope they continue to witness. "We are praying that God will open doors for us to grow the church as a consequence of the disaster," says Bob Drews, MTW missionary in Tokyo. "We know that if these doors open, it will mean hard gospel labor for many years, so we will also need His sustaining grace."

As the long-term plan unfolds, Christians in Japan are more hopeful than ever that Christ will raise beauty out of the rubble. "All of us here feel it. We know that what is happening here, in this moment of time, is one of the most exciting things God is doing in the whole world," says Roger Lowther. "It is such a privilege to be part of it!"

For more information about MTW's efforts in Japan, visit www.mtw.org.