



Moving to the Need

Imagine the entire coastal stretch from San Francisco to Los Angeles obliterated. Four hundred miles of cataclysmic destruction. Only then will you begin to conceive the scale of devastation sustained in the massive earthquake and tsunami in Japan, known there as the Great Eastern Japan Disaster.

“Japan will never be the same. The Japan Covenant Church will never be the same,” said Pastor Yasushi Shimizu, chair of the Japan Covenant Church (NSKK), our sister denomination.

The aftermath coincided with the sixtieth anniversary of the formation of the NSKK. Curt Peterson, our executive minister of world mission, and I were on hand both to join in the commemoration and to tour the devastated area. Following the anniversary recognition, we traveled for three days amid unending expanses of rubble and mountains of debris with Covenant missionary Jim Peterson and Pastor Shimizu.

It is easy to understand why he said Japan would never be the same. Thousands are dead or missing. Hundreds of thousands more are displaced. Many communities will never be rebuilt. The nation most prepared for earthquakes and tsunamis is in prolonged grief over a disaster no nation could have prepared for. Thundering ninety-foot swarms of water have little regard for the best seawall engineering in the world, exploding across coastal lowlands and valleys, demolishing steel, wood, and concrete with equal ease.

Personal stories humanize the numbing scale. We met with one leader who had just returned from a funeral for an entire family of five people. He told of a nearby preschool where all of the children were heroically taken by staff safely to higher ground, only for many of them to tearfully wait for parents who would never pick them up. And there is the harrowing ordeal of another youngster whose backpack snagged on a tree limb in the rushing water, saving her, only to watch the rest of the family be swept away.

Pastor Shimizu said the catastrophe is causing them to run to the needs around them like never before. Christians make up only about 1 percent of Japan’s population. It is decidedly counter-cultural and even alienating at points to identify as a Christ-follower. So when Christians gather together it is indeed an indispensable time for

mutual encouragement and spiritual refreshment. However, over time an inward focus can develop. Pastor Shimizu sees that the impressive relief efforts they are engaged in are jump-starting the NSKK to a new level of sensitivity for the needs of society—a society to serve, not withdraw from.

He is identifying a principle I see in the story of Jesus and Lazarus in John 11. Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. Mary and Martha are in despair. Yet Jesus enters into the very circumstance where others have given up. He raises Lazarus from the dead, the grave clothes are stripped away, and the people are astonished.

Jesus calls us to do likewise. The gospel always moves to the need, not away from it. By its very nature it enters places where others have given up.

And now the Japan Covenant Church is among those whom Curt Peterson calls “a company of compassion.” The grieving do not grieve alone, he observed. Heavy hearts are lifted higher by strong hands, persistent love, and listening new friends. The NSKK volunteers bring food, blankets, clothes, water. They bring smiles to children in evacuation centers. Still others shovel out debris and scrub away sludge, mud, and debris while the military impressively clears streets, river beds, and drainage canals.

Jim Peterson wrote this in his blog about our trip. “Have I made sense of it all? Most definitely not! But honestly, that doesn’t feel like a huge problem to me. The clearly visible and undeniable problem that I am completely unable to ignore is the catastrophic human suffering. Jesus hated it when people suffered, and his response was always motivated by compassion. That pretty much sets the course for me.”

Sixty years ago it also set the course for pioneering missionaries with names like Verme, Rigmack, Metcalf, Engeman, Peterson, Johnson, and Westburg. They ran to the needs of post-war Japan. A fledgling movement—the Japan Covenant Church—was started. Today that church is taking the lead as we partner with them in responding to this disaster with the heart of Christ.

Yes, Jesus hates it when people suffer. That alone helps set our course. May we be found entering the very places where others would give up. ■

Gary Walter is president of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

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