

God's Mission is Hope in Action – Learning from our Partners in Japan

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Lancaster Seminary

Thank you for this opportunity to speak at Lancaster Seminary. Our family has enjoyed living on Pine Street since last September, and we have been blessed to be able to revisit the many connections that we have here in the Lancaster area; part of those connections are family ties, but the other part is a history of mission here with the people of Japan. I have worked for Common Global Ministries for the past 22 years in the city of Sendai, Japan. The people I have worked with know Lancaster. It was the churches here in this part of the country that gave birth to our churches in Japan. All you have to do is walk to the back of this sanctuary to find the image of Mt. Fuji in the stained glass window. In that sense, we are a living history, and our Japanese partners are eternally grateful to you, for the witness of the church here, for planting the seeds of faith, and for continuing to walk with them in partnership through our Global Ministries.

I am also honored to stand before you to give “The Paul and Catherine Gregory Lectureship.” Kit is here with us today. Paul worked for many years for the Mission Board of the United Church of Christ. He and Kit had also been missionaries in China and Japan for some years. Many people have told me what a pleasure it was to work with Paul. Since my parents were UCC missionaries, Paul has also been an integral part of my family history. So again, the connections are everywhere.

God's Mission

Today I want to talk about mission: God's mission in this world. I will be speaking from my own experience of walking in partnership with Christians in Japan, especially as it was played out in the great disaster of March 11, 2011. The word “partnership” has been around for some time now. Partnership means honoring and listening to the other, and not making unilateral decisions. It also means sharing each other's joys and sorrows. There may have been a day when we had the money and power to dictate how mission was to be done. However these days we talk about “mutuality” and “relationship.” In some of our churches here in the US, people are beginning to realize that we ourselves are the ones thirsting for relationship. Our churches have lost a sense of those deep ties with the global community. In Global Ministries we want to hold on to the 270 international partnerships that we have around the world. Lancaster Seminary has played a leading role in nurturing that history of relationships with God's people. I hope that through the sharing of my story, I can help to enliven your imagination for renewed relationships with God's people in other lands.

These past months I have been traveling around the US visiting churches. Every four years I return to the US to share stories about how God is at work through our partners in Japan. This time the speaking has been both exciting and difficult. Exciting to think that in our 126 year history with the people of northeastern Japan, I was blessed to be

there when our partners were in crisis, and I got to represent you, to be the face of the churches in the US who wanted to reach out at a time of great need. The difficult part has been to talk about the suffering that is still ongoing. I hurt for Japan. I am close to tears when I think about the suffering unleashed by the nuclear disaster. They have become my people. I carry their struggles with me. I also carry their strong Christian witness with me. It has been encouraging to see how people in our churches here have prayed for Japan. People have shed tears for Japan. People have thanked me for bringing the truth of what is really happening in Fukushima. One young lady gave me a hug saying; "I lost my husband last year. I know what loss feels like. You've got to take care of yourself." She became the wounded healer to me; entering into our pain, through her own. It has been my role to be a bridge between peoples and churches.

I have chosen the following 15 pictures that will first guide us through the earthquake and tsunami disaster. The latter part of my presentation I will address the nuclear disaster.

Picture One (bicycling out to the coast)

Here we have a picture of our volunteers bicycling out to the coast soon after the disaster of two years ago. Sendai lies along the Pacific coast, and was one of the areas hit by the sizable earthquake. Fortunately, both my home and work place, the Emmaus Center, were far enough from the coast to be spared the destruction of the tsunami. However, we could hop on our bicycles and be down by the coast in a matter of 40 minutes. Within days of the earthquake, my work place became a relief center, and our partner church, the Kyodan, mobilized nationally to send volunteers out to the coast.

I want you to look at their backs. What do you think they carry with them? Do you think they knew what it was they had to offer? Many of our young volunteers just felt compelled to jump into action. They needed to go and see with their own eyes, and to lend a helping hand. However, once they got there to see the devastation and suffering of the people, many returned full of sadness, anger, confusion, a sense of helplessness, and questions about life and death.

Picture Two (Sendai)

The city of Sendai has a population of one million. This is where the German Reformed Church of America started sending missionaries more than 120 years ago. They started churches, established schools and a seminary. Then 60 years ago, the E&R church started a youth center to reach out to college age youth. The youth center is where I have been working. Most of the youth I work with have no ties to the church. It is an outreach ministry of the Japanese church. So you can see, it was by no coincidence that I happened to be living in Sendai.

Now, I want you to imagine this city of one million stripped of electricity, water and gas. No phone lines. Cell phones were useless. Food items were scarce because roads and

train lines were shut down. People had to line up for hours to receive two items from the grocery store. There was no gasoline at the gas stands. Life as we knew it was no more.

It is a humbling experience to suddenly lose the things you depend upon. But we also learned something invaluable through this experience. We learned that when everything has been stripped from you, what remains is relationship and community. We had each other. Modern society has greatly undervalued the importance of community and relationship. Yet in this situation it was most comforting to have the presence of another person. One pastor friend reflected, “With no electricity in the home, we naturally gathered out onto the streets looking for company.” Relationships are the resources that we need to nurture for times such as these.

Pictures Three & Four (sharing back at the Emmaus Center)

The Emmaus Center became like Grand Central Station with young volunteers coming and going all the time. Some came for three days, and others for longer periods. We hosted 2500 volunteers (80% of whom did not belong to the church) that first year by feeding them, housing them, and sending them out on bicycles to the coast.

The first picture shows our volunteers in one of the villages. The second picture shows volunteers at the end of the day in a meeting. They share about the work of the day; how many volunteers went to which homes? What was the content of the work? How many volunteers will be needed the following day?

Afterwards we broke them up into groups of ten to share about the day. We told them to share what is on their hearts. “This” we said, “is not a time for conversation or debate. Nor is it a place to flaunt one’s knowledge. It is a space to listen to each other; a place to be heard, and a place to honor the feelings of others.”

Japanese people are not accustomed to opening up in front of total strangers. But the volunteers had deep questions on their minds. What they had seen and heard weighed heavy on their hearts. The time of sharing became a safe space for them as they discovered that it’s OK not to have the answers, and to admit to your own brokenness. In this time of sharing each of the volunteers were able to discover something beautiful; that in each person there is something beautiful that is just waiting to be shared. When you discover that beauty in yourself and in others, you find renewed HOPE in humanity.

Picture Five (Mr. Sugawara)

The man on the left is a carpenter named Mr. Sugawara. Mr. Sugawara’s house had been hit by the tsunami, and he had lost his mother. His work place had been completely destroyed, and Mr. Sugawara had evacuated to an elementary school where he was staying with about three hundred other villagers. In those first days after the disaster, there was an overwhelming sense of despair in the air. Everywhere we looked there was destruction and loss.

One day soon after the tsunami, one of our young pastors from the Emmaus Center

hopped on his bicycle to go to the coast to see what he could do for the survivors. He met Mr. Sugawara, and in the course of their conversation the young pastor said something that has remained with me ever since. He said: “Mr. Sugawara, we are looking for HOPE. We want to share this HOPE with our young people. Would you help us?”

The young pastor asked Mr. Sugawara for help; as if to put the ball in the survivor’s hands saying; “You are the one that is going to lead us to HOPE. If you do not find HOPE we do not find HOPE.” Mr. Sugawara’s eyes lit up. He just happened to be the chairman of the local little league and loved working with young people. He said; “Come follow me.” He took us past the police blockades saying; “I will take responsibility for these people.” Then he turned to us and said; “I’ve got to warn you, I don’t like Christians, and I don’t care for volunteers.” “But I’m going to give you guys a chance. Do my front yard. You don’t need to work fast. Just do a good job. The neighbors just might come to ask for your help.”

This was the beginning of a beautiful relationship with the people of Shichigo village. Mr. Sugawara became our contact person in the village. Every morning our volunteers would arrive in the village on their bicycles, and Mr. Sugawara would tell us how many volunteers were needed in which houses. Eventually we were able to help with all 117 households in the village. They even asked us to work with them in the Buddhist gravesite; the graves of their ancestors. These people do not know the Bible, nor do they know much about Christianity. However, after sometime the villagers would say to us; “Thank you Emmaus Center! Thank you for walking with us. If it wasn’t for you, we would not be here.” Eventually they gave us a small prefab where our volunteers could rest during lunch time. They said, “We want you to be a permanent part of our village as we rebuild into a new future.” Such trust we could have never asked for.

Picture Six (disciples in the storm)

Christians in Japan are 1% of the population. This means that the dominant culture doesn’t understand you, doesn’t want to honor you, and acts as though you ought to conform to the ways of the dominant culture. Holding onto the faith can be much like trying to stay afloat in a storm. This is a Japanese woodblock print of the disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee with Jesus. I have learned so much from the struggles of our partners. It’s not easy to be small, and to be a minority. Through them I learned about the patience, courage and trust needed to keep true to the faith.

Japan for the most part is a secular society. People do not ascribe to a personal faith. However the two religions of Buddhism and Shintoism are very much alive. When there is a death in the family people go to the Buddhist temple, and when there is a birth, a wedding, or anything to do with new life, people ask for a Shinto ritual. Buddhism and Shintoism do not compete. They have differing roles in society. Religion is alive in the sense that traditions are important for the Japanese people.

The statement; “I don’t like Christians.” is an attitude I often encounter in Japanese young people. Religious people are perceived to be: narrow-minded, intolerant,

judgmental, and self serving. They think that religion is the cause of war. It has been my challenge to present a different face of Christianity that is tolerant of other religions, and open to listening and learning from others. I try to share that there are Christians who think that war is a poor way to solve conflict.

Statements such as “I do not like Christians” can be the starting point out of which lasting and endearing relationships of trust can begin. Again, it’s all in the relationships. Relationships are God’s way of working miracles in our lives.

Picture Seven (prayer by the coats)

On the eleventh of each month, at 2:46pm, people from the Emmaus Center gather out by the coast to hold hands for a minute of silence. In our circle are people who belong to the Tenrikyo Sect. There are also young people who would call themselves secular. No matter what our religious or spiritual background, we hold hands to remember the dead, and pray for those who continue to struggle. You would be surprised how much the young volunteers value this time of silent vigil. They told me they appreciated religious communities for the rituals and practices that bring comfort to a wider community. It was exciting to see Buddhist and Christian communities come together to pray for the dead, and to care for the grieving. Through this circle the young people find comfort in knowing that they belong to a fellowship of people who continue to pray and lift up the lives of those who suffer.

Picture Eight (Mr. Konno)

This is 83 year old Mr. Konno showing me his string beans last summer. Look at his smile! He has been a farmer all his life. After the tsunami destroyed his farm Mr. Konno lost all incentive to live. His wife thought he would become senile and die. The Konno family was one that was determined not to depend on volunteers. They were proud farmers; proud of the fact that they had always done things by themselves. For them, depending on strangers was shameful. They had no history of allowing strangers onto the farm. One day, two months after the earthquake, they decided to ask some volunteers to help out around the garden. Soon Mr. Konno snapped back to life. Each day he looked forward to having young college girls coming to help him on the farm. He could tell them what to do and they would listen to his stories. His wife told me how amazed she was to see the change in him. One day she leaned over the counter and stared into my eyes saying; “You know. I just don’t know why they do this for us. We are complete strangers! If there was a disaster in another part of the country, I don’t think our people would go to this length to help others.” I didn’t feel I needed to say anything in response. I could see that a whole new world had opened up within her – a world that she had never experienced before. She too had witnessed the goodness in the human heart, just waiting to be shared. Perhaps in the process her understanding of family, of the human family, had been broadened.

Picture Nine (the map)

Now I want to shift the discussion to the nuclear disaster. As you may know the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plants exploded several times following the earthquake. One fact that was clear from the beginning was that neither TEPCO nor the Japanese government was capable of managing the situation and protecting the public. The nuclear plumes not only released large amounts of radiation into the air and sea, but they have caused much anxiety and fear for the general public. There is much on this subject that I could say. However, I want to limit my discussion to how our partners are responding in this state of emergency. For those of you who want to learn more, I would direct you to look up the website for the Helen Caldicott Foundation (Nobel Peace Prize laureate) which sponsored an international symposium in New York on the second anniversary of the disaster.

Just a few points of explanation about this map: Notice Sendai, on the Pacific coast, seventy miles to the north of the reactors. The nuclear plume from the first explosion of March 12 traveled to the north, into an area north of Sendai. On the 13th, the second explosion carried the radiation down toward Tokyo. There are some areas in Tokyo with high levels of radiation, and there are questions about the contamination of Tokyo's water supply. The third series of hydrogen explosions carried the radiation northwest toward the city of Fukushima. This explosion released the largest amount of radiation onto the island. At this point there is a twenty mile radius which is off limits to anyone. But that does not mean that there are not hot spots outside the off-limits-zone that are not highly dangerous to human life. Directly west of the reactors you can find the city of Aizu Wakamatsu west of Inawashiro Lake. Please keep this city in mind because I will be referring to it later in my lecture.

Picture Ten (Gamma-ray spectrometer)

This picture shows a gamma-ray spectrometer which measures radiation in food items, water and soil. There are also geiger counters which allow you to measure the amount of radiation in the air. What is happening in Japan today is that people are making their own measurements. There is a group of concerned citizens, of which the church is a part, which does not trust the official measurements. With funding from CGMB, and the United Methodist Church, our partners provide these services free to the public, so that people can feel safe about the food they eat.

The situation is much worse than anybody would like to believe. Although the government announced a "Safety Declaration" in December of 2011, those living in and around Fukushima know that this is far from the truth. Pipes from Unit 2 are corroded and leaking, releasing large amounts of radiation into the environment. Radiation levels in the cities of Fukushima and Koriyama are not on a decline, they are rising. Next to Unit 4 there is an exposed pool of water in which there are 1500 rods of spent fuel. If anything were to happen to this pool of water, Japan would be left uninhabitable. Our

local Tohoku Conference (with whom I have been working these past 22 years) has arranged for an emergency alert system to alert all 88 churches in the conference in the case of an emergency at Unit 4.

The government has downplayed the dangers. They have sent in their “experts” and scientists to control the situation. They are trying to educate the public with new standards of safety; standards which would have been highly unacceptable prior to the disaster. The government prioritizes economic stability and recovery. They promise the people of Fukushima that they will be able to return to their homes. They provide money for people who have lost their land, homes and livelihood. As the days wear on the general public becomes tired of living in fear. There is also a psychology at work that wants to believe that they can return to their ancestral lands. They want to believe things are not as bad as people say. As the noose tightens, those who question the new official line are isolated and made to feel as if they are over-reacting.

Picture Eleven (Tomoko)

The young lady on my left is Tomoko. She is 22 years old, from Fukushima city where the radiation levels are high. Tomoko now works in Sendai, but she loves to go home and eat her mother’s cooking. Her mother uses vegetables that Grandpa and Grandma make. Tomoko sits down at the dinner table and casually questions whether the food is safe to eat. This simple question ruins the evening. Each member of the family reacts in a different way to the dangers of radiation. No one can talk about it rationally. So Tomoko learns not to talk about it. Radiation is the white elephant in the middle of the room that no one wants to talk about. Tomoko would like to have her own family, and have children one day. But her parents and grandparents are unable to entertain her simple questions.

The insidious nature of radiation is that it not only destroys for our bodies, but it destroys human relationships; in the family, at the work place, as well as in society. People are deeply polarized. Fukushima is a polarized disaster-zone.

Picture Twelve (Terumi)

This is Terumi, a member of the Aizu Wakamatsu Church in Fukushima. She heads a citizen’s group called The Aizu Radiation Information Center that strives to protect the people of Fukushima. They sponsor refreshment camps for children to escape from the high radiation zones for short retreats, so that children can play outside free of the fear of radiation. They also bring concerned parents together to share their concerns. The Center shares information and provides a support group for local residents who question the official line. They also join rallies and advocate for the children and residents in Fukushima. They speak out against a government that keeps the truth from the public, thereby putting lives at risk. Ever since April 2012, concerned citizens have gathered outside of the Prime Minister’s office every Friday evening to protest Japan’s dependence on nuclear energy. These gatherings can be anywhere from ten to one hundred thousand

people, and yet these continued protests seem not to receive any coverage by the international media.

Terumi shared with me her decision to evacuate right after the nuclear explosion. She thought that by setting an example, others would be encouraged to evacuate. However, when she arrived at her relative's house in southern Japan she felt terrible. Though her family consoled her saying; "You did the right thing." She could not feel right about her decision. That night as she was having dinner, the image of Christ sharing the meal with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus came to her. She saw herself in the shoes of the disciples. She saw the cross for what it was; she had turned her back on the people of Fukushima. She also understood the meaning of forgiveness in Christ. So she returned to serve her people. She stands as a strong advocate for the people who are walking in darkness in Fukushima. For her and her people, who are fighting the monolithic systems of government, international relationships are crucial. I asked her; "What would you like me to tell the churches in the US?" She responded; "Learn what is happening here in Fukushima. We want people to know the truth."

Picture Thirteen (flowers)

The road to recovery will take time. For most people, their lives will never return to the way they were. Life has changed. As the majority of society, and the whole world moves on with their lives, the clock of the survivors has stopped in time. They have not only lost their homes, their family members, and their jobs, but also their daily life; the simple things that bring joy and meaning to life. We might say also that they have been stripped of their dignity. One day they are independent citizens, and the next they are on the receiving end of benevolence. Relief work is also about helping people regain a sense of their own dignity as human beings.

Here you can see some of our volunteers taking flowers to the people of Shichigo. We want to show them that we care for them, and will continue to walk with them. But this is not about a one-way relationship. I think we all learned that relationships are mutually enriching. As much as the survivors were grateful to meet our volunteers, our young volunteers were grateful for the relationship with the survivors. It was as if we were looking into one another's eyes saying; "You are my hope. You bring me hope."

Picture Fourteen (Hisako)

This is Hisako, age 19. She is making glutinous rice balls with villagers from Shichigo. One day she shared; "I feel I have learned in one week what it would have taken me a year to learn at home. I finally know what it means to serve others; it means that they allow you to grow as a human being, and that feels real great!" When she concluded her remarks, the whole group of volunteers clapped, because she had expressed something that everyone else was feeling.

We offer ourselves, because this is all that we can offer. When we find authentic

relationship, we see that it has the power to change us for the good. Maybe this is what the Holy Spirit does for us. Maybe the Holy Spirit is a fancy word for relationship; a relationship you look back upon and say; “Boy didn’t our hearts burn when we walked that road together.”

Picture Fifteen (holding hands)

Now for my concluding remarks on mission: Many people think that “mission” is about what happens over there, across the seas or in other lands. People think that mission is about helping poor people. But I ask you; what if mission was less about “what we did for others” and more about “who we are;” a question of our identity! Jean Vanier, the founder of the L’Arche community in France, has a beautiful line. He says; “Love is not about doing something for others. Love is being able to find something beautiful in another person.”

Love is our mission. Mission is all about the relationships; relationships that are mutually enriching, uplifting and life giving. Enter into one and you will never be the same. What I am learning from our partners is that our relationship to one another enables us to be a better church here in the United States. Global Mission is about how we can live more faithfully here in this country. Partnerships encourage us and enrich us on our own faith journey.

I want to challenge Lancaster Theological Seminary, and our churches here in Pennsylvania, to enter into renewed relations with our partners in Japan. I know that the need for relationship is mutual. It may just be, that this is a relationship just waiting to happen.