

JAPAN 2012



The weekly cafe at the Help Tohoku House brought many smiles and laughter as we played games, sang songs and spoke with the locals who have been deprived of community and places of gathering since the tsunami.

One Year after the Tsunami

By Angela and Henry Hung

In the last short-term mission trip to Ishinomaki in September 2011, we experienced God's grace in an intensive way within a week. It was an extraordinary experience for us to live with God closely and re-charge our spiritual battery away from our workplace and busy life in Hong Kong.

After that trip, we always looked forward to receiving newsletters from the local missionaries: Rimpei, Virginia and Satoshi, about what's going on in Japan. In the past months, we can clearly see that God is orchestrating a big project in Japan: to awaken lost souls and to heal the hearts of many Japanese people who lost their homes and loved ones last March 11 when the tsunami struck. Every couple weeks or so, we learnt that a local Japanese had come to know Christ. This is

almost impossible in the past as Japan was considered a rocky land of the gospel with less than 1% Christians.

Early this year, we watched part of the Japan New Year concert "Kōhaku Uta Gassen" (紅白歌合戦). Their main theme this year was "HOPE": to revive the spirits of the Japanese through this annual event. We were touched by the song Hitotsu (ひとつ), sang by a singer Tsuyoshi Nagabuchi. Mr. Nagabuchi started singing the song in full darkness outside of the Ishinomaki Kadonowaki Elementary School. This school was flooded and then completely burnt down during the disaster, killing 74 of 108 students and 10 of 13 teachers and staff. At the chorus of the song, there was a radiant 360 degree beam of spot

light that lightened up the whole school and the surrounding Kadonowaki area. This song reminded us that many people in Japan are still in darkness and frustration, fighting to live everyday. Having hope for the future is an important factor for the broken hearts and souls. We continued to pray for the missionaries and the people in Japan. Despite the fact that we could not do much, we know God's plan is bigger than ours; and His timing is always the best.

Later in January, Flo shared with us there was a possibility to go to Ishinomaki again in March 2012, one year after the disaster. However, we were a bit worried that the weather will still be cold in March and would be tough for our team to go. We were also asked if we hear the calling from God to co-lead the trip, even

though the team formation and what we will be doing is still unknown. We started to pray for all these and later on we learned from Flo the trip is confirmed. We were very excited about this and started planning the logistics and the pre-trip meetings. (Turned out that March was the perfect time for us to experience better the kind of weather the local people had to go through a year ago.)

In our trip last year, we experienced a big hurdle from the objection of our parents due to their fear of radiation. They were mainly impacted by the various negative media coverage in Hong Kong (even though some of the news was not real). God showed us how to trust Him completely. When we relied on His power, a miracle happened: within a very short time, God used other people to soften our parents' heart and resolved all our hurdles. This time, as team members applied to join the trip, in addition to the concern of cold weather, some of them faced challenges from family objections around radiation and other concerns again. We trusted that this is part of the trip in how the team would experience God's power and we shared with them what we learned from our last spiritual lesson (and the fact that the radiation level there is lower than in HK). God finally gave us a total of 13 team members, which is even more than our last trip. Praise the Lord!

Up to the last few days before the trip, we were still discussing what we will be doing, where we will be staying, what facilities we going to have (or not have) and what we need to prepare, etc. God led people with different characters and backgrounds into our team. Each team member may have different objectives, different talents and different concerns. More than half of us were new joiners, and 11 out of 13 were girls! We were worried as the house-rebuilding work that we would have to do involve quite a lot of physical labour. Turned out the team had to split up and do many "girls' tasks", such as cooking and decorating. God is just awesome!



Then even after we arrived in Japan, our plans had to change last minute due to some uncontrollable factors. We had to decide what songs to sing, how to drive to some unknown places, what to do when team members got sick/injured/upset, how much food to buy for the cook-out, where to find corn starch, how much rice to cook and what do we do when the dishes were burnt, too salty or spicy. Amazingly, God taught us to have a peaceful heart during all these anxious moments. We learnt to obey Him, not to worry, and to stop using our own experience and planning. Just give God our best and He will do the rest. He let us experience His guidance and protection everyday. We even experienced a miracle of a meal cooked for 20 people, which ended up feeding 40 people!

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”
Proverbs 3:5-6

God's love is always abundant and it was eye opening every time when we serve Him wholeheartedly. The moment of the 3.11 one year anniversary was heart-breaking as we remembered many thousands who lost their lives, loved ones, homes and jobs. However, when we saw the smiles from the local people and long-term missionaries, as they sang, ate and played games, we felt that every minute of this trip was worth it. We had a chance to talk to a local carpenter, and learned how he recently became a Christian. We have also met many new friends, other volunteers from Asia, US and Japan. Some of them lived and worked with us and we became great friends. On the last day of our trip, we had a re-union dinner with a local family, whom we first met in our last September trip. Not only were they so happy and grateful to see us again (and to treat us with a big table full of yummy dessert!), the whole team also felt their joy and happiness. We prayed that they will get to know Jesus one day, who is the source of our love.

This trip was full of priceless rewards and happy memories. At the end, we felt that we were the ones who have received so much from God. As soon as we left the town, we already started missing all the people there, not to mention the super tasty oyster, BBQ and ramen in Ishinomaki! We look forward to the next trip and the next lesson from God!!





“I have always wanted everything to be in my control, and everything to be well prepared so that nothing will fall apart. However, we all know that we can’t... This is the time I should learn to surrender my will to God’s will, lift it up to Him and let Him orchestrate it, for I know He will have the perfect plan for me!”



Surrendering to God’s Will His Perfect Plan

By Fanny Su

On 3 Mar 2012, I departed to Japan again. It was my 12th time to Japan. I was excited as usual, but this time, I was also worried and nervous. I have never thought that I would go on a mission trip in such a short time (I’m a less than one year old Christian) since I have always thought of myself as not being spiritual and strong enough to go on a trip like this. However, when I learnt that IECC was going to send out a team again this year, I was thinking, maybe this could be the one! When we got closer to the departure date, my worries started piling up. I was worried about the weather, the people, whether I could still speak my long forgotten Japanese and also my health since I am not always a strong person, plus the fact that I have asthma since I was 8. Common sense tells you that people who have asthma shouldn’t be going on a mission trip where the major task is “mudout”. However, in the end, God proved to me that my worries were invalid after all. I remember when I received the trip booklet, the verse “Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations” (Psalm 46:10) was written on the front page. When I looked at it the first time, I didn’t really understand its meaning and how it is related to this trip. But now I finally understand it because I have experienced its true meaning during this mission trip. It’s a big gift and blessing that I have received to finally experience it!

After a full day of traveling, we started our first activity on the 2nd day. We attended the Sunday service at a local church. Like any other normal service, we worshiped and studied a few bible verses. To be honest, I was still way too tired that I really couldn’t concentrate much but it was very likely the fatigue mainly came from my worries. Maybe because God saw me worried like this, He sent me a very important message that day. When the local missionary there was sharing during the bible study, he said, “Jesus sent you here, He is with you”. Immediately I thought “wow, I’m such an idiot! Why would God call you and send you on a mission trip but leave you behind?” This is so true and I suddenly realized my faith was so weak! I have always wanted everything to be in my control, and everything to be well prepared so that nothing will fall apart. However, we all know that we can’t and that’s why we are worried about things! This is the time I should learn to surrender my will to God’s will, lift it up to Him and let Him orchestrate it, for I know He will have the perfect plan for me! This message was really helpful for the rest of my trip as I know I just have to listen to Him and serve wholeheartedly and I don’t need to worry about anything and He will make the best outcome of it!

During the trip, we have many different tasks, not only mudout, but we also did cookouts, café sharing, English class

and preparations for the 311 anniversary service. Though we divided members into different groups for performing these tasks, we will still face a lot of challenges like weather, response of the local people and logistics etc. As it turns out, God really provided what we needed. About 2 weeks before departing to Ishinomaki, I was still having quite frequent asthma attacks. When the day came for the mudout, I was really nervous about it since I really didn't want to cause any burden to my team because of my asthma attacks. At the end, I didn't even have one asthma attack throughout the whole 10 days trip. It was just so amazing! Besides, I never thought that mudout could be a very enjoyable work! I was amazed by God's mighty power that He brought volunteers, including Christians and non-Christians, from different nationalities, backgrounds and cultures together to perform His tasks. I really admire those long-term volunteers who have sacrificed their personal agendas and went there to serve. I have witnessed what it meant to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice. **“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:1-2).**

Sometimes we may not truly understand why God lets natural disasters happen, but through this, our minds can be transformed, not only for the volunteers who came to serve, but most importantly, those who do not know Him before can also get the chance to know Jesus. I have learnt not to question why something doesn't happen according to what I planned, because only God knows the bigger picture and we can be still and submit ourselves to Him, then we will be able to receive mercy and comfort.

On the day of 311, we were assigned to pick up garbage in the neighbourhood. Picking up garbage is never my favourite task. You can imagine how tiring repeating the same action is for 2 hrs - bending up and down again! At that time, I really didn't prefer to do it, but I told myself, if it's God's will asking me to do it, then I'll listen. As I walked around the neighbourhood,

what I picked up were broken pieces of tiny toy cars, shampoo bottles, combs and even slippers. It was really devastating and heart breaking. The images from the 311 tsunami overflowed in my mind immediately in how the houses were washed away and the fear the people faced when the

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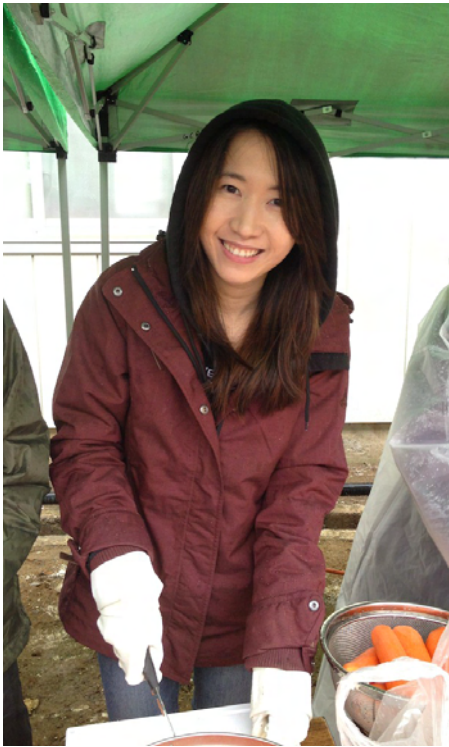
tsunami came. After we finished cleaning up, I took a walk with 2 team members and we bumped into Mrs Sato, a lady we met at the lunch cookout. She was very delighted to see us again and invited us over to her house. Although she seemed really optimistic, we could still feel the hurt deep down inside her when she showed us pictures of her friends and family. We could feel her loneliness since many of her neighbours either passed away or didn't want to return to this place to remember this horror disaster.

On that day, at 2:46pm, the siren rang again to commemorate the disaster and the people who have lost their lives and loved ones. Although the weather was very good on that day, I could still experience the fear. I am encouraged to see that many volunteers in different parts of the world came to help, yet I am also wondering how much time they are going to need for recovery. What we have done is so limited, so I pray that God will not forget these people and will heal their hearts and provide what is needed for His people to rebuild the place. This, my very first mission trip, was a very meaningful one. Especially to me as a young Christian, I was able to develop wonderful friendships and strengthen my faith through this trip. I am hoping that I would be able to return to Ishinomaki again sometime and be a part of God's plan!

Cookout

Cooking for the local community and enjoying a meal and games with them at the army tent with other volunteers.





Being Still

Hearing what God had to say

By Michele Cheng

My first mission trip: I wish I could say that I had a profound reason or calling to go on this trip to Japan. But to be perfectly honest, I kind of just wandered into this on a whim. Actually, that's not entirely true. I have always had a heart for Japan – my parents had lived in Tokyo, I took Japanese classes at university, and I'm currently a member of a taiko performance group. Spiritually, I had also thought about missions before. Actually, I had wanted to go on a mission trip for a long time, but

always managed to come up with the perfect excuses not to... no money, no time, you name it I said it. However, this Japan trip left me with no excuse.

Money? Previous plans for a Europe trip got cancelled, and so I had some extra savings on my hands.

Time? I recently quit a soul-sucking office job (okay... in hindsight, not actually that bad, but maybe just not right for me) and had some time before starting my next job in April.

Location? A first world country. One of the big reasons I was always so hesitant to go on mission trips was because I have an embarrassing tendency to be rather anal about matters of sanitation. It's a terrible reason, but I think it appropriate that I at least acknowledge this problem of mine in hopes that I might be able to overcome it in the near future.

So, with no excuses left, I took this as God's calling for me to go.

Truth be told, going into this, I had no idea what to expect. In the briefings prior to the trip, I eventually gathered that our team would be doing mud-out, cooking, and assisting in other community outreach activities with local volunteers. As I was not exactly the perfect human specimen for heavy labor, nor was I gifted in the art of preparing edible dishes for human consumption, I quickly became concerned. I panicked and feared that I would become a burden. What if I passed out on site during mud-out? What if someone got food poisoning from the food I helped prepare? Fortunately, I was soon reminded that though our abilities are limited, but with God, all things are possible. It would be conceited to believe that anything we might be able to contribute on this mission trip come from

any other source than God's grace and mercy. During our final team meeting before leaving for Japan, we prayed as a group for God to prepare our hearts, minds, and bodies for this trip. And as we left the meeting, I felt an overwhelming sense of peace sweep over me. Just my willingness to go would be enough. God would do the rest.

Despite my initial hesitation, when we got to Ishinomaki, I was actually quite stoked to work with the team and do all we can to help the community! In my mind, I had all these plans. But, God is good. He quickly reminded me (in His own special way) that He was in charge. Not me. This reminder came in the form of deteriorating health. I'm not sure how, but I soon became rather ill after the first couple nights, and felt completely helpless and useless to the team. I tried to do my bit in mud-out and cooking, but really didn't feel like I was contributing enough, and ended up breaking down one evening (after I physically collapsed outside a parking lot, and fell flat on my face on the cement pavement). God sent His angels to my side in the form of my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ on the team, and I was blessed to have them help pick me up not just physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. I felt really bad for "receiving" so much on this trip when I really should be "giving." But, in the quietness of my reflection, my mind became less cluttered with the agenda I had mapped out for myself to carry out on this trip, and I became more receptive to being still... and, just hearing what God had to say.

Our team drove to the neighboring town of Onagawa to spend some time to reflect and pray for the local people affected by the tsunami one year ago. As we drove on in silence, I suddenly heard the faint sound of music. Soon after the first few notes, I immediately recognized the song. It was "Still" by Hillsong.

"Hide me now under your wings

Cover me within Your mighty hand

**When the oceans rise and thunders roar
I will sore with you above the storm
Father you are king over the flood
I will be still and know You are God**

**Find rest my soul in Christ alone
Know His power in quietness and trust."**

Earlier that morning, it had been snowing, and so a white blanket covered the vast empty field facing the ocean. I felt so small, but then the lyrics rang loud, My eyes started tearing up, and I prayed a prayer for the Japanese people. Ever since I saw the



tsunami on the news in 2011, I had prayed for Japan. But somehow, this prayer was different. It was not a prayer of words, but of love. More importantly, it was God's love. People need the Lord.

It has been inspiring to see how *Help Tohoku* has reached out to the local community to instill hope and life back to the people who have had to witness such a devastating event. It was not until our visit that I learned of Ishinomaki's thriving fishing industry before the tsunami hit. And as we went by to see the fish market early in the morning, my heart just sank at how the industry has shrunk, and how many lives were affected as a result. The damage of the tsunami is still being felt to this day by the local people; yet even amidst what seems to be a great tragedy, I was constantly

greeted by smiles from the Japanese wherever I went. And when we would talk, and they'd learn that I was a volunteer, they would thank me. I'm not sure why. I feel like I really should be thanking them for being so strong, and welcoming me into their community. I guess they were happy because they were not forgotten. People still care, and that was what they needed.

I thank God for the amazing group of people working full-time in Ishinomaki right now. *Grace City Relief* was another group we had the privilege of working with on this mission trip, and I am just blown away at their capacity to love and serve. Please pray that God will continue to bless them so that they may continue to bless all those around them.



Top Left

A lone man standing at the entrance of the Ishinomaki fish market, a place that was once the largest fish market in the region.



Top Right

The remains of a toppled building in Onagawa, the next town that was flattened.



Bottom Left

Satoko and Satoshi, two long term volunteers.



Bottom Right

Mudding out where we spent a lot of time just digging dirt out.

A Circle of Help

The worst is over

By Hiromi Or

Being Japanese and going back to Japan for such mission trip had a special meaning for me.

I was originally not planning on going, until I saw the notifications on the church bulletin, saying "Japanese speakers are most welcomed" and that was what sparked my interest and my decision to go.

Honestly, before I went, I did not know what to expect and I had plenty of doubts on whether I would be of much help. However, God has blessed us by providing and grouping our team with individuals who are skilled and possessed different gifts. We had some team members who had established local ties from prior visits and were already familiar with the area. Some members were skilled and experienced in carpentry and were able to provide invaluable advice while mudding out. Some of us had superb artistic sense and were able to make use of their talents decorating the local community centre "Help Tohoku", whereas some of us were able to speak the local language and participated in some cafe gatherings where we would mingle with the locals.

We arrived at Ishinomaki one week prior to the 1 year anniversary of the tsunami. Although it was March already, the whole Tohoku region was still cold and there were a few days when it even snowed. We came prepared for such weather and were all wrapped up in down jackets and clad with heat packs. Yet the cold was sometimes still unbearable. Being there and experiencing such weather ourselves made us realize that the images and scenes shown on the television about this tsunami was not the full picture of the conditions back in March last year. It was then that we



“Although it was just a casual gathering with those locals, it was through those conversations that I realized and personally felt the strength and courage of the Ishinomaki locals that have gotten them so far.”



realized that although the tsunami killed a lot of people instantly, a lot of people passed away while waiting for rescue in such harsh weather conditions.

For the days we were there, much of our time was spent at "Help Tohoku", the local volunteer operated community centre at Kagonehama, Ishinomaki. This place served as a get together place for the local community, whether it was for English lessons, afternoon gatherings or simply for the locals to drop by when they wanted somebody to talk to.

We arranged a few afternoon open cafe sessions there, where we got the opportunity to talk and mingle with the locals. Within the people who gathered there, there were people who lost their children, families and homes. Having been a year since the tsunami, some of them were gradually opening up to talk about their experiences then. All of them had a different story, but all were sad stories. However, as they were telling their own stories and how the past year had been a long year for them, traces of sadness were not to be seen on their faces. Now that they look back, they are genuinely more than thankful that they have made it so far and were surprised by their own strength and the strong community ties that have been developed through this ordeal. Some of the elderly locals even went to joke about them starting to hit the gym so that if another tsunami hits, they would be able to run away faster.

Although it was just a casual gathering with those locals, it was through those conversations that I realized and

personally felt the strength and courage of the Ishinomaki locals that have gotten them so far. Ishinomaki's population is generally made up of the aged and elderly, yet when conversing with them, the determination you see from them wanting to live well for the sake of the people who died, was so strong and filled with energy.

When I first went on this mission trip, I kept on thinking how I could be of help to the locals. Looking back at those 10 days spent there, it was not solely me helping them, but a circle of help. Us showing the locals that we care by helping to mud out their houses, cook for them and spend time with them; them helping us to understand how far one's strong will can bring us although life may not always turn out the way we want it to be, every cloud has a silver lining; and our teammates taking care of each other and the genuine friendships that was developed from it.

God always has His plans for us and the Ishinomaki locals too believe that only good things could happen from now onwards as they have dealt with the worst already. I too, wonder what there is in store for them, but as usual...God knows what's best.





By Michelle Wong

Be Still

After all the acts had gone on and all the screaming fans had returned to their seats, Franklin Graham delivered the message of hope in the stillness of the stadium. This was the exact stadium used for identifying dead bodies just a year ago, but on this day it was filled with joy and praise. As he gave his alter call, I prayed for hearts to melt and for locals to stand in boldness to step forward. One minute passed....two...then three and no one came forward. But Franklin Graham remained at his pulpit and continued praying. Before you knew it, streams of people were heading towards the front; some were even running. It was a beautiful picture of hope.

And Know

In the still of the morning, I, alone walked towards the Help Tohoku house to resume my stenciling work. Could it get any better? It was a blessing to serve and do work in ways which felt more like a hobby than a grueling task. It was like one of those leisure pursuits which people only wished they had more time for. It was like working in a dream job, and if I had another week or two in Ishinomaki, I would have stenciled and decorated to my heart's content. And so as it is, with each missions trip, I saw how all of our talents were used to His glory; how each of our skills complimented the

“Be still and know that I am God.”

Psalm 46:10

A Beautiful Picture of Hope



tasks at hand; and how we needed to cooperate as one body, the body of Christ.

That I am God

In the stillness of the day, at 2:46pm, I stood there in remembrance of the tens of thousands who had died or had been injured just a year ago by the March 11th tsunami. The deafening ring of the tsunami warning bell overhead triggered thoughts and images of what might have happened on the very grounds where we stood. It was a moment of truth for me and my imagination went wild. This was the first time I was impacted so deeply by the disaster and so struck with grief. I was in awe of God's power; how He could clear things out but also clean things up and I was encouraged to know that change was happening.





Resting with a hot drink during a break at mudout outside Takahashi san's home.

Grace and Blessings Bonding with Different People

By Carole Tam

Hi, I am Carole, and though I have been a Christian for years since high school, I have been a kind of routine Christian. After being bombarded by our Pastor's challenge of asking us to go out to evangelize and not to be a passive Christian in almost every sermon, I finally decided to respond. Maybe it is because of my study of Japanese, God chose me to respond to His call in the mission trip to Japan Tohoku. Why this time? Actually, I think I missed the boat last time! I think God already started calling me last time (i.e. last May) when I got miraculously good results in the modular exam of my Japanese study (ranked 10th in about 200 students, *I could not believe my eyes when I saw my name on the notice*). It never happened before and I had studied the least for that exam. Plus this

time, He made me have no excuse by arranging my best and close girlfriend (also an Island ECC member) to join the mission trip with me.

So, I decided to go but I actually had nerve racking up my soul since I was the only doctor on the team. But, I was so ashamed to tell people I have not been practicing clinical medicine since I joined the Department of Health as public health doctor. My professional skills are no longer on clinical aspects on an individual patient's basis but on health planning, studies and health promotion for the larger population. Thus, I was getting worried 'what if' team members fell ill or injured, and how I should treat them. I started to pray and tried to beef up myself with up-to-date medical

knowledge on emergency care by reading first-aids and medical books. The more I read, I found myself feeling more inadequate and thus, I had to learn to count on Him, knowing that He will provide (wisdom, advice and support to me like a consultant to a junior doctor at medical ward round!).

Off we went, and I had not thought too much more (actually I had no time to think too much because of busy and packed work before the trip). Then during the trip, I asked God to speak to me, and let me feel Him more and closer and more real in my life. Ever since a long time ago, I know God loves me by knowledge, like the song says, 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so', but shamefully I have never felt it (or

felt it strongly) in my daily life. Then, He did, He did speak to me on the night of the first day of mud-out (6th Mar) as I read the devotional book (entitled ONE that we received from church). I had very deep empathy with Takahashi san (the home owner of the house where we did mud-out) whom I met on the same day. I was kind of lost and upset with myself for not knowing what to say (in Japanese) at that time to show condolence to Takahashi san as she wept for the loss of her husband, and to show how much we love her; but God told me (via the above-mentioned article) that we should embrace one another as sisters and brothers as one family in Christ – this should have been exactly what I should have told her at that point when she cried for the loss of her loved one. That drove me to suggest to Angela (our team's co-leader) on that same night that maybe we could put in a phrase on the bookmark (donated by my darling close friend, Phoebe) that 'we are/ hope to be one family in Christ' in Japanese.

I found it amazing that seemingly, God spoke to me and addressed my need. But, ironically, sinfully and shamefully, I denied Him. I was kind of testing Him at that point, telling Him that I did not believe that you are talking to me unless you show me more. The following morning, He showed me more by letting Virginia, one of the staff of the mission group named 'Grace Mission Tohoku' to share at the devotional time in order to address my complaints/ grumbles to Him about the trivial/ meaningless things that I had been working on (i.e. the mud-out tasks, the clean-up tasks which were seemingly endless and tiring). Virginia shared the bible verse, Proverbs 22:4, conveying the God's teaching to me, telling me humility was the way to finding God, and the smallest things (in our perception) would form the biggest picture in His plan, and the most important part was to humble ourselves. I thanked God deeply for letting me know that He is ready to respond to me anywhere and anytime. To take an analogy, stars are always in the sky but we cannot see them clearly in our daily lives in a concrete city like Hong Kong simply because our vision is narrowed by the close proximity of the high-rise buildings, or distracted by so many neon lights or subconsciously we do not see the need of counting upon them for light. But, in the wild darkness or a suburb in a country like New Zealand for example, I have seen stars big and close, twinkling brightly like diamonds in the sky. The stars stood out in the complete darkness as our minds are not distracted by other lights, and our eyes are focused on them looking upon them as lights to shed on our path! So, I have come to understand that God always speaks to us...through many ways (like stars dazzling in the sky), but it is us who have not chosen to find, learn and read His words and His ways and we may easily think He is not there! At this point, I really feel sorry for God to have such a daughter like me and hate myself for being so mean to Him. Yet He loves us so much like a father to a child but we simply choose to ignore Him and deny His love, care and concern.

During the whole trip, He taught me to humble myself and to do things like mud-out, cook-out, communicating with local Japanese, entertaining the locals by singing, dancing, and performing in areas which I am not (will never be) an expert and did not do superbly. So, this is what Proverbs 22:4 meant. Whatever glory that comes to these things, I know

they were done not by me but by God.

In spite of this, He rewarded me with grace and blessings arising from different kinds of 'bonding'.

1. Bonding with God personally

The greatest blessing surely came from a closer relationship with Christ. This was exactly what I asked for in the beginning of the trip. He answered my prayer and addressed my request. I feel Him closer in my life. As a matter of fact, I feel the need of staying in Him just like John 15:1-5 says as I really find I 'can do nothing' when I am apart from Him. I look forward to a closer relationship with Him walking with Him for the rest of my life. I have yet to figure out what His plan is for my life (i.e. His purpose in my life). Maybe it would not be as pleasant as I would expect, but I would like to know and live it out since I know only by living out the will of God shall I have a good, pleasing and perfect life as His will (Romans 12:1-2).

2. Bonding with sisters and brothers irrespective of churches, places and ethnicities to experience the ultimate joy of the 'One Body in Christ'

a.) Same church

– overcoming individual differences

I would like to thank God for letting me meet and be bonded with sisters/ brothers of this church through this trip. As a matter of fact, I had never/ not asked for bonding with anyone else other than God in this trip but He had rewarded me more than I asked for. I am so grateful to all the teammates since it is such a blessing to know them and be connected with them. They are all so gifted and have inspired me in many surprising ways. I am very much convinced that they are the handiworks of God since they are so unique, lovely and talented. I am glad that I am not the creator of the world, otherwise, I would surely have an incurable headache for the lack of craftsmanship to make so many pieces of fine art that are uniquely beautiful.

b.) Different churches and nations

– overcoming cultural and ethnical difference

It was only the second day of our trip. God had not left me a chance to doubt Him (or His greatness in unity). He led me to sit beside a Singaporean Christian (a sister who also came to Tohoku as a volunteer for the mudout program) on the way to the gospel concert (held between 2-4 Mar) where Franklin Graham was the speaker. I only found out later during the devotional time that most of the other brothers and sisters of our church were seated besides a local Japanese but they had not expected to (or prayed to) whereas I was seated besides an English speaking Christian even though I had been looking to (and prayed to) sit beside a local Japanese!!! Anyway, I think God wants to open my mind (and He did) that being on a mission trip was not just for one's own spiritual growth (i.e. not just like an autistic child living in one's own world with God), it is more on building relationship with other Christians and living interdependently on one another's support/strength like an intertwined vine in Christ so that we can become stronger to evil attacks. From

that point, God implanted a radar in my mind to identify opportunities to connect with sisters/ brothers whom I encountered in the trip.

I am deeply thankful to God for letting me meet many Christians from overseas e.g. Virginia (Help Tohoku), a Pastor from International Mission, and Japanese Christians coming from different areas of Japan e.g. Rimpei's family, Satoshi san. They showed me how to live a sacrificial life in faith to follow Jesus' teaching in evangelism (Matthew 28:16-20): their love to the people mirrors God's love, their desire to see others come to faith mirrors His desire, and their passion to make disciples mirror Jesus Christ's passion.

c.) Local Japanese Christians

– overcoming language difference

It was the second (again) last day of my trip. At this point, my learning from God on bonding with sisters/ brothers was limited to the perspectives of speaking the same language. However, I have never thought about overcoming language barrier to make deep (deeper) connection with Japanese speaking sisters/ brothers. As I sought His presence, God did not disappoint me and kept surprising me by taking me out of my comfort zone and then letting me know He is with me and in charge (like telling me "Carole, relax, stay calm and be happy as I am (your God is) here with you) like Jesus did with His disciples.

I would like to thank God for letting me overcome language barriers to connect with local Japanese Christians. In fact, I was kind of taken aback (overwhelmed) when I was asked by Satoshi san to work with a sister (Christian) from Nagoya team to prepare the BBQ dinner for the volunteers. This is not as simple as 'conversing in Japanese' but meant that I was put under pressure to be accurate/ precise in my language (e.g. use of words) to show etiquette, courtesy, respect on cultural difference, dietary preference during discussion, planning, seeking consensus, building up team work with Japanese Christian to get the task done well! Even though I am learning Japanese, my proficiency is very limited to simply dialogue and casual talk, not to mention expression of thoughts and feelings in Japanese. Plus, my language proficiency had never been tried on teamwork with Japanese speaking co-workers. I was kind of freaking out (worried and overwhelmed) but God was with us (the Japanese sister and other Island ECC sisters and me) that we had not only got the task done but the recipients (other volunteers)



“Jesus is willing to multiply whatever I (we) give sacrificially. Five loaves and two fish are small amounts but it can become a feast for thousands in God's hands. This reinforced my belief and faith in God that no matter what small amount I can give, God will use it in amazing ways for His glory.”

appreciated our food (seasoning of the cucumbers/ veggies). Plus, the Japanese sister (Keiko san) and we built a close bonding after the joint effort. So God let me understand and appreciate very deeply that we are one in Christ irrespective of barriers of languages, cultures, ethnicities or backgrounds. Looking back, this was exactly what the Singaporean sister told me (see above) at the time we were (made) to sit beside each other by God. Isn't it amazing? God made it happen to me without me asking or expecting.

3.) Bonding with Japan

– overcoming geographical difference

I liked Japan very much since a long long time ago but in the perspective of a tourist. Now I love Japan as my second homeland (second to China as I am Chinese). Again, it is because of this trip that has connected me to Japan with such a strong tie. I have so much empathy/ sympathy when Takahashi san and Sato san told us about their loss of love ones (husbands, close friends, properties, cars) and how they survived the tsunami. My heart was in pain and sorrowful with a certain sense of panic when I heard the siren at 2:46pm on 11 Mar one year after during the moment of silence at the memorial service for volunteers. I don't know why but my tears were kept rushing out as I heard the siren and I hurt for the locals for the loss of homes, loved ones and apparently all the hope they had of this life. I believe that only God can bring the ultimate hope and peace in their lives now and forever, and I hope so much (pray so much) for them (as much as for my family members) that they will

know and believe in Christ, and then we can be of one family and meet in heaven one day!

There are two other occasions that made me feel Japan (Tohoku) was home. The first one was our encounter with Tomomi's family (her parents and her), the dinner they wanted to treat us, the dessert feast prepared in love by her mother for us and the encouragement/ teaching given to us like love to children by Tomomi's father. The second occasion was when we were leaving the temporary housing after distributing curry rice left from Takedashi, an old gentleman rushed out to give us a souvenir (a fridge door magnet which is in the form of very cute turtle dressed in Japanese fabrics) and waved bye-bye to us with very warm smile on his face. We were there doing such minimal work but they love these 'strangers' as much as parents to children. No words could tell how thankful I am for their love and appreciation. I have nothing to pay back but what I could do is to keep them in my thoughts and my prayers and love them as my family. As a matter of fact, the moment I stepped onboard the plane, I started to miss the people in Tohoku; and the moment I looked down from the plane (as it flew up to the sky), I started to look forward to going back to Tohoku!

4.) Bonding with local Christians

– overcoming ranking difference

It was beyond my imagination that the blessings continued to come to my relationship with a sister who was former junior of mine at work. I am amazed how God continued to use me





surprisingly after I have come back from Tohoku trip. It was the weekend of the week when I returned from the mission trip. At the dinner gathering with former colleagues (all Christians), this sister looked weary and depressed, and was kind of like mute as I shared the mission trip. As we asked, she shared her worries about her dad who was in serious condition (septic shock) at the hospital's intensive care unit. Looking at her at that point, my heart was touched thinking to myself that I should do something to comfort her. So, I told her that I would like to visit her dad the following day. Her dad is a senior doctor (much senior than me). At the end of visit, I did not know what to say to comfort her dad (as a senior to me). Just at that moment, I didn't know where I got the courage (probably from the Holy Spirit) to ask him to pray together since I believe only God is the greatest healer. *(Now, as I look back, it was also probably due to training by Flo - our team leader who made me pray on numerous times at the trip!)* Her dad kindly followed and prayed with us. I only knew her dad was a non-believer when she told me while stepping out of the hospital. All these years, I thought she came from a Christian family though. Few days later, my sister was overjoyed with her dad's acceptance to the invitation by the Pastor of her church to the sermon in the following week. Praise the Lord, she said her dad never accepted Christ before but he changed after that prayer. Honestly, I don't believe it was my prayer with her dad that worked but I believe somehow God has worked through me. I was like a rusty machine which could run again with lubricating oil that was put upon me during the mission trip, i.e. I was getting used to praying publicly since I had not done so for long time.

In conclusion, I found myself being blessed more than I expected from this mission trip. I guess what I have been through in this mission trip and after showed what Jesus taught us by the miracle of 'feeding the five thousand with five loaves and two fish' (Mark 6:20-44) – Jesus is willing to multiply whatever I (we) give sacrificially. Five loaves and two fish are small amounts but it can become a feast for thousands in God's hands. This reinforced my belief and faith in God that no matter what small amount I can give, God will use it in amazing ways for His glory. Taking time off work, forfeiting pleasure and enjoyment from a trip, leaving personal rights and privacy behind, taking up the hardship of heavy duties/ cooking/ endless dish washing and cleaning, letting off our pride to serve non-believers and brothers/ sisters in Christ will not pose any costs or barriers to offering myself to Christ for His use since I know the reward to my spiritual life and eternal joy with Jesus Christ in heaven is more than the cost we pay in this life. To this, I am truly and deeply grateful to God for His mercy and grace; and surely look forward to Him using me in any ways anywhere.



Top Right

The girl's room where 11 of us slept together side by side.

Bottom Left

Long term staff, locals and our team during a meal together.

Bottom Right

Peeling potatoes to cook curry rice for Takidashi, the Saturday community lunch gathering.



From left to right: Phoebe, Akiko, Michele and Carole. Akiko is a volunteer who came from another part of Japan and worked with us for a couple of days.



Respect, Grateful, Delight

Three words to sum up my trip

By Phoebe Cheung

When I first told my friends that I would be going to Northeast Japan as a volunteer to help out with clearing debris and broken homes, and might be doing some cooking, they either laughed their heads off or shook them in disbelief. That's because if you met me, you would know that I am not the strongest type of gal and look like I can't even lift a brick. And cooking and cleaning? These two words just never appeared in my book at all. But as part of my new year's resolution, I had made up my mind to go on more mission trips this year with the aim to enhance my spiritual growth and experience God more in my life.

Japan was a likely mission trip choice to me as a frequent traveler to this country and a fervent student of Japanese for

the past five years. The horrific images of the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami one year ago had stuck to my mind. I felt strongly that I want to do something for these people and let them know that they are not forgotten by the world. My only worry was whether I might become a burden or jama (邪魔)

to my teammates or the local people.

This (jama) was probably the first impression that Flo, our team leader, got from me when she first saw me in one of the pre-trip meetings. When she later disclosed that she experienced a premonitory feeling when she first saw our team, I *knew* she was talking about me! Haha, but she didn't know underneath there is a

toughness and sense of discipline that can only be developed from years of boarding school training. Together with good planning and a body with strong immunity, I thought I will not have any problem surviving Ishinomaki at all!

In fact, the trip as a whole was easier than expected, even though I had never washed so many dishes or did so much floor sweeping in my entire life. But the accommodation was cosy and we were well fed with plenty of yummy local food (oysters, ramen and BBQ!). Our teammates were all mature and considerate and super friendly. So everybody got along well even though there were over 10 of us crammed in a room and sharing only one shower and bathroom. As mentioned before,

I was well prepared for the dusty work of mud out. In fact, I brought along the full gear: *construction boots with metal tips, goggles, masks, and a white overall completely covering my body from head to toe.* My funny total look brought quite a few laughs as many of my teammates thought it was quite an overkill. But at the end of the day, I was thankful for my gear for protecting me against the dust. After two days of mudout I had become quite an expert in clearing out mud (it takes forever for just one hole!) and taking out rusty nails. I also learned the trick of balancing myself and can walk quite fast on the elevated beams.

Later on I was assigned to the task of cooking, a task involving preparing lunches for around 20-30 local people. Though less physically demanding, cooking is more difficult than mudout! Cooking for such a crowd under time pressure was really no joke at all. Good thing my friend Carole (my cooking twin) was there to follow the instructions meticulously and do all the work of seasoning and marinating. Other team members Angela and Fanny were cooking like true pros using those gigantic pots and pans. Finally all was cooked and well received by the locals. We had chosen classic Chinese dishes (Mapo Tofu, Hainanese Chicken Rice, Pork Ribs with Black Bean Sauce, Stir-fried mixed veggies, etc) for a reason: Non-Chinese people would not be able to tell the difference even if we didn't get them exactly right, hahaha!

If I had to sum up my overall feelings of this trip, I would use three words, 'respect', 'grateful', and 'delight'. I will just elaborate each word in point form below:

Respect to:

- the bravery of those survivors who are giving their best to build new lives.
- the business people who are working hard to rebuild their businesses against all odds
- widows like Takahashi San who are left behind with a broken house and family and still remain hopeful to the future
- the community that tries to hold everything together
- the security and order that Ishinomaki still upholds with dignity despite such loss
- long term volunteers from all nations, Japanese returnees from overseas, regular volunteers from various parts of Japan (Chiba, Nagoya, etc).



“I am grateful for the warmth, hospitality and kindness of the local people given to us, which is much more than what we were able to give them.”



Grateful for:

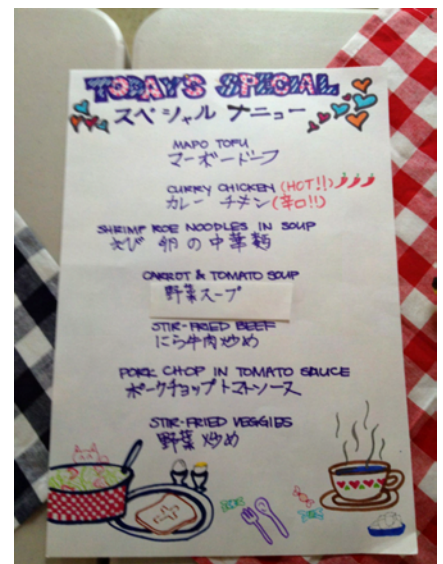
- the warmth, hospitality and kindness of the local people given to us, which is much more than what we were able to give them
- Takahashi San's deep bows to us when we finished mudding out her house for the day and, *bien sur*, her delicious fruit platter prepared as our break time snack
- the Kitami family's overwhelming hospitality and the unforgettably delicious strawberries they served to us
- the thanks and appreciation we received from various businesses (ranging from discounts at the fish market, to the free starter and desserts served to us by the Ramen House owner)
- the opportunity to see the good in people even when disaster strikes
- just the simple things in life: heat, unbroken houses, even and smooth roads, a bed, family, friends, pets, safety from earthquakes and tsunami,...

Delighted:

- that this must be the most meaningful trip I have taken
- that I was able to meet people and make many new friends, including people at church, local residents, and the volunteers
- that God enabled me to overcome the physical

- challenge and make it through these 10 days without falling ill
- that we were able to cook and chat with the local people, and show that the Tohoku people are not at all forgotten
- to have the cold and wet and miserable weather, which enabled us to understand the people's suffering exactly one year ago a little more
- that many people had come to accept Jesus Christ in Japan
- that I felt much closer to God during these ten days

That pretty much sums up my reflections of this 10-day trip. To my teammates, thank you for putting up with me and hope I had not been a Jama (well, not too much anyway) to you during those ten days!





“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.”

Romans 12:15



The Things that Matter The Ministry of Presence

By Flo Chiu

The Things that Matter

From a young age, I have taken a definitive interest and love in Japanese things - the gadgets, the food, the culture, the language, the orderliness and resilience...even snacks at a convenience store. Japan is a country known to missionaries as a "hard ground" where many have gone for years and have seen little fruit. Perhaps for many people, it is easier to fall in love with Japanese things than to actually say we love Japanese people. It takes time to get to know a person. It takes even more time to build a relationship that would be called a friendship and then to develop meaningful conversations that may in some way allow you to talk about the things that matter in life and death. That is anything but easy in Japan. But for the hour of bus ride to and from the Franklin Graham event in Sendai, that is what God allowed me to talk to Anbe-san about. Her family and the people she loves, her experience in the tsunami, what she does for a living, her birthday wish (it happened to be her birthday that day), and why she chose to go forward and receive Jesus after hearing the gospel at the Franklin Graham event that very same day I met her. When I asked her why she wanted to

become a Christian, she simply answered when you have many questions that you know no human can answer, your only choice is to find out whether there is a God. I know that she may continue to have questions even after receiving Christ, but I told her that we believe in a loving and living God who wants to have a relationship with us so continue to talk to Him and find out who He is. I may never see her again but for the short time we did, we talked about the things that did matter. I pray that for many of us living in Hong Kong, we would spend more time talking to those we love now about the things that do matter - the things close to our hearts and finding God in the midst of those things, not waiting for a tsunami to hit before anything gets spoken, or left unspoken.

The Ministry of Presence

For a missions trip to be about the activities we do is easy. For a missions trip to be about how we love and the relationships we build is not so easy. It is easier for the church to only send one team a year to Japan when there are already 19 other trips happening throughout the year. It is easier for me to

return alone to Japan than to bring a team along. It is easier to go when the weather is warmer than in the freezing cold to appreciate more deeply what the people went through in the tsunami and be there in their mourning. There are many things that are easier said than done, and certainly easier choices to make for our own sakes. But I am so thankful that we did end up returning to Ishinomaki this time to coincide with the 311 anniversary.

In Romans 12:15, it says

**“Rejoice with those who rejoice;
mourn with those who mourn.”**

During our time there exactly one year after the tsunami, for many of the local people, it marks one year since their loved ones passed away. One hard year of rebuilding their lives, rebuilding homes, making decisions of what to do, where to live, and how to continue on. For many, their homes are still in the temporary housing. For some like Takahashi-san whom we met, their homes are only just starting to be rebuilt by Samaritan's Purse. During the 4 days we "mudded out" her home - literally digging mud out of her floors and tearing out wooden planks that was destroyed by the black water from the tsunami, we worked alongside her and listened to her tell us her story of what happened when the waves came crashing into her home. Her tears fell as she recalled how she narrowly escaped death under the water and how her husband made it safely to the second floor but died from the cold and health complications 17 days later even though they were eventually rescued. We held her hands as we prayed together at the beginning and end of the work day, being told that even though she was not a Christian yet, she liked holding hands and praying. Even though we are only one of the many volunteer groups who would work on Takahashi-san's home until it is finished, I have always believed it did matter to be there as a Christian group showing love in action and presence. But it wasn't until we met Tomomi's aunt and cousin that I truly understood that the ministry of presence can have such a big impact on someone we would only meet for 2 minutes. We met Tomomi and her family last September as she was a friend of one of our team members. This time when we met again, it was exactly on the day of the 311 anniversary and she came to pick rubbish with our team before the anniversary service. When we saw her, she was with her aunt and cousin, whom we have never met before. We introduced ourselves briefly to them and noticed that her aunt had tears in her eyes. It was such a brief moment of meeting one another that none of us really thought too much into it until we received an email from Tomomi after we left. She spoke of her aunt and cousin who thanked us for visiting their town and shared that they said our presence gave them so much courage of not being forgotten. It was only then that I realized those tears were actually linked to our presence. It was a privilege to be there.

Receiving love

During the trip, the weather fluctuated widely each day, but it was generally very cold with snow or rain falling on most days and periods of sunshine in between. My body was obviously not used to such cold weather and I caught the flu by the second day, resulting in a voice that sounded like Kermit the frog and deteriorating strength. Perhaps it was because of my personality and because I was the team leader, I did not think too much of it and continued with each day's work. Unfortunately my condition was too obvious for people on my team to ignore, and soon medicine, hot water, orders to rest, messages from friends in HK (even one from my own brother!), and even frustration at me started to come in. This

was not really the attention or kind of love I am used to receiving and what was seemingly a normal flu became one of the lessons God wanted to teach me on this trip. A seemingly little thing led to conversations about what it meant for me to receive love, and particularly receiving love that doesn't quite come in the form that I am used to or most readily accept. It made me think of various conversations I have had with friends who also come from more traditional Chinese families. I realize that even in my own family, love is often expressed in the form of service or words spoken in a way that sounds more like nagging or criticism than in a way I would have hoped it would come in - understanding and support. Sometimes when love is shown in a way you don't receive well in, it may even be easier to reject such love than to accept it. It was humbling to know that God's words for us to "...love one another deeply, from the heart." (1 Peter 1:22) involves choosing to receive love that may be expressed differently (or not expressed or spoken at all), and still also choosing to love one another deeply from our hearts. It also meant learning that part of loving God can mean taking care of the body He gave us and not taking our health for granted. When I returned to HK, I told a close friend she had taught her daughter to live well, love well and die well. Thank God He demonstrated to us what love is, loving us first so that we may also learn to love one another. I also thank God for a team that demonstrated that love in action, so willing to give in everything they were asked to do, and being used by God to teach me about loving well - a lesson I will continue learning the rest of my life.

Returning

After the trip, many people have asked me how is Japan a year later? Are things back to normal? My answer often back to them is it's better and people are working on rebuilding their homes and lives, but the rebuilding and healing may take as long as 10 years. I shared with my co-leaders Angela and Henry before the trip that I wasn't sure how God is going to lead us after this trip. Should we continue to return to Ishinomaki after Samaritan's Purse pulls out some time this year? Will there be ongoing work for us to do and be a part of? No one really knows what things will look like in a disaster area's recovery as needs and ministries change month by month. But at least I can say I see God is at work in this area as people are coming to know Him, and my prayer is still for all this to point towards the God of hope and comfort and love. It doesn't matter how much we are able to do in the bigger picture, but how we can be faithful in the small things and trust in God's sovereignty. Our theme verse has not stopped echoing in my mind as I continue to pray for Japan: "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." (Ps 46:10) I am praying that we will return to Japan again this year and continue to be a part of their rebuilding and healing. What that looks like will be for God to show us.



Preparing breakfast for volunteers at the army tent.



Returning Six months later

By Candice Yeung

Time has gone by really fast this year and it seemed like we pressed the fast forward button to March 2012 and before we all knew it, we were already on a plane to Narita Airport on 3rd March.

I have not skipped a beat after our Sept 2011 trip to Ishinomaki in Miyagi of Sendai. Ishinomaki is a city that was heavily destroyed by the tsunami and earthquake more than a year ago. It was the biggest fishing port in Asia. We transported straight from Narita on a 7 hour bus ride to one of the houses which we worked on 6 months ago. It seriously felt like Ishinomaki has been changed by "Hope"! It still feels like a ghost town in some ways but I noticed lots more smiley faces this time! :) We walked into one of the homes we worked on last September, and was amazed how God has provided. It was done up just in time for us to live in there for our stay there. It felt just like yesterday when we knocked off the wall, the kitchen and the toilet, and experienced living without any electricity, water, toilet or kitchen inside the other half wrecked house last

Sept. That was just like how some locals lived in their homes at that time. I'm amazed at how the little things we did last year could turn into now a fully renovated home with light, heater, a kitchen and a toilet built in for all the volunteers to stay. It is such a blessing!

The whole team went to the Tohoku Celebration of Hope with Franklin Graham at the Miyagi Stadium. One year ago, Miyagi Stadium was the place where they put the dead bodies as there wasn't enough space to put all of them. I totally love how Samaritan's Purse (SP) has been so good in helping to rebuild the community, especially in the home repair program. The SP team was on the same bus as our team and the locals. We were all well aware that God's presence was evidently among all of us and with the locals, as the SP team led the worship on the bus and we all sung together in English and Japanese on the 1 hour bus ride to the stadium. Not only that, the more touching moment would be the sudden rush of people rushing to the front of the stage at the stadium after

Franklin Graham shared the story of the Prodigal Son and asked people to receive the ultimate healing and to be made right with God. The spiritual condition of the tsunami survivors had jumped a big leap! So keep praying for the locals and all the Japanese across the whole nation that they will continue to open their hearts for God.

As mentioned earlier, Ishinomaki was the biggest fishing port in Asia and so many locals used to work in the seafood industry. Many now are still devastated by the destruction and many are still trying to make a living out of it. At the beginning of our trip, we went to the Ishinomaki Fish Market where wholesalers would bid on seafood to further understand their current situation. Taking an interest in their livelihood and a little visit to see how they were doing could mean a lot to them and give them more motivation in doing their business. The whole team also went further to visit some other fish processing companies where they would do everything now manually without the freezers, fish cutting machinery

and face the challenge of workers who prefer not to work and receive government unemployment funds. Business funding is required, as all their boats and equipment for the fishing businesses cost a huge amount of money.

We continued to work closely with SP on the home repair program this time, but just on one big house near the Ishinomaki Manga Museum to build the relationship with the house owner and to continue to bring hope and healing to each people we talked to at the Watanoha neighbourhood. The tsunami survivor house owner herself is in her 70s and is hoping to move back into her home after the house gets repaired. It is SO brave of her as she lost her husband after being saved from being stuck in her home for 3 days in the freezing weather. She was such a sweet lady and she would hold our hands as we prayed for her and her family. I would love to visit her again when we go back there next time.

We experienced 4 seasons in one day, where it could be sunny like summer in the morning and then snow and storm at night. So many people got sick this time including myself. Maybe God had a different plan for me at Ishinomaki this time. Last time, I was mainly doing house demolishing work and since now quite a few homes got fixed, there were lots of restoration work to do such as home decorations and decorations for the volunteers' tent for holding meal gatherings with the locals.

Since a few of us already came to Ishinomaki last year, we were able to become not just partners with the local long-term missionaries at Help Tohoku but also friends. It was really encouraging to have them around, as they left their jobs and countries to love and serve the people of Ishinomaki as soon as Tohoku got destroyed by the 311 tsunami and earthquake in 2011. It really touched my heart, and I also hope we would deepen our friendships in Christ and support them when needed. I really loved their sense of humour and how they connected with the locals. Such a

joy to witness all those sweet moments! :)

We also got to reunite with the tsunami survivor family whom we met last September. Tomomi san, the eldest daughter from the family also worked with us at the mudout last year. It was a pleasure to know that she and her sister are getting married this year. Tomomi san and her husband basically live and work in Tokyo (about 6 hours bus ride from Ishinomaki), and she took the bus the night before we met and caught the night bus back after the dinner. It was precious to know they used the group photo from last year as their 2012 New Year card. I felt so loved and was seriously touched by how they appreciated our involvement in rebuilding their local community physically, emotionally and spiritually and that it would mean so much to them.

After my return to HK, many friends told me that they thought the restoration of Tohoku is done. To be honest I was shocked to hear them saying that at first, but then I thought about it again and realised maybe there hasn't been any regular news in HK and people became busy with their own lives. There is just not enough coverage of how they and others can help. This really triggered me to do something to get the word out on how to get more volunteers and missionaries to go to the disaster zone and support the locals to rebuild the community in the next 10 years. As a designer, I hope to use my digital design gift from God to spread the words out more and to help maybe with the local missionaries on their projects for the people at Ishinomaki and other tsunami-affected areas. Perhaps each of us from now on should pray more on how we can use ourselves to help the tsunami survivors.

Left

Local volunteers singing on a bus on the way to the Franklin Graham Festival of Hope.

Right

The New Year's card the Kitami family made with the photo of our team and their family from the last trip in September 2011.





“And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and you strong, firm and steadfast.”

1 Peter 5:10



Why Japan?

By Josephine Tiu

According to the 31st January 2012 Tohoku (north-east) loss update, 15845 deaths have been reported and 3340 are still missing in Japan due to the 9.0 magnitude earthquake happened a year ago on 11th March 2011. A lot of people have lost their homes, their jobs, and their loved ones from the tsunami and the subsequent stress.

“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt... Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the Lord have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.” (Ezekiel 36:33 & 36)

A simple thought of hoping to utilize my construction background to help restore shelters ignited my passion to sign-up for Japan. Of all the team members whom God could have chosen, He handpicked me – the most impatient with least Japanese knowledge – to stay behind for a month.

Growing up in an ambitious-driven culture, I am prone to compare and compete all the time. I wanted to take home a list of tangible accomplishments like our last year’s Uganda mission trip. Upon arrival, I was really excited to hear all the

tasks that I could be involved in, such as mud-out damaged homes, takidashi (soup kitchen / cook-out), mochi-making, community basketball, local business visits, open cafes, and the 1-year celebration event, etc. Until one night after our team departed, I tripped in a ditch and sprained my ankle badly from walking in the dark, followed by contracting stomach virus. All the activities had to be put on hold. Frustration and disappointment overtook my mind; I couldn’t restrain myself from asking why.

The following day, I isolated myself to submit all my anxieties and irritations to our faithful friend, Jesus. During that time of reflection, I came to realize that I still see God as a judge whose love for us is based on our performance. Even though I am constantly being reminded, “God is love and He loves us just the way we are.” This theory does not seem to sink in my heart. I am still not convinced that I can do nothing and receive the same amount of love. Now I understand why people say, “The furthest distance is from the brain to the heart.”

BE STILL

Once again, I stumbled from my pride issue. When things don’t work according to my plan, I easily lose patience. As far as the world is concerned, I am an ordinary individual with no special talents or supernatural abilities. The lesson is not

how much Josephine can achieve, but how much Josephine is willing to surrender. God has prepared this voyage to teach me to be an obedient child. In the midst of my depressive chain of thoughts, I heard a gentle whisper in my heart, "Stop pushing yourself so hard to be a perfectionist. I just want you to **be still and know that I am God**. The reason why I brought you to Japan is to show you my presence. I am with you no matter where you are. Let your most endearing Father in heaven lavish you with His unconditional love." This is the pivotal point of my journey in Japan: re-learning from the basics. Know God, not just know about God, but to know Him intimately.

GRACE

In any type of relationship, love naturally grows through knowing more and deeper. When I decided to anchor myself in Jesus' unceasing love, I began to embrace all the obstacles that come my way. Without failure, He satisfied my goal-oriented personality by filling up my schedule with even more varieties of work. God provided whatever I needed to complete the assigned tasks, from sweeping the filthy floor, to demolishing a tough wall, to lifting crates of 23kg seaweed, to sharing love with the local Japanese. It doesn't matter what I do, as long as I dwell in His presence, His promise remains the same, yesterday, today, and forever. This is the true grace of God.

"And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." (1 Peter 5:10)

The theme of our mission is "hope", but the word I received from God is "grace". I couldn't connect these two words until today when I was totally exhausted with joy in bed as my trip approaches the end. These words spoke to my heart, "Hope itself is like a star – not to be seen in the sunshine of



"...You are God. Yet you love me with a Father's love and I, stand amazed."

From Relentless Grace, the Vine Band

prosperity, and only to be discovered in the night of adversity. Afflictions are often the black folds in which God uses to set the jewels of his children's graces, to make them shine better."

Throughout the entire trip, there were uncountable occasions where I felt extremely guilty for being selfish, unfriendly, inconsiderate, and judgemental. I am really disappointed in myself for being such a horrible person, but God's grace is always wonderful. He wants to purify me from every hidden agenda and rotten motive by surrounding me with a bunch of loving team members, encouraging local partners, and forgiving volunteers. This is definitely not what I deserve to receive – an unforgettable experience of unity to serve with people from all around the world.

Why would God do that? The only answer is because He is "the God of all grace", and it literally means the God of all kinds of grace, who has unlimited supply to every problem we face. His "Amazing Grace" gave me courage to profess my relationship with Jesus a year

ago, and His "Relentless Grace" carried me through this mission trip. Suffering won't last forever – this is the hope that we profess. Our prodigal God has prepared glorious plans for each and every one of us. His abiding, unreserved, and unfailing love provided me a secret hiding place in Japan. My plan was to restore damaged homes for the survivors, but Jesus' perfect plan is to restore the room in my heart first. My heart is only as small as a fist, but God's heart is big enough to love the whole world, including you and me.

How are you investing your time, your talents, and your money? Surely, much of what you have invested will pay dividends in this life only, but the grace of God gives you interest, which is eternity. You can never go too far where you can't come back home. When we give from our hearts, we get God's undivided attention.

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:18)



From left to right:

The bike I use to ride around the neighbourhood parked outside the army tent; resting with other volunteers from Japan during mudout; mochi making at a community event.



Sitting outside Help Tohoku house with Flo enjoying one of the rarer days of sunshine and warmth.



A Lesson of Love Surrendering Those We Love to God

By Ricki Yuen

God taught me a lesson of love in Japan.

Among the many other things that I was looking forward to, I was excited about going to Japan to spend time with a really good friend, sister and colleague - Flo, who also happened to be the main leader of the trip. We work together at church in the same department. We see each other more than we see our families. She is someone who knows me so well that she can complete a sentence for me without me finishing it.

This Japan trip was considered one of the toughest trips because of the harsh living condition and cold weather. It was snowing almost every other day in Japan when we were there. Almost half of the team fell sick at some point during the trip. I was one of them and probably one of the very first who got sick. I was throwing up and having stomach pain after eating a raw oyster. So I was ordered by our leader (Flo!) to stop participating in any activities until I get better. Thankfully after a full day of

rest, I recovered and was able to join the team again.

So when Flo first started getting sick, I tried to get her to rest too but she wouldn't listen. She kept telling everyone she was fine when she obviously was not. Slowly but surely my impatience grew. It started to frustrate me when I noticed her cough getting worse. The busyness of getting the team organized and a lot of the other behind the scene stuffs kept her up till late and she started to lose her voice, yet she refused to rest. It got to a point where I thought it was just too much for her, so I decided I need to confront her.

My well-meant conversation didn't end prettily, or maybe more like I didn't take it very well. Flo wanted me to understand that she has responsibilities to fulfill as a leader and she has to put others above herself and that includes her health. When she said I have to let her do what God is asking her to do and she gave me a look that I felt she was saying, "Ricki,

I thought you would understand but why don't you?"

I snapped!

"Fine then!" I screamed in my head, "I'll get out of the way!" I told myself.

I felt my love was not appreciated so I decided to just stop caring entirely. I turned my face and put on my ipod music as I heard her coughing next to me all through out the night. I wasn't sure why I was so snappish. The following night after we returned to our guest house, I realized I lost my iPhone. It probably fell out of my pocket somehow when I was shoveling dirt at the construction site earlier during the day. I was so upset at myself. Flo came to me and offered to pray but I was so upset that I didn't want to talk to anyone.

"NO! I DON'T WANT PRAYER!!!" I said.

I was so angry at the same time I felt so bad for being rude and irritable. I knew I was being

mean to Flo but I couldn't control my feeling, I felt very much like an idiot. That night I sat quietly in the corner during worship and devotion. I refused to sing or pray. I didn't want to offer my unclean heart to God. I wanted to hide. Then I heard the team sang "He Knows My Name"...

I have a maker
He formed my heart
Before even time began
My life was in His hands

He knows my name
He knows my every thought
He sees each tear that falls
And he hears me when I call

I wept bitterly because I was overcome with shame. But as I continued to cry, I felt the presence of God and thoughts that were not from me started to rush into my head. I felt God was stroking my hair and telling me it's okay. He said He knew my heart. He knew I was trying to love and be a good friend. But He reminded me love cannot be forced. Jesus never forced His love on us. His love came in a form of patience, kindness and gentleness. The scripture about love in 1 Corinthians 12 came to mind again.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

I realized my behavior in the last couple days could hardly be called love. True love is not trying to control the other person. Our decision to love should not be dependent upon whether it is received or reciprocated. God loves us unconditionally and He wants us to give the same kind of love to others. God told me to love Flo is to

"I think all I am trying to say is being a Christian is not about living a perfect and righteous life. God knows our mistakes even before we made them. So what He cares about is how we react and the lessons we learn from it."

release her back to God and let God take full control of her life.

More importantly, the bigger lesson God wanted me to learn is to love my family unconditionally. How much I wanted to get along. I feel helpless each time when they argue because there is nothing that I can do to help. Many times the love that I have for my family turned into anger because I didn't know how to deal with my emotions and being angry was easier. It takes more effort to be patient, to be kind, to be gentle and to persevere.

Another lesson that God taught me in Japan was to have humility. Humility to admit to our own faults and weaknesses instead of blaming the other person for causing us pain.

I think all I am trying to say is being a Christian is not about living a perfect and righteous life. God knows our mistakes even before we made them. So what He cares about is how we react and the lessons we learn from it.

The ending to my story with Flo was that we made up! God strengthened our friendship even more after this! :)

Left:
Patting a dog as we met a neighbour while walking to the Help Tohoku house.

Right
We threw a surprise party for Michelle, one of our team members, who spent her birthday in Japan away from her husband and family.



**“And now these three
remain: faith, hope and
love. But the greatest
of these is love.”
1 Corinthians 13:13**