

Report on
the 4th Great East Japan Earthquake
International Theological Symposium
Being Called “Kirisuto-san”:
Re-visiting Christian Identity
in Post-disaster Japan

**Preface to the Report
on the Fourth Great East Japan Earthquake
International Theological Symposium**

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In 2016, five years after the Great East Japan Earthquake, we held the Fourth Great East Japan Earthquake International Theological Symposium together with Fuller Theological Seminary on February 29, Monday, and March 1, Tuesday, at the Ochanomizu Christian Center.

The theme of the first symposium in 2012, “How can we start again? Centennial Vision for Post-disaster Japan” became the overarching theme for the symposiums that followed. The second symposium in 2013 focused on “The Church: Embracing the Sufferers, Moving Forward.” The third symposium in 2014 had the theme “Raising Leaders through Sufferings beyond Walls.” I believe these themes placed the focus on the issues most important for the local churches following the earthquake as we strove to remain aware of how the situation and resultant needs were changing. In addition, keeping our focus on the 100 years to come, we scheduled from the third symposium a second day for youth, young leaders, and other lay people. At the invitation of a number of seminaries in Kobe, we have from the occasion of the third symposium held similar meetings in Kobe as well.

I have great joy in knowing that through the activities of the first three years, leaders of various organizations that had not known each other could meet face to face, build relationships of trust, and begin to work more closely together.

We chose “Being called ‘Kirisuto-san’: Re-visiting Christian Identity in Post-disaster Japan” as the title for the fourth symposium. In the midst of post-disaster relief activities, a woman in the disaster area called a Christian worker “Kirisuto-san,” speaking with warm familiarity and appreciation for that worker’s consistent visits and support.

The Christian population in Japan is under one percent. We realized that ninety-nine percent of the people saw us simply as “Kirisuto-san,” caring nothing about our denominational labels and thus transcending them. Perhaps they could somehow see Christ in us. Keeping in mind the perspective of those outside of the church, this symposium gave opportunity to think about mission, relief activities, community relationships, and the nature of our churches. Because of the earthquake, we have overcome many walls that divided us and learned to work together. What the church in Japan has experienced through this disaster can be of value to the church around the world.

On the first day of the symposium, Takanori Kobayashi, president of Tokyo Christian University, served as moderator. Wilbert Shenk, professor of Fuller Theological Seminary, spoke on “Preparing for Disaster” and Takashi Yoshida, president of Kobe Reformed Theological Seminary and representative of Tohoku HELP followed with his reflections on “Being called ‘Kirisuto-san’: Re-thinking Christian Identity in Post-disaster Japan.”

In the afternoon, I (Fujiwara) moderated a panel discussion on the theme, “At least go offer an incense stick!” A man in the disaster area who had suffered the loss of loved ones cried out these words to Christians who had come to do relief work. Churches in Japan usually teach that in order to avoid idol worship, Christians should not offer incense to the dead. These words, however, carried for us a special significance. One of the panelists, Hiroaki Yonai, pastor of Kokubunji Baptist Church and chair of the Japan Baptist Church Association, had related this incident to us. The cry of this sufferer focused our discussion on the nature of mission work. Others on the panel were Takehiko Oda, professor at St. Marianna

University School of Medicine, priest in the Catholic Osaka Archdiocese, and chair of the Japan Missiological Society, Makoto Kato, pastor of Oi Baptist Church and former executive director of the Japan Baptist Convention, and Taku Noda, director of the Student Christian Fellowship of the United Church of Christ in Japan.

Following this discussion, participants broke into smaller groups for workshops led by organizations reporting and reflecting on their relief activities under the theme, “The Great East Japan Earthquake: Five Years Later.”

I served as moderator for the second day of the symposium. Wilbert Shenk delivered the main lecture, “The Faces of Disaster: the Faces of Christian Compassion.” Looking over the span of the next 100 years, the most serious problem we face is the lack of young people in the churches. Where are young people that have interest in Christianity? They are most prominent in the Christian schools and universities. These young people also went to serve in the disaster areas. As the average age of church members goes up, the church and Christian schools must become better connected. Asking why young people do not go to church, we discussed whether there might be problems inside the churches, a theme that we reflected on together over lunch.

In the afternoon, we had a response to these issues from leaders within the church. Panelists Shoko Amanaka, General Secretary of the National Christian Council in Japan (NCCJ), Atsuko Hiki, Director, the Division of Education, NCCJ, General Secretary of the National Christian Council in Japan, Naoki Okamura, professor of Tokyo Christian University, Makoto Ogawa, a director of Kirisutosha Gakusei Kai (KGK/IFES) each gave a brief address, followed by a general discussion. Shu Matsumoto of Seigakuin University moderated.

This report includes the main lectures and some of the panel presentations. Some materials are in English.

I would like to note that Seigakuin University has supported these symposiums financially, with human resources, and in publications from

the start. We are particularly grateful to Mitsuharu Akudo, Chair of Seigakuin Schools, not only for being in attendance at all of the symposiums, but for his messages and prayers as well.

(translated by Brian Byrd)

* Regarding the past symposiums, please refer to the following books (Atsuyoshi Fujiwara and Brian Byrd ed.):

A Theology of Japan: Monograph Series 6

Post-disaster Theology from Japan: How Can We Start Again? : Centurial Vision for Post-disaster Japan (Seigakuin University Press, 2013)

This volume presents for a wider audience the voices of theologians and church leaders who gathered in Tokyo to consider “How Can We Start Again? Centurial Vision for Post-disaster Japan” one year after Japan’s March 2011 disaster at the First Great East Japan Earthquake International Theological Symposium. It includes lectures by Juan Francisco Martínez, “Christian Responses in Times of Disaster: Learning from Church History,” Glen Harold Stassen, “The Cross as Compassionate Suffering and as Confrontation of Injustice,” and Yoichi Yamaguchi, “The Tohoku District in the History of Japanese Christianity.”

A Theology of Japan: Monograph Series 7

The Church Embracing the Sufferers, Moving Forward : Centurial Vision for Post-disaster Japan: Ecumenical Voices (Seigakuin University Press, 2014)

The Church Embracing the Sufferers, Moving Forward continues the task of *A Theology of Japan 6: Post-disaster Theology from Japan*. The lectures and seminar reports included here are from the Second Great East Japan Earthquake International Theological Symposium held in March 2013 that marked the second anniversary of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster. It begins with the keynote address by Fuller Theological Seminary President Richard Mouw, “Serving a Suffering Savior in ‘the Time of God’s Patience.’” In the panel discussion and seminars that followed, a variety of voices from within Japan reflected on and related the experience of the church as it has dealt with the aftermath of the disaster and sought to take positive steps forward towards recovery and rebuilding. Topics include student volunteer work and the Christian university, Catholic Church volunteer bases, art therapy for pastors from the disaster areas, support for children, Christian and Buddhist services for the dead, nuclear power and radiation contamination, and the role of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces.

A Theology of Japan: Monograph Series 9

Raising Leaders through Sufferings beyond Walls: Centurial Vision for Post-disaster Japan (Seigakuin University Press, 2016)

Raising Leaders through Suffering beyond Walls reports on the Third Great East Japan Earthquake International Theological Symposium. It features addresses by Fuller Seminary Professor Juan Martínez and by David Boan and George Kalantzis of Wheaton University, along with reflections from leaders of Catholic, mainline, and evangelical churches in Japan. The book also discusses the Christian Forum for Reconciliation in Northeast Asia, held in Nagasaki in 2015.