

# Christian Forum for Reconciliation in Northeast Asia : Japan Reunion

Brian Byrd

Over the past five years, Duke University Divinity School's Center for Reconciliation has brought together Christian leaders from Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong, and the US for "Christian Forums for Reconciliation in Northeast Asia" Duke is seeking to create a "Community of Friendship," a new space for worship, prayer, discussion, and collaboration in the conflict fractured region.

After a planning meeting at Duke's North Carolina campus in 2012, the first six-day forum met in Korea in 2014, and included a pilgrimage visit to the DMZ that divides North and South Korea. Nagasaki provided the venue for the second forum in 2015. Archbishop Takami welcomed the Asian and American participants to his hometown and challenged them to send out from the meeting "ripples of peace." The middle day of the six-day event featured a pilgrimage to sites in Nagasaki testifying to the suffering and resilience of hidden Christians (Kirishitans), the Atomic Bomb Museum, and the Oka Masaharu Memorial Museum, missing from tourist maps, but dedicated to honest appraisal of atrocities perpetuated by Japan against its Asian neighbors, and discrimination against Koreans and Chinese who labored in Japan before and during World War II. Many of these outsiders received no compensation from Japan for losses and injuries suffered in the war and from the atomic bomb. The third forum, held in Hong Kong in 2016, included a pilgrimage to Macao, for centuries the center and setting off point for Catholic and Protestant missions in Northeast Asia. It also grappled with the issue of Chinese-Hong Kong relations, soured by Beijing's broken promises and colored by the student-led Umbrella Revolution street protests. In 2017, the forum returns to Korea, to Jeju Island,

where Catholic Church leaders and others have protested the construction of a Korean naval base that can accommodate nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers. The 2018 forum will be held in Japan, most likely in Kyoto or Okinawa.

Reconciliation Center founder and director Chris Rice envisions a ten-year span (2012–2022) to establish more firmly and expand the international Christian fellowship and interchange now taking place in this region through the forums. Rice, the son of missionary parents, grew up in South Korea, and then spent seventeen years in the American South following a call to live in shalom, or peace, in communities that brought blacks and whites together. Rice wrote books describing this experience. He also collaborated to form a movement of reconcilers, the Christian Community Development Association.

While studying at Duke University Divinity School in 2003, Rice encountered Katsuki Hirano, a Japanese pastor from the UCCJ Daita Church in Tokyo at Duke with his family on a study leave. Rice grew up in Korea hearing stories of Koreans forced to learn the Japanese language and give up their Korean names during the Japanese occupation (1909–1945). Because of this Rice disliked Japanese people and culture, and avoided Hirano after a mere five-minute conversation.

Rice stayed at Duke to establish the Center for Reconciliation in 2005, and in 2006 launched The African Great Lakes Initiative, bringing together Christian leaders from war torn nations in Eastern Africa. Finding success here, Rice sought to foster reconciliation in Northeast Asia, where problems of history and historical understanding hamper building cooperative relations among the countries

and their Christian constituencies. Rice had no contacts in Japan, so he asked a Japanese Christian composer studying at Duke to introduce someone in the Japanese church. The composer recommended Hirano, leading to a sort of reunion in 2011 when Hirano met Rice at Narita Airport and hosted him in Japan. Rice found the land beautiful, the food delicious, and the people he had scorned warm and thoughtful. Reflecting tearfully on his change of heart, Rice contrasted his five-minute conversation with Hirano at Duke eight years previously and his failure to invite Hirano's family to his home with Hirano's five days spent showing Rice Japanese hospitality. Hirano, also in tears, translated this story when Rice preached to Hirano's congregation in Tokyo. Reconciliation took on new significance for both men.

In February 2017, Japanese leaders involved in the Northeast Asia reconciliation meetings arranged a three-day reunion for people from Japan that had participated in the forums. Fourteen people gathered at the Episcopal Church Convent of Nazareth retreat center facilities in Tokyo to reflect on the journey they had shared thus far, and through worship, prayer, and conversation, to find the way forward. Hirano opened the reunion with a meditation asking that we see the church not first in its conflicts and inadequacies, a place where it sometimes seems that strangers gather and even squabble on Sundays. Hirano asked that having the eyes of our hearts opened, we might see a church filled with the fullness of Jesus Christ, a church described as Christ's own body (Ephesians 1 :15–22). Professor Atsuyoshi Fujiwara of Aoyama Gakuin University then spoke on the value of the "space" our group shared and the seeds of hope, friendship, and potential that the forum had planted.

Rice stated the policies, or the DNA, as he called it, of the forums. 1 ) Our bodies matter; we have to be physically in the same place. This is not a virtual forum. We come with our differences and our old stories, but as we interact and even disagree, we find the poisons of our prejudice extracted. 2 ) Our reconciliation meshes with the story of God, so the Bible is key to our journey. We take seriously both Jesus (John 3 :16) and Justice (Luke 4 :18), the two "Js". 3 ) Our goal is not power, but the beloved community Martin Luther King spoke of where blacks and whites, in his case, could live together, where rivals and even enemies become friends. 4 ) We are ministers, not Messiahs. Reconciliation starts with God, not us. 5 ) Reconciliation starts with our closest relations, and "is never bigger than the person next to you." 6 ) Reconciliation brings rest to the restless. Rice told of Tanzanian albino born in a culture where albinos are hunted and killed for their body parts. This woman twice tried suicide, but meeting Christ, chose the path of service to others, her place of rest after suffering so long. 7 ) Pilgrimage, or relocation to the places of historical conflict and witness (such as Nagasaki), moves us towards the deepened understanding prerequisite for reconciliation.

Rice then spoke of four Cs: Community, in which we are becoming the "New We"; Content, where as Christ the Word became flesh, we need to know our context, using the tools, for example, of sociological analysis; Catalyst, as forums educate and inform; and Conversion, what God is doing. Drawing from his experience in East Africa, where church members, pastors, and priests were implicated in the 1994 Tutsi–Hutu genocide, Rice asked "How are Christians formed who say 'No' to killing?" Forums need to be schools of conversion from the "old we" of tainted group identity.

Rice spoke of “restlessness for a new reality” among the young people in Korea, his current home. Churches in Korea have lost their appeal for many in the new generation. Authoritarianism and power abuse on the part of some church leaders and the failure to offer a credible voice in the face of political corruption and social inequalities have driven some young people from the church to the streets to join, for example, the million person protests against now ex-President Park. Instead of the church, corporate giants like Samsung disciple the young elite that endure grueling student life to emerge employed and victorious. Churches tend to cater to the older, the elite, and the nationalists.

The church in Japan has its own challenges in bringing in young people. During group discussions, Yuki Ino, a younger member of the group, told how his church building has become a place for the neighborhood children to come and play after school four days a week. Ino felt that children needed more opportunity to play together. He passed out flyers as students left the local elementary school, inviting them to drop by the church for activities like table tennis, board games and baking cookies. About ten children a day (a total of 100 different children over the course of a year), now find the otherwise scarcely used church building a fun and friendly place. At the suggestion of appreciative parents, Ino also started a for-pay guided study time for children. The children, none of whom have any previous exposure to Christianity, hesitate in coming to Sunday school. Thus far, Christmas, widely celebrated in Japan in its secular version, has been the primary occasion where the children and their families have come to church. Ino wonders how he can welcome children into the church. In bridging this gap and continuing to use the church facilities for children, Ino seeks the

understanding of the twenty mostly aging members that gather each Sunday.

The mainline denomination in Japan (UCCJ) has suffered serious division for five decades. During a time of nationwide student unrest, seminarians at the Tokyo Union Theological Seminary staged a lockout on campus that ended only when the seminary leadership called in the police. The UCCJ, divided into one group of socially active churches and another of more conservative churches, could not hold a General Assembly for decades, and members of seminaries on either side of the schism lacked opportunities for communication. The reunion provided safe space for such professors to share worship and fellowship. Participants rejoiced in the easing of long-borne burdens this sort of reconciliation allowed.

Tasks remain as we move forward. A book of the songs and prayers that unite and inspire the forums needs compilation. Reports of the forums need to be published in Christian newspapers, and current participants will invite others to join future forums. Rice’s key works will be translated into Japanese, and a Japanese Theology of Reconciliation written. Rice closed his reflections warning against activist burnout: we are not to save the world. He led participants in singing a Spiritual that has energized and inspired reconciliation workers in the US and beyond: “I want Jesus to walk with me; All along this pilgrim journey, we want Jesus to walk with us.”

(ブライアン・バード 聖学院大学総合研究所特任講師)