

# The Great East Japan Earthquake International Theological Symposiums

Brian Byrd

Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, the world's largest, educates pastors, theologians, and counselors from around the world, including many from Japan. Following Japan's March 11, 2011 once-in-a-thousand-years earthquake and tsunami disaster, Fuller wondered what they could do to assist the church in Japan. Christian leaders in Japan, aware that many domestic and international organizations had begun relief efforts, asked Fuller to contribute their unique gift of theological support for Japanese churches struggling to recover from the disaster and restore their ministries. Fuller agreed and sent scholars to speak alongside counterparts in Japan in a series of five post-disaster international theological symposiums held in Tokyo from 2012–2018 and in Kobe from 2014–2018. The symposiums are continuing, with the next one scheduled for 2020.

Under the common theme “Post-disaster Theology from Japan: How Can We Start Again? Centurial Vision for Post-disaster Japan,” The East Japan Disaster Relief Christian Network (DRCnet), Seigakuin University General Research Institute and Tokyo Christian University (TCU) cooperated to sponsor the symposiums, supported by over thirty Christian denominations, churches and para-church organizations. Seigakuin played a key role in providing leadership, promotion, office, and personnel support. The symposiums brought together leaders and relief workers from mainline, evangelical, and Catholic churches for worship, learning, and networking. Walls between isolated and divided Christian groups in Japan came down as leaders spoke of their struggles and dreams. Christianity in post-disaster Japan began to experience a new start and gain a fresh, long-term,

shared vision.

This report introduces the five symposiums.

## 1. Post-disaster Theology from Japan: How Can We Start Again? Centurial Vision for Post-disaster Japan (2012)

Japan was still struggling to clear away debris and recover from shock as 260 participants gathered on March 23, 2012 at Seigakuin Girls School in Tokyo for the first symposium. Fuller professors Juan F. Martinez and Glen Harold Stassen, together with administrator Mary Given Hubbard had visited the disaster areas, listened to victims' stories, and prayed with local Christian workers for two days before returning to Tokyo for the symposium. After a time of worship, Martinez addressed his listeners from his text prepared in English and translated into Japanese. Throughout the symposiums both languages were used. Martinez spoke on “Christian Responses in Times of Disaster: Learning from Church History.” He outlined how the fall of Rome in 410 AD, the 1666 fire of London, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake had precipitated theological searching and compassionate response relevant to post-disaster Japan. Stassen, in “The Cross as Compassionate Suffering and as Confrontation of Injustice,” showed how in Mark's gospel, Jesus entered scene-by-scene into the suffering of others, bringing healing and welcome. In the face of authorities that opposed his peaceful, welcoming ways, Jesus firmly spoke the truth that led to his death. Stassen also shared how his father's visit to Hiroshima immediately following the atomic bomb had made both he and his father lifetime peacemakers. Stassen asked forgiveness for the bombing. Stassen, champion of nuclear disarmament, passed away in 2014.

Tokyo Christ Seminary President Yoichi Yamaguchi drew from his study on “The Tohoku District in the History of Japanese Christianity” to show how the church had persisted, despite martyrdom in the Kirishitan era and resistance to Christianity that continued thereafter, to work for civil rights and to maintain a Christian presence in the region. Hideo Ohki, Director of Seigakuin University General Research Institute spoke of “The Reformation Pressed Upon Us by God: Thinking Theologically of Japan,” calling for union within the long-divided Japanese churches. In “Grasping the Time of God: Participating in His Work,” symposium organizer and chair Atsuyoshi Fujiwara, then at Seigakuin University called out, “Brothers and sisters in Christ, what do we want to see in the next generation and the generations that follow.” Japan had initially welcomed but then rejected Christianity at three critical junctures in its history: 1) the Roman Catholic missions from 1549, 2) following the opening of the country in 1859, and 3) after the defeat in war in 1945. Could the wounds left by the earthquake become the fourth opening for God in the hearts of the Japanese people? For this to happen, Fujiwara said the church must “become the church,” a community of believers “faithful to God as disciples of Christ, praying that God might work through them.” Church leaders must meet together in this time of crisis, honestly sharing hurts, needs, and visions, networking “over coffee in a café.” For this, the symposiums from the first have proved catalytic.

## 2. The Church Embracing the Sufferers, Moving Forward (2013)

Ochanomizu Christian Center in Tokyo provided the venue from the second symposium held on March 27, 2013, “The Church Embracing the Sufferers, Moving Forward.” Fuller President Richard J. Mouw in “Serving a Suffering Savior in “the Time of God’s Patience” presented our call “to seek the shalom of the place where the Lord has

called us to serve, engaging in the kind of honorable deeds that glorify God,” believing in the face of tragedy and challenges in “the ultimate happy ending: the appearance of the eternal and glorious Kingdom of Jesus Christ.”

In the panel discussion that followed Mouw’s keynote lecture, professors at two Christian universities discussed how volunteering in the disaster areas had shaped their students. Bishop Kazuo Kouda of the Catholic Tokyo Archdiocese then shared “From the Experience of the Catholic Church.” Kouda helps lead Japan’s branch of Caritas Internationalis, a humanitarian assistance organization of the Catholic Church with more than 160 member organizations. He related how Caritas staff and volunteers serving in the disaster area had drawn closer through a time of honest reflection at the end of each day’s labor. This was the first time for many at the symposium to hear a Catholic bishop speak; doors opened to a wider, more embracing ecumenism. Clinical psychologist Akira Fujikake, professor at Seigakuin, told how he had taken part in retreats held at hot springs for pastors and their families in the disaster areas, events planned to allow those most heavily engaged in relief work to find refreshment, fellowship, and healing insights over meals and through informal sessions. Fujikake used art therapy and other methods to help participants “gain new insights about themselves or communicate some important aspects of their inner feelings.” He found that pastors were healthily “embracing paradox” through collages they made that expressed both “hope and despair, optimism and pessimism, trust and suspicion, the day-to-day view and the long-term perspective.” Fujikake asked that the church “be a place to share together,” for listening deeply and responding constructively, not for dealing out pat advice and unreflective answers.

After lunch together, participants chose from a variety of workshops, including “The History of the Mission of the Orthodox Church in Tohoku,” “The

Church in Nuclear-contaminated Fukushima,” “The Great Earthquake and Care for the Heart: Dealing with Loss and Anger,” “‘Staying In’: Engaging Japanese Culture with the Authentic Gospel,” “Support for Children in the Disaster Area,” “Post-disaster Tomurai (Services for the Dead) and Interreligious Cooperation,” and “Unification of the Country, Self-Defense Forces, and the Church.” Each session allowed participants to learn from those most deeply engaged in relief work and research.

### 3. Raising Leaders through Sufferings beyond Walls (2014)

Keen to involve and learn with the generation that will carry on Christian ministry in Japan, the symposium committee added a second day for youth and young leaders from the third symposium in 2014. Participants in the general meeting on February 16, the first day, braved a heavy snowstorm to hear Juan Martinez from Fuller speak on “Suffering and Serving in the Way of Jesus: Meaning Making in Response to Disaster.” Martinez’s Mennonite tradition had been born and shaped in suffering and persecution during the 16th century. Mennonites knew 1) “suffering does not come as a surprise.” In this broken world, “bad things happen to all.” 2) “Suffering is also a key part of the redemptive work of Christ. Christ carries our pain as he redeems us.” 3) “the intersection of suffering and service is an important place where we can find God’s presence in our lives.” Martinez connected the stories of suffering and service in Japan “to the stories of believers around the world and throughout the centuries.”

Bishop Isao Kikuchi of the Catholic Niigata Archdiocese (Currently Archbishop of Tokyo) and President of Caritas Japan wove his personal story into his talk on “The Work of Caritas.” When Kikuchi returned to his devastated hometown after the earthquake, he found a natural fifty-meter rock wall in the sea still standing amidst walls made by

human hands that had collapsed in the tsunami. “Human technology and wisdom, compared to God’s creative power and mystery, is so weak, so small, so meaningless,” reflected Kikuchi. The bishop also contrasted immediately necessary material assistance with “assistance that creates a change in the hearts of local people” and “has long-term and wide-ranging effects.” One committed “to relief and rehabilitation operations after major disasters has to be an ‘animator’ who creates change of heart among local people.”

Workshops included “Considerations in Psychological Counseling: Creating New Narratives and Rituals,” “The Dilemma of Mission in Tohoku: Balancing Physical Relief and Spiritual Salvation,” and “How to Engage with Rites for the Dead and Traditional Folkways.” David Boan, co-director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College shared his expertise in “What Disasters Teach the Church.” According to Boan, the protective, visible and compassionate presence of the Church is needed and expected in times of disaster. He urged churches to have plans in place in case of a disaster, documenting the increasing of disaster incidence and damage worldwide. In a disaster, the church can be a bridge to those in need, a resilient, healing community, and in some cases, a community monitor, revealing and correcting failures of the state.

On February 18, the second day of the symposium, George Kalantzis, director of The Wheaton Center for Early Christian Studies, addressed students and young leaders in his lecture, “‘Whose Feet Are You Washing?’ Raising Leaders in the Midst of Suffering.” Kalantzis told how St. Basil, bishop of the city of Caesarea in Cappadocia, in modern day Turkey, responded to a severe earthquake and resultant famine of 369 C.E.. Basil called the monastic orders to engage with the world, mobilizing them to provide food and shelter for the suffering. Imitating Christ, who had washed the feet of his disciples, Basil and his co-workers

“ministered to the bodies and souls of the needy, combining marks of respect with the necessary refreshment, thus affording relief in two ways.” Kalantzis closed with a challenge from Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas: “The truthfulness of our claims is judged by the kinds of communities it produces.”

Living out the theme for that year, “Raising Leaders through Sufferings beyond Walls,” Kirisuto Gakusei Kai (KGK, part of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship) and the mainline Student Christian Fellowship (SCF) began a partnership that continues to flourish. KGK led the opening worship in contemporary style. Young leaders from different backgrounds shared regarding their efforts to serve in the disaster areas. SCF then brought the symposium to a close in contemplative Taizé-style worship, a much-appreciated first experience for many.

The third symposium marked another new beginning. It expanded to include three seminaries along with Christian students and leaders in Kobe, a city hit by a massive earthquake in 1995<sup>1)</sup>. As Juan Martinez shared his personal struggle to grieve the death of his sister killed in an automobile accident in the prime of her youth, he invited his Kobe listeners not to bury but rather tell their own painful stories of disaster. Such sharing brings healing and strengthens community.

#### 4. Being Called “Kirisuto-san” : Re-visiting Christian Identity in Post-disaster Japan (2016)

Fuller had initially committed to sending lecturers to Japan for three symposiums. However, recognizing the meetings’ significance, Fuller extended this partnership, sending veteran missiologist Wilbert Shenk to the fourth symposium. In his lecture on February 29, “Preparing for Disaster,” Shenk told how the French Huguenot community of Le Chambon had studied, internalized, and put into practice Christ’s teaching on discipleship found in Matthew 5–7 and the Parable of the Good Samaritan

(Luke 10:25–37) as they sheltered Jewish people fleeing the Nazis. Shenk called for Christian communities to do likewise, intentionally nurturing virtuous character so disaster response by individuals and communities becomes second nature.

Seminary president, pastor, and general secretary of relief organization Tohoku Help Takashi Yoshida explored the significance of “Being called ‘Kirisuto-san’: Re-visiting Christian Identity in Post-disaster Japan.” He told of a pastor in the disaster area that visited an elderly woman and asked if she needed anything. She replied “I don’t need anything but your visit. It gives me joy. You guys are bearing Christ, aren’t you?” The pastor realized that he had nothing to offer but Christ, just like Peter in Acts 3:6. Disaster victims fondly called the Christians helping them “Kirisuto-san,” meaning “a Christ.” Christian denominations had no significance for the average Japanese person. What mattered was their character and actions.

Shenk spoke again on March 1 to young leaders on “The Faces of Disaster—the Faces of Christian Compassion”, sharing how his own father had led mobilization efforts in the Mennonite Church in coping with local disasters. Shenk discussed how the scriptures, music and the arts can help in healing the trauma of victims of the various disasters that beset our lives.

#### 5. Removing “Kamishimo” (Shedding Formalism), Becoming Authentic Christians: Salt of the Earth, Light of the World (2018) <sup>2)</sup>

In the general meeting on February 5, Ryan K. Bolger of Fuller drew on his expertise on the church in contemporary culture as he spoke on the need to present Christianity’s good news in language and formats that connect with the current generation. Yuichi Osumi, President of Tokyo Union Theological Seminary, explicated biblical texts with humor and humility. Lenzo De Luka, Provincial of the Society of Jesus, Japan Province shared how the Jesuits adapted their message and approach to ministry from the time they arrived in Japan in 1549.

Taking the symposium's theme to heart, the young leaders took complete charge in determining the format for the second day of the symposium, February 6. Eschewing academic lectures, they performed skits and gave brief talks that led into a series of small group discussions. With each member of the randomly selected groups given time for in-depth sharing, participants encountered fresh perspectives and began new friendships. Students and young leaders have taken the initiative to organize their own meetings between the symposiums.

### Conclusion: The Path Ahead

Fuller has agreed to continue its cooperation and will send a lecturer to the sixth symposium planned for 2020. Fuller's presence has helped bring together the disparate groups in the church in Japan to pursue what Atsuyoshi Fujiwara envisioned as the symposiums began seven years ago:

As we came in March 2012 to the one-year milestone following the disaster, we needed theological perspective to grasp this kairos (time) in history and to consider the direction in which Japanese churches should move. Instead of setting our goal as restoration back to the way things were on March 10, 2011, we wanted to set our focus on what we could see as a result of the events of March 11 and on the work of God in post-disaster Japan. Theology is to serve the church. What do Japanese churches need to see today after the massive disaster? We wanted this conference to be an occasion to reflect on the role and responsibility of the church and on its vision for mission in Japan and to engage in this together, going beyond denominational walls while respecting different traditions. We also hoped that our theological and ecclesiological efforts would contribute to world Christianity by encouraging

others to learn from what Christianity in Japan went through in the disaster.

Began out of the shock and trial of disaster, the generous concern of Fuller Theological Seminary in partnership with Seigakuin, Tokyo Christian University, and DRCnet, then Aoyama Gakuin University, KGK, and SCF, the Great East Japan Earthquake International Theological Symposiums are helping to unite and revitalize the church in Japan, providing a forum and fostering connections key for the future of Christian mission in this land.

### 注

- 1) Kobe Lutheran Seminary, Nihon Iesu, and Mennonite Seminary
- 2) Seigakuin withdrew, and Aoyama Gakuin University, KGK, and SCF joined from 2018.

(ブライアン・バード 聖学院大学総合研究所特任講師)