

EASTER 2010 SUPPLEMENTAL STORIES

STORY 1

"Many would like the poor to keep on saying that it is God's will for them to live that way. But it is not God's will for some to have everything and others to have nothing. That cannot be of God. God's will is that all his children be happy."

• Archbishop Oscar Romero

Everyday Kim and I are confronted with the profound suffering that permeates Haiti. It is a country where fathers search in vain for work, mothers struggle to feed their hungry children, and education is all too often a luxury that the impoverished masses have little or no access to. It is a country where barefoot children beg in the streets, heaps of fermenting garbage pile up everywhere, and people continue to die of preventable diseases for no other reason than that they are poor. Despite these inhumane living situations it is not uncommon for one of my seminary students or a local church pastor to wonder aloud if the people of Haiti are being punished by God due to their lack of faith or for some sin that they have committed. Others are more confident in their assertions that God has blessed the righteous (aka: rich nations) and is dishing out to the poor nations, including Haiti, exactly what they deserve. Interestingly, much of this type of theology was brought to Haiti and spread throughout the country by evangelical Christians from the United States.

Part of the work that our partner organization CONASPEH does in Haiti is to provide theological education and training for pastors serving in their member churches. Many of these pastors have been leading their churches for several years, but they often do not have any formal education and have not had the opportunity to take classes on things such as theology, the Bible, and church history. CONASPEH fills this void by working to provide such courses for these pastors, many of whom serve poor congregations that are unable to pay them a salary. A key component of the theological foundation that CONASPEH teaches can be found in the organization's symbol, which is an inverted tree. The tree has its roots in heaven, but the fruits of the tree manifest on earth. The message that the inverted tree symbolizes is that the God that Jesus revealed is a God who calls and inspires us to work to produce the fruits of love and justice on earth. Like Jesus, we too are invited to participate in bringing the good news of God's love and justice to a world where some of God's children are being denied their right to life and sadly, openly questioning if this is God's plan for them. Jesus said in John 10:10, "I came that they may live and have it abundantly." As followers of Jesus let us join CONASPEH in preaching the message of abundant life with both words and actions.

STORY 2

Greetings from Poland in the name of Jesus Christ!!

On October 4, many of you were using the Global Ministries prayer for Poland and the world. There's a great sense of uplift in knowing prayers are circling the world, and we really felt it! We'd like to share with you what was happening in Poland on that day.

First of all, that World Communion Sunday, a young woman entered our church in Lodz for the first time. It seems that she and her boyfriend had been working in Belfast, as so many young Poles have done. One Sunday, they both wanted to go to church in Belfast, but were not finding a Roman Catholic Church in their path.

Time was passing, so they decided to enter the first church they came to. It was a Presbyterian Church. The couple was warmly welcomed, sat next to the pastor at tea and fellowship after the service, and returned to warm welcomes Sunday after Sunday. Polish workers are not always easily accepted in Northern Ireland for religious and economic reasons, so the Polish couple felt they had found an oasis of hope and relationship.

Back in Poland on World Communion Sunday, this young woman, returned from Belfast, arrived at Lodz Reformed Church at 9:30. Worship starts at 10:30, but the choir practices at 9:45. We invited her to join our "Joyful Noise Band" and--WOW!! She sings and loves to sing and wants to return. Doug was preaching and the service was partly in English, which she understands well. At Fellowship following, she was warmly welcomed by age peers, and we are hoping that she will continue to worship with this congregation.

That same World Communion Sunday, a young Filipino-American woman arrived. She is beginning studies at the medical university here in Lodz. She has a heart for outreach, will be attending the Lodz church English language Bible Study, and--we hope--will continue to worship with this congregation. She, too, joined the choir.

People in the pews were greeted by brand new and never-seen faces and voices singing a new song—"Santo, Santo, Santo" in three languages--with the stalwarts of our choir. What a World Communion Sunday it was!!

We thank you for your continuing prayers and support. Both are needed and treasured during this critical time in the life of Kosciol Ewangelicko-Reformowany—the Evangelical-Reformed Church in Poland.

Peace in the midst of all storms

Liz and Doug Searles in Lodz, PL

Doug and Elizabeth Searles serve with the Evangelical Reformed Church in Poland. They serve as mission workers for church growth and outreach.

STORY 3

"Perfect love casts out fear." • First John 4:18

I stand before a classroom full of 180 college seniors at Miyagi Gakuin Women's College in Sendai, Japan. They are in my Christian Studies class because it is required. For the most part they are not interested in Christianity. If anything, they are distrustful and afraid. They know a bit about the religious cults that have expressed themselves in violent ways in society. They also know about the Christian fundamentalist groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses who knock on doors trying to spread their brand of apocalyptic Christianity, or the Marumori group that uses loud speakers at major festival times to recite Bible verses to tell the world that "you will be damned if you do not accept Jesus." So the students have reason to be afraid. They believe that religious people are narrow-minded, bigoted, and antagonistic toward other religions. I stand before them at this university which was started by the German Reformed Church of America 123 years ago, very much aware of its rich history of service to women in Japanese society. I know that the challenge before me is to take away the FEAR in their hearts. Each time I face a classroom full of students, I am reminded that "perfect love casts out fear."

Our partner church, the Kyodan (the United Church of Christ in Japan) is deeply divided over the issue of communion. This year marks the 150th year of Protestant mission in Japan. There are many celebrative events planned across the nation to mark this significant time in the history of the church. And yet, it seems as though the Japanese Christians themselves are unable to dialogue at all about the issue of communion; whether the Table should be open to all, or limited to baptized Christians. Last year the standing committee of the Kyodan singled out one ordained pastor and voted to excommunicate him because of his open stance on communion. This sent shock waves across the Kyodan, especially among those who believe that dialogue and tolerance have always been the strong foundations of this United Church. At the General Assembly there was much discussion on this issue. At last the General Assembly did not excommunicate the pastor. However, the issue still remains to be resolved. Our partner church is deeply divided over theological issues. FEAR is alive and well within the walls of the church trying to break the body of Christ.

This month I will be marrying a young couple who used to be students of mine at the Sendai Student Center over ten years ago. The bride to be is a Christian, and the groom a Buddhist priest. When they came to my house to prepare for the wedding, I could sense their anxiety as they discussed some of the issues they may need to face in the future because of their differing religious backgrounds. The Buddhist community has traditionally expected the wife of a Buddhist priest to perform many duties for the temple. The young couple shared with me their commitment to see that the wife's religious integrity is protected. They also expressed how dialogue has been crucial in their relationship as a way to build mutual respect. Such young people can inspire us by their trust in God.

All around the world I think we in the church are witnesses to the LOVE that casts out FEAR.

Fear is everywhere. I am encouraged by so many people who take the courage to express a LOVE that overcomes fear. Without knowing it, they give expression to the Good News; "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

Shalom,

Jeffrey Mensendiek

Jeffrey Mensendiek serves with the Council on Cooperative Mission, assigned to the Gakusei (Student) Center in Japan. He serves as Director of Gakusei (Student) Center in Sendai, Japan.

STORY 4

Anyone living in the Midwest knows that spring time is also tornado season. In some communities, sirens sound once a week for routine testing. In other communities, they sound only when a tornado has been sighted. Such was the case one recent afternoon in an Illinois town when a funnel cloud was sighted in a neighboring county.

Residents of the nursing home's dementia unit were enjoying their weekly worship service in a large dining room with lots of windows overlooking the grounds. The facility's alarm sounded and staff sprang into action to get the residents to an inner corridor where they would be safe from harm should the windows come crashing in.

Unfortunately, all the noise and quick action by the staff upset the residents and most of them quickly became very anxious, some even crying. The DBS Chaplain, who was leading the service, quickly took the situation in hand. She walked through the group, gently touching the residents on the shoulder or arm and cajoling them into singing along with her. One-by-one, the patients' spirits calmed and they slowly turned their attention away from the confusion and joined in the singing.

By the time the storm threat had passed the residents were once again calm. Staff helped them return to their original meeting place and the DBS Chaplain resumed the worship service.

DBS Chaplaincy care is a ministry of the Disciples Benevolent Services and is currently available to more than 2,000 individuals in five states.

STORY 5

In this workshop, I learned many practical skills to farm organically—composting, the importance of protecting the soil and plant diversity, the interrelationship between plants and animals on a farm, etc. I also came to see the important place of the lowly earthworm in sustaining life naturally.

Through composting, I gained a deeper appreciation for recycling. Moreover, when I see the value of recycling, I realize how wasteful our urban societies are today. On an organic farm, the death and decay of leaves and other organic material yields rich fertilizer that gives life. Theologically, we can literally say that life comes from death or, conversely, that death gives life. It is a natural process whose value to life I've come to understand more deeply as a result of this workshop.

I also gained a great appreciation of the health benefits of organic farming. The Green Revolution that began after World War II with its emphasis on chemicals to enhance agricultural production was viewed as progress at the time. Today, however, the Green Revolution could be renamed the Poison Revolution or the Toxic Revolution. We would have fewer concerns today about health care if we had not gone down this path.

From our visits to organic home gardens around Kandy, we saw how much could be grown on a small piece of land, including on slopes. We also saw that all of the farmers we visited were women, and usually not young women. I really appreciated all of their work and sweat over a long period of time and how they had to creatively plan their garden.

This workshop gave me a deeper understanding and appreciation as well of the interrelationships in life, in nature and in organic farming. We learned how important it is to plant crops of different plant families next to each other as a natural way to fight diseases and pests, that this is one way in which we as organic farmers can mimic nature. Through this process, we can see how different plants work together.

If we expand the importance of diversity to life, we see how important it is for each of us to be different, for our differences complement each other and make our societies stronger and healthier. It also underlines the wisdom of God in creating differences among plants and among people. If we were all the same, our societies would lack a lot of skills and wisdom.

Today our diversity is used by some people to divide us. Our human family is composed of people of different races, different ethnicities, and different religions. Based on the deeper understanding of diversity that I gained at this workshop, I've learned how important it is to embrace these differences instead of seeking to make the other's identity like mine. Moreover, we can come to understand and appreciate the mystery of God more deeply if we all learn from the insights and gifts of each other's faith. This is something I hope we can do as part of the ICF family.

Bruce Van Voorhis

Bruce Van Voorhis works in Hong Kong for Interfaith Cooperation Forum [ICF], a regional network of young Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim and indigenous activists working for justpeace at the grassroots level in South and Southeast Asia. ICF is a joint program of the Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs [APAY] in Hong Kong where Bruce is based and the Christian Conference of Asia [CCA] located in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

STORY 6

Alicia has been in the Alabama foster care program for 11 of her 16 years. The first five years of Alicia's life were all about survival. She and her two siblings were forced to take care of themselves, living with fear, hunger, uncertainty, and abuse. They lived in a world from which many children never escape. Alicia and her sisters existed in an environment with angry people who did not know how to love and care for others. She was just five years old but Alicia knew of no other possibility than a life filled with abuse and neglect.

She was soon taken from her home and placed into the custody of the Alabama Department of Human Resources. Being taken from the only family she had ever known, even though she was severely neglected, only compounded her fear and uncertainty. She was forced to live with strangers and did not yet understand that the life she was being given would prove to be better than the one she had known. She missed her family and her old way of life, only because she didn't know anything different.

Alicia has lived in three foster homes over the past 11 years. With each move, she suffered loss and uncertainty. She grew to believe that nothing was permanent. Over the years, she developed problems with attachment. It is difficult to imagine the fear one feels knowing they belong no where, that they belong to no one. Alicia somehow had the strength to keep on living.

Now, at 16 years old, Alicia feels as if she finally has a place to call home. She lives with people who understand the obstacles she, and children like her, must overcome. Along with her foster parents, Alicia has been an active participant in the Christian Services for Children in Alabama's (CSCA) Therapeutic Foster Care program. She enjoys the successes associated with the Independent Living Program and may even, one day, become a mentor to others who share the same experiences.

Alicia's foster parents were carefully trained and then certified before Alicia was permitted to move into their home. They provide her with the nurturing environment and have worked with Alicia to understand that she is valued and that it is important for her to value herself. For the first time in her life, she has a family that is helping her to become the blossoming young woman God intended her to be.

The praise goes to Alicia for her resiliency; to her foster parents for providing the stability and nurturing she so desperately needed; and to CSCA for being the conduit to bring healing and love into Alicia's life.

Christian Services for Children in Alabama is a service unit of the Disciples Benevolent Services.