

The Great Eastern Japan Earthquake and Tsunami 11th March, 2011 What Happened Then and How Things Are Now



The Rt Rev'd John Hiromichi Kato,
Anglican Bishop of Tohoku Diocese, Japan.

This reflection on the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami of 2011 was distributed during Bishop John Kato's visit to England in March 2014. Bishop Kato thanked English congregations for their support at a service held in Southwark Cathedral and later with the Japanese Anglican Church (UK) based at St Martin's Church, West Acton London

The Nippon Sei Ko Kai (日本聖公会, Nippon Seikōkai, "Japanese Holy Catholic Church") abbreviated as NSKK is often referred to as the Anglican Episcopal Church in Japan.

As a Province of the Anglican Communion the Nippon Sei Ko Kai shares many of the historic doctrinal and liturgical practices of the Church of England and American Episcopal Church and is in full communion with the see of Canterbury. The Diocese of Tohoku (meaning north-east) is centred on the city of Sendai in northern Japan and is one of eleven Anglican dioceses in the country.



The earthquake which struck eastern Japan at 2146pm on March 11th» 2011, was unprecedented in its scale of magnitude nine, which may happen possibly only once in a thousand years. The damage caused by the earthquake itself such as collapse of buildings and houses was huge. But an even more enormous calamity was the tsunami which reached 40m high and attacked subsequently the fishing ports, housing areas, schools, old people's homes, railway stations/tracks and highways along the east coast lines for a distance of some 500km.

All of them were swept away without trace. Those who tried hard to escape for their lives to the third floor or even to the roof of the nearby buildings could not save themselves and became victims. On top of this, people had to spend the night in extreme fear, threatened by water and fire, which was ignited by gas and petrochemical complexes in the region.

The number of the victims, including the dead and the missing, as of January 2014, reached 18,524 and those still living in temporary housing number as many as 280,000. Public services to sustain people's lives such as water, electricity and gas-supplies were not restored for a long time. According to the World Bank estimates, the amount of economic loss caused by this natural calamity is the largest ever in human history.

The disaster and explosion at Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant

Another disaster and fear we had to face came from the accidents and explosions at Fukushima First Nuclear Power Plant. Approximately one hour after the earthquake, Fukushima First Nuclear Power Plant, which is run by Tokyo Electricity Co., had to stop its operation due to the loss of all electric power supply. Consequently, it was not possible to cool the nuclear reactors, resulting in a huge meltdown, and a number of hydrogen explosions followed, so we found ourselves in the midst of a severe nuclear accident.

The concomitant terror and confusion caused by the serious radiation and leakages of radioactive substances over a wide range have not as yet been solved. As a result residents of nearby communities have had to move out to other areas and whole villages find shelter. People have not been allowed to return to their own homes. Furthermore, many of them have very little possibility of returning to their hometowns and villages even in the long- term future.

Those who lived in the devastated areas were deprived of life, livelihoods, beloved families, jobs, and their home communities. There is no doubt that they feel utterly lost even to this day, in a situation where they can see very little prospect of restoring their lives to how they were. Even now we hear that the number of victims is still increasing because of the hardship of the life in shelters. Victims have committed suicide out of hopelessness, and death has come as the outcome of the hard labour for those who are engaged in reconstruction work.

Damage to the Diocese of Tohoku

In the Diocese of Tohoku, a community in Shinchimachi, Fukushima Prefecture, which includes one of the parish churches, was devastated. Three people in Isoyama St. John's Church lost their lives. Among the three, two were parents of a daughter who lost her life while she protected the kindergarten children during the cold night and died of hypothermia. Her parents had been missing for some time, but later they were identified by DNA testing.

Responses Made by NSKK and the Diocese of Tohoku

The Cathedral of Tohoku Diocese is located in Sendai City which is near the Pacific coast. I myself experienced the great earthquake when I was in the Cathedral. I went back to my home nearby and spent a dark and cold night with my family. At the time we had very little idea about the tsunami and its enormous outcome. Without electricity, we had no TV news, no newspapers and we knew nothing of what was happening around us.

Three days later, on the Sunday, and when I went back to the church, people who could gather there were very anxious to know each other's situation. That was when I came to know the sheer size of devastation as the result of the tsunami.

The liturgy we held that morning became the occasion for the people to share their news and to confirm each other's safety.

The diocese immediately decided to set up a head office for organizing relief activities. We started by making inquiries of people's whereabouts and safety. Young people hurried off to the elderly in the community to distribute some water and food. At that stage, we most badly needed petrol. As the roads were destroyed here and there, our activities were severely limited. A week later, when our food was almost gone, the NSKK General Secretary and Mission Secretary arrived at the Sendai office. They had had to make a detour due to the destruction of the highway between Sendai and Tokyo. Subsequently, people from the other dioceses of the NSKK were able to fly in one after another.

In May, 2011, the 'Let Us Walk Together' project was started for the whole NSKK to get involved in the work of restoration and recovery of our communities. With the Primate, The Rt. Rev. Nathaniel M. Uematsu as the leader, eleven dioceses stood together as one body. This was the first such attempt in the whole history of NSKK.

The name 'Let Us Walk Together' meant for us that we needed to walk together, trusting that Jesus Christ is also walking with us, rather than just the idea of ourselves helping someone else. Its guideline statements read as follows:

'We will walk together in respect for all who face hardships arising from the Eastern Japan Earthquake.'

We will walk together towards the rebuilding of the lives and communities of the victims.

We will walk together encouraged that Our Lord Jesus Christ who also walks together with us.'

As an initial stage, the main activities of the project have been to extend our support to those who stayed in shelters, and later on, in the temporary housing complexes. Particularly, we concentrate our concerns on the homes and groups for the elderly, the handicapped, children and foreign residents in Japan, among who are many Filipinos and their families in the affected areas. It was our intention to focus our hearts and eyes on those to whom the Government pays little attention.

A great number of the laity of the NSKK churches volunteered and participated in this Project. Approximately ten members became full-time staff and were based in the Sendai office to make it a homebase for our activities.

Words of Gratitude for Prayer and Support from the Anglican Communion

I am most grateful for the huge support and prayer given to us by the whole of Anglican Communion. The archbishops, presiding bishops, primate bishops and other bishops as well as laity and clergy from various parts of the world have visited the victims and the affected areas and made a large amount of donations.

In October 2013, we had the honour of a visit made by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Revd. Justin Welby who detoured to Tokyo and Sendai before he visited Korea to attend the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Pusan.

Archbishop Welby had a face-to-face intimate conversation with the family members of the three laity who lost their lives in the calamity.

**Into the Second Stage from ‘Let Us Walk Together! Project’.
The setting up of a ‘Special Project on Nuclear Power Plant and
Radiation Issue’ and New Steps of Tohoku Diocese ‘*Daijini Tohoku*’.**

The work of ‘Let Us Walk Together Project’ was run for two years between May 2011 and May 2013. We subsequently decided to start a second stage of activities: At the level of the whole Province, we should become more specialized into the nuclear power plant accident issue. As the Diocese of Tohoku, we need to be more deeply rooted in the community, encouraging the laity to become more involved in and to continue our activities. We therefore started a new work and named it ‘*Daijini, Tohoku*’. ‘*Daijini*’ means ‘Love Each Other’ in the dialect of Eastern Japan.

Our involvement in the nuclear power plant and radiation issue is based in St.Peter’s and St.Paul’s Church in Koriyama, Fukushima Prefecture. We will pay particular attention and extend our concerns to those who have lost hope for future in their life as refugees. At the same time, we intend to emphasize our deep concerns about radiation and nuclear power problems and to actively send information out into other parts of the world.

The activities of ‘*Daijini Tohoku*’ are based in Sendai Cathedral. The Support Centre in Shinchi, Fukushima Prefecture, where three people lost their lives, will also be continued. It will remain as a symbol for the community there.

Some part of the ‘Let Us Walk Together Project’ still continues, such as cooperation with handicapped people’s groups as well as coordinating visitors from other parts of Japan and worldwide to meet and pray together with people affected. This is because we believe that the most important thing for us is to KEEP PRAYING and NOT TO FORGET.

Keep Praying and Not To Forget

It is said that Japan is one of the super-powers in today’s world. The north-eastern (Tohoku) area in Japan is, however, the most poverty stricken and marginalized area in Japan’s history. It has been an alienated locality. Even before the great earthquake, it has suffered from an aging population, de-population, poverty, youth unemployment and lack of hope for the future. The whole area has seriously deteriorated.

Regarding the Diocese of Tohoku, NSKK, the diocese covers an area as big as half of England. We have 24 parish churches and 17 kindergartens as well as nurseries. There are only 10 Anglican clergy, including the bishop. We have several retired clergy helping us but I am sure that this diocese is to be counted as one of the toughest among areas for Christian mission and evangelism, as is generally true in Japan. We have walked thus far with a great deal of prayer and support offered by friends in and out of the country.

Of course, at the same time, we remember that in many parts of the world, people are suffering and victimised by natural calamities, war and conflicts.

Lastly, I would like to express my deep gratitude for the Church of England and the Anglican Communion for remembering us in your prayers and for the donations offered to us. At the same time, I would like to add my sincere hope that our churches continue to walk together with those in suffering as Our Lord. I trust that you will continue to pray for us in the future.

In the name of Christ. John Hiromichi Kato