

Gospel Spreads After Disasters

Japanese pastors observe a spiritual awakening in a culture often resistant to Christianity.

Story by Debra Smith

“Come, Lord Jesus, come,” sang Hannah Sakurai, perched with her guitar on a make-shift stool in the back of a moving truck. As the crowd of earthquake and tsunami survivors grew, despite the cold, Ishinomaki city residents milled about selecting needed goods, drinking tea, and talking with believers. A team from CC Kokobunji, Tokyo, was 240 miles northward, serving in the hard-hit Tohoku region. Hannah’s father, Pastor Chizuo Sakurai, explained, “We let people take five items each. The worship music really set the tone; it took the focus off material things. It’s not about giving away items. It’s about treating people gently and kindly—with respect. As we did so, they began telling us their personal stories. So we got to minister to both physical and spiritual needs.”

In the wake of Japan’s recent earthquake and tsunami, several Calvary Chapels and fellowships have been serving victims. Such

groups include Calvary Tohoku Relief, which CC Kokobunji and CC Okinawa recently partnered to form, and Committed Fellowship Tokyo. Four other churches have also joined together to assist in relief work: CC Tokorozawa, CC West Tokyo, CF Fuchu, and Logos Christian Fellowship.

While Tokyo lifestyles were inconvenienced, the greatest devastation was northward, along Tohoku’s coastline. Therefore most aid teams have targeted various Tohoku cities.

Perfect Timing

“I like God’s appointments,” commented Pastor Chizuo. On his and CC Kokobunji member Maxx Godsey’s first trip north, they and Pastor Rick Barnett of CC Okinawa created a “store” of free supplies in a 7-11 parking lot. Opening their rented truck full of donated food, clothing, and other basics, the three began discussing needs with people



Devastation remains: Homes, cars, and lives were swept away by a 9.0 earthquake and subsequent tsunami on March 11, 2011.

Photo by Tech. Sgt. DeNoris Mickle, U.S. Air Force



In Ishinomaki city, Pastor Chizuo Sakurai co-formed Calvary Tohoku Relief ministry

Photo by Maxx Godsey

from CC Kokobunji, Tokyo, hands items to a family whose home is in the background. CC Kokobunji and CC Okinawa recently to distribute resources, help cleanup and rebuild, and share the Gospel and love of Christ in Japan’s devastated Tohoku region.



The Japanese military evacuates survivors through streets flooded by the tsunami. Photo by Toshiharu Kato/Japanese Red Cross

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Pastor Chizuo Sakurai of CC Kokobunji, Tokyo

and locating items to suit each. One family, having lacked electricity and eaten only cold food since the disasters, requested a portable gas stove. Having run out, the believers promised home delivery if they received any. But they got lost en route and spent 30 minutes extra driving—unable to call for directions, since phone service was still down. “We finally found our new friends’ apartment,” Chizuo recalled. “They weren’t home, but they arrived a few minutes later. If we hadn’t spent that half hour wandering around, we wouldn’t have seen them. That was the Lord’s timing.” Additionally, the family had just learned that their son had passed the high school entrance exam. “That is a very big deal in Japan,” Chizuo explained. “The boy wanted to celebrate with his family. Using the stove, they were able to cook warm food for the festivities. These people aren’t Christians—yet. But God orchestrated all that. Who knows what else He will do?”

We do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.
Romans 8:26b

“This passage directs all our ministry,” said Chizuo. “How can I know what people need? I can’t; I’m just human. I don’t know where to start, what to do, or how to pray. But the Lord does. As we rely on Him to guide our actions and our prayers, He orchestrates things—again and again. We only see little puzzle pieces. He knows the big picture.”

A Surprising Softening

The believers also took their truck to residential streets. Chizuo said that supplies were initially rejected almost every time; “That’s our culture,” he explained. “The first reaction of most Japanese is, ‘No, we don’t need it.’ But it’s not true. If you offer again, persistently and respectfully, people eventually accept.” Often once a need was admitted and the truck of supplies was opened, people would spot and request other items—tissues, batteries, hand sanitizer, socks, jeans. “Soon, we felt like clothing store employees,” Chizuo said. “Asking, *What size? What style?* Then, people would open up their hearts and tell us about themselves.”

In one rural area, an older man said he had found his precious bicycle in the mud after the tsunami—only to have it stolen days afterward. “We asked if we could

pray for him, and he said yes,” Chizuo related. “That’s rare in Japan, where people think of Christianity as a foreign religion.” Everywhere they go, Chizuo continued, “We see softened hearts. That’s a big deal—only God can do that.” A lady who said she used to read the Bible, but hadn’t for 13 years, had her copy sucked away by tsunami waves. Expressing a desire to begin reading it again, she took the one offered her. Another lady who took one Bible returned, requesting another for a friend. “I remember exactly where she lives,” Chizuo said. “I’m sure we will see her again. We plan to return on a regular basis; we’re in this for the long haul.”

The group’s long-term goal, Chizuo explained, is to establish a Bible study in Ishinomaki. “We’re asking the Lord to raise up someone local to lead,” Chizuo said. He is interestedly watching one young man who visited the truck after nearly all items were gone. “We didn’t have what he requested, but the Lord prompted me to give him a nifty gadget I had recently been given,” Chizuo said. “He asked when we would return. We didn’t know yet, and phones still weren’t working, so we told him we would pray that we would run into each other on our next trip. We did—and he spent three hours helping us unload supplies to give away.”

Hope for Children

Grace Christian Fellowship in Ome-shi, Tokyo, founded the relief organization CRASH—Christian Relief, Assistance, Support, and Hope—in 2005. An equipper



Photo by Maxx Godsey

Chizuo prays for a woman who has been unable to make contact with her mother-in-law since the disasters.

and a networker of Christians who serve amidst tragedy, the group has trained many volunteers in disaster response and trauma care. CRASH associate Dan Bolinger, a pastor from Iruma city, is coordinating teams who provide emotional care to survivors.

In March, CRASH Director Jonathan Wilson was standing with his wife Rie among tsunami debris. Noticing a muddied pink teddy bear, “We were struck by how many children have been affected by these disasters—and how hopeless they must feel,” Jonathan said. After Rie picked up the bear, they noticed it had an Easter egg painted on its chest. As they visit children’s hospitals and refugee centers, Jonathan continued, “We now use the bear to explain our hope in Jesus. The greatest opportunity for evangelism is now.”



Photo by Maxx Godsey

A family whom Chizuo and others from Calvary Tohoku Relief found wandering the streets of Ishinomaki receive donated supplies. Because there is little to do in Ishinomaki’s rescue shelters, people are often seen meandering among the ruins.



Photo by Yoko Sakurai

Calvary Tohoku Relief workers arrived at this outreach to find 200 people already waiting for supplies. Throughout the event, the team also gave away 300 Bibles.



Photo by Amy Totsis

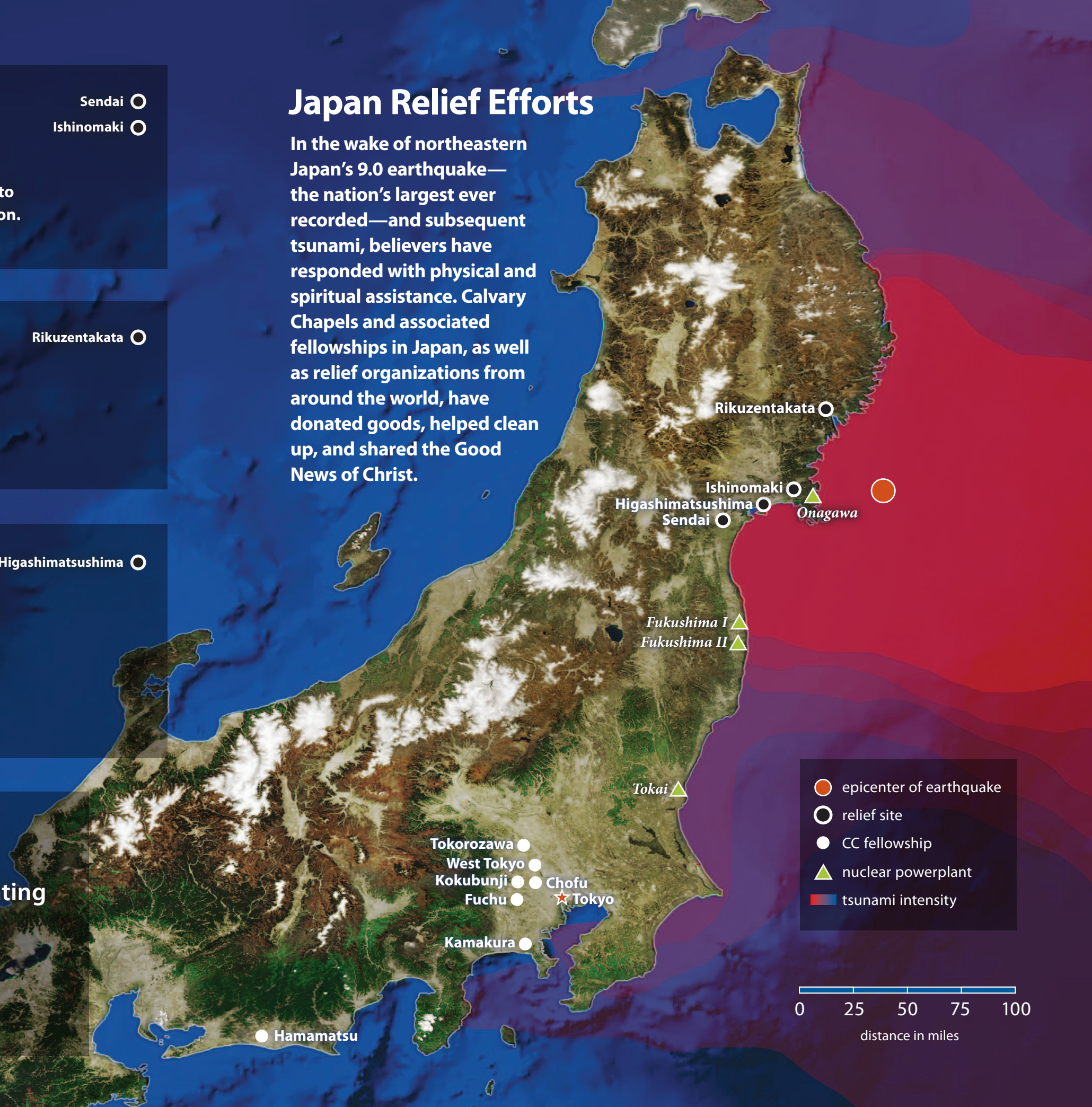
In Shuto, a port area of Ishinomaki, Calvary Tohoku Relief volunteers shovel tsunami mud from a parking lot.



Four Tokyo-area churches serve barbecue to evacuees at a school now used as a shelter in Higashimatsushima city.

Japan Relief Efforts

In the wake of northeastern Japan's 9.0 earthquake—the nation's largest ever recorded—and subsequent tsunami, believers have responded with physical and spiritual assistance. Calvary Chapels and associated fellowships in Japan, as well as relief organizations from around the world, have donated goods, helped clean up, and shared the Good News of Christ.



Calvary Tohoku Relief
 CC Kokobunji in Tokyo and CC Okinawa—which is on a different island southwest of Tokyo—have, together, recently formed Calvary Tohoku Relief. The believers travel to serve survivors in the hard-hit Tohoku region.
calvarytohokurelief.blogspot.com

Sendai ○
 Ishinomaki ○



Committed Fellowship Japan
 This Calvary Chapel church, which is also known as Committed Japan, has concentrated relief efforts in Rikuzentakata city of Iwate prefecture.
www.committed.jp/home

Rikuzentakata ○



CC Tokorozawa, CC West Tokyo, Logos Christian Fellowship, and CF Fuchu: Four Tokyo-area churches have partnered to serve in Higashimatsushima and other cities. CC Bible College Okinawa students have assisted.
www.calvarytokorozawa.com

Higashimatsushima ○

Committed Relief

Under the leadership of Pastor Lance Cook of CC La Habra, CA, Committed Relief is coordinating relief efforts from the U.S. as well as directing funds to ministries in Japan.
www.committedrelief.org
info@committedrelief.org



During an outreach of Calvary Tohoku Relief, Pastor Rick Barnett of CC Okinawa, Japan, surprises children with stuffed animals donated by a church member.

Rikuzentakata

When Pastor Marre Ishii of Committed Fellowship Tokyo and his wife felt initial tremors, they assumed it was a small earthquake—such as Tokyo residents consider routine. Marre said, “For hours, we had no clue how serious the damages were.” Though news channels reported widespread destruction northward, no images were available. Phone and Internet connections were down.

The manager of Kick Back Café, the church’s outreach-oriented restaurant and coffee house, soon arrived at the Ishii’s home with news: Rikuzentakata, the home city of Kick Back’s dessert chef Kana Hasegawa, had reportedly been entirely destroyed. This could mean Kana had lost her parents and grandparents. Quickly, the Ishiis assembled with Kana and other church members at Kick Back. Together they watched the news, knelt to pray for Kana’s family’s protection, and read the Scriptures.



Rick Barnett gives Ishinomaki residents a book that explains how to know God.

He [the righteous] will not be afraid of evil tidings; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the LORD.

Psalm 112:7

Kana heard nothing for four days. Then suddenly, her uncle called with word—their relatives were all safe. In time Kana learned that her mom had survived the tsunami after, realizing she had forgotten something, she had turned back toward her city hall office. Those at the evacuation center to which she had been headed perished, while Kana’s mom and 100 others survived atop the city hall building’s higher roof.

Committed Fellowship Tokyo has focused their assistance in Rikuzentakata. There, on the group’s third ministry trip, they opened Mobile Kick Back Café from a van. They served free coffee and hot curry rice to about 500 refugees, including a fisherman and six people he rescued. After a tsunami wave had washed them far out into the sea, the man pulled them into his boat. Marre commented, “Death is part of these peoples’ lives now. Everyone has lost someone. But they don’t blame anybody; they accept it. Most don’t know the God of the Bible, but they have a sense that their lives were spared for a reason.” On its next journey to Rikuzentakata, Committed Fellowship plans to set up a bookshop and distribute free Bibles and Christian books—hoping, Marre explained, to point people toward following Christ as their reason for living.



Kana Hasegawa, right, reunites with her mom Keiko, who was missing for four days.

Photo by Youngsoon Ahn



Tsunami waves reached the third floor of Rikuzentakata’s City Hall building.

Photo by Youngsoon Ahn

Rikuzentakata City Hall worker Keiko Hasegawa shares her tsunami experience with Committed Fellowship Tokyo relief workers, including Pastor Marre Ishii, left.

a need: The building across the street, he explained, was owned by an elderly couple. They too ran a catering business. The tsunami, though, had filled their kitchen and supply rooms with debris higher than most humans are tall. They and their employees had fled to a refugee center; but the previous day, Mr. Takahashi continued, the couple had visited and seen their business’ destruction for the first time. The woman had cried and exclaimed that she felt completely helpless to fix the warzone-like mess.

The team set to work; the project took 4½ hours. The next day, upon the believers’ return to order barbecue from the Takahashis for an outreach event, they met the couple: the Shirades. The two had returned to begin what they expected to be weeks of work—and been shocked to discover their building completely clean. “We don’t know how to express our gratitude,” Chizuo recalled Mr. Shirade saying. “It’s like a second tsunami. The first destroyed; the second righted things. This is what we needed—someone to come alongside us and lend a hand. Many groups are giving away things, but we need help even more.”

At the barbecue later that day, several believers met a civil leader of the low-income apartment complex where the outreach was held. Upon learning that Chizuo is a pastor, the man became excited and exclaimed that he had recently been listening to religious radio programming—both Buddhist and Christian. “I sense that there is only one God, not many,” he continued. “And I think He is just and righteous. So next time you come back, I want to talk with you about that.” Chizuo has been asking the Lord to create opportunities for conversations about spiritual things—and sees this man’s interest as a direct answer to prayer. “This is a great confirmation,” Chizuo said. “The Lord answers prayer—for me and for others.”

Others joined Calvary Tohoku Relief for the barbecue, after which Pastor Travis Takamiya of CC Tokorozawa found a piano dumped by the tsunami. Pastor Kiyomasa Akashi of Logos Christian Fellowship recalled, “We carried the piano to a community center. Travis played, and people’s hearts were softened. I prayed for a lady who shared her story and cried. Many begged us to come again and help long-term.”

The View from California

CC La Habra, CA, Pastor Lance Cook has helped develop Japanese fellowships for 15 years. He also leads Committed Relief, which grew from CC La Habra’s service following the 1995 Kobe, Japan, earthquake. “Committed Relief’s goal is to come alongside the local body of Christ. In this case, that’s been easy—we already had long-standing relationships with many people on the ground,” said Lance, who is close friends with Chizuo, Marre, and others. “It’s unique to have church ministry partners already in place when a large-scale disaster takes place.”

In the local Shinto and Buddhist faiths, Lance continued, “People believe in karma, so whatever befalls a person in this life is thought to be a result of something they did in a previous life. Reluctance to interfere

with the laws of karma makes people less eager, in the culture as a whole, to help others during times of disaster. This situation creates a huge contrast between Shinto and Christian behavior. It gives us a platform to demonstrate Christ’s love in action.”

Open Doors

Calvary Tohoku Relief’s fourth trip northward, in mid-April, comprised 18 people from four fellowships throughout Japan and CC Montebello, CA. On the group’s second of four days in Ishinomaki, several team members volunteered to help a family who were busily cleaning their home and catering business of debris and silt. The residents were resistant—as is typical in Japan’s self-reliant culture, Chizuo said. The believers offered again. The man, Mr. Takahashi, became suddenly enthusiastic as he realized