

St. Mary's teachers in Ishinomaki, Japan



May 3, 2011

Opportunity Knocking

A few weeks ago, I heard about an opportunity to volunteer in the Tohoku region from some good friends in the Men's Ministry of Tokyo Union Church. I could not attend this first opportunity, so I reached out to a few other teachers who had expressed interest in volunteering "up north." We then got in contact with NADIA, an organization of foreigners living in Japan who want to help connect other foreigners with relief work opportunities.



Preparation

Our Headmaster Brother Michel and Takamichi-san stepped forward to not only allow use of the school vehicle, but to help

cover transportation costs in support of this relief effort of five St. Mary's teachers.

With this taken care of, and our housing and work assignments set by NADIA contacts in Ishinomaki, we went shopping at a local home improvement center for supplies.

To go on such a trip NADIA recommends the following: waterproof rain boots, waterproof rain suit, heavy-duty rubber gloves and lightweight liners (like gardening gloves with grips), protective eyewear, face masks, a construction helmet, and volunteer insurance.

Other than that, you pay for lodging and food while you're there (local ryokans/hotels are preferable to continue to stimulate local economies) and just need to be ready to follow

instructions for your work assignments with a heart for service.

The Crew

Brendan Riley, Triston McMillan, Danny Wall, Trisha Hornickel and Brad White were the St. Mary's teachers who joined this first trip, along with Matt Ushida, a friend from Tokyo Union Church. We left Tokyo a little after 6:00am on Saturday, April 30 for Ishinomaki.



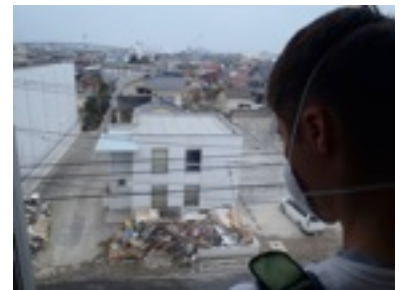
DAY 1: APRIL 30, 2011



Day 1

When we arrived in Ishinomaki around noon, we had a quick bento lunch at the NADIA headquarters, an abandoned high-rise storage building just a few blocks from the emergency refugee center (a local elementary school). While we waited for our first work assignment, we carted out mud, debris, and boxes of leftover Christmas decorations from inside the NADIA HQ first floor.

Next we walked with the Ishinomaki Postmaster to clean out the post office. The tsunami had filled the entire post office from floor to ceiling, so most of the building was destroyed and our primary job was to clean out the file cabinets, store room, and bathroom, which were still filled with stale, rotten water left behind by the tsunami. The smell was overpowering and took some getting used to, even while wearing heavy-duty masks with charcoal filters.



Following this, we accompanied the Postmaster to his home a few blocks away. He asked us to search through the rubble of his boyhood home, where his parents had lived for many decades. Specifically, we were searching for some ancestral Buddhist prayer statues that meant a great deal to him. Although we were unsuccessful, we did find a special photograph and necklace that he kept. The walls of the home were broken, leaning, or missing altogether, so we didn't linger long. But the Postmaster still made sure to scoop out the caked ocean-sludge from his genkan and say "ojama shimasu" as we entered the home.

After returning our tools and changing out of our now filthy work clothes, we drove to Matsushima for an overnight stay at a local ryokan overlooking beautiful rock outcroppings in the bay.

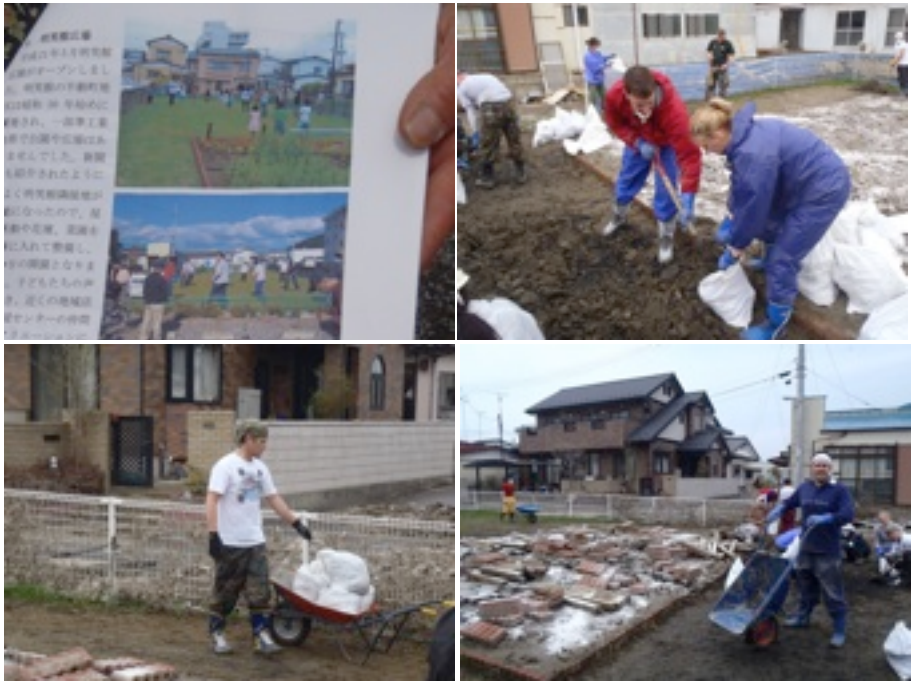
DAY 2: MAY 1, 2011

Teaming up

We returned to Ishinomaki at 7:30am for a full day of work. This time, we joined another NADIA volunteer team to tackle a larger-scale project. The operators of a local home for elderly and disabled individuals had been hit by the tsunami, as it was only 25 meters from a main ocean canal.

Next to the center was a large grass field that was formerly adorned with beautiful flower gardens and spaces for spending time outdoors with others from the community, but now was

covered in thick, layered mud. Our job was essentially to remove this top layer of mud, pack it into sandbags in teams of two, cart the sandbags to the street, and stack them for later removal by members of Japan's Self-Defense Force. It was grueling work, but the team we joined was spirited and great to work with, so the job progressed quickly. After several hours on this day (and many more hours the previous day), this joint team of over 20 volunteers finally cleared the field. The second team had to return to Tokyo right away, so we returned to NADIA HQ for lunch and our next assignment.



DAY 2 (CONTINUED)



Teaming up

This time, we had a much more narrow task. A grey-haired man with a kind smile named Ishikawa-san led us to his home, a few blocks from the refugee center. He had lived in this beautiful traditional home with his mother and sister for 57 years before the tsunami flooded the entire first floor from floor to ceiling and destroyed everything they owned.

We entered Ishikawa-san's home and were overwhelmed by the task in front of us. Because he felt the structure itself was still sound enough to live in, he asked us to prepare the three rooms on the first floor so that he and his mother and sister could move back in as soon as possible.



The floor was covered in the same mud that blanketed most of the town, but this time, the mud was dry and caked into the wood floors under the now removed and rotten tatami. At first it really seemed like there wasn't much we could do to help salvage this home. We started small and used an assortment of brooms to start pushing the dirt around, all the while imagining what a gorgeous home this must have been before the tsunami.



After 2.5 hours, we were called back to the NADIA HQ, but didn't feel ready to leave. So, we asked to be able to continue and spent another hour scrubbing and scraping every surface within reach.

We cleaned two of the three rooms to the point that they could actually be lived in, but were unable to do the third and final room. A NADIA team followed up the next day and reported later that they finished the job.



The homeowner, Ishikawa-san, had generously bought some chocolate-covered pretzels and bottles of water for us throughout our time working in his home, but as we were about to leave, he announced that he had something special to share with each of us.



Ishikawa-san's Parting Wisdom

On a small table outside, he had assembled small trinket bags with tissues, a coin, various beads, and other items to share his gratitude for our time working together. His message to us was this:

“When you leave Ishinomaki, please do not take with you memories of the destruction of the tsunami or the mess around us. Instead, take with you the memory of this human connection, the relationship between us and the time we shared together.”

It was a touching moment and the first time I allowed myself to fully embrace the weight of the experience as a whole. His humble determination and positive spirit will remain with me as a source of inspiration for the rest of my life. He is just one of the millions of people whose lives were changed forever by this disaster, and although we couldn't even clean just three rooms of his home in our short time together, I know that interactions like these are the most important moments in life. Perfect strangers, separated by culture, race, age, and circumstance, being brought into each other's lives for brief moments of love, compassion, and humble grace.

This is the first of what I hope to be several trips north, and I want to express my sincere thanks to my friends and colleagues who eagerly gave their time, energy and love to share in this experience.

Donations

Several elementary classes heard about the trip beforehand so many students created cards celebrating the coming of springtime. We delivered these cards along with other donated items like paint, markers, and crayon sets to the refugee center/school.

Further Opportunities

If you are interested in volunteering directly in the relief efforts, either here in Tokyo or in Tohoku, please let me know and I'll do my best to contact you with a variety of organizations (NADIA is at <http://team-nadia.org>). Ioki Ichikawa has also volunteered through the Japanese Red Cross and may have some information as well. These families and individuals need all of us to give of ourselves and our resources to recover. It was a massive disaster of historic proportions and our help is only a drop in the ocean, but the keychain in my pocket from Ishikawa-san reminds me that our time there, however short, was worth every minute. Thanks for reading and feel free to pass this on.

In Christ's love and hope,
Brad White

