

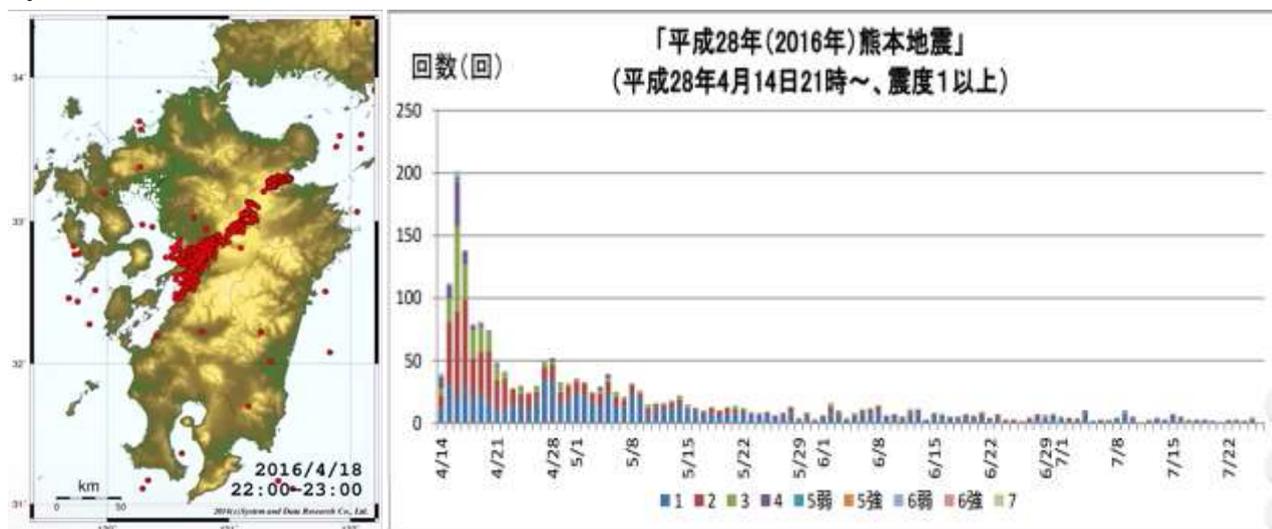
Interview with Rev. UMESAKI Koji

Moderator, United Church of Christ in Japan (UCCJ) Kyushu District

In the aftermath of repeated earthquakes in Kumamoto and Oita prefectures, countless people have extended prayers and support to those affected. From a distance we understand that tremors are still happening, that some roads remain impassable, that each heavy rainfall threatens new landslides, that thousands of residents are living in shelters and temporary housing, that some people still spend nights in parked cars fearing injury while they sleep. We catch glimpses of the current situation in news or via facebook, but it's hard to see the whole picture. Churches, ministers and members of UCCJ are still working hard to meet daily challenges on the ground, but they're simply too busy (and tired!) to organize their thoughts and photos into regular reports. So, when the moderator of UCCJ Kyushu District, Rev. Koji UMESAKI, recently visited Tokyo for meetings, we asked him to share about the current situation in an interview. The following report is based on Rev. Umesaki's comments, supplemented with publicly available information.

Tremors and recent landslides

Since the first tremor hit Kumamoto Prefecture on April 14, nearly 2000 earthquakes have occurred measuring 1 or greater on the Japanese seismic intensity scale of 1 to 7. Most of these tremors have along the Hinagu-Futagawa and the Beppu-Haneyama fault zones, which cut across Kyushu Island from Kumamoto in the South-West to Ōita in the North-East.



Left: Red dots mark epicenters of tremors 1 or greater in the first 4 days, April 14-18. Right: Daily frequency (vertical scale) and strengths (color code at bottom, level 1 to maximum 7) of tremors, April 14 - July 26.

The frequency and magnitudes of tremors have diminished and many residents have returned to their own homes, or moved into temporary housing erected by municipalities, but anxiety remains high for many residents. After 3 months of unpredictable tremors, one simply can't feel secure. Even

a modest tremor can cause new damage, even sudden collapse, of a structure weakened by previous quakes. The number of people who remain in shelter centers has fallen to less than 5,000, down from 180,000 in the first few days. Meanwhile, in areas where slopes had been destabilized by previous tremors, recent heavy rains caused landslides and loss of life and homes.



Computer-aided image of Mt. Aso, Japan's largest active volcano, which sits at the heart of the tremor-plagued region. The strongest tremors have occurred near Mt. Aso, and ground fissures and landslides have been most severe in this area.

Situation of UCCJ congregations, facilities, communities

As reported in late April, there were no serious casualties among UCCJ members. However, one church member suffered complete collapse of the family home and many others have experienced less severe, but still worrisome, damage to their homes and property. Kyushu District commissioned Ichiryusha-Vories, an architectural firm with a long history in church structures, to conduct a preliminary study of 15 churches and manses affected by the recent quakes. As a result 3 structures were found to have suffered "mid-degree destruction," 9 suffered "minor destruction" and the remaining 3 had "light damage." The difficult question now is, should the district and congregations spend a significant portion of limited funds on further, detailed studies, or should they move ahead quickly with repair and reconstruction of the most-damaged buildings. As many churches contemplate the magnitude of physical tasks ahead, some are also grappling with new concerns about their viability as congregations as long-standing members consider pleas from sons and daughters to join them in other cities, out of concern for their safety at home.

Ministers and church members have been working under very difficult conditions to aid one-another, while also trying to give material and spiritual support to neighbors. Rev. Umesaki points out that, while stress and fatigue is felt by everyone, ministers are at particular risk of burnout.

"All day, every day, they minister to the best of their abilities and the limits of their strength, and then they go home to responsibilities there—parenting, marriage, housekeeping, home repairs etc. It's very difficult to find time for rest. It is wonderful how we have all come together in crisis,

but I still feel concern for some of my colleagues, whose usually-bright faces have been visibly clouded by fatigue and stress.”



UCCJ ministers and church members gather for one of their meetings. Rev. Umesaki at center, wearing clerical collar.

There is also the indescribable stress that comes from the constant expectation of another tremor, never knowing when, or how strong, it will be. To illustrate how this affects one’s spirit, Rev. Umesaki, who now lives and ministers in Fukuoka about 2 hours away, recounted an experience from one of his earlier visits to Kumamoto.

“I visited several churches to check on the ministers and buildings, and in each place I found the sanctuary and other rooms in disarray. Lecterns and altars were overturned, bookshelves had fallen over and hymnals and Bibles were strewn across the floor, some face-up with open covers, others face-down with folded pages. I offered to help pick up the books and return them to the shelves, because I didn’t want to step on, or over, these precious books. I assumed that my colleagues felt the same way, but each minister said to me, ‘No, Reverend, it’s OK. Just leave them where they are.’ This puzzled and bothered me, but I couldn’t bring myself to ask the reason. As I drove home that night—the trip took 7 hours, not the usual 2—I kept thinking about this. Then, finally, I understood: They DID pick up those books. They picked them up after each big tremor. They had done it so many times, they came to feel the task was futile and dispiriting. I couldn’t understand this right away, because I was a visitor.”

Serving neighbors

Amid all of these challenges, UCCJ Kyushu District has been seeking ways to meet neighbors’ needs, by combining resources with other Christian bodies and working with other actors, too. One fruit of these efforts is a close collaboration with the Kumamoto YMCA. The local YMCA, which quickly gained the confidence of local government authorities for its organizational and people skills, received a commissioned to manage municipal shelters in Mashiki and Mifune, two towns on the outskirts of Kumamoto city. These shelters have become important hubs of support for residents

who were displaced by the earthquakes.



YMCA staff and volunteers offer support and activities for people of all ages

UCCJ Kyushu District, for its part agreed to set up a volunteer center, through which volunteers would be dispatched in appropriate numbers to the two YMCA-run shelters, where the work is indoors and the needs primarily spiritual, and to land-slide areas of Minami(South)-Aso, where the work is outdoors and involves physical labor. Setting up such a volunteer center was, however, easier said than done. It took considerable time to prepare an appropriate space, and to find coordinators who could commit to such demanding work for an indefinite period. The volunteer center is just now beginning its work, and UCCJ Kyushi District is reaching out for volunteers through church channels.

Another innovative project that has recently gotten off the ground is a drop-in *Dream Café* at the Mashiki shelter, for local residents and shelter users. Simple cafés like this became veritable lifelines for many people who had lost their homes and been thrust into unfamiliar surroundings after the 1995 Kobe-Awaji Earthquake, and also after the 2011 East Japan Earthquake. The relaxed atmosphere and open space for conversation offers comfort and opportunities to build relationships with new neighbors. It helps to reduce and prevent isolation and depression, which can lead to heartbreaking cases of “kodokushi,” or lonely death, in traumatized survivors. This café, which was spearheaded by Rev. Sunghyo KIM of Korean Christian Church in Japan (KCCJ) Kumamoto Church, is sustained by a team of collaborating UCCJ ministers who take turns at the café to minister through conversation and special events, like games and advanced origami-making, or make-your-own-chopsticks workshops. The café has been a big hit so far with youth, parents and the elderly.



Left: Rev. Kim (at right) and some café collaborators

Right: Craft table during a make-your-own-chopsticks workshop

Rev. Umesaki, when asked where he sees God's grace at work, answered, "God's gifts are not easy to see right now, amid the confusion, stress and fatigue. But I believe they will become increasingly evident with time. One thing that I can say is this: The crisis has forced ministers and congregations to turn their eyes outward. Before the earthquakes we might have been content to look inward, focused only on congregational worship and the upkeep of our own each church. But now we need others, and others need us. By living through these days together, upheld by and upholding neighbors, I believe we will learn lasting lessons about what it means to be a church in this world and in society."

The churches and people of UCCJ Kyushu District have also been upheld by neighbors in distant places, through prayers, gifts and visits. Representatives of the "KiJang" Presbyterian Church of the Republic of Korea (PROK), a close mission partner of Kyushu District, attended the District's General Assembly on May 3-4, delivering a message of solidarity, as well as support funds. A delegation from Kungsan YMCA in Korea visited affected areas and support activity sites in May, and donated funds for the work of Kyushu District. Within days after the first major earthquakes, two partner churches in the United States, the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ (UCC), transferred donations for the support of recovery work through the UCCJ General Assembly Office, and in June a UCC representative visited Kyushu. The ministers and churches of UCCJ Kyushu district have been heartened by each such gesture of solidarity.

The work of our Lord continues. Please remember in your prayers our sisters and brothers, the ministers and members, of UCCJ churches and partners in Kyushu. If you are moved to offer further support by a simple piece of mail, or by volunteering or donation, please use the following contact information.

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