

Christian Churches Growing in Japan

It's been nearly three months since Japan was torn apart by an earthquake and tsunami. The billions of dollars in damage sent the country into a deeper recession as many jobs were lost, businesses were left crippled—and in some cases destroyed—by the disaster. While it was bad news for the economy, the tragedy has given the church a boost.

Joe Handley is President of Asian Access, a ministry that supports the local church in Japan. He's in Fukushima, Japan, now getting a good look at what God is doing through the church post-earthquake. Handley says of all the relief groups he's seeing in the region, the greatest response has come from "Japanese churches from all over the country—Okinawa, Tokyo, Hiroshima. It's just unbelievable the amount of love Japanese churches have mobilized to reach out and help clean up at this time."

In talking with them, Handley says churches have a new desire to plant churches, especially in areas where there were none. "One of these areas, Iwata, is one of the least-churched regions of the entire country of Japan, and yet pastors have a real heart to reach out to them at this time of need."

Handley says one denomination wants to plant 50 new churches in this area, while another group wants to plant churches in the seaside villages that have never had one.

Before the disaster, church growth was on the decline. This is really a new season for the church," says Handley. "Networks are forming that are brand new—churches from across denominations that are saying, 'God is calling us for such a time as this.'"

Immediately following the quake, there was a spiritual

awakening. Previously taboo, the Japanese were now open to talking about spiritual things, including the Bible. Handley says that continues.

“As missionaries, Japanese pastors and congregants are delivering aid, more often than not they’re getting questions: ‘Why are you doing this? Why would you come up in these affected regions? Where is God in the midst of all this?’ This is truly a new hour spiritually, and it could change the shape of the spiritual climate of the entire country,” he explains.

Handley says one congregation in the devastation zone has had many opportunities to share Christ. “They’ve lost their own homes. They have no food. They have no clothing. But they are having spiritual conversations with people and I have heard countless stories of people coming to Christ through that church and other churches.”

Handley asks for prayers for Japanese Christians working their country. “They’re overwhelmed with the need. And they’re overwhelmed also, to some degree, with the groups that are coming in that they’re trying to facilitate. So pray for great grace for them and wisdom as they receive teams.”

Asian Access also has a \$1 million matching grant. About \$500,000 has already been raised, but support is needed now to meet the rest of it that will allow them to provide spiritual and physical relief in this crucial time.

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