

VIDEO 1. IRCA English –Rural Hokkaido

Hello. My name is Robert Witmer

I came to Japan in 1969 as overseas personnel of the United Church of Canada and taught English at the Hokusei Gakuen University in Sapporo and engaged in a lot of other activities while there as well.

In 1975 my partner Keiko and I went to Nayoro in northern Hokkaido and worked at the Dohoku Centre a rural centre there and in 1977 I went to the Emmanuel Seminary in Toronto for 3 years, was ordained as a minister, and worked at the Dohoku Centre and at several churches in the Dohoku Sub-district until 2018. In April of 2018 we moved to Tokyo and I became principal of the Theological Seminary for Rural Mission there and will retire at the end of March this year.

Rural Churches

I want to thank you so much for this opportunity to share about

Rural churches in the Hokkai District where I worked for so long.

1.

One church I want to share about is the Wassamu church. It is in the town of Wassamu 35km north of Asahikawa and with a population of 3,095. When the previous minister left this church in 2012 the membership was zero! The Dohoku Sub-district discussed what they

should do and decided they should not close the church at a time when it was carrying a debt. The minister of the Rokujo Church in Asahikawa became the interim minister and the Sub-district managed finances and care of the building. Worship was held once a month on Thursday morning and was followed by sharing lunch after worship. People from other churches in the Subdistrict were invited and between 20 and 30 from other churches participated. It was worship on a Thursday and so most of those who could participate were retired and they did more than just participate in worship. They made the lunch, they cleaned the building, they cut the grass, they shoveled the snow in winter, and they harvested fruit that was growing on the church property. They were able to share their presence in so many wonderful ways. In a short time the debt was paid off and 3 people returned to the church as members, and some others who lived close to the church also attend worship even though they were not members. This is still true for the Wassamu church.

One church is not alone! We are called to live together!

In 2014 a group from the United Church of Canada on a visit to Hokkaido attended worship at Wassamu and a female minister who was a member of the group shared the worship message. Her title was “Go Team Go! And ” She was saying “We are called to walk together!”

2.

The other church is the Bibaushi church in the town of Biei 24km south of Asahikawa. The population now is around 10,354. It was 20 years ago when this church building was in need of repair and there were only 3 members. They thought they needed to close their church but ministers in the Dohoku Sub-district suggested they build a new church and said all the churches in the Sub district will provide support. It took 10 years but in 2008 when there were only 2 members remaining they finally said OK let’s try to put up a new church building. All the churches in the Sub-district thought about how they provide support and one of the ministers made a support song that the ministers sang at the Hokkai District annual meeting while they went around collecting contributions for the church. The minsiters also

designed T-shirts and jackets with a “VIVA ushi” church design

An went around to other churches to sell them. In 2009 the dedication of this church that had only 2 members took place with an attendance of more than 170 people!! And over the church on that day there was a beautiful double rainbow! Was that a special present from God!? With so many connections the cost of the new building was all payed off a year ahead of schedule. Membership now is 9 and worship attendance is 12. Another characteristic of this church is that they have a Jingus Kan (lamb) barbecue in the summer and close to 80 people from many different churches come to participate.

Yes, “We are called to walk together!”

But while the Covid-19 virus is still with us we may have to

Think about and find new ways to walk together.

VIDEO 2

Concerns and Possibilities for Rural Churches

In Hokkaido where we lived the population peaked in 1995 but has

been decreasing ever since especially in rural areas. In the city of Nayoro where we lived the population in 1995 was 34,664 but in 2020 it was 27,289. And it has decreased even more rapidly in towns and villages. And it is not just a decrease in numbers the rural population is also becoming more aged. As people get older some find it difficult to attend worship and there are also fewer young people connecting with the church.

Church members and seekers are decreasing and income from contributions is decreasing and it becomes difficult for many churches to call a minister. In the past any churches were closed when they experienced a situation like this but Hokkai district now values solidarity and that's how the Dohoku Subdistrict was able to call an interim minister for the Wassamu church and receive lay assistance too. Some small churches will connect with other churches in their area and have worship together in each other's churches once or twice a year and will share a meal or have a time of learning together.

Another characteristic of the Dohoku Sub-district is the Stamp Rally that started in 2017. There are 10 churches and 2 centres in the

Dohoku Sub-district and they all have a picture and a catch phrase on the poster and lay persons and ministers receive a bingo card which they take to visit churches or centres and receive a stamp on their card. If they have a bingo spot or a full card they can receive a gift from the Sub-district at it's annual gathering for learning and sharing together. On the top of the poster is written "Let's meet face to face!" "Let us connect with one another!" "Let us work together!" and at the bottom It says "Let us increase the range of our mission!" "Let us travel throughout the Dohoku Sub-district!" and one more says "You are loved! ~ The Dohoku Sub-district of the Hokkai District"

Yes, one church is not alone! We live together!

As our United Church of Canada friend said "Go Team Go!"

"Let us walk together"

But while the Covid-19 virus is still with us we may have to think about and find new ways to walk together here too.