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Happy New Year – in Japan, the Year of the Tiger. Elspeth, Sammy and Hana (our feline family) are having illusions of grandeur! Their human “staff” (Sheila and Barbara) are hoping that, as cats sleep for much of the time, it may be a more restful year than the one that is ending.

I don't actually remember why the beginning of the year was busy, but by March I was glad to be able to get away and spend 10 days in the UK and get some rest as well as visiting universities with a view to setting up exchange programmes. We were subsequently able to sign an agreement with one of them, and were hoping to begin implementing it in summer, but the threat of swine flu meant that most students preferred not to travel, so that the first group of our students will be coming to the UK under this agreement in March. It took me a long time to discover that most Japanese, not just the elderly and infirm, seem to expect to have yearly vaccinations against flu, so that the idea of swine flu coming into Japan while a vaccine was not yet available caused a high level of panic, fuelled by the media – until swine flu actually started spreading seriously here, at which point the media did a complete about turn and called for calm, while minimizing the coverage.

I got back from the UK in time to turn round and go to the Missionary Conference in the Mt. Fuji area before the new academic year started on April 1st – an academic year that I shall actually be quite glad to see the end of. In April every year the students are all given Kwassui diaries, and if there are some left over the staff can also use them. Because, of course, they all look alike, we try to add some means of identification, and I looked quickly at some stickers in my drawer, left by a former colleague, and thought that one with cheerful balloons and the message “U R working hard!” would be OK – the colour of one of the balloons matched the colour of the diary. With hindsight, even though it reflected the way I felt barely into the teaching year, this was somewhat foolish. Next year I shall be looking for a sticker with a message along the lines of “Take it easy!”

Not that this year has by any means been all bad, and we give thanks for some of the developments. This year in April Kwassui opened a new Faculty of Nursing in cooperation with the state-of-the-art national hospital in Nagasaki prefecture. Actually it is located in Omura, about 25 miles from our main campus. This is the first four-year university facility there, so the city seems very pleased to welcome us. Historically, Kwassui once had a presence in Omura, as about 100 years ago our founder Elizabeth Russell established an orphanage there after an earthquake and tidal wave destroyed fishing villages in a neighbouring prefecture. However, the government gradually increased its facilities, and in time the Kwassui orphanage was discontinued. Now in our 130th year as an educational institution for young women, we again have a connection with Omura, seeking to prepare health care providers for a rapidly aging society.

Another campus means more opportunities but more work, and Barbara and I now go to Omura every Friday morning, when all of the students and staff gather from 8:20 to 8:45 for services of

worship, and take our turns speaking there, as we do on the main campus. We have also been more involved in the Christian Centre programmes on the main campus, as our “retired” chaplain finally retired even from part-time teaching. At the same time a combination of events left our (English) department seriously understaffed, and whereas we have some part-time help with the teaching, the administrative and committee responsibilities have piled up. There are also a number of churches in the Nagasaki area which are currently without ministers (the norm here being one minister per church, however small), which means we are also involved in preaching on Sundays. A joy, but a lot of work to prepare, as I still wouldn’t dare preach without a full script, even though I regularly teach in Japanese from an outline and notes.

Although we have been too busy all year, the real rush came from November. Kwassui was founded in 1879, and the 130th anniversary has been marked by a series of events, starting with an exhibition of photographs and materials related to our early history. There was an opening lecture and recital on our oldest organ on November 3rd, which I missed as a colleague and I were in Korea interviewing a student from a sister college who wants to transfer into the English Department. There have also been a number of concerts, including a performance of Handel’s Messiah for the Founder’s Day celebrations on December 1st, and a wonderful concert by the organist from Notre Dame Cathedral, who for his encore took the melody of the Japanese hymn that we sing at all Kwassui ceremonies, but which he was meeting for the first time, and proceeded to improvise on it for the next five minutes.

In the midst of all the busyness there are signs of encouragement. The Bible study groups continue, and the “regulars” at the hall of residence have made great efforts to involve new members. We have been able to start a discussion group for short term foreign exchange students based around the content of the weekly chapel services – one of the Chinese students asked, “If I attend this class will I become a Christian?” Well, it isn’t a requirement... but some students do! One of our fourth year English Department students, Wakana, was baptized at Christmas, as was an older lady, Mrs. Maeda, at the church I usually attend. When I spoke at the worship at Tarami, north of Nagasaki, earlier in the month, there was a newcomer in the congregation who said she had attended Kwassui Junior High School, and now that she is in her fifties and starting to think about the time remaining to her, she would like to know more about the Bible.

So we continue to sow seeds and pray for their eventual growth. (But we still hope that life will be slower from this coming April...