

## Partnership visit to Asian Rural Institute, Tochigi - Japan 4<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> September 2017

Due to increasing challenges of extreme climatic conditions lately plus the difficulty of recruiting mission personnel with peculiar specialist skills such as Agriculturists specialising in organic farming to serve in Africa, I accepted the invitation to visit Asian Rural Institute (ARI) in Japan as an option to address important farming issues in Africa.

### Aims

- To work with African partners that use rural development as a mission tool
- To promote food security and employment initiatives especially in rural areas
- To advance asset management of landed properties for agriculture thereby preventing encroachment
- To expose African partners to learn and contribute to cross-cultural agriculture in addition to swapping climate smart techniques in Asia
- To train future Agribusiness personnel urgently needed by our partners
- To encourage income generation and sustainable ventures for rural based Christian ministries where church growth is often rapid

I arrived the Asian Rural Institute at Tochigi, 200 kilometres North of Tokyo on Monday 4<sup>th</sup> September after about four hours of travel. It was an early start and I was glad to reach the venue in daylight. Kathy Froede, the Ecumenical Officer of the institute had invited me over to see their facilities, meet with participants, volunteers and staff of ARI with the probability of training African Methodists in future. I realised it was a public holiday in Japan when I arrived ARI in Tochigi, no wonder there were many University students on the same train. Little did I know that we were all heading for ARI in Tochigi. I later found out that they about a dozen of them were volunteering at ARI for ten days as part of cultural exposure to the international community at ARI as well as acquiring other skills.

On campus, I resorted to a tour using the map sent to me by Kathy with the hope of quicker induction the next day. I met Kathy but had a sprained knee, so she had to limit her campus tour especially with many hilly and rugged topography on site. I later met with participants from Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Liberia, Ghana, Japan, Myanmar, East Timor and South Africa. Most worked with NGOs. Later in the evening, 18.30 hours to be precise; it was dinner time. Everyone sang a short song with its lyrics on the wall and I enjoyed the lovely dinner cooked by the participants since staff were on break. I later crashed into my room as I was expected to assemble with others at 06.30 hours the next morning!



### ARI community rhythm

The next day was full on. The exercise routine was being transmitted on the radio all over Japan and we all joined at 6.30am for five to ten minutes followed by a short prayer. Everyone joins one of the three groups to know his or her assignment for that morning. Then there is the daily morning chore for twenty minutes in which all participates too. I was in the beautification team so I removed the weeds around the chapel alongside others. At 07.00 hours, the group met again in front of the farm shop and proceeded to the allotment to weed the carrot beds whilst some participants prepared breakfast. ARI has no paid *support workers* at the institute therefore all duties are shared among residents on site. By 08.00 hours, we went to cafeteria for breakfast and changed our working clothes into casual ones. At 9.00 hours, we assembled at the chapel for morning *gathering*. A staff member, participant or guest share a story, we sing a hymn and pray afterwards. Then guests introduce themselves and purpose for visit. Notices, reports and important information are shared all lasting a maximum of forty minutes. From there, staff go to their offices and we all shared in *foodlife cycle* at the classroom. Staff shared knowledge on good farm practices based on observations made at the various group allotments during the week e.g. green peas needed to be lifted, egg gardens staked and raising seedlings from spinach seeds for next month etc. They also discussed side effects of some pesticides (e.g. Clopyralid a weed killer not permitted in Japan) and how they could make their way into the food

chain. ARI promotes the use of organic pesticides and participants share knowledge as well as learn new techniques using natural and local materials such as vinegar etc. which varies in different contexts.

ARI has three pillars – *Servant leadership*, *Foodlife* and *Community of learning* and all three are integrated in daily activities. Throughout the year, each participant takes on the leadership roles for two weeks to develop listening, leading, enabling and assigning skills. Each morning, the leader identifies and share field work duties among group members using drafted timetable for crops -harvesting, weeding, staking, watering, thinning (radish and carrots), cutting flowers etc.; and for livestock – feeding, watering, mixing feed, cleaning pens etc. These exercises builds confidence and promote consultation with others in decision making encouraging leaders to lead by example and participate in tasks.

### Cross-cultural exposure

In order to promote community cohesion as a feature of rural development, participants were exposed to different communities in Japan during a ten-day study tour throughout Japan. The three groups went to different parts of Japan and had just returned the weekend before I arrived at ARI –well timed! Each group deliberated on what and how best to present observations made. In class, they shared how community projects ended when objectives were met rather than going on indefinitely. A few commented that it was okay for each farmer to have a different farming philosophy and formulate his or her own based on local content .e.g. some elderly farmers resorted to chemical use due to scale of production but managing it to use bear minimum. Reduced chemical usage is success, practices are different. This proves that imposition ideas and philosophies from elsewhere on local farmers without conferring with them is not the solution. Don't discredit chemical use totally, gradual adoption of organic farming is progress. The group decided to address this key question for their presentation - *Is organic farming the ultimate solution towards rural development?*



Participants discussing community issues

Someone commented on *how focussed Japanese students were knowing what they wish to do in future*. Others echoed important sayings that had positive impact on them -*healthy soil is healthy life; what you need is around you; seek local resources to support farming; reduce waste; problems come with solutions; farmers should learn to support one-another etc*. During the study tour, participants realised that rural development policies in Japan arose from problems e.g. farming movement in Japan evolved into having health insurance especially in rural places. We later had lunch.

### Humanitarian and Relief response

On Wednesday 6 September, the participants, staff and visitors travelled on two buses to Minami Soma city– a town affected by triple tragedy six years ago and was now a ghost town. The biggest earthquake with a magnitude of 8.8, struck the Eastern region of Japan on 11 March 2011, which reached Asian Rural Institute 256 kilometres away. Over 150,000 people were evacuated from the city. The following day i.e. on 12 March 2011, the nuclear energy pipeline burst leading to the evacuation of the surrounding 20 -30 km radius, evacuation of areas with high readings of radioactive substances plus the removal of 5cm topsoil all over to prevent. The challenge of radiation having no smell and being invisible compounded the problem and the released radioactive substances were blown by gusty wind from Fukushima. Lots of questions were asked and relevant information disseminated helped ARI cope through the ordeal. ARI worked alongside its communities and local government to protect children, livestock and the vulnerable. Six years on, we visited Litate village, Minami



Ms Tomoko Arawaka – ARI Principal, speaking to us on our way to places previously affected by the earthquake

soma city and Namie town – all ghost towns with very low radiation levels. We prayed for the towns, affected families and the government as we passed through them in our two buses. One of the affected farmers said many communities were still waiting to be compensated and the farmers unable to return to farming. Consequently few farmers came together to start a solar power business that could generate electricity on such wasted land and sell back to the government to raise income. The initiative was three years old and has been successful so far. The Christian farmer who shared his vision and hope with us said he had two children and therefore had to leave Litate village. However God provided another means of supporting his family and he works with other two staff. It was a humbling experience showing we have much to be thankful for.

### **Ecumenical and multi-faith participants**

The next day I stayed back at ARI premises to observe processing and bagging of soybeans, poultry and pig feed. Later I had a session with Tomoko to discuss training prospects for African Methodist partners to promote sustainable and environmentally smart farming. Tomoko shared how participants were drawn globally and volunteers could serve on short and long term bases. All duties were jointly shared among residents and people from all faiths are welcome to serve however the institute is run on Christian principles. Each year, the course starts late March until early December and runs in English. As part of the cross-cultural experience, participants visit neighbouring farms, communities and some establishments within Japan. There were at least ten participants from various Africa countries enrolled in 2017. They shared about the significance of servant- leadership which is counter-culture as well as having practical exposure to all aspects of the curriculum. They were very optimistic about their future.

### **Food security and zero wastage**

There was a daily rhythm of activities. Crops were harvested on Fridays and Tuesdays for menu plans and shopping activities. Daily supply of milk and eggs from the poultry and goat section in addition to the variety of vegetables, maize, rice and fish. Pigs are sold as and when required and at special celebrations. The cattle were taken away after the radioactive outburst due to contaminated grass then. The school aims to be self-sufficient, teaching participants to make optimal use of all its resources and only purchase what was absolutely essential. Interested staff join in at meal times though many living with families on site eat at home. The punctuality and commitment rate of all have been over 98%. Staff members come from the Philippines, Indonesia, Ghana, Cameroon, Japan, America, India and working from 06.30 hours until 6.00pm plus Saturdays until after 10am since almost all live on site. As part of promoting *no waste culture*, participants all take turns to work in the kitchen to learn to prepare various meals from different cultures or process extra food stuff for sale or storage. I witnessed lots of arrivals and departures around weekends, impacting on food and room preparations. Therefore regular updates on movement of guests and residents was important for room and food preparation as well as assigning tasks to all.



Mr Timothy Appah –ARI Poultry specialist

I later accompanied Timothy Appah, a staff member responsible for poultry production and hails from Ghana. He was an ARI graduate and was asked to join the staff nine years ago due to his incredible gifts in farming. He had won several accolades and was often invited as a consultant to conferences and seminar particularly on organic farming in Africa discussing its prospects and challenges. In the evening I was with the piggery support group and the goat support group on Saturday morning. It was great!

### **Group dynamics**

Participants work in groups all year to develop team spirit however they are swapped once a year in addition to rotating leadership. On Friday afternoons, each group collectively visit and observe farm activities to plan for the weeks ahead indicating crops to be harvested, new seedlings to be raised, beds requiring weeding as well as mixing rations for livestock, turning floor, preparing for new birds etc. Also participants were thought to utilise local resources to supplement unavailable materials either due to seasonal changes or otherwise. They all return to class for joint planning led by a nominated participant. Staff took notes on leadership skills and how others were engaged. This offered me opportunity to know and discuss with participants on skills, principles and knowledge acquisition during the course plus how they plan to use them when they return home. As I went along during *field work observations*, I then seized the opportunity to discuss with staff - how were participants selected, how was progress

being measured, feedback from past participants, what was the course curriculum etc. It was good exposure and there were other sending body representatives from India and America onsite as well investigating similar issues.

### Community event planning



Harvested crops from ARI farms at the kitchen for meal preparation

Then Ms Tomoko Arawaka– the Principal of ARI, spoke on Appreciative Inquiry as vision and planning tools for an organisation focusing on best group discovery, collective positive dream; clarified, prioritized and strategic design leading to great delivery. I later met with Yukiko to discuss curriculum of ARI courses plus recruitment process. She was delighted to share great stories for participants including African former students. Participants also organise various activities to develop practical community building skills. One of such was the annual Harvest Thanksgiving Celebration brings together the whole of the community and hosts about a thousand guests from far and near. Planning involves everyone especially when over one million

Japanese Yen has to be fundraised. It was interesting to watch the onset of its preparation at *Konoinia House* using Appreciative Inquiry and involving everyone that would be present on 14-15 September 2017. Volunteers and visitors were invited to observe and contribute.

### Rural based employment

At weekends, all participants, volunteers and staff exercise communally in the morning before feeding livestock and checking on farm plots. (On Sunday only a selected few using a rota system feed livestock). We then had breakfast before joint general cleaning of the whole premises for an hour led by the Principal. Only those assigned to kitchen duties were exempted from cleaning duties that they might carry on with cleaning the dining area, kitchen duties as well as meal preparation for the rest of the day. At 10 a.m. we finished and I left the premises to visit businesses providing rural employment and enhancing community building. One of such was *hikari no café* owned by a Christian couple that employs disabled persons at the café. Meals, snacks and desserts produced by staff were sold to the public and funds generated support training especially for the disabled. The next day we visited the language centre for teaching English and Japanese among others. It also doubles up as a cultural centre and the senior citizens were presenting cultural dances many of which had worked abroad.



Kathy –ARI Ecumenical Officer with Bunmi at *hikari no café*

### ARI graduate global network

I later met with JB Hoover, the Executive Director of American Friends of Asian Rural Institute. He helps with fundraising, recruitment, liaison with churches and donors etc. and visits ARI at least once a year. He had worked and lived at ARI for twelve years and helps with maintaining links with alumni of the Institute. He works closely with Kathy Froede the Ecumenical Officer and both arrange tours across the US for ARI graduates to give updates as well as visit ARI graduates in their home countries to witness impact of training received or challenges encountered.

The significance of promoting community building is the importance each small farm holder plays in providing food, employment and resources whilst living in harmony with nature and neighbours to uphold good values that benefits all..... ***That we may live together.***

*1 Peter 3:8 – Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another, love as brothers, be tender hearted, be courteous....*

Thank you  
Dr Bunmi Olayisade  
Africa Partnership Coordinator –MCB