

## Working as a volunteer in Sendai, Japan

Tuesday, 12 April

My first day as a volunteer turned out to be a real expedition. This morning I left to take the 7.14 train following the directions provided by the local Caritas team.

I phoned the church at Shiogama where they told me to take the 10 a.m bus from the eastern exit. There they told me that the bus would leave from the western side. Finally I found the bus stop – there were only three buses per day. So I decided to go to the local church where a young Japanese priest proposed to take me and another volunteer who had just arrived from Tokyo by car.



After a racing drive, we arrived at the Shiogama church. On the way, I could see buildings ripped apart, furniture scattered everywhere, as well as parking areas filled with damaged vehicles sometimes piled on top of each other.

Talking to the priest, I learnt that they had been surprised by the number of offers to come as volunteers with 300 signed up as of today who have come from all over Japan including Okinawa.

At the church, they gave me a Caritas t-shirt and I filled in a form – it's almost a disease in Japan, it's difficult to do anything with having to fill in a form! A person from the church took us to the support centre. It was more than 20 minutes on foot in the middle of which he asked us if we remembered the way as we would have to find our own way back!

At the centre, things were under way as follows. First, I filled out a form (surprise!). Then they gave me a green vest with the words "City of Shiogama, volunteer" (in Japanese obviously). Dressed in the vest, we went to sit with the other volunteers while we waited for the other leaders to come and explain our work. For my colleague (who absolutely wanted to stay with me for fear of getting lost), we were sent to the hospital.

Nothing glorious today. I spent the time filing in the archive room.

After the earthquake, the patient files were scattered across the room. We were interrupted by a minor tremor. The TV and the radio always make an announcement several seconds before the arrival of a particularly strong tremor.

There were three young people from Shiogama working with us: two high school students and a young worker. I did not dare ask them what had happened to their own families.

At 3 p.m. they told us to stop our work and to return to the support centre. After handing back our vests, I saw that my colleague was panicking so I proposed that we return to the church together. Once back at the church, I met a Japanese Religious sister who had learnt French in Canada. Apparently, she did not pick up the accent.

They took us to the Tagajo station where I was able to take a bus for Sendai. The ticket was twice as expensive as the train.

During the day, I also learnt that the Japanese government has finally recognized that Fukushima is a Level 7 disaster. I may be wrong but I think that the main problem comes from the plutonium scattered around the nuclear reactor (particularly in the sea). Its extremely long half-life is a concern but since plutonium is not easily dispersed, the problem, although extremely serious, essentially involves the area around the reactor.

After arriving back in Sendai, I went to the church where they asked me for feedback. I gave them my report:

An efficiency problem owing to the fact that the volunteers arrive without receiving any real follow up;

There are no trains available and the volunteers are arriving at Sendai each day. I am surprised that the church does not organise car pooling to avoid multiple trips by the volunteers.

For the future, I offered a number of suggestions based on my work today.

First, gather the files from one group that have been sorted in a specific area of the room dedicated to that purpose. This would avoid the need to recheck the list of files that have already been sorted. Secondly, arrange someone to verify the complete list in order to organise the shelves.

Today I received a report of the aftershocks over the last two days. Yesterday there were 79, including 42 at Fukushima. Today as of 3.30pm, there were 49 including 24 at Fukushima.

Tomorrow, I will give my first English course since the 11 March (for a student who is re-starting his course)..

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