We Shall Overcome

Timothy D. Boyle

Since the Crowned With Thorns newsletter was reinstated in 2007, I have served as translator and layout editor, and for the foreseeable future, I will continue in that role despite having entered my retirement years. As this is the first issue of CWT since my retirement, I've been asked to reflect back on my years in Japan and the things I have learned. Thus, our normal "We Shall Overcome" front-page, short article will continue over onto the next pages as the opening article. I want to begin with one of my favorite Scripture verses: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28)

This statement by the apostle Paul relates to a prayer that before his conversion he himself no doubt prayed, together with his fellow Pharisees. It was their practice to recite this prayer daily: "O Lord, I thank you that you did not make me a Gentile, a slave or a woman." I think it quite likely that Paul had this specific prayer in mind when he penned those words in his letter to the Galatians.

We cringe at the thought of that self-righteous prayer, but it is symptomatic of our fallen human nature. It's this same mindset that leads to every type of prejudice and discrimination that takes place in our world. While discriminatory attitudes come in a variety of forms, I think that for the most
part they can be grouped into the 3 basic categories that are exemplified in this misguided prayer. The divide between "Jew and Gentile" represents all forms of ethnic and racial prejudices, and so that is one basic form of discrimination. The second is between "slave and free," and this is representative of class distinctions that are made in societies and the discriminatory behaviors that arise from that. The third basic category, then, is that between "male and female," which refers to gender discrimination. There are, of course, some forms of discrimination that don't quite fit so easily into one of these 3 categories, such as ageism and discrimination against persons with handicapping conditions, and so I don't mean to imply that everything neatly fits into these 3 basic categories. Nevertheless, I do find these basic categories helpful in understanding the issue and what our response to it should be.

Before I reflect back on my personal experiences in Japan and particularly how they relate to the issue of discrimination, I first want to complete this basic overview of discrimination as it relates to Paul's statement and what a Christian response to this issue should be. First, why is discrimination wrong? After all, if one believes that humans are merely intelligent animals that evolved from more primitive animals by natural processes alone (the standard Darwinian model), then "survival of the fittest" is the name of the game, and it's only natural that the strong dominate the weak.

While this "law of the jungle" is what is so often the case in many societies (and indeed, all societies to a certain extent), it is antithetical to the biblical worldview, which is that all people are of inherent value because every single human being is created in the "image of God." This is why discrimination against anybody based on who they are is such an affront to God. Certain forms of "discrimination" based on what someone has done (such as segregating violent criminals from society and putting them in prison) are legitimate, but never based on who they are. (I suppose that the obvious exception to that would be segregating men and women in intimate situations like bathrooms and showers, but even that is challenged in some circles. But dealing with that issue is beyond the scope of this article.) At any rate, this is the position I come from as I look at the general issue of discrimination as I reflect back on my years in Japan.

Buraku discrimination would at first glance appear to be a type of "class discrimination," the second of the three basic types referred to in the Galatians passage. After all, it certainly isn't based on racial or ethnic differences, as there is no way to distinguish people of buraku heritage from other Japanese except by the family line they were born into (which is recorded through the family registry system). And yet, there is something different about this insidious form of prejudicial distinction from the kind of "class discrimination" one would find in most other societies. In my own country of the United States, we certainly do see many forms of discrimination, but the most obvious have been based on racial differences.

Discrimination based on class differences does exist, of course, but it's based more on economic and educational differences, which change over time. Thus, moving from one "class" to another is not at all uncommon. Not so, however, with those born into a buraku community. Becoming wealthy or highly educated doesn't change one's ancestral heritage — which is what is being discriminated against, and so in that sense, buraku discrimination more readily fits into a kind of ethnic discrimination. This "ethnicity," however, is not based on anything in one's genetic makeup. It's an entirely artificially imposed distinction based on the societal role one's ancestors played. In this case, it was those forced into the very necessary role of dealing with the dead bodies of animals and the products made out of animal carcasses. This made them "defiled" in the eyes of society, and this "defilement" was viewed as being passed on by birth, even if one isn't involved in such occupations now.
I first became aware of the severity of buraku discrimination in Japan about 20 years ago when I went to Sayama with a group from the Kanto District to learn about the Sayama Incident. It wasn’t long after Ishikawa Kazuo had been paroled from prison, and so as we walked along the supposed route he had taken and considering the things he was supposed to have done based on his "confession," I found it beyond belief that anyone could be convicted on such obviously trumped up charges. I remember thinking how inept the police were who thought up the things to put into this obviously forced "confession," and I thought, "Boy, if I were going to make up a story like this to make Ishikawa appear guilty, I could do a whole lot better job than that!" It was so utterly implausible as to be laughable, and yet he spent 30 years in prison because of it. Even some 23 years later, he still hasn’t been granted the retrial that would actually look at the overwhelming evidence that would prove his innocence. The police had badly botched the investigation, as well as another high-profile murder just before that and so were under a great deal of pressure to "get their man." Thus, someone from the despised buraku would thus be an easy target to serve as the sacrificial lamb to take the pressure off.

Even before coming to work at the Buraku Liberation Center in 2007, I had taken an interest in this case, and since then I have attended numerous seminars and rallies where Ishikawa himself was present. I have been deeply impressed by this man, as he shows no bitterness towards those who stole his freedom for so many years, and indeed he sees how much good came out of that evil — and still can through the publicity it gives to the Buraku Liberation movement. I was deeply moved when I heard him express gratitude to those who have supported him, and particularly to one prison guard who took the time to teach him how to read and write.

The fact that Ishikawa was functionally illiterate is one powerful piece of evidence for his innocence, as the ransom note connected with the murder he was accused of had obviously been written by someone who was well educated. Ishikawa went so far as to say that while his incarceration was indeed a grave miscarriage of justice, the net result was that he gained an education that would have been denied him had this never happened. Of course, that would not have been the case if he had actually been executed, but when he reflected about what kind of life he would have lived without that time in prison, he said that he likely would have lived a life of poverty and ignorance right there in the buraku he’d been born into. Thus, he could be thankful for what he gained instead of bitter for what he had lost. That prison guard knew that Ishikawa could not possibly be guilty of that crime, and he invested a great deal of his own time in helping Ishikawa acquire the skills he would need to continue the struggle to finally get his day in court and clear his name. That struggle continues, but it was really heartwarming to hear of this good-hearted prison guard who encouraged Ishikawa and dedicated himself to helping him.

As I close out this brief reflection, I am reminded of a thought I had about how Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s memorable speech, "I have a dream," could serve as an inspiration for the Buraku Liberation movement. That speech took place just 3 months after Ishikawa Kazuo was arrested. In it, he said, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Translating that into the situation in Japan, we can say, "Yes, we too have a dream. We have a dream that one day Ishikawa Kazuo and all of his brothers and sister born into a buraku community in Japan will one day live in a land where they will not be judged by their family registry but by the content of their character." May that day come soon so that everyone in Japan and indeed around the world can join together and "sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, free at last, Great God almighty, we are free at last.'"
Youth Conference on Civil Rights and the Romani Social Movement
By Kawakami Tasuku, Theology Department of Doshisha University

Last year, I had the privilege of being sent as a representative from Japan to the "Youth Conference on Civil Rights and the Romani Social Movement" held in Germany. My trip lasted from April 6 – 20, 2016 and was supported by many, but most of all by the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity of the Southwest German Evangelical Church (EMS). I also was able to participate in the International Romani Day and visit such places as museums and memorials of discrimination, as well as the remains of Nazi concentration camps.

As I visited such places and heard the presentations concerning this history, the impressions I most strongly felt were the "passing down of history" and the "power of youth." There are numerous monuments and museums that record the history of discrimination and the Holocaust. These all came from a movement after the war to keep that memory alive in a post-war society that would prefer to simply forget their history of discrimination and acts of genocide. The Sinti and Roma Civil Rights Movement began in the 1970's and lead to the official recognition by Germany in 1982 of the massacre of Sinti and Roma people during the Nazi era. This, then, led to the building of many such museums and monuments detailing that history. The International Romani Day is an effort, I
think, to put into concrete action that desire to pass on the history to today’s young people. It began with various testimonies and the playing of Romani music, but we also sang protest songs and listened to such things as hip-hop music and viewed various art exhibitions around the town. Through all of this, I sensed how the youth were bringing their own culture, through such things as hip-hop, together with this history, while paying tribute to the memory of those who experienced this discrimination and fought against it.

I had the opportunity to meet with youth from around Europe at the youth conference held at the Heidelberg Sinti and Roma Center. These were young people who were actively involved in civil rights movements in their own countries. Together we studied the history of Sinti-Roma discrimination and the civil rights movement, and we discussed issues related to the various activities each of us were involved in, including anti-discrimination movements, youth empowerment, maintaining fluency in the Romani language and traditional culture, preserving the memory of the Holocaust, fighting against forced relocation, building up an international network, supporting children’s education, etc. As I observed these discussions, I could clearly see the "power of youth" and the "handing down of history." There is, of course, the issue of the numbers of youth involved being still rather small, but I felt that they were not simply following the same patterns previous generations had done but were breaking out of that mold into patterns
appropriate to the present age. I got a lot of new ideas that I could take back with me to Japan to try out there, including the use of modern plays and films and the production of fliers and stickers that speak to the fashion culture of youth.

On the 3rd day of the conference, we visited the European Parliament in Strasbourg France to witness the award presentation for the civil rights of European Sinti-Roma. I think this was a recognition of the "passing down of history," as the director of the Hungarian movie we had seen in the conference was awarded this prize. The movie portrayed the trial of neo-Nazis who had massacred Romani people and showed how discrimination still continues even in the courts and public sector. This movie was produced in 2013, but exists only in a few languages, including English. Thus, we talked among ourselves how we hope to get it translated into many more languages. Through all of this, I sensed a strong desire to not only communicate this history to the society at large, but also to find ways of overcoming these barriers to make real progress.

In Ravensburg, I met a woman named Magdalena Guttenberger, who has dedicated herself to passing down the history of her city and her own family to young people. In her church there, they have constructed a monument to the holocaust out of train rails that led to the concentration camps. This was constructed in response to the voices of those who wanted to keep alive the memory of all of those who had experienced severe persecution during the war years. Magdalena said, "My wish is for young people to know and remember what happened then so that such tragic mistakes will not be repeated." Her own sons are helping to fulfill that desire, as they are actively involved in the liberation movement.

I was impressed by how strong the various movements are to not let the memory of this long history of repeated discrimination and persecution simply fade away. By keeping the memory alive and passing down that history to following generations, I really sensed how the "passing down of history" and the "power of youth" work together to set up a cycle of empowerment. That baton is also being passed on to me, and so as one person who is working towards a world with no discrimination, I want to receive that baton and carry it forward.
The International Conference on Minority Issues and Mission
Kim Sung-Won  Korean Christian Center

Various Japanese Christian churches gathered together in Tokyo at the invitation of the Korean Christian Church in Japan last November for the 3rd International Conference on Minority Issues and Mission. The World Council of Churches gave its full cooperation in making this event happen.

The purpose of this conference was to put together a platform to combat the rapidly increasing problems in Japanese society involving hate speech against minorities, particularly groups with foreign ancestry. Likewise, the conference aimed at finding ways to both combat the rapid rise in anti-immigrant, anti-minority feelings in many advanced nations and turn this into an opportunity for Christian churches to make this a mission priority with the goal of the kind of multicultural inclusive society God envisions for us.

There were representatives from 8 countries in North America, Europe and Asia from a variety of denominations, and together with WCC staff and participants residing in Japan, there were a total of about 160 in attendance.

I would particularly like to report on the deeply meaningful experiences I had as we worshiped together during the opening and closing worship services, the evening vespers and the Bible study periods, as we came together in mutual understanding of the richness of Christians standing against chauvinism and embracing a multicultural inclusive society.

We listened to expert analysis of the political, societal and economic background behind the rise in chauvinistic thinking in Japan and other advanced countries, and we also had presentations from various minorities in Japan, including migrant workers, Ainu, Okinawans, Buraku and Koreans in Japan concerning their experiences and the issues they face. There were also reports from Germany, the U.S. and South Africa concerning the situations in their countries for minorities. A representative of the WCC also gave a special report on the episode in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the US where 9 members were shot to death by a racist.

There were 3 specific plans of action decided on at the conference. 1) Each church should not only proclaim a message of reconciliation and inclusiveness, but should also take concrete actions to overcome chauvinism within their own spheres of influence; 2) establish a network among the churches in Japan and around the world to share information and strengthen our solidarity; and 3) hold this International Conference on Minority Issues and Mission once every 5 years.

One other thing I should mention about this conference is the critical role that young people played in it. For 3 days prior to the conference, they visited locations where minorities in Japan live and then expressed their experiences at the conference in very dramatic ways. Thus, one thing we confirmed at this conference was the necessity of young people taking the reins.

Lastly, there are two other things I want to mention. The first is that in order to carry out the mandate of this conference, a "Minority Mission Center" is to be established in Tokyo, and already financial and other forms of support are being offered by Japanese and overseas churches. The other is that the central committee of the WCC that met following this conference decided to revive the Program to Combat Racism committee that formerly had existed to deal with racism and chauvinism.

There is also a publication in both Japanese and English of the proceedings of the conference entitled, "The International Conference on Minority Issues and Mission Official Booklet — Spread the Tent of Inclusivity."
A Report From Miyakojima, Okinawa
By Nakamura Shinsaku, lay person in the Miyakojima Church

The struggle continues not only in Henoko and Takae, but also here in Miyakojima. On the Japanese mainland, Miyakojima is often thought of as simply a peaceful resort island in the south, but it also the proposed site for an anti-ship anti-air missile base that would house 700 to 800 self-defense force personnel. The thinking behind this is that in the event of a conflict between Chinese and American troops, such a base would allow them to close off the Miyako Straights between Miyakojima and the main island of Okinawa so that the Americans would have time to retreat out of range of Chinese shelling. This, however, would result in the more than 50,000 civilians on Miyakojima being embroiled in the reprisals against the self-defense forces. It is thought that such a conflict could thus be limited to the Okinawan island chain from Yonokuni to Amami so as to avoid an all-out war. That is practically identical to the plan envisioned by the Japanese military in 1945.

Ever since Assistant Secretary of Defense Sato came to Miyakojima last May to announce this plan, voices of protest have been raised from a variety of positions from not only already existing organizations but from others as well. The actions of young mothers have particularly stood out, as they protested the specter of their own children being killed. They were united in their opposition to the killing of anyone.

One result of these opposition movements was that one of the possible sites, an area of dairy farms called Daifuku, was, in spite of attempts to push it through by the pro-base mayor, taken off the list. That area is the main water source for the island, and so if the aquifer there were to become contaminated, people could no longer live on Miyakojima. The movements to protect the water of life resulted in that success, but it can also be said that Miyakojima's vulnerable environment protected the island.

One other site in the running is the Chiyoda Golf Course. It turns out that the mayor has now admitted that he tried to sell the idea to the Department of Defense. It is right in the middle of the island next to the Nobara Radar Site and is also very close to my own house. The three neighborhood associations directly involved in these sites, Daifuku, Chiyoda and Nobara, have all weighed in against the project, and particularly strong is the opposition from the Nobara group. While the "allergy" to the self-defense forces was thought to be comparatively light in this area, the fact that for many years now they have had to put up with helicopter noise and worries about electromagnetic radiation from the radar, on top of various expansions having been made without any explanation, has led to a situation where realization of the damage military bases cause has erupted. At the meeting to explain plans for the deployment held on Oct. 2, we were told that the missile brigade was to be deployed but that such things as the placement of the munitions depot had not been decided. This was such an inadequate response that it led to immediate voices of protest from the crowd, along with calls for the entire plans to be scrapped.

The mayor, however, along with a majority of the city council, are in favor of the project. It's not that the citizens are not concerned about the situation, but for many of them, they see it as a place of employment for their children when they graduate from school, along with other perceived benefits such as having pictures of Prime Minister Abe posing in front of their school. I can well imagine how the upcoming election in January for mayor and the election of city council members next fall will determine the future of Miyakojima.

This Abe administration is one that was determined to build a new helipad in the Takae section in the northern part of Okinawa Island. Even though this community has a population of less than 200, they sent in a thousand riot police along with the self-defense forces to force things through. They force their will upon the people concerning both Takae and Henoko on Okinawa and remake Japan into a nation that can wage war. At this rate, all of Miyakojima will become another "Takae."
"Relating Together, Changing Together"
by Matsumura Koji, member of the Kita Toyonaka Baptist Church

The 19th annual Youth Seminar was held from August 10 to 12 at the Kobe Iesadan Church, with 36 participants, including those who could only attend part-time. This year's theme was "Changing and Being Changed: Relating Together and Changing Together."

On the first day, we listened to a lecture by Uramoto Yoshifumi concerning the "Mass Mailing of Discriminatory Post Cards Incident," and on the second day, we visited numerous locations in the area where we learned of the work of Kagawa Toyohiko [founder of Iesadan (Jesus Band) who worked among the slum dwellers of that day]. We also, however, learned of the discriminatory language he used in his writings of the people living in the buraku district then. Uramoto san said concerning this, "Ignorance breeds discrimination." I learned the importance of opening one's heart to the people you meet in such situations, for if you simply judge people based on your limited knowledge, you may very well end up discriminating against them.

The overall program was indeed enriching, as it included an introductory lecture, a study of the Sayama Incident and a Bible study. On the final day, we held what was called the "Liberation Cup," which consisted of dividing into small groups where we discussed what we had learned during the Youth Seminar and then made short presentations through illustrations and skits of that. We really had a fun time together, as we were able to share our ideas and learn from each other as we prepared our presentations. I think this was our first step in relating to each other.

Our Apologies For the Delay in Publication
Kobayashi Akira, BLC Director

In our previous issue (Issue 61, Feb. 15, 2016), we published a translation of an article by Mizuno Matsuo entitled in English, "Reflections on Presentation at Conference in Germany." The translation, however, included explanations and expressions that the author took exception with, and so this has been a topic of discussion between the author and the activities committee of the BLC over the past year. Members of the activities committee have met several times to discuss the implications of this issue. The CWT editorial committee also met immediately after being informed of the problem to discuss whether the translation included wording that some might consider discriminatory, how to deal with corrections and what to do in the future concerning publication of the Crowned With Thorns newsletter. Communicating the intricacies of buraku discrimination and other societal issues in English to people overseas is a very difficult task. We at the BLC have been rethinking the process of doing this, having simply delegated this important task to one translator. We are reconsidering how to best avoid the situation of having one translator come up with the appropriate expressions and use of words in fulfilling this important task. The editorial committee has, of course, endeavored to check over the translations prior to printing, but this was inadequate in this case, and for that we sincerely apologize. With respect to a republishing of the article by Mizuno Matsuo, the Activities Committee is still in ongoing discussion. That process will take more time, and as this issue is already late coming out, that will be saved for a later time. We have offered our sincere apologies to Mizuno san and all others involved, and we will endeavor to publish this newsletter in its best form for our readers around the world.
Buraku Liberation Center Activities

Over the past year, the BLC has been involved in the following primary activities and events:

Events Related to Appeals for the Retrial of the Sayama Incident
"The Citizen’s Rally For Granting Ishikawa Kazuo a Retrial" was again held in 2016 on May 24 and again on October 25 at the Hibiya Park Outdoor Music Pavilion with about 2500 people in attendance. In the morning, we held a “Christian Pre-Rally” with about 50 people.

On August 25, 2016, the BLC sponsored a rally and march in the Hibiya and Roppongi areas of Tokyo with 160 participants.

On October 28, BLC jointly sponsored “The Association of Religious Faiths Dealing With the Problem of ‘Dōwa’ (a euphemism for buraku discrimination). The theme of this year’s meeting was “Religious Leaders Seek the Happiness of Ishikawa Kazuo and His Wife,” and was held at the Shinpuku Temple of the Shingonshu Chisan Buddhist Sect with 100 in attendance.

Youth Seminar
The annual youth seminar was held August 10-12 at the Kobe Iesudan Church with 36 participants.

Human Rights Seminar for Seminarians
On March 28, 2017, we held our annual human rights seminar for seminarians with 13 participants from 8 seminaries at the Kyodan headquarters in Tokyo. Watanabe Sayuri of the Japan Baptist Seminary gave a presentation entitled “The Work of the Japan Baptist Seminary in Dealing with the Issue of Gender-Related Discrimination.”

Liberation Play
The Liberation Play entitled “People Can Change” was held at the Kyodan General Assembly on October 25 before an audience of about 150.

National Conference on Buraku Discrimination
We are holding our 13th such conference, with this year’s being in Chitose, Hokkaido. We expect about 100 attendees under the theme of “Present-day Discrimination in ‘Moshiri,’ the mythical divine land of the Ainu people.”

During this past fiscal year of 2016, we give thanks for the prayers and financial support of our friends both in Japan and around the world that allowed us to be involved in these various activities. This year is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, and so it is a special year in which we seek renewal like that of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 as we pray for peace, freedom and equality throughout the world. Please pray for the upcoming National Conference on Buraku Discrimination to be held in Hokkaido, as well as our upcoming Youth Seminar on August 22-24. Likewise, pray for our interns coming to work at the BLC, first a seminary student from the Gyokuzan Seminary in Taiwan during July and then during August, a seminary student from the Rural Evangelism Seminary. We also will be doing the Liberation Play in several locations.

Crowned With Thorns Editorial Committee
BLC Director Kobayashi Akira, BLC management committee chairperson Higashitani Makoto, Tim Boyle, Sato Shigeyoshi, Oguri Ken, Iwahashi Tsunehisa and Yamashita Soki.

We appreciate your comments and suggestions concerning this newsletter and how to make improvements. Donations in either Japanese yen or US dollars are greatly appreciated and can be made by personal check.