We Shall Overcome

Before Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus, he was a hard-core Pharisee, and so he would have likely prayed a prayer that the Pharisees are said to have prayed that went like this: "Oh Lord, I thank you that you did not make me a Gentile, a slave or a woman." We cringe at the thought of such a prejudicial concept of individual human value, but that was the common perception of the Pharisees of that day. I believe that Paul specifically had this misguided prayer in mind when he wrote the words of Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." These three categories represent the three main types of discrimination that still curse the world today — racial/ethnic, class and gender discrimination. Each of these categories involves the circumstances of one's birth — in other words, who you are as a human being created in the "image of God." Our activities at the Buraku Liberation Center focus on working to end Buraku discrimination, which clearly fits into the second general category, that of "class discrimination." But we work in solidarity with all ministries and movements that seek to end all types of discrimination, whichever of those broad categories they fit into. Unlike the Pharisees' prayer, we should be able to give thanks to God for whomever he created us to be.
Dōshūren: Many Faiths Working Towards A Common Goal

By Rev. Ichiro Ono
(Former pastor of Heian Church, vice-moderator of the Kyōdan and Moderator of Dōshūren from 1985-87)

[Editor's note: “Dōshūren” is the abbreviation for the name of the interfaith organization working to abolish buraku discrimination from Japanese Society. The full name is “Dōwa’ Mondai ni Torikumu Shūkyō Kyōdan Rentai Kaigi,” which translates as: “The Association of Religious Faiths Dealing With the Problem of “Dōwa” (a term referring to integrating the buraku people in the general society).” As with many such long names, this is abbreviated by taking the first character of three of the main words and combining them together, somewhat like an acronym in English.]

One social commentator perceptively said, “Japan is a department store of religions.” As this phrase implies, Japan is a land in which a variety of religions form their own organizations, build their own buildings, and proudly proclaim the number of their adherents. If the numbers of adherents claimed by each religious organization are all added up, the total number far surpasses the total population of Japan.

This wide variety of religions in Japan, however, can, for the most part, be categorized into three main groupings — namely Shintō related, Buddhist related and Christian related. Shintō is, of course, the original animistic religion of Japan, while Buddhism was first introduced in 552 A.D. and Christianity formally arrived on Japanese shores in 1549 with the arrival of Francis Xavier. Christianity grew very rapidly for a few years, but with the ascension of the Tokugawa Shogunate to power at the beginning of the 17th Century, the country was closed off to the outside world and Christianity was severely persecuted and banned. It wasn’t until the forced reopening of the country with the signing of a treaty between Japan and the US in 1854 that the door was once again cracked open to Christian evangelism. With the formal lifting of the ban in 1873, the door to Christian evangelism was finally opened up again.

The historical setting of religion in Japan is one of constant political interference, with the political powers-to-be giving protection to certain religions while oppressing others. The emperor system has from ancient times strongly influenced religious organizations to take on a similar hierarchical structure, with the founder and his or her successors being at the top of a pyramid organizational structure. As this was simply assumed to be the way things should be, a vertical societal structure and a strong class consciousness naturally followed. The net result was that this consciousness led to an acceptance of an Indian-style caste system, with its rampant discrimination and lack of consciousness concerning human rights. Religious doctrines and concepts that justified this situation were thus uncritically accepted and even today make it difficult to throw off these traditions.

Japanese society thus has a history of various forms of discrimination being sanctioned by and encouraged by the authority of religion. Among these are discrimination based on one’s family background and occupation, marriage discrimination, discrimination against women, people with handicapping conditions and even persons with lower academic or other abilities, etc., all of which are social phenomena considered to be "normative." Among these various forms of discrimination, the group that has suffered the most for hundreds of years is the buraku people. In response to the cry of these people and their efforts to address the abuse of human rights they suffered, however, the vast majority of religious persons and organizations were oblivious and indifferent to their plight.

From Aug. 29 to Sept. 7, 1979, the Third World Conference on Religion and Peace was held in Princeton, New Jersey. In response to a statement by a participant that buraku discrimination in Japan had been
maintained and fostered by Japanese religions and that it was similar to the problem of untouchables in India, Sōyū Machida, the chairperson of the Japan Buddhist Federation and head priest in the Sōtōshū sect, repeatedly stated such things as “There is no buraku problem in Japan today,” and “While it is true that there is a small minority of people making a lot of noise about buraku liberation, the reality is that there is no such discrimination in Japan.” The other delegates from Japan to the conference did not attempt to rebut these remarks in any way, and there was a good deal of applause indicating their support. This incident speaks volumes as to the ignorance, unconcern and persistent prejudicial attitudes that prevailed in the religious world of Japan at that time.

In response to this incident, the Buraku Liberation League, which had been for many years sounding the alarm against the prejudicial attitudes of Japanese religious organizations and specific incidents related to that, stepped up its efforts to call them to account and to educate them as to the actual situation. Even prior to this, the BLL had conducted such conscientization meetings with the Jōdōshinshū Honganji sect, the Shinshū Ōtani sect, Tenrikyō and the United Church of Christ in Japan concerning the buraku discrimination issues still smoldering within each of their organizations. With respect to the UCCJ, representatives of the BLL met with Kyōdan (UCCJ) representatives on May 15, 1975 and presented us with the evidence of numerous statements and actions by people within the Kyōdan that showed their prejudicial attitudes. I was vice moderator of the Kyōdan at the time, and as we were confronted with the evidence, I was blown away. What shocked me the most was the things they pointed out in the writings of Toyohiko Kagawa, the famous Christian reformer who had dedicated his life to uplifting the downtrodden in Japanese society and whom I had such a deep respect for. It was a rude awakening for me to see the numerous discriminatory statements he had made in reference to the buraku people.

We in the Kyōdan came to view their presentation to us as a warning from the Lord Jesus himself, and we realized that the Kyōdan needed to sincerely deal with this issue and work towards the abolition of buraku discrimination. I would imagine that the leaders of the other religious organizations mentioned above also had similar experiences when the issue of buraku discrimination within their own faiths was pointed out to them.

On Nov. 28, 1980, a consultation of religious leaders was held in Tōkyō concerning this issue, and then on the following Dec. 9, the Risshō Köseikai, another Buddhist sect, joined together with the 4 original organizations to issue a joint invitation to all religious leaders in Japan to join together in the effort. Formal invitations were sent to all religious bodies that claimed at least 50,000 members, a total of 316 organizations (65 Shintō related, 169 Buddhist related, 61 Christian related and 21 others). March 17, 1981 was chosen for the date, and 981 religious leaders gathered together in Tōkyō. As a result, Dōshūren was formally organized at their first general assembly on June 23, 1981, with a membership of 55 religious bodies and 3 associations (the National Council of Churches in Japan, the Japan Buddhist Federation and the Federation of New Religions). Since then, 9 other religious bodies have joined, so that there are now 64 religious bodies and 3 associations in membership.

As stated in the 2nd article of its bylaws, the purpose of Dōshūren is to “return to the founding principles of each members’ teachings so as to overcome buraku discrimination.” Included in the preamble, there are the following stern words of self-reflection: “If we do not struggle with this issue of buraku discrimination, we do not deserve the title of religious leaders of Japan.” The meaning behind this statement is that a “new reformation” is necessary in which each body pledges itself to internal reformation away from the old stance that simply preached equality and love with their lips while all along desiring to maintain that status quo of discriminatory structures and attitudes based in the ancient concepts of the emperor system and its concomitant societal caste structure.

As is the case in any age, there are high and difficult barriers that stand in the way of reformation. It has been 28 years now since
Döshüren began its activities, and yet we cannot in good conscience claim that the work has proceeded smoothly and at a good pace. The number of participating entities has changed little from the beginning, and it is generally not the case that each member has "returned to the founding principles of its teachings" to analyze and reform their ways based on that. Even though it began with a great goal in mind, if Döshüren becomes too focused on simply maintaining its organizational structure, there is always the danger that it will become an organization fighting against buraku discrimination in name only, with the discriminatory attitudes and structures within each body being little changed.

Nevertheless, while progress has been slow, the activities of the Döshüren have raised up a new generation of leaders and the solidarity and cooperation between the various religious bodies has deepened, so that we are making progress as never before.

The UCCJ served as the moderator of the organization during its 3rd biennial term for a 2-year period beginning in 1985. During that period, one important activity we were involved in was the "People's Movement to Demand the Establishment of a Basic Law for Buraku Liberation." We worked hard in cooperation with various governmental, business and religious groups to lobby for such legislation, and so we were involved in a wide variety of activities related to this effort. While our efforts to get such legislation passed were not met with success, the efforts themselves provided an opportunity for growth in our own understanding of the realities of human rights abuses and discrimination within Japanese society. Likewise, the experience helped us understand more deeply the importance of the UCCJ working together with other religious organizations in addressing these discrimination and human rights issues.

This year of 2009 is the beginning of the 15th biennial term, and the UCCJ again finds itself as the moderating entity within the organization, and so for the next 2 years, we will have the responsibility of overseeing the office work and being the Döshüren moderator. The former vice-moderator of the Kyödan, the Rev. Makoto Kobayashi is serving as moderator, and Fumio Tanba, an office worker at the Kyödan headquarters, is the main staff person in the small office that has been set up in the Kyödan headquarters in Tökyö. Two other staff persons, Ms. Kimi Umetani and Mr. Masayoshi Nagao, round out the team working in the office.

The Rev. Makoto Kobayashi served as vice-moderator of the Kyödan during the previous 2-year term, and is now serving as the moderator of the Döshüren. Fumio Tanba, on the right, has been active in buraku liberation activities for many years as a staff person in the Kyödan headquarters, and now serves as chief staff officer of the Döshüren.

The Kyödan formally established the "Task Force on the Buraku Discrimination Issue" on July 15, 1975, and this later developed into the Buraku Liberation Center in July of 1981. For the last 34 years, the Kyödan has been engaged in the struggles for human rights and the elimination of buraku discrimination, working in solidarity with other organizations for a common cause. We certainly need to continue these efforts, and I have great expectations for our leadership during these next 2 years to see significant progress towards meeting the stated goals of the Döshüren of a "new reformation."

The Lord Jesus said, "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mat. 20:26-28) My prayer is that we will keep this foremost in our minds in following our Lord as he leads the way towards protecting human rights and eliminating buraku discrimination.
I would like to share some personal reflections concerning my being selected as moderator of the Dōshūren at its general assembly in April of this year.

The Beginnings of Dōshūren
As an organization, Dōshūren springs forth from an incident that happened when the representative of a Buddhist organization to the World Conference on Religion and Peace 30 years ago made inaccurate statements such as “there is no buraku discrimination in Japan.” In response to these misstatements, representatives of people who had long been involved the buraku liberation movement carried out intense conscientization efforts to bring about reform.

Without going into the details, over the next two years, there were several gatherings of various religious bodies to discuss the issue and to work towards a cooperative effort to eliminate buraku discrimination. The results of these efforts was an appeal sent out to the various religious organizations to work together, and in this appeal were the following words, “unless we return to the founding principles of each of our teachings for the purpose of eliminating buraku discrimination, we do not deserve the title of religious leaders of Japan.” Thus began the Dōshūren, with 55 religious bodies and 3 associations of religious bodies, in June 1981.

Of course, several bodies had already been involved in activities designed to promote the elimination of buraku discrimination, but with the founding of this organization, the issue became a common goal to pursue jointly. Thus, Dōshūren is the result of a process of first being challenged by having discriminatory attitudes pointed out and then reflecting on that and repenting of those wrong attitudes.

The Present Issues Facing Dōshūren
It has now been almost 30 years since Dōshūren began its resolve to promote “buraku liberation,” and during that time, it has sponsored numerous training seminars. Likewise, each religious body had produced their own educational materials to promote enlightenment concerning this issue within their own circles.

I wonder what the total number of attendees has been over the years for all of the numerous seminars and other events that Dōshūren has sponsored. While the results of those efforts may not be able to be quantified in terms on mere numbers, I feel that the effects they have had in terms of the change in thinking on the part of numerous individuals has been great indeed.

While I am not that familiar with all that went on in the early years, I do feel, however, that due to the great differences in teachings and purpose of each of the member organizations, Dōshūren is not an organization in which the body serving as moderator can really provide the kind of strong leadership necessary to move the organization along. At least, that is the way I see the present situation.

From the standpoint of running the organization, the body serving as moderator has been expected to do all of the planning, publications and everything else. Thus, when accepting the job, the moderating body had to be prepared to dedicate a considerable number of staff in order to do an adequate job. This resulted in several organizations indicating that they simply could not handle the job and so were unprepared to accept the moderator role.
Thus, in order to lighten the load, the idea of dividing up the duties was floated, and so now the planning division and publications division are handled by different member bodies. I think this was a very good move, and so now, as we’ve endeavored to streamline our operations, I believe that the Dōshūren office load can be handled with our present staff of three people.

Another point that is not directly related to the work of the Dōshūren, yet that is very significant, is the relationships that have been developed between personnel of the various member bodies — something that one doesn’t often see in other contexts.

Nevertheless, issues still remain.

For instance, the present number of 64 religious bodies in the membership is not much different from what we began with, and so the issue of how to encourage other bodies to join in the effort remains.

Also, there is the ongoing issue of the terminology, “dōwa.” [See editor’s note in previous article. “Dōwa” has similar connotations with the English word “integration,” but also has some negative nuances as well, and so some want to avoid that.] The dynamics involved within each member organization are, of course, different, and so some have opted to replace “dōwa” with “jinken” (human rights).

Thus, even though there is the positive effect of broadening the activities to the elimination of all forms of discrimination, there is also the aspect that when “buraku” and “dōwa” are put up front, some people shy away, and thus, there is also a negative reason for shifting to the term “jinken.”

Nevertheless, when we consider that the primary reason for our existence in the first place is to focus on “buraku liberation,” I think we should consistently reaffirm that purpose.

Communicating the Reality of Buraku Discrimination to American Churches

By Tim Boyle

As missionaries supported by both the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church USA, my wife and I are required to periodically return to the USA for a “home assignment” period. We spend 3 to 4 months after each term of 3 or 4 years in
Japan visiting as many churches as we can, giving priority to “supporting churches,” those that have been contributing funds to either of the boards in our behalf to fund our salaries and other expenses. We began in Hawaii on January 30 and flew out of Portland, Oregon for our return trip on May 25, with 22 other states and Washington DC in between. We made presentations at 23 churches, and in most of them, I gave the sermon in addition to presenting our power point presentation. Several of the churches had more than one worship service, and I preached the same sermon three times at one large church that even had about 400 people at a Saturday evening informal service.

After our brief stopover in Hawaii, we spent the next two months in Pasadena, California, using a church-owned apartment as our base for visiting churches in California, Nevada and Arizona. Then we flew to Michigan, where we picked up a car we leased from a friend, and drove down to our temporary home in Decatur, Georgia, our base for April and May. From there, we visited churches in West Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and Mississippi, in addition to Iowa on the way back to drop the car off in Michigan. We were also able to visit our daughter Lisa in Minnesota and various friends along the way. Our last few days were in Portland, Oregon, and from there we flew back to Japan.

The sermon I preached in various forms was on human rights and what they are grounded in. I began by briefly describing buraku discrimination in the Japanese context and then broadened the subject out to human rights in general, focusing on the fact that the only adequate grounding for human rights is our intrinsic value as beings created in the image of God. Any other basis one could imagine would involve value that is acquired, such as through our accomplishments, both actual and potential. But God values us for who we are as his creations made in his own image, and it is for this reason that all forms of discrimination based on who a person is (rather than on anything they have done) is an affront to God, since it denigrates his image. When possible, which was most of the time, we also showed a power point presentation that focused on the reality of buraku discrimination in Japan and the activities of the Buraku Liberation Center in combating it.

I received a great deal of positive feedback from those in attendance, and the one sentiment that was shared more often than anything else was the surprise expressed that this sort of discrimination was going on in Japan. Americans know all too well about racial and ethnic discrimination, but the idea that people would harbor such strong prejudices against people within their own ethnic group based on the occupations of their ancestors is viewed as irrational to the extreme. While class discrimination is certainly present in some forms even within egalitarian American society, the idea that someone could be “defiled” because they inherited that from their ancestors is difficult for most Americans to fathom.

One of the highlights of our trip was our visit to the “Highlander Research and Education Center” in Tennessee (www.highlandercenter.org). This institution was begun in 1932 by Myles Horton, a man ahead of his times. Its initial focus was the labor movement, but that soon expanded to racial justice issues, and it was instrumental in the early days of the civil rights movement, helping equip such leaders as Martin Luther King to make such a great impact on American society for good. It continues today to work for a just and harmonious society in numerous other avenues, such as the environment and immigration.

We spent the night in “Horton House” and toured the facilities, spending time in the library and book store to collect materials that might be helpful in the future work of the BLC, primarily on organizing and education efforts to combat buraku (and other) discrimination.
Update On BLC Activities

In the previous issue of Crowned With Thorns (Jan. 31, 2009), we included an overview of the many activities the BLC is involved in. In order to keep our many supporters informed of our current activities and those coming up in the immediate future, we want to uplift some specifics mentioned in that general overview. Going in order of the previous list, the BLC has prepared and mailed out to all Kyodan churches the pamphlet, including worship aids, for the annual “Day of Prayer for Buraku Liberation,” which was on July 12.

The “Liberation Play” described in the previous newsletter has been performed six more times so far this year, once to the Dōshūren seminar at the Tenrikyō (one of Japan’s “New Religions”) headquarters on Jan. 20 with 60 in attendance, at the “Peace Festival” at the Midorigaoka church in Kanagawa on March 20, with 100 in attendance, at the summer seminar on buraku liberation in the Kyōto District on Aug. 16, a the Hyōgo Christian Center in Köbe on Aug. 23 under the joint auspices of the Osaka and Hyōgo districts, and at the Kyūshū chapter of the “Association of Christian Organizations Dealing With the Buraku Issue,” where there were 2 presentations, on October 5 and 6, with a total of 120 attendees.

Our annual youth seminar was from August 25 - 28. Likewise, we hosted a summer intern from the end of July through August.

Our publications have proceeded more or less on schedule, with 3 issues of “Kaihō e no Habataki” (“The Fluttering of Wings Towards Liberation”) being sent out in the last year, the first focusing on buraku discrimination on the internet, and the other two featuring the Dōshūren, which is also the feature article in this issue of CWT. Issues 55, 56 and 57 of the “Buraku Kaihō Zenkoku Tsūshin” (“Buraku Liberation National Communications”) were also mailed out.

And, of course, our English newsletter is continuing, with this issue being the 5th since it was resurrected some 18 months ago.

Many of our staff and volunteers participated again this year in the May 23rd rally in Tōkyō on the “Sayama Incident.” Normally, the next rally would have been on Oct. 31, but with the change in government and with many former opposition legislators who have supported our movement now in power, it was decided to hold a special rally on Sept. 15. Even with this new hope, however, it may take some time, but we hope to be able to bring good news in the bear future. This is such an important issue, that we must not give up. We must maintain the fight for justice.

As mentioned in the last issue, the “caravan” we had scheduled in June went off very well. Four members of our BLC community departed on June 13 in a van for a 10-day tour of Shikoku, where they held midweek meetings in churches and community centers, with a total of 356 in attendance. They also had the opportunity to make a presentation to some 900 high school kids at the Matsuyama Seinan High School. The 4 members of the team split up on Sunday morning to give the messages in 4 separate churches as well. A number of us met up with them on the evening of June 19 for a big rally at the Mishima Shinkō Church in Ehime Prefecture, and then the next day, we had a “field trip”.

The last item mentioned in the list in the previous issue was that of cooperation with other anti-discrimination and human rights organizations. In relation to that, we want to uplift our international relationships. Our two main relationships in that regard are with the Sinti-Roma ministry of the EMS (Association of churches and missions in South Western Germany) and the Dalit Liberation ministry of the churches in India. We have invited them to share briefly in the following pages their perspectives.
The "Working Group Between the Sinti/Roma and the Churches in Baden-Wuerttemberg" has just celebrated its 10th anniversary, and we are thankful to the Buraku Liberation of the Church of Christ in Japan, for having given us the motivation to establish this group in 1999!

Within the network of partner churches in the EMS (Association of churches and missions in South Western Germany), contacts between minority groups like Dalit in India and Buraku in Japan have a long history. In a Church consultation between Japanese and German churches in 1993, a question was raised by Japan concerning cooperation of German churches with the minority of Sinti and Roma in this country. The Buraku Liberation Center invited church authorities and representatives of the Sinti and Roma to introduce their longstanding liberation work. The first journey took place in 1996, and was followed by a second in 1998, with synod members of the Wueremberg Church among the participants.

They decided to establish an ecumenical working group, which included members from both of Catholic and Protestant churches and representatives of Sinti and Roma organisations. The "Association of German Sinti and Roma in Baden-Wuerttemberg" was one of our founding member organisations.

The main focus of the working group is to become more aware of discrimination and how to overcome it. Activities are mainly concentrated in public events, seminars, activities in schools and for school teachers, and in congregations and confirmation classes. Publications are also part of our anti-discrimination efforts. We also foster international networkings of Sinti and Roma groups with organisations of Dalit in India and Buraku in Japan.

On July 1st, we had a 10th anniversary celebration for these activities, and we are thankful that two delegates of the Buraku Liberation Center in Japan, Mr. Kataoka and Rev. Mizutani, were able to participate with us and so remember the very beginning of our working group and the importance of international solidarity in anti-discrimination activities.
Solidarity Between the Buraku Liberation and Dalit Liberation Movements

The BLC invited the Rev. Dr. B. Suneel Bhanu, a professor in the Department of Dalit Theology and Head of the Department in Religion at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in Chennai India, to share with CWT readers a few thoughts concerning the relationship between liberation movements in Japan and India. We received word that he had just been elected a bishop in the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, the largest Lutheran denomination in India, and has been making the rounds visiting churches under his care. As he wasn’t to be available until after our deadline, we decided to simply introduce his important work, while expressing our congratulations to him for his new calling.

Suneel, as we affectionately know him here in Japan, has a long connection with the BLC, having earned his doctorate degree at the International Christian University in Japan, with a doctoral thesis dealing with a comparison of the histories and realities of Dalit and Buraku discrimination in India and Japan. This valuable thesis has been scanned one page at a time, and while it is somewhat cumbersome to email as attachments, we would be happy to email all 212 pages to anyone interested in reading it.

In his thesis, Bishop Bhanu describes the significant overlap between the Dalit and Buraku peoples’ experience of oppression and discrimination and how similar the origins of and realities of this discrimination are. He documents how the dominant religions in each historical context not only formed the philosophical basis of and sanction for such discrimination but how religion also holds the key for liberation of both the Dalit and Buraku peoples from this deplorable situation. While the power and promise of the Christian gospel is foremost in this regard, the thesis also deals with significant reform movements within Buddhism both in India and Japan that promote equality and an end to caste discrimination.

This, of course, is right in line with Dōshūren, the interfaith organization introduced earlier in this issue of CWT, which seeks to encourage reforms within each religious tradition to both face up to the complicity of their own groups in the institution of and continuation of such discrimination and to take concrete actions to alleviate it.

The BLC is committed to cooperating in every way possible to work in solidarity with ministries in India working to end the oppression endured for so long by those who have been victimized by the caste system and its religious and political sanctions. May God grant us the wisdom and courage to overcome all obstacles to eliminating the curse of both Dalit discrimination in India and Buraku discrimination in Japan, along with all other forms of discrimination based on who one is as a human being.