We Shall Overcome

As we approach the 50th anniversary of the arrest and prosecution of Ishikawa Kazuo in the city of Sayama, based solely on the perceived expedience of him being an “expendable” buraku youth who conveniently had no proof he was somewhere else when the murder occurred, we still have not seen justice in the Japanese courts. And yet we still have hope, because the evidence points so clearly and conclusively to his innocence and that his conviction was completely based on trumped up charges by a police force bent on finding a convenient scapegoat among the despised buraku community. Hope is a central theme of the biblical narrative, and it is the power of God working in the lives of his people that is the basis for that hope. We see this most clearly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. An interesting illustration of how this perspective changes everything is the following short sentence, written with no space between the words: HOPEISNOWHERE. Most people instinctively see that as being, “Hope is nowhere.” If God doesn’t exist and we are truly left to our own means to “make up the rules as we go along,” then there is no ultimate hope or meaning. But we can have confidence that truth and justice will ultimately prevail, and this gives us hope. With God in the picture, there is one more space in that sentence, and it reads, “Hope is now here!” With this hope empowering us, we can work for a just society where discrimination no longer rears its ugly head. Because God is with us, we shall overcome!

Timothy D. Boyle
The 2012 National Buraku Liberation Conference was held at the Higashi Umeda Church in Osaka from June 11 to 13, with a total of 189 participants from as far away as Hokkaido and Okinawa. The conference began with an opening worship service followed by a keynote address celebrating the 30th anniversary of the founding of the BLC and a fellowship time. The second day centered on field trips, for which we divided into 7 groups. The following is a report written by the pastor of a small church in Esashi, Hokkaido, Rev. Hiroyuki Fujisaki, on the field trip his group went on, which was to the “Liberty Osaka” Human Rights Museum.

“Mayoi Michi” (a path you get lost on; going down the wrong path)

It was the location of what had been the largest leather-tanning village in western Japan and a place that had suffered severe discrimination for a long time. The name of that village, however, had disappeared from maps, and so it was not discernible from a present-day map. Nevertheless, we were able to go there on our field trip.

Our first stop was at a human rights center entitled “Liberty Osaka.” Quite contrary to my expectations, it was located in a quiet neighborhood. Liberty Osaka was the first human rights education facility established in Japan. However, the present Osaka mayor, Toru Hashimoto, has indicated that the city will be cutting off its financial support as of the end of March this year, because, in effect, “it doesn’t jive with his interests.” The end of city subsidies could very well mean the closing of this facility.

The Liberty Osaka facility is located in a remodeled elementary school that was the second such elementary school build in the city of Osaka. The original school was built with the funds raised by the people of the discriminated-against buraku, with the goal in mind that “buraku liberation begins with the education of our children.” So, it was into this historic place that we now entered and where we were met by an elderly gentleman who served there as a volunteer guide. He began by sadly complaining, “The people who leave this community are never able to speak of
their hometown again." Someone who is from a discriminated-against buraku isn't able to openly acknowledge their background, and so I cannot find any other words to describe this other than "How sad!"

Across the street from Liberty Osaka, several high-rise apartment buildings have been built, and so unless you were told that during the Edo Era (1603-1868) this area had been a discriminated-against buraku called "Watanabe Mura," you would have no idea that was the case. On a Tuesday in the early afternoon, it was really a quite place. The curator of the museum used a map from the Edo Era to describe what Watanabe Mura was like. It was just like the description I had read in the pre-conference materials. On the screen, he projected pictures taken during the 1960's which reminded me of the town in Kochi prefecture where I had lived some 40 years earlier. So, as we stepped back into that world for a short time, we could get a good picture of what life was like. The reality of a leather-tanning town and the horrid conditions people were forced to live in came through loud and clear.

Our guide told us, "The road you walked along coming here is where the only road leading out of Watanabe Mura to the main town that then existed was located, and even today, the name of this road is Watanabe Road." He then showed us again the Edo Era map, and it was clear that indeed there was only one road. This largest leather-tanning village in western Japan was on the coast so that the pelts transported from all over Japan could be unloaded and processed. But this one narrow road that led out of the town to the rest of Osaka was only about 180 cm (6 feet) wide. As we looked down at the markers indicating the original road, I felt as though I was entering a "mayoi michi" (a path you get lost on; going down the wrong path). Looking at the markers indicating where the old road and other features of the village were, along with the present-day high-rise apartment buildings, none of it made one directly sense the discrimination and prejudice.

"Do you know," someone said, "why this area is so quiet? You'll notice that there aren't any markets or restaurants in the area at all."
So, even today, no one wants to open up a shop in the area. Later on, I heard that our lunch had been prepared by the staff at Liberty Osaka. So this road is even today a "mayoi michi," as discriminatory attitudes still rule in the hearts of people. In this quietness there still exists the deep darkness of discrimination. We had heard in the keynote address the night before, "Unless the system is changed, discrimination will not go away. We need a strategy to change the system in order to rid ourselves of discriminatory attitudes." I had sensed that that was a deeply meaningful speech, but as I contemplated on that "mayoi michi," I felt a sense of "mayoi" (at a loss) as to what the path to liberation from discrimination really is. It is, of course, the path of justice, and it is we ourselves that must be that path.
Report on the Court Decision on the Kamagasaki Suppression Incident
by Rev. Shigeyoshi Sato

This past Dec. 12, the Osaka High Court announced its decision to Pastor Takao Otani and 3 others their arrest on the April 5, 2011, over the “Kamagasaki Suppression Incident.” We have reported on this incident in previous newsletters, and so we’ll only do a brief review of what happened here.

During the July 2010 elections for the House of Councilors, Rev. Otani led a protest demonstration in support of the Kamagasaki day laborers outside the Haginochaya polling place in the Nishinari ward of Osaka. This was in response to the unjust action by the city of Osaka in 2007 to revoke the citizen’s registrations for day laborers in Kamagasaki, which also entailed them loosing their voting privileges. The purpose of the demonstration was to call attention to the situation and to call for the restoration of their right to vote. However, some 9 months later, on April 5, 2011, Rev. Otani and 5 others were arrested on the charge that that demonstration amounted to “forcible obstruction of business.” Of these 6 persons, 4 were formally charged with this offense and were tried in the Osaka District Court and found guilty on January 30, 2012. As a result, the 4 defendants appealed to the Osaka High Court requesting a thorough examination of the incident. The decision of that court to deny the appeal was announced on Dec. 12. The chief justice stated in his explanation that he accepted the contents of the lower court decision as being valid. In other words, the demonstration was viewed as an obstruction to the peaceful polling that caused disorder, and thus it qualified as “forcible obstruction of business.” After the judgment was announced, one of the defendants, Mr. S, cried out with tears in his eyes, “Chief Justice! Obey the Japanese Constitution and your conscience!” as he approached the bench. The judge, however, immediately adjourned the court and quickly left the room, as though he were trying to escape.

If you conform to the Japanese Constitution, what Rev. Otani and the others were appealing to during their demonstration was only natural. In other words, since the right to vote is a basic human right guaranteed in the constitution, it was incumbent on the city of Osaka to take immediate steps to remedy the situation. The city, however, has not taken any steps to accomplish this even to this day. Thus, it is the city of Osaka that is in violation of the constitution and not Rev. Otani and his fellow defendants. Both the lower court and the high court judges, however, avoided even referring to this violation of the constitution by the city, and they refused to take into consideration the rationale for the demonstration, only focusing on the perceived disturbance of the peace at the polling station, thus judging it as “forcible obstruction of business.”

So, what is it that gives rise to an injustice such as this? In my humble opinion, it arises from a deep-seated prejudice held against people who have been forced into the day-labor market. In today’s Osaka, prosecutors and judges do not view these people as the valuable human beings that they are. Day laborers are viewed as being unworthy of societal benefits, just being tools or machines that one can dispose of when no longer useful. It is because of this underlying prejudice and discrimination that the unjust decision was made to suppress a proper demonstration in support of their rights and to overlook the violation of the constitution by the city of Osaka.

The defendants led by Rev. Otani, along with their supporters, are not giving up the fight. The next goal is to take the fight all the way to the Supreme Court. So, as we continue our efforts, we ask for your prayers and your support in our behalf.
We Can Create Liberation: Imagination and Creation, God Saves

by Daichi Okawa, Doshisha University Seminary Student, Chairperson of the Buraku Liberation Youth Seminar

This was the theme of the Buraku Liberation Youth Seminar, our 15th since it began. A total of 35 participants joined at least part of the time in the 4-day conference, held from Aug. 21 to 24 at the Kinrin Church in Kyoto.

The UCCJ Buraku Liberation Center has been sponsoring this seminar every year since 1998, with the purpose of promoting interest among the youth in the issue of buraku discrimination and developing new leadership in the buraku liberation movement, and over the years, many young people with a connection to buraku liberation have participated. The program has consisted of various ways of sharing together times of prayer, singing, Bible study, meals and discussion. It is a retreat in which someone new to the movement, who begins with the question of what a buraku is, can feel comfortable in coming, and it is this aspect that makes this event so attractive.

Typically held in Osaka, this year’s event returned to Kyoto, and various new things were added to the program in an effort to give something new, so that the program wouldn’t just “end like it always does.” Participants were divided into groups where they did roleplaying in a skit format and we took a field trip, engaged in Bible study and had study sessions on the Sayama Incident, etc. What we tried to remain conscious of during all portions of the program was to “imagine the pain” and then through that to imagine moving on to liberation from that pain, which is the creation of liberation. [Ed. note: The words for “creation” and “imagination” have the same pronunciation in Japanese (sozo) but with different “kanji” characters, and is thus a meaningful play on words.]

創造 (sozo) = creation
想像 (sozo) = imagination

Our field trip was to the section of Kyoto where many ethnic Koreans live and then on to the nearby buraku areas. We learned about the history of those areas and listened to the people’s hopes for renewal in their communities. For roleplaying, we had scripts of plays we read together and then made up our own modifications, acting out the parts, feeling the pain of discrimination and imagining being liberated from that.

So, how did we fare in both “imagining” and “creating” liberation during the 4 days of the program? I would say that as we “imagined the pain,” deepened our understanding through numerous encounters, and thought about the concrete situations we studied, it became apparent that the road to both “imagining” and “creating” liberation is a long road indeed. Nevertheless, even as each participant goes back to his or her own setting knowing that indeed such liberation is a long road, I think we were all able to imagine such liberation as we had fellowship one with another. At times, the discussion was very serious, while at other times, we laughed so hard that we cried, and through all of that, we created something new. While it may just be a small hope, it was nevertheless a hope towards liberation.
Seeking A Peace Not Based on Might
by Mariko (Muratsubaki) Matsuda, Okinawa

On this day also, I feel the rumble of the noise of Osprey planes flying over my house. I can't help but think to myself, "Someday, one of those is going to fall out of the sky. Will it fall on my house? Who will it fall on?" It's like being a prisoner on death row wondering when your time will come. That's what we've had to resign ourselves to, living here in Okinawa.

These planes were said to be defective from the beginning, and already several people have been killed in crashes of Osprey. And yet, due to the aging helicopter fleet stationed at the Futenma Base of the US Marine Corp, these planes were flown in this past October 1st to be stationed at the base, in spite of the protests of the local people. Those of us who are pushing for the dismantlement of the Futenma Base and a return of the land held a conference on June 17, sponsored jointly with the city of Ginowan, to register our protests against deployment of the Osprey planes. We also had scheduled a "citizen's rally" for August 5, but had to postpone it due to a typhoon. It was rescheduled for Sunday, September 9, and so in order for Christians to join in the protest, all the churches that could hold their services earlier than usual. Over 100,000 people came together to protest, but to no avail, as the deployment went ahead as scheduled. I was in tears thinking, "This is just like it was in the days prior to the return of Okinawa to Japan."

My house is located about 100 meters from the fence surrounding the base and about 800 meters from the main runway. In 1945, as the US military landed on Okinawa with the intent of setting up a base to launch attacks on the Japanese mainland, they overwhelmed the Japanese military, with many civilians getting killed in the crossfire. They appropriated any land they wanted for their military bases, and the surviving civilians simply had to make do with building homes on lands surrounding the bases. My grandfather's land was part of what became Futenma Base.

This past October 16, 2 American soldiers who were about to be transferred to Guam gang-raped an Okinawan woman. Ever since 1945, we have lived in fear of this type of violence from US military personnel. The incidents that make the news in the Japanese and American press are just the tip of the iceberg, as there are many incidents and accidents that take place. It's particularly so when it comes to those of a sexual nature, as only a small percentage of the actual number are ever exposed. For US soldiers who are training to engage in the barbarous acts of war, Okinawa is in effect an occupied territory, and so they have little compunction in abusing Okinawan women.

Likewise, on November 2, a drunken American soldier on a rampage broke into a house in the town of Yomitan, injured a junior high school kid, broke a TV and then fell out a second story window, injuring himself. Others have continued to be arrested for drunken driving, but they are typically protected by the US government and sent home, where their sentences are unbelievably lenient.

Historically, Okinawa was an independent nation, going under the name of Ryukyu from the 14th century. They came under the control of the Satsuma Clan of Japan in 1609, but their king remained on the throne. In 1872, however, the newly established Meiji government abolished the Ryukyu Kingdom,
and then a few years later, in 1879, they forced the Ryukyu king to move to Tokyo. In the process, they annexed Okinawa and made it into a prefecture as a part of Japan. In the battle for Okinawa in 1945, Okinawa was considered expendable in order to protect the mainland, and as a result, many people died. After the war, Okinawa became a pawn in the negotiations for Japanese independence and came under US control. The system was such that we were forced into poverty, and yet we continued to struggle to rebuild. During the Vietnam War, we also experienced the sufferings of Asian peoples being slaughtered, as we cowered in fear while the bombers flew in and out of Okinawa. We campaigned to be returned to Japanese control, since Japan was now a nation with a Peace Constitution that forsook the right to wage war, and while that came to fruition with the return of Okinawa to Japan in 1972, the Japanese government has ignored our pleas to have Okinawa’s share of the burden of military bases be similar to that of other regions of Japan. [Ed. note: 74% of US military bases in Japan are in Okinawa.] The United States is a nation with a strong Christian presence, and so I wonder why it continues to use military force to solve problems by violent means. Why don’t they shift their societal system from one centered on weapons production to one focused on peaceful industry? Jesus clearly told us to “love our enemies.” I believe that if Christians around the world would put their heads together to strategize and work together to bring about a peace that is not dependent on weapons, we could solve the problems of war and poverty, so that wealth would not just be concentrated in the hands of a very few, and the peoples of the world could live in peace and happiness. If we would work towards the happiness of other people, world peace would gradually be realized.

Buraku Liberation Center Report

BLC Director, Akira Kobayashi

The Buraku Liberation Center recently celebrated its 30th anniversary, having been founded in November 1982. It’s been almost 20 years since we moved into our own building in Nov. 1993. One thing we are doing in relation to this is to collect and maintain documents and other resources of these past 30 years.

This past year was also the 90th anniversary of the “National Levelers’ Society Proclamation,” which is considered to be the first declaration of human rights in Japan. Likewise, this year will be the 50th anniversary of the arrest of Ishikawa Kazuo and the “discriminatory Sayama trial.” We have been pushing for a retrial of the “Sayama Incident,” and so this year, we plan to work hard to see a breakthrough in pursuing justice for this case.

The following are the main activities and events that have happened since our last report in June 2012:

- The National Conference held once every 2 years was held at the Higashi Umeda Church in Osaka, with 189 people in attendance.
- Two Sundays in July were designated as “Days of Prayer for Buraku Liberation” in churches around the nation.
- In August, the annual “Buraku Liberation Youth Seminar” was held at the Kinrin Church in Kyoto, with 35 in attendance.
- In October, the new “Liberation Play” entitled “Giving Birth To Hope” was first performed at the Kyodan General Assembly.
- Also in October, about 70 Christians joined together with hundreds of others in Hibiya Park in Tokyo for the annual “Citizens’ Rally to Seek a Retrial in the Sayama Incident.”

Our usual activities of publishing 3 different newsletters and various committee meetings, participation in conferences and other activities with related organizations, etc. continued, and in addition to these, we hosted 2 interns and also issued 2 formal
letters of protest, one concerning the issue of the “Osprey” military aircraft being deployed in Okinawa and the other concerning an article published in the “Shukan Asahi” magazine. This latter issue involved a very discriminatory article entitled “The ‘Hashishita’ Savior or the King of the Mobs.” It referred to the mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto, who is a rising star in Japanese politics, and made reference to his apparent buraku background. The characters for Hashimoto’s name (橋下) are different than the much more common the Hashimoto (橋本) and literally mean “under the bridge.” This gives the impression of low birth, and the article’s use of the literal reading of “Hashishita” was clearly meant as a slight. Concerning Hashimoto’s politics and some of his own statements, we at the BLC have often taken issue, but the idea that because he is of buraku background or of low birth he therefore unworthy is a travesty that we deeply deplore.

The new liberation play, “Giving Birth To Hope,” is the tenth such play we have produced. It was written by Jo Kawakami, who serves as secretary of the BLC Activities Committee and who has written several of the previous plays as well. The storyline is that of the daughter of a church member who later found out that her mother had suffered discrimination in the church when the daughter was still young. It is the story of how this young woman developed in her own faith and dedicated herself to become a church pastor and fight to end such discriminatory attitudes. This play will be shown at several locations during 2013.

Cast of the new Liberation Play, “Giving Birth To Hope,” as they performed at the 2012 Kyodan General Assembly. Author Jo Kawakami is second from the left.

Crowned With Thorns Editorial Committee
We appreciate your comments and suggestions concerning this newsletter and how to make improvements.