



**WORSHIP
AND
MISSION
FOR THE
GLOBAL CHURCH**

**AN ETHNODOXOLOGY
HANDBOOK**

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80. THE AROMA OF BEAUTY: MUSIC IN DISASTER RELIEF

By Roger W. Lowther

It was hard not to stare at the devastation surrounding us or shrink at the stench of decaying fish and squid washed in by the tsunami that struck Japan on March 11, 2011. Our group of twenty-two volunteers—pastors, missionaries, church members, and others—drove two trucks and two vans into a gravel lot, recently cleared of debris, and started unloading supplies. Others started making meat and veggie stew on large propane burners. A little over a month after the earthquake, we were doing our best to help the survivors of a community in Ishinomaki.

The pleasant aromas of the cooking soup drifted through the air, a smell almost forgotten by those who began to line up. It awakened a hunger, an appetite, not only for delicious, hot food, but also for life. Hope itself was wafting through the air.

Bruce Huebner, graduate of Tokyo University of the Arts, walked up and down the lines of waiting people, playing his *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute). The traditional melodies gently carried familiar stories of both pain and peace, awakening a joy for life that had been forgotten. Bruce played, not to distract people from the boredom of waiting in line, not as mere entertainment. His music brought a delicious aroma of a different kind, one just as real and meaningful, pointing to something that will always satisfy and can never be lost. Workers and survivors alike heard it and remembered.

What part does music play in disaster relief? was not a question on my mind at the time, as I and everyone else were overwhelmed by the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters. But at the very first shelter I brought supplies to, I spied an old electronic keyboard in the corner. When I mentioned to the shelter manager that I was a musician, everyone started to set up chairs and gather around. Once I started playing, they didn't want me to stop.

Hundreds of thousands of people resided in shelters after the earthquake, grief-stricken and unable to move forward with their lives. People need love, and music opened doors for us to remain in the shelters and share that love long after the need for material supplies had ended. In the scores of relief concerts that first year after the disaster, building relationships was paramount. After hearing us play, people willingly opened their lives to us and shared their stories.

We have witnessed dramatic changes in the mood of a shelter during a concert. "Bravo!" and "Wonderful!" ring through the air in a festive way. Children come up to play with us. People

repeatedly break down in tears as some deal with their grief for the very first time. As a thank-you to us, one energetic eighty-four-year-old gentleman sang songs from his youth, bringing cheers from everyone in the shelter. One damaged community center was transformed for a little while into an elegant concert hall as the music transcended the surroundings.

The most dramatic response occurred at Onagawa Nuclear Power Plant's shelter following a moment of silence for the two-month anniversary of the tsunami. The mood was incredibly somber, and we realized the usual upbeat opening to a concert was far from appropriate. Bruce came up with the brilliant idea to call out a melody on his *shakuhachi* from one side of the gymnasium. Steve Sacks echoed a varied response from the other side of the room on his flute. Calls and responses of comforting melodies crisscrossed the room, mesmerizing us with their healing power. As we were leaving, one of the junior high girls got up the courage to play her flute. Bruce and Steve quickly joined in, and before long a whole group of adults were joyfully dancing in their celebration of life!

I have played with other Tokyo-based professionals in schools, hotels, sports complexes, community centers, and even outdoors. Setting up my portable digital organ never fails to draw crowds and comments, but nothing compares to the reactions when I start to play. "Wow! You've turned our gymnasium into a beautiful cathedral," one shelter manager told me. People always send us away with "Please come back, and play longer next time!"

Ten Christians from The Juilliard School came with me to the Watanoha Elementary School shelter to help in musical relief work (one of fourteen concerts they gave in twelve days) three months after the tsunami struck. As the afternoon light began to wane, refugees pulled out their flashlights and lanterns so we could all see the music. The howling winds of a typhoon raging outside had knocked out the power and created an eerie atmosphere inside the gymnasium full of people. Torrential downpours created lakes of standing water surrounding the building. Yet the music allowed us all to relax and feel like everything was going to be okay.

At an International Arts Movement conference in New York City years ago, Jeremy Begbie encapsulated the importance of music in disaster relief. He said:

In a world that is so obviously not as it ought to be, it is the calling of artists to be agents of a new world, a redeemed world. Whenever we start to believe that nothing can ever be different, that our homes, relationships, careers are basically stuck in a groove and can never change and never will change, whenever we start to believe that the horrors of the world just have to be, the emaciated child compelled to beg at a road side, or the prostitute forced to the streets to feed her drug addiction, whenever we start to believe that there can never be anything new under the sun, *it's the artist's calling to make us believe things can be different, that life can be new, that a new world is possible, a world that ought to be.*⁴³

Neither my training in conservatory nor my job as church musician could have prepared me for that first year after the earthquake. However, my role as an artist in disaster relief fit as clearly and naturally as if we had planned for it all along. The aroma of beauty plays a powerful part in the healing of individuals and community reformation.

43 International Arts Movement Conference, "Redemptive Culture: Creating the World that Ought To Be," February 23, 2007. New York City.