

That We May Live Together: The Asian Rural Institute

Transforming the World One Village at a Time

April 17, 2006. The taxi ride from Nasushiobara Station to Asian Rural Institute seems faster than usual, perhaps because it's dark and I can hardly wait to get there. I am coming this time with a new responsibility—that of being a member of the Board of Directors of American Friends of ARI (AFARI). The welcome from those working late in the Main Building is as warm as ever, even from Mitsuko-san as we meet for the first time. Over the next several days, new staff members become friends, along with four young German volunteers and almost thirty participants gradually becoming familiar with new territory, the 24/7 use of English language, and some chores previously—but no longer—divided along gender lines back in their home countries. *Our mission is to build an environmentally healthy, just and peaceful world in which each person can live to his or her fullest potential. This mission is rooted in the love of Jesus Christ.*

Participants are engaged in farm work teams with those whose mother tongues and customs differ substantially from their own. Za Khar, a Baptist pastor from Chin State in Myanmar cooperates with Domi, a Roman Catholic priest from Tanzania, and Tutu, a Bangladeshi project coordinator who works with rural poor people. They share responsibility for a garden plot which they must plow and fertilize (with bokashi, an organic fertilizer created at ARI) before planting seedlings. Until a bolt attaching the engine to the plow disappears into the soil, they use small-scale modern technology to try to dig straight rows, but it's a happy surprise for all (or maybe not) that doing the same job by hand is easier, faster and far more accurate. *To carry out this mission, we nurture and train rural leaders for a life of sharing.*



A few weeks into the curriculum, classes are in full swing. Participants are divided into groups for orientation

to the agricultural and livestock mosaic that nourishes the 60-or-so persons of the ARI community. Starting at the aerial map of the campus, Nagashima-san guides the group from the small fishponds that have just been scrubbed down, whitewashed and painted in readiness for fresh water and fry (tiniest fish) which will get off to a good start in this well-protected environment. The group walks to larger ponds where the fish will be moved as they mature, and then up to an area where paddy fields (*tambo*) soon to be irrigated and planted with rice seedlings lie waiting. *Leaders, both women and men, who live and work in grassroots rural communities primarily in Asia, Africa and the Pacific, form a community of learning each year together with staff and other residents*

At this point the concept of integrated farming really starts to kick in. We learn that once the *tambo* are planted, baby fish and ducklings will be set loose to enjoy their new but separate home fields. Both will live on weeds and insects as they grow, thus precluding the need for pesticides or herbicides to protect the crop. When fall approaches and the rice reaches its peak height, the husks begin to droop from their weight and whet the ducks' appetite for new fare. It is then that, yes, the *ducks* are harvested, a sad day for those who tenderly cared for them even before they hatched. Fish come next (no sad faces about rounding them up for dinner!) and finally, the rice is harvested by the entire ARI community with intensive labor, delight and deep satisfaction in knowing they are reaping the grain that will feed the community through the coming year.

In the 1990s, local schools began sending their lunchroom waste to ARI each day. At the pig house halfway up the hillside, a huge metal drum is heated up and the uneaten food is cooked to eliminate any possible accumulation of food bacteria. Later, it is fed to the pigs. Both pig and chicken pen floors are layered with a fermented mix of rice husks, microbes and daily doses of manure. The denizens of those pens do a thorough job of mixing the ingredients either by rooting or scratching, and when that mixture is shoveled or swept out, it is composted to become fertilizer to be used on the fields. In stark contrast to the school food leftovers, the kitchen waste at ARI may add up to a few inches in a plastic bucket after any given meal. Only on "chicken days" do the bones add to the bulk of what's scraped into the bucket if they haven't already been claimed by Go-chan, staff member in charge of the kitchen, for the next day's soup. Sometimes I visit a seminary near our home in New Jersey, often at mealtime because I like the food in the dining hall. There I always see students of the same color sitting together and wonder why that happens at a seminary, of all

places.

At ARI, the tables are mixed, with a Camerounian sitting next to a citizen of Myanmar or Nagaland, a Sri Lankan with a Haitian or Tanzanian. A Japanese member of the community is often found at each table. English is the common language; working with or caring about and for the poor in one of any number of ways is the shared vocation. Appreciation for food - beginning with its planting or pre-natal experience and throughout its growth cycle to harvest and meal preparation - also unites this multi-national group of people who discard almost nothing because they are so personally involved with the food's production from the beginning. At ARI, this is called "foodlife" because life is totally dependent upon having enough food to sustain it.

At chore time after morning exercise, I see the director, Isao Nozaki, doing the most menial of tasks in the Main Building. While I am there, it is his turn to chair Morning Gathering, and he asks the community for understanding of his somewhat less-than-predictable schedule because of medical treatments necessary for his wife at a nearby hospital. Following his position on ARI staff from 1974-1991, Nozaki-san and his wife worked for Japan International Cooperation Agency (JAICA) for 12 years, living and working in Jordan, Sri Lanka and Bhutan. He graciously accepted the position of director when Koa Tasaka retired this March. On the eastern side of the Big Pond, the American Friends of ARI (AFARI) are working with Steven Cutting, Ecumenical Relations staff person, in a new venture this year - a Northwest and Midwest (USA) speaking tour with Sri Lankan graduate ('95) and former Training Assistant ('04) Fr. Laksiri Peiris. Laksiri and Steven have spoken at

churches, colleges, seminaries, and international service organizations as well as met with denominations' Asia desk people to update and inform them of current news from ARI. Fr. Laksiri, an Anglican pastor in a very rural area of Sri Lanka, shares ARI through narratives of his own experiences there and the transformative effect that ARI's servant-leadership training has had on his parish and the entire community. *Through community-based learning we study the best ways for rural people to share and enhance local resources and abilities for the common good.*

Have you visited ARI yet? You are most welcome there; just give ample notice to Tane-san at info@ari-edu.org. Become familiar with the ARI web site (<http://www.ari.edu.org>) and send it along to friends; email Steven (ecu@ari-edu.org) if you'd like to receive "Take My Hand," the AFARI twice-yearly newsletter and have a sample copy sent to your home church. Your prayers for the ongoing work of this extra-ordinary institution, its founders and supporters, participants, staff and volunteers, will have immeasurable value both for those who contribute *to* and benefit *from* its presence here in Japan and in the wider world God has created.

Statement in italics is the Mission Statement of the Asian Rural Institute.

Article and photographs contributed by Pam Hasegawa, Chair of the Board of Directors, AFARI.

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