



SEAC students with Toshihiro Takami (left, circa '62-64)

Historical Developments Leading to the Foundation of the Asian Rural Institute

At its inaugural assembly, held in Kuala Lumpur in 1959, the East Asia Christian Council (EACC)¹⁾ unanimously adopted a resolution, among others, which stated that education and training of rural pastors was an urgent task in contributing to postwar rehabilitation of Asian countries, and urged the Japanese churches to carry out the mission. After that, EACC formally requested the United Church of Christ in Japan to realize the contents of the resolution.

In response to the request, in April 1960, the following year, The South-East Asian Christian Rural Leaders' Training Course (SEAC)²⁾ was newly established on the campus of The Theological Seminary for Rural Mission (Machida City, Tokyo). Establishing the course within a theological seminary was meant to signify in a concrete manner the confession of war responsibility by the Japanese churches, in light of their support toward the military government's actions during WWII, and their atonement for such sins committed. At the beginning the participants were Japanese as well as rural pastors and evangelists mainly from Korea and Taiwan. As time went on, however, the course started accepting participants from other Asian countries such as the Philippines and Thailand. In this history, we could see a new philosophy of development assistance sprouting and evolving from the conventional way of thinking of 'sending Japanese agricultural technicians to Asian countries and having them engage in rural development projects,' to a new approach of 'training local workers there and assisting them after the training so that they would be able to continue their activities after returning home.'

Under the climate of rapid economic growth, the then Japan's agricultural policy, as reflected in the newly adopted Agricultural Basic Law, was to push forward modernization drives by scaling up production following the European and/or American practices. Rather than following this trend of the times, Toshihiro Takami, the second director of the course since 1962, opted to establish a training program that would be

more relevant to the rural realities of Southeast Asian countries. He visited around to practical farmers with participants and positively adopted traditional farming techniques and arts of living in Japan. Opportunities developed in the meantime of exchange with local farmers at the grassroots level, thus "postwar reconciliation" began to take its concrete shape, gradually and in many different forms as well.

In 1963, the Theological Seminary for Rural Mission made a fresh start under the name of Tsurukawa Rural Institute. Seven years later, on the occasion of its reorganization in 1970, SEAC, which used to be an independent training center in the seminary, was incorporated into the total institution and became 'Southeast Asia Course' (equal to two other courses, category-wise, namely, theology and childcare). Faced with a financial crisis that happened later on, however, the seminary could not help but downsize itself (such as discontinuing the childcare course and drastically cutting the number of staff). Fortunately, the Southeast Asia Course survived this restructuring crisis along with the theology course.

Meanwhile, (formerly known as) East Pakistan caught the world's attention. It was an area that suffered cyclone disasters almost every year, but the damages in 1970 and 1971 were particularly serious, and the World Council of Churches (WCC) appealed for an emergency action to its member churches in order to relieve refugees, reportedly exceeding 8 million in number at one point. The Service Department of the National Christian Council in Japan (NCCJ) launched a refugee relief campaign, beginning November 1971³⁾, under the motto 'That We May Live Together.' The NCCJ decided to dispatch T. Takami (associate director of its Service Dept. and director of The Southeast Asia Course) together with Kazuho Makino (a staff member of The Southeast Asia Course, who was in India at that time) to the affected area. During the stay there, they cooperated in



The first bus for study trips (about 1971)



Ken Muto, principal of the Theological Seminary (fifth from left) with the Takamis (right from him, early 1960)

the drafting of a Post-cyclone revival plan led by the WCC.

Later in December of that year, East Pakistan became an independent nation, called Bangladesh, after the Indo-Pakistani wars. Relief workers happened to ‘discover’ about 300 power tillers stacked up in a certain harbor warehouse. It was learned later that before independence, they had been imported by a government agency from Japan. Then a local Catholic relief organization purchased the power tillers and sought Japanese churches out for sending operation instructors for the tillers. The NCCJ Service Department (Protestant) and Caritas Japan (Catholic) organized a joint committee and dispatched 50 young men to Dhaka in April 1972. T. Takami led the group first and later it was taken over by K. Makino and Hajime Kikuchi, also a SEAC staff member. At the time when even the term ‘NGO’ was not commonly used, this group was counted as one of the pioneers of international cooperation projects by private organizations

Successfully completing their duty by the end of July that year, those young men came home. Many of them had a strong feeling that they did not want to end their experience as just a one-time, temporary relief activity. Instead, they began to grope for building a sustainable relationship with overseas peoples. While, at the same time, the NCCJ was also on the verge of creating a cooperation/assistance philosophy of a new breed. In one of the official documents released later that year, it states: “What kind of cooperation can we do without disturbing the self-reliance of local people? In order to train agricultural leaders, we plan to invite several young men from Bangladesh.”⁴⁾ The second act of a long story of ‘That We May Live Together’ was about to begin.

In those days, Tsurukawa Rural Institute could not help but downsize itself due to financial circumstances as mentioned above. Because of that, those who were with SEAC led by T. Takami began to look for a new avenue to carry out the origi-

nal mission of the training center. After several land-scouting trips to various locations, they finally decided to settle on the present site in Nasushiobara City, in the north of Tochigi Prefecture, to establish The Asian Rural Institute. In this place, there were devoted supporters who shared the same vision, and who accepted and hosted SEAC participants in the past for on-the-job farming practice and other live-in training in their communities. Thanks to the help of those supporters, from selecting and acquiring the necessary property to completing all the paper work required for authorization by the prefectural government office, ARI - Southeast Asian Rural Leaders Training Center was on its way to establishment. On September 16, 1972, the first founders’ meeting was convened. (From this point onward, Sept. 16 was designated as the Foundation Day of ARI.) In January of the following year, the application was duly filed with the governor’s office, and in March, ARI was formally authorized under the category of a vocational school.

Reference: At its Fourth General Assembly (Uppsala, 1968), the WCC called on its member churches throughout the world to become ‘servant churches’ for rural people, the urban poor and so forth who had been trifled with sudden changes of the world economy. For that purpose, the Rural Agricultural Mission (RAM) was created with education and training of rural leaders in mind under the Division of World Mission and Evangelism (DWME). This was in 1973, the same year when ARI was established.

1) Presently, Christian Conference of Asia (CCA)

2) South-East Asian Christian Rural Leaders’ Training Course (commonly called SEAC)

3) The goal of the campaign was to raise 10 million yen. The average starting salary of new college graduates at that time was a little less than 40,000 yen per month.

4) From ‘Refugee Relief Campaign Report’, Nov. 1972.