Adventure, Japan
By Donna Bordelon Alder
Summer, 2010

Every trip abroad is an adventure, I have decided. Some places yeild adventures that are at once frightening and thrilling, like when the electricity goes off during a thunder storm in Nairobi and stays off for hours. The skies, once clear of the storm clouds, are dusted with stars that go on forever, unobscured by city lights. Some adventures bring all the senses to a point of rich excitement and confusion, like a party so unfamiliar and so exhilarating that it leaves your mind in constant high gear. Japan does this. It is filled with new smells of fried sweet potatoes, wheat honey cakes heated over flat iron griddles, tastes of assorted flavors of okonomiyaki and tempura, sights of trees sculpted into elegant shapes, ikebana and carpets of green moss.

A group of nine of us, under the direction of Gale Lynch, headed out from Roberts in May to Osaka Christian College for ten days to teach English, do tourism duty and stay at guest homes. From the moment we landed at the Kansai Airport in Osaka until we lifted off from Tokyo’s Narita Airport the trip was filled wth experiences unique to any I have had before. The language was incomprehensible, no matter how hard I tried to connect the strange sounds of the Japanese terms with familiar English combinations, I could not keep their meaning in my head. The written symbols looked like stubby pickup sticks scattered into graceful patterns, row upon fluid and meaningless row across the billboards and signs. There was no deciphering them, none, nada! The food was full of strange tastes, salty, tangy and sometimes all too spicy for me as I discovered after swallowing an innocent looking tuft of green wasabi at the Tofu restaurant in Kyoto. The sidewalks were immaculately clean. The junior high school we visited had floors which shone from careful scrubbing by the students themselves whose job it is to keep the buildings clean. The narrow streets were lined, shoulder to shoulder with houses, fifteen to twenty feet wide, always fronted by a tasteful collection of potted plants or a tiny sculpted garden with a shrine. The turned up corners of the roofs were everywhere a reminder that this was Japan. Each foray into town began with a walk to the subway where we would
launch a short trip to the Osaka castle downtown or an extended trip to Hiroshima. On each walk we encountered bicyclists in dress suits or casual wear, mothers cycling infants in baskets perched in front or behind. Constantly they rode past, going in both directions. I don’t think I ever got the hang of keeping my eyes on the comings and goings of the bikers and had to be reminded repeatedly to “look out.”

We stayed in the guest house of OCC, ate breakfast in its tiny kitchen, bathed in the strangest combination of shower, then hot tub (in that order), always remembering to remove our shoes at the entrance of each building so as to keep its floors clean and pristine. In both the junior high and the Christian church I attended on Sunday we were given slippers to replace our shoes. The tree covered OCC campus educates about 500 or so young women who are all commuters. They arrive in early clusters and spend their days learning to care for preschool children and to speak English. Everyone in the Japanese school system learns English from Junior High on, but five or six years of English instruction is not enough to make most of them fluent. I understand that now having experienced the difficulty of capturing even a few of their Japanese phrases.

Kyoto, with its lovely shrines surrounded by hundreds of acres of carefully tended gardens, was our first day trip destination. Its park included sculptures of packed gravel mounded up in an exact cone representing Mount Fuji, then spread in rippling waves representing the oceans which surround the four islands that make up Japan. Azaleas were in bloom and scattered pinks and reds among the golden bamboo groves on hillsides carpeted by brilliant green mosses. There is a custom in Japan, when a young woman or man turns twenty they are given a handmade kimono, dressed to the nines for the day and then they venture out to the shrines and places of interest to celebrate the occasion. It was our delight to encounter several such young people at the Kiyomizo Temple.
Probably the most memorable visit we made came on the last full day we were in Japan. We stepped aboard the bullet train and brushed our way through the countryside at a whopping 190 mph on our way to Hiroshima. To most Americans the name Hiroshima is synonymous with the atomic bomb. It is hard for us to separate these two concepts. To my delight I found Hiroshima a bustling, modern city whose restaurants and temples are memorable and beautiful, whose rivers, seaside shrines and parks grace the bustling streets with charm and elegance. But make no mistake, the city has a huge and consistent commitment to world peace. The Peace museum was a somber reminder of the event which brought World War II to an end. The nine of us were the American minority in a museum filled with Japanese children learning of the devastation brought to their grandparents by ours. It was somber. It was a vivid reminder to me of the horrors of war and its destruction. The museum is dedicated to peace and has at one of its strategic memorials a plaque which reads

LET ALL THE SOULS HERE REST IN PEACE
FOR WE SHALL NOT REPEAT THE EVIL

This monument embodies the hope that Hiroshima, devastated on 6 August 1945 by the world’s first atomic bombing, will stand forever as a city of peace. The stone chamber in the center contains the Register of Deceased A-bomb Victims. The inscription on the front panel offers a prayer for the peaceful repose of the victims and a pledge on behalf of all humanity never to repeat the evil of war. It expresses the spirit of Hiroshima – enduring grief, transcending hatred, pursuing harmony and prosperity for all, and yearning for genuine, lasting world peace.

Amen.