

Cross Current



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A New Field of Art



When they first appeared, they looked from the air like works of art, stolen and scattered across Japan's countryside. But the evidence was planted.

A relatively new idea, *rice paddy art* started in 1993 in the village of Inakadate, 600 miles north of Tokyo. The area needed a revitalization project to breathe new life and beauty into the region and a committee hit upon the idea of using different colour rice plants to create giant murals in the countryside.

Now, hundreds of volunteers painstakingly plant four kinds of rice each May, following patterns to create intricate murals that cover 15,000 square metres. A common variety called *tsugaru-roman*, buds with green leaves. But the agricultural artists create depth and definition by using an ancient strain called *kodaimai* rice, which has purple leaves. Brown and yellow rice are also planted, for more contrast.

When standing beside the fields, the designs are invisible, even when the rice plants explode into colour, just before harvest time in September. Visitors must climb the tower of the village's mock castle to see the stunning murals and get the full effect.

And those murals have come a long way. For the first nine years, villagers and local farmers stuck to a simple design of Mount Iwaki. But as their confidence and expertise grew, so did the intricacy of their work. And when artists wanted to make an especially big impression, landowners came together and signed agreements to allow for a few enormous murals that stretched across property lines.



If you're serious about bringing a little light to this dark world, be prepared to use yourself up.

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The village even embraced new technology, using computers to plot precisely where the four rice colours should be planted for maximum effect. Today, the fields are ablaze with colourful, highly-complex images of dancers, samurai warriors on horseback and historical figures like Napoleon. More than 150,000 visitors come to Inakadate every summer to see the art, swamping the village of just 8,700.

Inspired by Inakadate, other Japanese villages are getting into the act, turning large swathes of countryside into a colourful canvas that nourishes mind, body and soul. Best of all, that canvas renews itself every year, limited only by the vision of those who plant.

And so it is with us. As followers of Christ, we have a wonderful opportunity to add our personal witness to God's unrelenting love and power, with plantings that grow into a complex, compelling and complete image of Jesus Christ. Your life is the rice field. The plantings are the values, priorities and countless acts of love and kindness that characterize your Christianity.

In response to God's goodness, our lives must have a continual focus on revitalization. We must bring new life and beauty to everything around us by finding creative ways to show people what God's heart looks like. And to depict the full depth and definition of that spiritual portrait, we plant a combination of ancient precepts and modern pragmatism, making faith vital and relevant in the real world.

But that glimpse of God is not obvious from a human vantage point. To get the full effect of spirituality, we need a God's-eye view, a spiritual perspective that rises above the pettiness and preoccupations of this world to take in the Big Picture. But, rest assured, people will notice when God is seen through our actions.

Though we all start small, revealing only a simple outline of Christ in our lives, our testimony grows increasingly more powerful and dramatic as we grow in confidence and learn how to use the transformative energy of the Holy Spirit. But to really catch the attention of the world, believers must work together, providing an even bigger canvas on which to portray the character of Christ.

Churches who do so will inspire others and draw seekers, feeding mind, body and soul with an ever-deepening testimony of who God is. Our witness will change from year-to-year. People will eat it up.

Rick Gamble