



Challenging Issues



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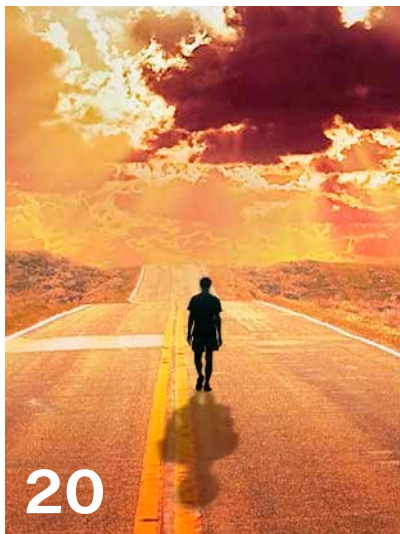
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January 19, 2021
SEND Center, Higashi Tokorozawa



February

JEMA Connect

February 15-17, 2021
Ochanomizu Christian Center, Tokyo

March

WIM Spring Day Retreat

March 4, 2021
Okutama Fukuin no Ie

WIM Kansai Christian Women's Conference

March 8, 2021
Mustard Seed Christian Church, Osaka



Details about future JEMA events can be found on the JEMA website:

jema.org

Also see our magazine online: **japanharvest.org**



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Challenging Issues

I began writing this editorial before I'd received most of the submissions for this issue. Yet it already looked like not only a magazine about challenging issues, but also a challenging magazine issue. But you don't need me to tell you the difficulties our magazine team has had in putting this together!

There are many tough things about serving in full-time ministry, let alone cross-cultural ministry. And that's in addition to where we serve. I've mentioned before that after we'd announced that we were going to Japan as missionaries an Asian missionary at our home church pulled my husband and I aside and told us we were mad to go to Japan.

Yes—what we do is hard by human terms. But somehow, it's part of God's inscrutable plan. He's called you and me to this land to serve him here at this time.

I recently read a book by Larry Crabb in which he looks at Habakkuk's story. In Habakkuk 2:2–20, God answers the prophet's complaint about God's apparent inaction in relation to the evil he saw around him. In verse 20, God says, "But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him" (ESV). Crabb wrote that, in essence, God said, "I call you, Habakkuk, and all My genuine followers, to be still and know that I am God (see Ps. 46:10). Habakkuk, be silent. You have no part in writing or directing the plot of My story. I do, however, privilege you with the call, a weighty and splendid opportunity, to advance My narrative chiefly by remaining faithful to Me no matter what trouble comes into your life that confuses and overwhelms you."¹

In many ways that fits what we do here in Japan. We don't know God's plan. We don't know why God hasn't brought the great breakthrough that God's people have been praying for over many decades. And neither do we know what part we might play in his story here. However, he has called us to be faithful to him, no matter what results we do or don't see, no matter what trouble we do or don't experience.

In this issue, you'll find articles about two types of challenges we face: those relating to Japanese culture and those we face as cross-cultural workers.

When our *Japan Harvest* team chooses a theme for an issue, we've often got an idea of what articles we'd like to see. Because we depend on volunteers from the JEMA community putting their hands up to write, it's sometimes surprising to see how people interpret the theme. We were a little surprised that not so many wrote about the challenging issues in Japanese culture. But we're thankful for those who did write. Challenging issues are hard to think about and hard to write about. Perhaps this magazine will inspire some of us to think harder about the difficulties we face in Japanese culture.

This issue covers topics as diverse as the Trinity and child safety, competitiveness and contextualisation. We commit this issue into God's hands and trust that he's brought the articles he means to have included this time, and that these will encourage, inspire, and equip you to continue in your ministry with Japanese people.



Blessings in Christ,
Wendy
Managing Editor

The themes for the upcoming issues are:

Spring 2021: Caring in the New Normal

Summer 2021: Japanese Mindset (submission deadline Feb. 28)

Autumn 2021: Men, Where are They? (submission deadline May 30)

Winter 2022: Technology (submission deadline August 30)

1. Larry Crabb, *When God's Ways Make No Sense* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018), 75.

Huddle Up with Matt Murton

A virtual talk show series with Christian baseball players from overseas

Christian Shimbun, July 19, 2020 Translated by Grace Koshino

After much delay due to COVID-19, the 2020 season of Nippon Professional Baseball finally began on June 19, without spectators. Not long before that, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes Japan (FCA Japan) uploaded a video to YouTube hosted by Matt Murton, a former baseball player for the Hanshin Tigers. Through the video we get an insight into how some of the Christian players have been coping during this pandemic.

Huddle Up with Matt Murton is a series of chats between Murton and other Christian baseball players living in Japan. The first and second videos were with Spencer Patton (pitcher for the Yokohama DeNA BayStars) and Steven Moya Mercedes (outfielder for the ORIX Buffaloes), and the third, fourth, and fifth were with Jonathan “Jon” Edwards (pitcher for the Hanshin Tigers) and Jerry Sands (also with the Hanshin Tigers).

Murton, who stopped playing Japanese professional baseball in 2015, asked the players questions about their lifestyle and training routines during the COVID-19 pandemic, differences between Japanese and American baseball, their favorite Japanese food, and about their faith. Murton also shared his own experiences while playing for the Hanshin Tigers and even gave a lesson on how to speak Japanese with a Kansai dialect! It is interesting to get a peek into the players’ everyday lives.

The idea to create the video series came about when Will Thompson, the national director of FCA Japan, saw an FCA

video on the internet called “Huddle Up!” Thompson explained, “The FCA is active in 90 countries across the world but most of its activity takes place in the US.” When many people were under lockdown back in March and April, the video was made to encourage US fans and trainers. Thompson wondered whether something similar could be made to suit the Japanese audience, and while Thompson prayed about it Murton came to mind.

“Murton not only achieved numerous records back in the day, but he has a big heart and speaks well. Although it has been five years since he left Japan, he returns once a year to join events and he also connects with his fans via social media. When I approached Murton about this idea, he said that he would be ‘happy to cooperate to show appreciation to fans.’”

“In the video, we see Murton chatting with the guests about topics ranging from their faith to everyday

matters. A Christian watching may think, ‘Wow, they’re Christian athletes. I want to support them,’” said Thompson.

Edwards and Sands are new in the field, so they are still relatively unknown. But a few days after the video was uploaded to YouTube, Sands, who had just been promoted out of the Tigers reserve team, hit a come-from-behind three-run homer against the Yokohama BayStars.

“The videos could be used as a tool to evangelize to sports fans,” said Thompson.

Five videos in the series “Huddle Up with Matt Murton” have been uploaded on the FCA Japan website. They’re in English with Japanese subtitles.

YouTube link:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCG82Lx85Lb-CKT2fwPKXqYQ>

FCA website:

<https://www.fcajapan.org/> ■



Opening scene of the video

West News

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, Your God reigns!”

People with visual impairment and the pandemic

Christian Shimbun, August 2, 2020 Translated by Tomoko Kato

Challenges and opportunities

While COVID-19 was spreading in Japan, especially in the Tokyo metropolitan district, how did life change for people with visual impairment? In Tokyo on July 16, at the “Japan Mission Conference for the Visually Impaired” (known as Mōden), two churchgoers with visual impairment, Ms. Haruko Nishiyama and Ms. Taeko Kimura, talked about their circumstances.

Nishiyama (a member of Shinsen Church, the United Church of Christ in Japan or UCCJ) said, “Almost all of our life depends on touching, but we have been asked not to touch too much. Wearing a mask is troublesome, too, as we make full use of the feelings on our skin to walk unassisted.”

Kimura (a member of Shitaya Church, also UCCJ) said, “Because we cannot see, we can’t correctly ‘socially distance’ like non-handicapped people. When we go out with helpers, it is impossible to leave a two-meter gap between us.”

Nishiyama said, “It confuses me when I can’t ask someone to help me. When we go out with the help of someone else, being close to each other is inevitable. But now I cannot ask for help when I need it. The organization for people with visual impairment provides us with helpers, but for the past few months more than 60% of the helpers have not been working there, since there is no guarantee of avoiding infection. When they say, ‘I will not

come with you as I am worried,’ I cannot say, ‘Oh, that would be a problem for me. Please come anyway.’”

Kimura talked about shopping—“When COVID-19 started spreading, some shop assistants dropped the change from a higher point into my hands. I understood they did it to avoid the infection risk caused by touching my skin, but I hated it. However, when they put the change on the tray it was also a problem as I could not see where it was, so I prefer it to be handed to me directly.”

But Nishiyama also discovered an unlikely opportunity. When Shinsen Church canceled their Sunday worship services because of COVID-19,

place, it is wonderful to be able to feel close to each other like this.”

At Shitaya Church, only members who live near the church have been going to the church building during the COVID-19 pandemic, while others have been attending online worship. Kimura said, “One of the church members calls me during the worship and puts her telephone in front of the speaker. I can listen to the message in real time.”

She also said, “It is necessary to be cautious about the infection, but it is sad if we become inconsiderate due to overcautiousness.” Kimura and Nishiyama asked us for our understanding.

Let’s use Zoom for communication! (Kanmōsen)

Kansai Mission Association for the Visually Impaired” (Kanmōsen), is an interdenominational organization started in 1972 by the listeners of “Go-isscho shimashō” (Let’s Go Together), a radio program by PBA (the Pacific Broadcasting Association).

Their activities have been greatly enhanced by communication tools such as personal computers and smart phones that can be controlled by human voices. This year, COVID-19 caused the cancellation of their popular summer Bible Camp. So instead, they planned a meeting called “A short message and conversation” over Zoom for August 10. Miyajima, a staff member at Kanmōsen, said, “COVID-19 must not isolate people with visual impairment. That is why we will share daily testimonies and themed prayers using Zoom. For the people without any PC experience, we will assist them in installing the application. We hope it will develop into a regular meeting.” ■



From left: Ms. Nishiyama and Ms. Kimura

their pastor, Mitsuya Asa, started “Kyōkai Tsūshin,” a church newsletter, for prayers and communication with church members. Audio versions are being delivered to Nishiyama. “This newsletter makes me feel closer to other church members. Unless the person sitting next to me says something I wouldn’t know who they are, and most leave after worship without much conversation. But ‘Kyōkai Tsūshin’ tells me news of people I never talked to. Although we cannot gather in one

Seniors need Jesus

By Dan Ellrick

If the church is prepared and flexible, the silver harvest will be bountiful

A few days ago when I opened the door to accept a delivery, a smiling man in his seventies handed me a parcel, got my signature, and then jogged off. I wasn't surprised at all; energetic septuagenarians are not rare in Japan. We see silver-haired men and women walking, biking, running, and working.

Of course, there are also many elderly people who struggle with daily life. Next to our apartment building there is a private home with a small flower garden where an elderly woman used to live. She was frail and moved slowly, but she enjoyed spending time outside when the weather was good. I always greeted her and sometimes stopped to chat when she was near the gate. Each time we talked she proudly announced her age; the last time we talked, she was 102. Knowing she is gone now, I feel a twinge of loneliness when passing her house. I regret not making more of an effort to talk to her about Jesus.

Two years ago, I celebrated my own sixtieth birthday, called *kanreki* in Japanese. *Kanreki* is thought to mark the beginning of a second life. It is a time for reflection and for new beginnings, and many people retire or make other life changes. Special *kanreki* celebrations with gatherings of family and friends are common.¹ As Japan ages, more and more people are entering their post-*kanreki* second lives. Already, government statistics show that 35% of the population is age sixty or older.² This raises the question: How can we share the gospel effectively with seniors? There are no easy answers, but here I consider a few stories of seniors coming to Jesus and some insights we can glean from them.

Seniors coming to faith

When we hosted our first summer team, we paired each short-term worker with a local church member to knock on neighborhood doors. They introduced themselves, presented a *Digest Bible* as a gift, invited everyone to a barbecue in the park by the church, and said thank you before leaving. No effort was made to talk longer unless asked to—this left people curious, and it distinguished our church from cult groups. Almost 2,000 *Digest Bibles* were given out, and about 20 people came to eat free hot dogs from a grill and chat with the short-term workers and church members. People came and went freely, but those who stayed until cleanup were invited into the church for ice cream and to enjoy singing a couple of songs. One of those who stayed was Mrs. Yamada.³ She lived only a block from the church but had never thought about visiting it until Maggi, a college student from Panama,

and a church member knocked on her door and invited her. She came for a hot dog and to talk, stayed for the ice cream and singing, and then began to attend church regularly. Six months later, after studying with the Japanese pastor, she was baptized at Christmas. Mrs. Yamada was in her sixties and had never been in a church before.

Mrs. Yamada was a frequent user of the lending library at church, and she shared the books and things she learned at church with her husband. Not long after her baptism, her husband's cancer relapsed. When the pastor visited him at the hospital, Mr. Yamada said, "Tell me about this faith my wife has." Minutes later, he accepted Christ and asked to be baptized. The pastor visited him again the next day and, after again confirming his decision, baptized him. Mrs. Yamada wept with joy knowing that she and her husband would be together in heaven. Mr. Yamada died in the hospital. While he never set foot in the church, we look forward to seeing him in heaven.

Some years later, while pastoring at Osaka International Church, I was in the church office when a 59-year old Japanese man knocked. He introduced himself as Tommy and said he would like to be baptized. I asked him when he had believed in Jesus, and he said a long time ago. In fact, he continued, he had asked for baptism 20 years ago but was told that he needed to study more before being baptized. Since then, he had been gradually learning more about the Bible and faith. After more discussion of his beliefs and understanding, I got out my calendar and we chose a date for



Mrs. Yamada singing during her first time ever in a church

his baptism. He was radiant when he came out of the water, and from then on, Tommy joyfully attended church as often as his work permitted, occasionally bringing family members with him. A couple of years later, he called and asked if I could visit his mother-in-law, Fumiko, in the hospital.⁴ I agreed, and my wife and I, along with Tommy and his wife, gathered at the bedside of the tiny 86-year old woman. We were all surprised to learn that she already believed in Jesus. She explained that when she was in grade school, a friend sometimes took her to Sunday School. Ever since then, she had believed in Jesus in her heart but had kept her faith a secret for more than 70 years because of family opposition. Knowing that she might pass on anytime, I asked if she wanted to be baptized. When she said yes, I baptized her on the spot.



Dan prays for Fumiko after her baptism

I recently did a funeral for the father of a church member named Yumi. She had led him to faith just two weeks earlier. She knew he did not have many days left, and when he made a clear confession of faith, she baptized him herself. I was proud of her—she had been helping with the Alpha Course, and in training, I had encouraged her to ask the Holy Spirit to lead and then to be bold in ministering. Yumi was a little nervous that her pastor might

disapprove of her doing the baptism herself, but, like me, he was filled with joy that she had been confident enough to lead her father to Jesus and baptize him. We are praying for the rest of her family. I know Yumi's witness and the joy and hope expressed at the funeral made an impression, but the most powerful testimony was the father's decision to ask for baptism and a Christian funeral. When a family patriarch makes these choices, it releases the rest of the family from their obligations to Buddhist practices and family traditions.

Some insights

Well-known ways to reach out to older Japanese include English or cooking classes, light hiking trips, and hospital or nursing home visitation. The stories above provide a few additional simple insights. In Mrs. Yamada's story, pairing short-term workers with church members to invite neighbors to a fun event proved effective. In Tommy's story, simply being available at the church office on a weekday and taking the time to listen sympathetically was a key element. In the case of Yumi's father, releasing a lay person into ministry was essential. I doubt that her father would have wanted a visit from a pastor he had never met, but he was happy to talk with his daughter, whom he loved and trusted.

The above stories include three hospital-bed baptisms—one by a Japanese pastor, one by me, and one by a lay person. Three different churches are represented, and each time baptism was administered immediately to new believers who had never attended the church. Two of these churches normally baptize by immersion, and one usually required a study program before baptism, but all of them set aside their usual church practice to minister to

people in immediate need. This flexibility allowed these elderly Japanese people to experience the wonder of salvation as expressed in baptism and the joy of being welcomed into the church. Further, they were enabled to leave a Christian legacy and witness to their families.

Another common thread in these stories is Japanese people reaching out to their families. Mrs. Yamada shared with her husband, Tommy shared with his mother-in-law, and Yumi shared with her father. Japanese Christians are often hesitant to share with family, especially if their family criticized them when they were baptized. Yet, with support and encouragement, Japanese people can learn to pray for the Spirit to give them opportunities and the courage to be bold when opportunities come for effective witness.

A silver harvest

Older Japanese can and do come to faith, sometimes even very quickly, when they hear the gospel at an opportune time. The time before and after kanreki, when Japanese reflect on their past and think of beginning a "second life," can be a favorable season—it was for Tommy and perhaps for Mrs. Yamada as well. Crises, especially illness late in life, can be a time when people are surprisingly open to Jesus, especially if a family member or close friend shares the gospel. If the church is prepared and flexible, the silver harvest will be bountiful. When we see the white hair of seniors, let's think of John 4:35: "Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest" (ESV). **JH**

1. For example, 「みんなで祝おう還暦式」 <https://m-kanreki.jp> (accessed Sept. 10, 2020).
2. Calculated from Excel file "Population Estimates by Age (Five-Year Groups) and Sex," <https://www.e-stat.go.jp/stat-search/file-download?statInfId=000031973096&fileKind=0> (accessed Sept. 10, 2020).
3. All Japanese names have been changed to protect privacy.
4. Part of this woman's story was previously shared in: Daniel Ellrick, "A Time for Decisions," *Japan Harvest*, (Summer 2018).

Photos submitted by author

Dan Ellrick and his wife Karen have served as missionaries in Japan since 1996—first in Hiroshima, then in Osaka since 2002. Dan is also the Japan representative of the International Ministerial Fellowship.

Japanese worldview: identity in a collectivist society

By Rachel Hughes

Japan's group-oriented society has deep historical roots that present specific challenges in ministry with Japanese people

Every worldview is a complex system of how a certain group of people views the world, expects things to work, and defines good and bad. Of course, every culture has aspects that easily align with biblical living and points that go against the teaching of the Bible that are hard work for Christians in that culture to identify and change. A little while ago, I helped a Japanese friend edit his thesis about three aspects of the Japanese worldview that are challenging for Japanese Christians and churches. He explained that the Japanese worldview is deeply rooted in thousands of years of history and cultural development. I found it so fascinating and helpful that my husband and I based our last home assignment presentations on it. I have crafted a three-part series for *Japan Harvest* from this long thesis in the hope that it will be as revelatory for you as it was for us. The three topics are collectivist identity, multiple-minded spirituality, and hierarchical structures. This is the first article of the series.

Identity in a collectivist society

A Japanese person's identity is bound to their social community. Relationships with family, friends,¹ and the authorities strongly influence how Japanese people behave.² Three major historical circumstances have shaped this collectivist view of identity.

Agricultural background

Ancient Japanese people lived in clusters. They collaborated with neighbours and followed annual farming cycles. To foster good working relationships, elders taught subsequent

generations to avoid quarrels and differences of opinion. Since communities worshipped guardian gods and local gods to wish for successful harvests, they believed spiritual unity aided societal success. A community member's value was found in their contributions to farming and spiritual customs. The failings of an individual member negatively impacted the wellbeing of everyone. Families would hide individuals who were unable to contribute or who hindered the work. Individual concerns or beliefs were less important than the needs of the community and societal relationships.

Group governance

During the Edo period (1603–1868), the idea that

the group was responsible for an individual's behaviour was formalized in the legal system when the *gonin gumi* (group of five) system was implemented. Villages were divided into groups of five families who were collectively responsible for several duties, such as paying agricultural tax and controlling the behaviour of individuals. The purpose was to strengthen the community mentality and govern subversive thought. Therefore, the group's reputation took



precedence over individual freedom. More recently, during the Second World War, neighbours in *tonari gumi* (group of neighbours) were required to monitor each other and expose anyone demonstrating an anti-war mindset. They also worked together for defence against air raids and they shared food distributions. Individual behaviour was a group issue.

Family genealogy

Dōzokudan (kin group) is a structure consisting of *honke* (main house or senior branch of the family) and *bunke* (derivate houses or junior branches). This household structure was legally prescribed in 1898, based on the patriarchy of samurai classes in the Edo era and influenced by the agricultural community.³ A “junior” house was established through political marriage and took on a subordinate role—receiving land, housewares, and sometimes goodwill for business from the main house.

In this system, the importance of individuals was their benefit to the family; all decisions in life, including marriage and career, were evaluated based on the prosperity of the kin group. At the same time, an individual’s identity was connected to the status of their household.⁴

Identity in modern Japan

This worldview—that assesses a person’s value in terms of their contribution to society, that prioritizes allegiance to their group, and attributes status based on family connections—can still be observed in Japan today. This affects the behaviour of Japanese Christians. Being part of Japanese society means doing the same things at the same time, and to be united means having the same thoughts and ideas. Anyone who acts or thinks differently is fundamentally at odds with society as a whole. Japanese people continue to function with a strong consciousness of community orientation and obedience to superiors. There is also a residual sense that group members should correct errant individuals.

For example, while very few Japanese people farm rice today, society expects them to follow the “rail” (path). For example,

students don’t repeat years of school; those who go to university start at age 18 and begin work at age 22. Anyone who is different is labeled “*ichi-rō*” (one-year delayed) or “*ni-rō*” (two-year delayed). Someone who disturbs the system is considered a disruptive community member.⁵

Individual decisions are still dominated by surrounding authorities and benefits for the group. In middle and high school, most students join a club that meets after school and on weekends. The club often takes priority over an individual’s personal desires. So, for example, if a Christian is absent from a school tennis club on Sunday to attend church, they are distrusted and often not allowed to participate in matches.

In the workplace, employees are often expected to remain in the office at the end of the day until their boss leaves. As work relationships have the highest priority, employees can be expected to go drinking with their boss and colleagues after work, and—if a superior requires it—to work on Sundays. Also, just as society was historically organised into groups, workplaces are arranged in teams, so one person’s absence or mistake will be shameful or problematic for the whole team. As in the past, work takes priority over an individual’s faith or spending time with family.⁶

In addition to all of the above, the power of the family can prevent believers from committing to the Christian faith. The fear of upsetting or shaming their family (impacting the status of all family members) can prevent someone from becoming a Christian or attending church.

So Japanese believers are in a constant battle against societal norms. They struggle to be honourable community and family members, while maintaining their faith. The biblical challenge for Christians is that God calls them to be engaged in this world, but to simultaneously hold non-conformist attitudes.⁷ In a Japanese worldview, this can be particularly challenging.

Identities in Christ

Of course Christians in every culture need to have their identities, cultures



and relationships transformed by the gospel, just as much as Japanese Christians. But the specific, practical application of the Bible needs to be relevant to each worldview. In his letter to Philemon, Paul addresses a hierarchical, class-based relationship amongst people from a similarly group-oriented culture, so it is useful for addressing the Japanese context. He teaches Onesimus, Philemon, and all church members to base their self-identity, their way of relating, and how they value others on their standing in Christ.

Self-identity

Paul describes himself as “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (NIV), “an old man”, “a partner”, and someone in need of refreshment and support, but, at the same time, someone in a position to give orders in the church. He does not devalue himself because of his inability to contribute while in chains or the shame of that circumstance. In fact, Paul appears to find his value in being a prisoner of Christ and views literal chains and perceived weakness as irrelevant to his identity. Paul describes everything in relation to God; he views life from the perspective of being “in Christ”. This gives him a personal value apart from his contributions in this world.

As Japanese Christians develop this same view of personal value, they will be better equipped to stand firm in Christ against the pressures of collectivist thinking. They need a deep understanding of God through studying his Word. As God’s power, sovereignty, and love become more real to the believer, they can live confidently as a child of God, holding onto his promises instead of basing their sense of value on their contributions to society.

Pastors and church leaders need to teach members how to read and interpret the Bible correctly, and encourage them to study on their own. As they do this, true repentance will transform their hearts and fill them with joy and thankfulness. They will know that they are reconciled to their heavenly Father and are forever secure in the unchanging love of God. Rather than the changeable pressure of surrounding

opinion, they will be able to rely on a loving God to give their life value.

Relating as groups

Paul calls Philemon his “dear friend”, “fellow worker”, “brother”, and “partner”. He appeals to Philemon to shift his mode of relating to others from one that desires to control to one based on his relationship in Christ. Paul entreats Philemon to welcome Onesimus back “as a dear brother”, grounding his appeal in love. This community of people, the church, is not for the purpose of judging and controlling, but for the purpose of loving and refreshing.

When a Japanese person sees a group of Christians together, they should be struck by the Christians’ indiscriminate love. But too often, Japanese people don’t go to church for fear of not being good enough or of being judged. It is important that churches do not simply become another place of judgment and control in a person’s life.

To help Japanese Christians develop a biblical worldview, they need discipleship that teaches them to apply the Scriptures to their everyday life. Rather than being controlled by a social group, Christians can encourage each other to submit to God’s expectations, surrendering to his judgement not men’s.

Value of others

Paul accords status to people because of their standing in Christ. Under Roman law, slaves were regarded as the property of their masters and were expected to bring economic benefit to their owners.⁸ In spite of Onesimus’ background as a slave who had stolen from his master, Paul calls him “my son”, “my very heart”, and “a dear brother”, thus indicating spiritual equality. Paul accorded both Philemon and Onesimus the status of beloved brothers and equal partners according to their new relationship in Christ, rather than their economic or familial positions in this world.

Sometimes Japanese churches value people according to their worldly position, rather than as brothers and sisters or partners. Furthermore, just as families did in the past, churches are

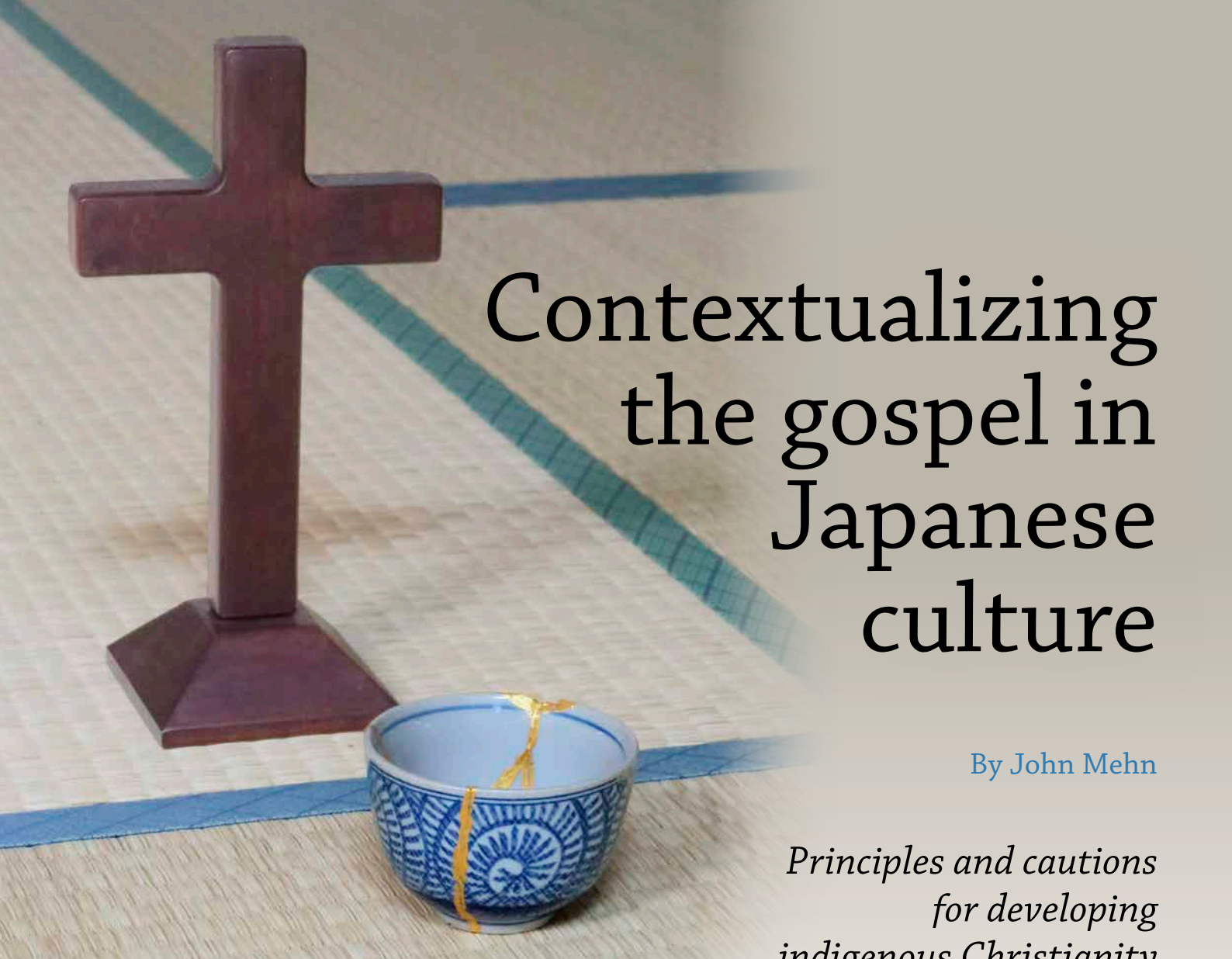
tempted to compare and compete with other churches. They may find status in their numbers, “holiness”, influential members, or the important reputation of their pastor.

But Paul uses intimate and value-bound terms of relating in the book of Philemon. Through this he demonstrates that believers have become a new family. God has given them the status of his children. The national Japanese church would be strengthened with discipleship on relating as the family of Christ.

This collectivist aspect of the Japanese worldview gives Japanese people a tendency to value themselves and others based on their social contributions, to control others through social groups, and to accord status based on social standing. A Christian worldview finds our value in Christ, our everyday behaviour dictated by God’s expectations, and our status as members of God’s own family. The challenge identified here suggests Japanese Christians need discipleship and encouragement focused on how to joyfully live out their identity as children of God in their everyday lives and relationships, and not to fear those who look on. **JH**

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4. Hayao Kawai, “*Nihonjin*” to iu Yamai, *shohan*. ed., Ushio Raiburari (Tokyo: Ushio Shuppansha, 1999), 156-158.
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Contextualizing the gospel in Japanese culture

By John Mehn

Principles and cautions for developing indigenous Christianity

“Japanese churches have largely failed to become Japanese in order to win the Japanese.” What do you think of this Japanese leader’s assertion?

Japanese culture remains one of the greatest challenges in missions. Faithfully communicating the gospel to the minds and hearts of Japanese people demands holistic and rigorous commitment by Christians to share the gospel with relevance in the Japanese context. Being faithful to Scripture while respecting Japanese culture requires profound discernment.

I have written in the past that one of the main reasons Japan is unreached with the gospel is the lack of a contextualized indigenous faith.

As I read, talk to, and email workers in Japan, I realize afresh the need for further clarity regarding contextualiza-

tion. This article will highlight several essential principles of contextualizing the gospel in Japanese culture and some cautions related to the theory and practice.

What is contextualization?

The goal of contextualization is a vibrant community of disciples of Jesus rooted in the indigenous soil of a people. It is much more than solely using the Japanese language and expressions, adjustment and relevance to the Japanese culture, and good cross-cultural communication. Moreau helpfully defines contextualization as “the process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content and praxis of the Christian faith so as to communicate it to the minds and hearts

of [Japanese] . . . The goal is to make the Christian faith *as a whole*—not only the message but also the means of living out of our faith in the local setting—understandable” (36).

Tim Keller writes that “contextualization is not . . . ‘giving people what they want to hear.’ Rather, it is giving people the Bible’s answers, which they may not at all want to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals in arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them” (89).

Essential principles

We must be concerned for both the Scriptures and the context we work in.

Fundamental commitment to Scripture

Our ultimate commitment is to the Scriptures as the only truth and authority for faith and practice. Contextualization demands seeing the cultural context with theological lenses. Christian responses to culture may require the review and possible re-emphasis of several teachings of Scripture, while other responses will require theological development specifically for the Japanese context.

Each of us comes to the Bible from our own cultural perspective, and we gravitate to our preferred sections or cultural biases. We must engage the culture of Japan by viewing the Scriptures with fresh eyes. This freshness will, with the help of the Holy Spirit, enable us to discover new perspectives that include new application. As people desirous of indigenous Japanese churches, we must allow the universal absolute truths of Scripture to challenge us as Christ's disciples and servants.

Respectful commitment to context

Andrew Prince encourages evangelicals to use an "approach [that] takes culture seriously but puts Scripture rather than context as contextualization's starting point" (15). Though it's in a secondary role to Scripture, cultural context should not be ignored.

As we are called by God to love and serve the Japanese people, we must be sympathetic and respectful towards their entire culture, including their practices, values, beliefs, and worldview. We need to present a Christ who is not foreign. Our communication should be clear to their hearts and minds. We should be flexible, as winsome as possible under gospel authority, and connect to the inner hopes and dreams of the Japanese.

Culture is manmade and by nature affected by the fall of man, so every culture has elements that are opposed to God and the Christian worldview. But, due to general revelation and the image of God in man, every culture also has some elements that more easily harmonize with Christian truth. The

difficulty in contextualizing is not just adjusting and adapting to the culture but also discerning what elements are helpful and harmful for that process. Contextualization is a skill that involves much discernment, balance, and focus.

How is contextualization practiced?

What do we do when we hear of Japanese Christians worshiping idols in their home or young believers practicing Japanese divination? To appropriately respond, we need biblical discernment. Many have found Paul Hiebert's widely referenced model of contextualization valuable. These are the implications for our practice of contextualization:

- We do not reject Japanese culture and its practices as completely evil (non-contextualization).
- We also do not accept Japanese culture and its practices as completely good (uncritical contextualization).
- We consider both the evil and good in Japanese culture. We must carefully discern through critical contextualization. This process is: 1) cultural understanding, 2) biblical understanding, 3) critical evaluation, and 4) contextualized practice.

Doing this will help us avoid an alien gospel and compromising our faith through syncretism.

Pitfalls to Avoid

In my experience of working with Japanese people, practicing contextualization means avoiding several pitfalls.

Ignoring your own cultural glasses

Recently I had an email discussion with another Western missionary about the problem of Japanese resistance to the gospel and the lack of contextualizing Christianity for the Japanese.

I wrote, "You and I are Westerners and have Western perspective . . . we are not trying to contextualize our Western Culture with Japanese Culture. We are trying to contextualize the Biblical Worldview and Beliefs with the Japanese Culture."

We must understand that there are problems in both Western culture and Japanese culture when compared to the biblical worldview culture. We must first unpack our own Western culture and the history of Christendom to understand the biblical culture more clearly. We must remove our Western cultural glasses and see in a different way.

For example, we have not thoroughly thought about the influence of the Western church on Japanese church patterns and traditions including worship services and church architecture.

Our responsibility is to be profoundly discerning and wise. The subtle problem of not understanding the snare of our own culture can keep us from faithfully contextualizing our faith for the Japanese. We want Japanese living out the Christian faith in forms and practices that are truly Japanese and totally biblical.

Striving for relevance but becoming unbiblical

To appeal to the Japanese, some Christians advocate adopting beliefs and practices from Japanese traditional religion (Shinto, Buddhism, Taoism). They suggest adopting or embracing rituals and practices in Japan without considering the underlying worldview and beliefs. These suggestions vary from encouraging Christians to attend religious festivals (*matsuri*) to advocating the adoption of recently discovered obscure Shinto names for the Christian God. Simply adopting practices or rituals without considering the hidden belief or worldview supporting it presents possible danger.

Many years ago, I was invited to perform a groundbreaking ceremony for a church attendee's new house. This Christian ceremony replaces the traditional Shinto ceremony. However, instead of a Shinto approach of appeasing local gods, the ceremony emphasizes the biblical creator God's control and ownership of the property and his intimate care for both those who will build the house and ultimately live there. This was an immensely powerful reminder of how our faith speaks

clearly to the needs and practices of Japanese.

We want to be relevant to the Japanese, but there is a danger at the same time of wandering from biblical moorings.

Seeking “the cultural key” with the wrong revelation

Some believe Japanese culture holds the key to ministry, and on the surface, this sounds reasonable. I often hear someone advocate for finding cultural clues or redemptive analogies in the Japanese culture. Like Paul, I also believe we should use all possible means to save the lost (1 Cor. 9:22). Along with exegeting the Scriptures, I am a great advocate of exegeting Japanese culture. However, we must keep in mind the vulnerabilities of any culture.

First, every culture is fallen. The Lausanne Covenant asserts that because “men and women are God’s creatures, some of their culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because they are fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic.” This sin of man refusing to worship God is both individual and corporate in its nature.

Second, God’s revelation in any culture is limited. Romans teaches that God has revealed himself in nature, sometimes identified as “common grace” or general revelation. We can make two mistakes from general revelation: expecting too little from it

or expecting too much. The extent of God’s general revelation in creation and human conscience has limitations and qualifications. Though we believe that God uses general revelation, we must not lose sight of the fact that the clear message of the gospel is most clearly and ultimately found in special revelation (Rom. 10:14).

As we said above, our ultimate commitment is to the Scriptures. Seeking the “ministry key” in the Japanese culture instead of first seeking the key in the Bible can leave us vulnerable.

Pursuing answers in isolation

Contextualization involves everything from theology to everyday practices, but typical Western theological training (often common in Japan) is not designed to address every cultural issue discerned in Japanese religious and cultural beliefs. In my pastoring, when Japanese people had to contend with religious practices like Japanese funerals, I was never totally aware of the biblical or cultural issues. I always referred these people to a Japanese pastor friend, as he was studious and an expert on Japanese religion.

Missionaries have a limited role in this process of contextualization—the key is Japanese people who are exploring the answers in community with others. We all have blind spots, contend with problems like syncretism and theological error, and need to be cau-

tious of excesses. One Japanese person I admire for his work in contextualization, both conceptually and practically, is Dr. Mitsuo Fukuda. I wish we had dozens of leaders just like him. We need a large community, with many Japanese believers and other Asian believers, to continually work on these issues and encourage cultural awareness and engagement.

If we walk alone on this journey of contextualization, we walk into hazards. We need a larger audience of participants that includes scholars and academics in cultural anthropology, sociology of religion, and missiology. And we also need practitioners in Japan, including workers, leaders, and pastors, especially those evangelicals who share the authority of Scripture. We need all of them in dialogue on these issues.

Moving ahead in contextualization

We really cannot avoid contextualization: we either do it well or we do it poorly. If we are committed ultimately to the Scripture and to respect the Japanese culture—understanding its beauty as well as its fallenness—then we need to find balance, avoid blind spots, and not pursue reckless approaches. This difficult process taxes all our abilities, but we should not explore contextualization on our own.

We need to intensify our learning posture. Let’s not stop listening, observing, or being curious about Japanese culture. Let’s ask questions and talk with others, especially Japanese, about cultural issues. Let’s strive not to solve the issues at first but to understand them well. As my college professor said, “Read, read, and re-read.” The list of references on this page is a great starting point for additional study as you continue to learn Scriptures and the culture, which will lead to a more indigenized Japanese faith. **JH**

Photo by Karen Ellrick

Since 1985, **John Mehn** has served as a Converge missionary in cross-cultural church planting and leadership. This article is an edited excerpt from his book, *Sowing the Gospel in Japanese Soil: Understanding Japanese Religious Beliefs*, 2019, (Ch. 7 “Understanding Contextualization,” 115-141). See that publication for more supporting resources.

Recommended references on contextualization

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- » Fukuda, Mitsuo. *Developing a Contextualized Church: As a Bridge to Christianity in Japan*. 1993.
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- » Van Reheenen, Gailyn ed. *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Culture Currents*. 2006.

Communicating the Trinity

By Dan Ellrick

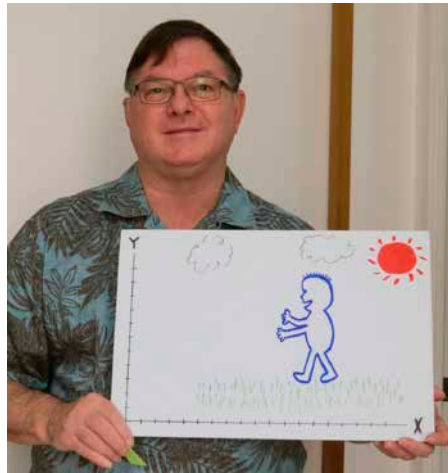
Analogies can help Japanese people understand this essential doctrine

After the worship service, Kazuko¹ and I were sipping green tea and chatting in the church kitchen. She had been a Jehovah's Witness for years, but she had begun to ask questions after her husband recently told her she was being brainwashed. So she decided to visit our Thursday morning Bible study, and eventually she also came on Sundays. Over tea, she told me that she enjoyed the worship services and studying the Bible with the Japanese pastor, but added that she still couldn't accept the "illogical" doctrine of the Trinity. She was surprised when I replied that I thought the Trinity doctrine was both logical and essential for understanding the Bible.

From her years with the Jehovah's Witnesses, Kazuko had come to believe that the Trinity doctrine was illogical, non-biblical, and invented by heretics in the fourth century. She had learned some of the biblical basis for the Trinity from her studies with our Japanese pastor, but she still felt that it was a contradiction of logic and impossible to believe. Even though my Japanese was quite limited at the time, I felt the Holy Spirit prompting me to try to help her to understand. With a piece of paper, a pen, and a pair of scissors in hand, I began to share. What follows below is an expanded version of the lesson I shared that day.

Mr. Flat's World (Taira-kun no Sekai)²

In small groups, you can draw Taira-kun and his world as you speak. For larger groups, I prepare foam board sketches ahead of time (see photos). For details, see my

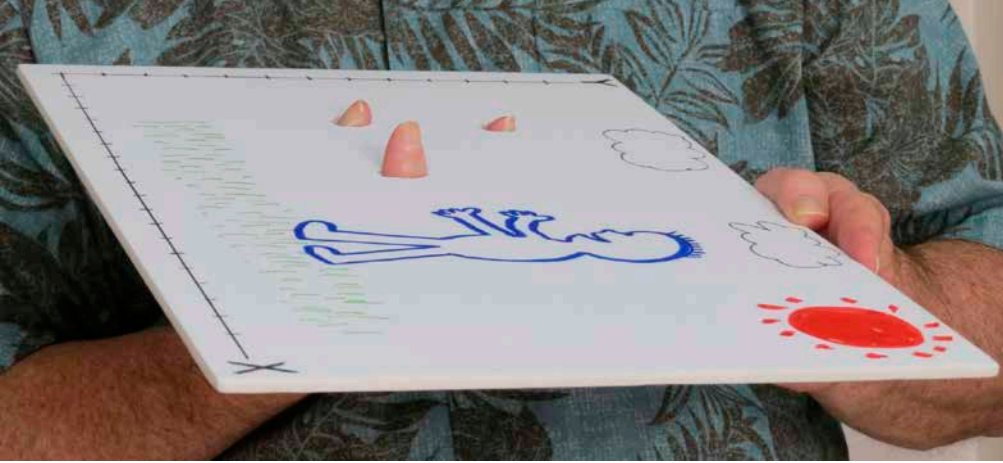


bilingual, three-message series, *The Trinity God*, on YouTube.³

1. Imagine that a young man named Taira-kun lives in a two-dimensional world. (Draw Taira-kun and his world. Include some clouds, grass, and a sun. Make sure everything is depicted as being within a two-dimensional world.⁴)
2. Can you imagine what Taira-kun's world is like? It is a flat world, a two-dimensional plane.
3. If I add a triangle, what does Taira-kun see? He sees only a line. (Draw a triangle and then hold the picture almost edge-on to help people imagine what Taira-kun sees.)

4. What if I add a circle and a square? To Taira-kun, it looks like three lines. (Draw a circle and a square and tilt the picture again. Make sure everyone understands.⁵)
5. Since Taira-kun sees only three lines, how can he tell the difference between the triangle, the square, and the circle? Maybe he will walk around the objects and feel for the corners.
6. What if I cut a hole and put my finger through Taira-kun's world? He will still see only a line since he cannot see above or below the hole. (Cut a hole and put your finger through the hole, then tilt the picture to help people see Taira-kun's view.)
7. What if I cut more holes and move my finger between the holes? Taira-kun will see a line that magically appears, disappears, and then reappears in a different spot. (Cut two more holes and move your finger between the three holes to demonstrate.)
8. What if I put fingers in all three holes? Taira-kun will see three lines. (Put fingers through all three holes and tilt the picture to demonstrate.)





9. Now, imagine that one of my fingers speaks to Taira-kun and says, “You see three lines, but we are really one hand.” I can offer evidence of my power by performing my appearing and disappearing “miracle” and “creating” new triangles and other things in his world, but I cannot prove to Taira-kun that my message is true because he cannot rise above his two-dimensional world to see my hand.
10. Will Taira-kun believe my message? What do you think? (Let people give different answers; encourage them to think about it and share.)
11. Taira-kun cannot see the reality of my hand because he is only two-dimensional. Similarly, we would not be able to see the reality of a four-dimensional being.
12. How many dimensions does God have? We don’t know. Maybe God has infinite dimensions. The difference between God and us is much greater than the difference between us and Taira-kun. The Bible doesn’t tell us how many dimensions God has, but it does reveal that God is transcendent over space and time. The Bible also records many miracles of God, but for God, these miracles may be as simple as when I moved my finger between holes to appear and disappear in Taira-kun’s world.
13. In the Bible, God reveals himself as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. There are many verses that show this—one is Matthew 28:19, where Jesus commanded, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (NIV). There are three persons in

this verse, but “name” is singular. In another place, the Bible says, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

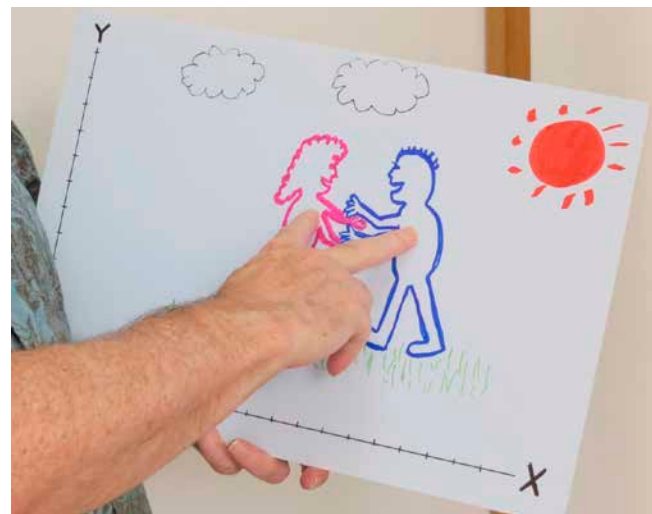
14. God reveals that he is one being but three persons. This is the Trinity—three persons in one God. It is not illogical; it simply recognizes that God is transcendent over our world.
15. While we have Taira-kun with us, let’s learn another lesson. Do you think Taira-kun is lonely? I think he needs a wife. (Draw a wife for Taira-kun.)
16. They are a happy couple, so they hug a lot. But no matter how close they get to each other, I can get even closer to both of them. I can see inside their heads; I can touch their hearts. (Place fingers where their hearts would be.)
17. Similarly, God can see inside our minds and hearts; he can see our thoughts and feelings. God knows us perfectly, inside and outside.
18. When we invite Jesus into our hearts, he is with us forever and he remakes us as new people from the inside out. (Touch the happy couple’s hearts again.)

Conclusion

That day I shared with Kazuko in the church kitchen, she seemed excited by our talk and said she would think about it. A few months later, Kazuko was baptized. Afterwards she thanked me, saying that the Taira’s World lesson had been very helpful. Since then,

I have used variations of this lesson a number of times, and it is always well received.

Like most attempts to explain the Trinity, the Taira’s World lesson relies on an analogy. Like all analogies, it breaks down if examined too closely—for example, my three fingers are parts of my hand, but the members of the Trinity are not “parts” of God. However, the power of the Taira’s World lesson is that it is not really an explanation of the Trinity. Instead, it is an analogy that shows why we have trouble understanding the Trinity. Used together with other Trinity explanations, I think it can be helpful for many Japanese.



Whatever approach is used, I think it is essential that we do our best to help people understand the Trinity. For most of Christian history, the Trinity doctrine has been the clear line of division between true Christianity and pseudo-Christian fringe groups. If we fail to teach the Trinity, we leave our congregations vulnerable to the pseudo-Christian groups of our time. **JH**

1. This name has been changed to protect privacy.
2. I first developed this lesson after reading Edwin Abbot’s classic book, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. Others have developed similar talks with roots in the same book.
3. Direct link to my bilingual series on the Trinity: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL5tX4VD4w87UP143TcxXt8OC5pwO5tZdr> (accessed Sept. 15, 2020).
4. Practice ahead of time to avoid mistakes (e.g., a face should be drawn as a side-view silhouette. Otherwise Taira-kun is looking up out of his two-dimensional world, which is impossible for him).
5. My experience is that Japanese find it easier than Westerners to imagine a two-dimensional world, but almost everyone gets the idea within a few minutes.

Photos submitted by author

Prayer: the best answer to challenging issues

By Sara Wolsey

A powerful way to deal with any challenge is to set up a creative way to pray regularly

One of the most powerful ways to deal with any challenge and any situation is to create a prayer room, a prayer corner, or a prayer file in order to spend extended times fervently bringing to Father God “all kinds of prayers and requests” (Eph. 6:18, NIV). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples to pray in a private room: “But when you pray, go into your most private room, close the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees [what is done] in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:6, AMP). In the 2015 film, *War Room*, Miss Clara converted a closet in her house into a prayer room and plastered the walls with prayer requests and Scripture verses. She called it her “war room” because, as she put it, “In order to stand up and fight the enemy, you need to get on your knees and pray.”¹ As a church council member, I have faced numerous challenges in recent years. After watching this film, I was greatly inspired to create my own prayer room like Miss Clara. As a result, I have seen many supernatural and awe-inspiring answers to countless prayers over the years.

Challenging issue #1: ministering to widows

Financial challenges

It’s clear from scripture that churches are mandated to take care of their widows. God has given me a heart to minister to widows. In Summer 2015, a widowed church member fell and hit her head badly. This resulted in a hospital stay and a large medical bill of over 100,000 yen for an MRI and other medical tests. The church finance committee chairman asked me to

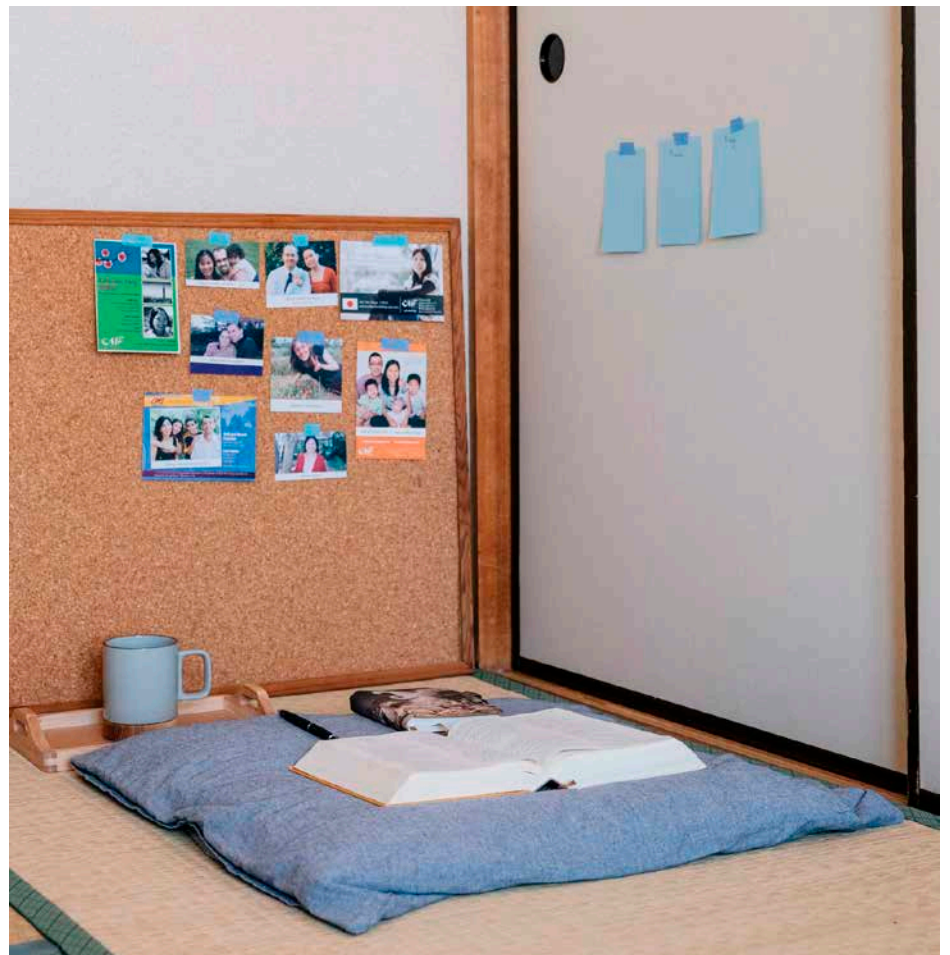
pray for God to provide and bless this widow with extra finances.

God answered this specific prayer by providing 135,000 yen through freewill love offerings from several church members! This need was not widely advertised. Instead, council members quietly prayed about it in their prayer rooms at home. God went above and beyond our expectations of 100,000 yen. We can never out-give God. The widow in question was immensely grateful for our monetary gift and made a full recovery from her fall. I have also prayed for other widowed church members, and God has answered these prayers by provid-

ing clothing, shoes, food, gift vouchers, and money from church members who have felt led by the Holy Spirit to give to the ministry of supporting widows.

Non-Japanese widows

The church council has ministered to non-Japanese widowed church members who had been married to Japanese men. The challenges these widows face include isolation, loneliness, financial difficulties, as well as visa and language challenges. Some of them have children and grandchildren here, so they would prefer to remain in Japan long term. Another challenge included Buddhist in-laws who requested a



Buddhist funeral rather than a Christian funeral for the widow's deceased husband.

Once again, after praying for these needs, God answered in various ways. Some church members felt led to take these widows out for regular meals, especially on special occasions such as Mother's Day and Christmas. As a result of prayer and support from the church, our widows are feeling loved and cared for, and they are also growing greatly in their Christian faith.

Additionally, the church council sought to resolve the issue of funerals in the future by creating Christian funeral documents for all church members to complete if they want to. These documents have given members an opportunity to make specific requests for the arrangements for their Christian funeral.

Challenging issue #2: dealing with suicide

In July 2016, a close Japanese friend in Osaka died by suicide. He was only forty-two years old. We had been good friends for fourteen years, and he had occasionally attended church with me. Just over three years later, another friend in his late thirties also died by suicide. Naturally I suffered shock, grief, loss, and great sadness in the months following, especially as both friends had never shown any outward signs of depression. I continually questioned myself and wished that I had done more to try to prevent their passing, but I had no idea whatsoever of the inward battle of deep depression they had wrestled with. Having gone through the traumatic experience of losing two friends to suicide in three years, I know how challenging suicide can be for family and friends left behind. Some of my friends have also lost friends this way. But my friends and I now know that God and his Holy Spirit will help relatives and friends through such a traumatic experience.

Useful Prayer Room Resources

- » **Operation Japan Prayer Guide:** 5th Edition 2019 is available on Amazon in Japan and US
- » **Open Doors resources:** to pray for the persecuted church
<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/resources>
- » **"The Believer's War Room—Dr. Charles Stanley"** video:
<https://youtu.be/juCDFnel90E>
- » **"Making a Prayer Room"** video playlist:
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLhah-Sifa7NK0LmID55AGyIDqvCp-3VjH>

To help in our healing and recovery, my friends and I spent long times of prayer in our prayer rooms. We spent more time reading the Bible and worshipping God. We talked to friends a lot more. I still miss my two friends who died, and often think of them, but as a result of prayer and support from the Holy Spirit and other friends, God is healing my heart. I will continue to pray for the families that these two young men left behind.

Challenging issue #3: the global persecuted church

In Spring 2020, I posted some beautiful Kansai postcards of encouragement to two Christian children of a church pastor in Mexico, where Christians are sometimes persecuted for their faith. I also prayed for them. At that time these children were required to live separately from their Christian parents due to severe persecution.

This past summer God answered my prayers and the prayers of other Christians around the world, and this Mexican family is now reunited and living together in the same house.

Preparing a prayer room

A prayer room or corner, or a prayer file will help you to pray more intentionally and will make it an exciting daily routine. Items could include:

- A small room or closet.
- Bible. God will often speak through the Bible during extended times of prayer.

- Prayer guide. One of the best is *Operation Japan* (reviewed in the Summer 2020 issue of *Japan Harvest*).
- Prayer journal or file and a pen for keeping a record of prayer requests and answers.
- Sticky notes for posting prayer requests on the walls.
- Posters of Scripture verses: enlarged key scriptures posted on the walls will build your faith.
- Map of the world: for praying for various countries and the persecuted church.
- List of names of not-yet-believers you are praying for.
- Photographs of missionaries you support.
- Prayer jar for storing all your answered prayers. It will be a great blessing to take them out and reread them at the end of every year!

There should be no phones so that you don't get distracted. If you don't have a room or closet, a corner of a room or a portable prayer file will work just as well. At the end of 2019, YouTuber Alexis Ashley made two prayer binders for 2020: a larger one for the whole year and a smaller one to be carried around for daily use. Ashley's subject sections for her binder included:

- praise
- confession
- scripture
- spouse, family, friends, etc.
- church
- reaching beyond
- priorities
- goals²

I pray that in creating a prayer room or prayer file, you will worry less and will pray more intentionally and regularly. Your relationship with the Lord will be strengthened, your faith will be emboldened, your prayer life will be more vibrant, and you will witness some amazing answers to prayer. **JH**

1. Wikipedia contributors, "War Room (film)," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=War_Room_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=War_Room_(film)) (accessed May 22, 2020).
2. Alexis Ashley, "Prayer Binder War Binder Set Up 2020," YouTube video, December 17, 2019, <https://youtu.be/gx9gy-5k6xw> (accessed Oct. 19, 2020).

Photo by Alex Fung

Sara Wolsey first came to Japan from the United Kingdom in 1998 as an Assistant English Teacher in public schools. Sarah teaches English in Kansai and is the secretary of the Osaka International Church Council.

Working for the

By Jack Garrett

Ministering in Japan is hard, but if we keep our eyes fixed on God, we'll be able to remain faithful

The world operates on “What’s in it for me?” Christians can get caught in that trap, too, but can feel horribly guilty about it when they recognize that motivation. The good news is there’s essentially unlimited reward for serving the Lord, even if the world doesn’t recognize it.

Serving in Japan is hard

Japan is known as “the graveyard of missionaries,” and there are countless examples to back that up. I speak from experience, since my parents arrived in 1934 and 1935, respectively, and are literally buried in Kokura, Kitakyushu. The expression, however, doesn’t come from physical graves so much as it does from despair, discouragement, and lost motivation.

New missionaries often arrive with great expectations of learning the language in a year and then wearing out a baptistry or two with new converts (you can stop laughing now). The truth is, the Japanese language is one of the world’s most difficult, at least for English speakers. My father was noted for his expertise, and he often had Japanese people asking him about particular kanji. But he confessed to me that his Japanese reading was quite slow, and I know he had a slight accent right to the end.

I really spoke Japanese before I did English, but the only Japanese schooling I had was kindergarten, so my constructions (sentences, etc.) can seem unnatural to Japanese. And don’t even ask about my reading and writing! Even for someone as gifted as my father or with as many advantages as I have, Japanese can be very difficult.


And then there’s the matter of converts. On at least one occasion my father prostrated himself on the floor and cried out, “God, if I’m what’s in the way of revival in Japan, then take me out of the way!” He was deeply loved and respected by the Japanese, even receiving an award from the emperor at the time of his death, but the response that he desired—of whole-hearted commitment to Christ—happened far less often than he wanted. If you are tied to numbers, Japan is not the place for you!

Missionaries—and foreigners in general—are often seen as interesting and are even sought out, but there seems to be a wall keeping Japanese from realizing that the things they are hearing truly apply to them and are a matter of eternal life and death. We may feel we are listened to or ignored; accepted or rejected. After all, we are *gaijin*, outsiders! I still wrestle with it.

I was born here and have lived most of my years here, but still I am accepted as Japanese only by people who know me well, and often, not even by them. At the same time, there’s a sense that we are dearly loved in this city. Given my wife’s health issues (see my article in the Autumn 2020 issue of *Japan Harvest*, p. 38), one time I was talking with someone from a local funeral company and mentioned that, were she to die, we would need the auditorium of the Civic Center for her funeral, because so many people love her. He replied, “No, you would need the Arena,” (a local sports facility).

Another factor that makes serving here hard is the simple reality of the mobility of modern life. Over the years I have baptized close to one hundred people, but our current Sunday morning attendance is around ten. We have people literally around the world! I even had a pastor in Osaka write to thank me for sending him such a good, dedicated believer, even though, if I’m not mistaken, she has married and is currently living with her husband in the US. Of course, job transfers aren’t the only reason for people leaving. We once had a number of people leave the church all at once, and they never did let us know what the issue was. Things like that are

ultimate reward



painful indeed. Again, if your focus is on numbers, you're in the wrong place.

God calls us to faithfulness

But, God continues to call people to Japan, and God is the very best boss! However, we need to pay attention to his “Terms of Service,” as service providers these days like to say. God is looking for faithfulness from us. Jesus said some remarkable things about our serving as his representatives:

“He who listens to you listens to Me; he who rejects you rejects Me; but he who rejects Me rejects him who sent Me” (Luke 10:16 MEV).

“Whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me” (John 13:20 NIV).

“He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives the One who sent Me” (Matt. 10:40 BSB).

In these three verses we have three important verbs: listen, accept, and receive. We could have a long theological discussion of all the nuances, but the fact remains that Jesus authorizes us to be his agents, and we must not forget that.

Need for prayer support

Many times we have seen people leave Japan feeling defeated. However,

what was defeated was not the kingdom of God or even their ministry, but rather their conception of what their ministry “ought to be.” Such defeat focuses on man rather than on God. I have fallen for that trick of the enemy myself, and it indeed feels awful. Prayer support is essential for every believer, but especially for every missionary. We had a period of several years in which we had lost our prayer support, and before I knew it, all my other activities (I’m self-supporting) had taken precedence and the church was no more than a hobby. God used a faithful believer to speak a strong word to me about that, and then God put me in a situation where I was again able to assemble a group in the US who would pray for me here in Japan.

There are rewards

There is much hardship in serving in Japan, but occasionally we come across rich, fertile soil. We have a lady in this church who had severe clinical depression—she was unable to come out of her house. But now she’s the most on-fire, reliable person you could hope to have in your church. Because of the dramatic change in her, her brother-in-law and then her husband both committed themselves to Christ. Her younger daughter and her husband are

also Christians, and we have assurance that it is only a matter of time before her older daughter and her son (shortly to graduate from college) will join the rest of their physical family in the family of God. That family quite literally makes up for a lot of the troubles we’ve endured.

All of that said, the ultimate rewards are in our Lord’s hands. As Hebrews reminds us, “So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (Heb. 10:35-36 NIV). I have every assurance that when my parents arrived before the Lord in heaven they heard, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness” (Matt. 25:21 NIV). I can think of no greater reward, and it will make every sacrifice, every sorrow, every trial fade into total insignificance. As Paul tells us, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Cor. 4:17 NIV). **JH**

Jack Garrett graduated from Carson-Newman College and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He’s married to Cathy; they have lived and ministered in Omura since September 1981. They have two daughters.

I compare myself to you, and I'm sorry

By Robert Adair

How can we overcome our tendency to silently compete with one another in ministry?

One evening at the Fall 2019 JEMA Refresh Retreat, a fellow participant introduced a few of us to the game “Spot It!” (By the way, these retreats are great, so go if you ever have the chance.) Once I understood the rules, my posture changed, and I leaned as close to the table as I could, deciding to win. It wasn't long before other participants were giving me a hard time (in good fun) about my competitiveness.

I know that I am more competitive than most people. I have also had enough conversations with fellow missionaries to see that competition and comparison are common struggles. They are more universal than we would like to admit and they are awkward to discuss.

Competition in personal ministry

Language is one area where we tend to compare and compete. I am not proud to say that the following inner dialogue regularly happens when I am in a Japanese-language situation with another foreigner. They open their mouth and I . . .

A. Feel relief or pride when I realize my language ability is better.

Or

B. Feel insecure or embarrassed when I realize their language ability is better.

This is wrong, yet quite common for many of us. No matter where we are language-wise, many of us non-native speakers feel some degree of insecurity about our current ability. This seems to

be consistent between missionaries in language school all the way up to veterans with several decades of ministry experience. I am aware of this tendency, yet I struggle to break the cycle.

The same comparative tendencies come up in other areas of ministry. I am quick to share or defend my fruit when describing my ministry. I tell my stories in a way to make sure my contribution doesn't sound less than others'. I judge people based on their support level. I compare theological backgrounds, ministry models, and sending organizations.

I don't want to give the picture that I am continually sitting around judging people. I'm not. But these thoughts and comparisons do regularly pop into my mind, and they affect my emotions and authentic relationships with others. I wish they didn't.

Is the answer appropriate vulnerability? I am not advocating transparency in the form of sharing everything with everyone. Still, I wonder if I can overcome insecurity about language ability by admitting to others my temptation in this area. While it is undoubtedly uncomfortable, does discussing it make a difference?

Competition between our organizations

This dynamic also plays out on an organizational level. Since September 2019, I have been serving as the director of my organization's missionary team. I want to see revival come to Japan, but the secret truth is that I hope that our people get the credit. I want to partner with other organizations and churches, but I want our people to

lead. I want to work in the same region as other groups, but I want our missionaries to have the best placements. I want your Japanese to be great, but I don't want it to be better than our missionaries' language skills.

I cognitively believe that we are one body, and when anyone in missions “wins,” we all win. At the same time, I wrestle with feelings of competition, jealousy, comparison, insecurity, and inferiority. This is the antithesis of JEMA's vision, and I grieve over how often my heart and mind bend in these directions.

Here are examples of how I have struggled with organizational comparison. The questions I asked myself in these situations are in brackets.

- Reading an article online promoting another ministry's work. (*Why aren't they writing about our work?*)
- Noticing the size discrepancy between our organization and others. (*Why can't we recruit more missionaries?*)
- Serving at a church alongside missionaries from another group and being tempted to compare our fruit. (*Why aren't we seeing as many of our friends baptized as they are?*)
- Wanting to collaborate with other organizations in our prefecture—but desiring our missionaries to get the best placements and credit for making things happen. (*What if something cool happens, but we don't get any credit?*)



My friends in the organizations alluded to above are doing excellent work. I am not proud of the thoughts and questions I listed above. Although I didn't fixate on these questions, I realized that I easily became insecure at the idea of another organization's success. I don't want to live this way. I want to hear about something organization X is doing well and celebrate it without the "but we," "what about," or "why not us" questions.

Rejoicing with those who rejoice

Following the 3.11 triple disaster, I had the privilege of hearing many stories in Miyagi. The theme of comparison came out in many of those conversations. Romans 12:15—"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (NIV)—served as a key verse as we navigated those difficult and complicated discussions.

It is relatively easy for us to mourn with those who mourn. But I wish I had known how to rejoice appropriately with people

who had a reason to rejoice. I think we often face the same tension when our organizations interact. I can sit down and listen to a missionary's struggles, a problematic personnel situation, or someone's pain, and respond appropriately. It impacts me emotionally, but it doesn't threaten me. Their struggle doesn't challenge my success (or lack thereof).

But the sad truth is that if you tell me that your church plant is exploding and you don't know what to do with all the new believers, I may not know what to do. Intellectually I know you're telling me good news, but my emotions aren't always in sync with my beliefs. Paul is calling the church to be equally empathetic when responding to someone's situation, whether in good

or challenging times. It's not about me. I need to grow in this Romans 12:15 mentality.

Who am I trying to please?

In January 2020, I attended a meeting with several Japanese leaders and a few missionaries. We were dreaming, praying, and strategizing over how Japan can practically get to 2% Christian. My Japanese was probably the worst in the room, and I felt embarrassed that I couldn't speak as clearly as I thought I should.

What am I doing here? Did what I just say even communicate? They must think it's a joke that I am here. These were a few of the thoughts that bounced around inside my head from time to time. Then at other times, I would oscillate to feeling proud that I was included in the discussion. *Very few missionaries are in the room, and I am one of them. I'm pretty awesome.* My view of self was dependent on how I assumed others in the room perceived me.

Mike Wilson, a friend and colleague who passed away two years ago, often talked about this temptation. He was quick to remind us that we are all serving an audience of one. It does not matter how I am doing in comparison to anyone else. What matters is how I am doing before God.

Competition and comparison express themselves differently in each of us. I love my organization, but I want my joy to come from the advancement of God's kingdom in Japan, regardless of who gets the credit. For us to work together on micro and macro levels, we must move beyond the insecurities and pride that cause us to compete. To see Japan transformed by the gospel, we need to minister as one church (both among missionaries and the broader church in Japan). I am sorry that I still struggle with comparison and pray that, more and more, we will learn to "be one" (John 17:21). **JH**

Robert Adair serves in Miyagi prefecture through a partnership with Shioyama Bible Baptist Church and as the missionary director for Asian Access. He is husband to Roberta, father of four energetic boys, and enjoys spending time in the mountains.



When God doesn't show up

By Mark Benton

Hanging in there when it feels like God has deserted you

“Mr. Benton, I’m sorry to tell you this, but your wife has ovarian cancer.” She had undergone surgery that day for what we thought were harmless adhesions, but the doctor found something else. I was in shock. Going home from the hospital that night in 2007 to pick up our three children, I felt like I was traveling in a tunnel—a dark, winding course that only ran deeper, no light at the end, only more darkness as it plunged into the earth.

With every ounce of strength, she fought hard. The doctors gave her three to six months, but my wife was not going to give up. We had three children (at the time our older son was 16 and twins aged 10), all adopted, one with special needs. They needed a mother, and I needed a wife. No way was she going to leave this earth. She endured four major surgeries and nearly 50 rounds of horrible chemotherapy. She lost her hair, became bloated and then lost weight, got sick repeatedly, and always felt tired. More than eight months

were spent in hospital beds. We cried and prayed together.

We had been called to Japan together. We built a family and ministered together for 35 years. And then she was gone. After nearly six years of fighting, God took her. We had faith and prayer warriors around the world supporting us, but it didn’t work. She died.

What do we do when God doesn't show up?

How do we respond when life turns out differently than expected? My wife and I had given up careers and large



church ministries to come to Japan. We loved to help and share the gospel with Japanese people. We planted churches together. “Why me, God?” I screamed more than once, as my life collapsed around me. “What am I supposed to do?”

John the Baptist is one of the greatest men who ever lived. We know him as a New Testament prophet—that voice in the wilderness calling for Israel to repent, preparing a path for Jesus. After baptizing Jesus, John was not the focal point, but rather Jesus stepped up and began his amazing public ministry. John was not concerned about that; he proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah and in no way wanted people to focus on him rather than on God’s Savior.

But then John was arrested and put in jail. There was John, no longer able to walk about freely and do what he felt God was leading him to do. Visitors came and talked about Jesus and the amazing things that were happening. Although the stories were good, some parts didn’t sit right with him. Maybe because of his confinement, he was unable to fully perceive what was happening. Jesus was different from what John had expected. He began to doubt and wonder if his cousin was truly the One.

A change in circumstances, whether good or bad, can have a big impact on our faith in God or what we think he has called us to do. Especially during a hard time, it’s easy to doubt.

John asked a favor of his disciples. I’m paraphrasing here: “Friends, Jesus is doing some good things. But I’m wondering if he’s truly the One I was talking about. Go check him out and get back to me.” Imagine if you were one of John’s disciples talking to Jesus. What would you want to hear to encourage the great prophet? “Yes, I’m the One. And tonight, I’m going to break him out!”

Instead, Jesus simply says, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the

dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” Jesus adds, “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me” (Matthew 11:4-6 NIV).

In the dark days of my wife’s long cancer battle, I wondered why God had deserted me. What had I done wrong? I wasn’t perfect, but was I that bad? When he didn’t show up to heal my wife, it became apparent that God wasn’t going to do what I desperately wanted. But ultimately I learned an important truth: Blessed is the person who does not turn away because of something that God has or hasn’t done.

John’s disciples had to return to the dark, dank cell and tell him: “Yeah, good things are happening, but you’re not going to be involved. He just

Blessed is the person who does not turn away because of something that God has or hasn’t done.

wants you to hang in there.” Jesus fully acknowledged how great John was and referred to him as the Elijah of his generation. Yet, he let him sit in prison until he was beheaded.

Take courage in God

When we face difficult times, we want God to tell us why. We beg him to change our circumstances. Unfortunately, we usually don’t learn why until much later in life, and he often doesn’t help us escape our hard circumstances. I lost the wife I loved for 35 years, the mother of our three children, my best friend and ministry partner.

Maybe you’re going through a difficult time now. You came to Japan full of ideas, but they didn’t work. You saw some success, but now the situation has gone sideways. You’ve lost hope. I can’t advise you what to do next, but I can tell you the same thing that Jesus told John: don’t give up believing. Your personal circumstances have no rela-

tionship to how God feels about you. Proof of God’s love for you is found on the cross.

About halfway into those dark years with cancer, I talked to a good brother who had gone through a similar situation with his wife. He helped me accept my fate. Instead of saying “God will heal her, don’t stop praying!” he said, “Mark, she’s going to die. Get ready for it.” Though painful, he helped open my eyes. I was able to get my mind out of the prison cell of suffering and focus on what was important, caring for my wife and kids. It allowed me to remember all the good things God had done in our lives and rejoice. I was able to remember the times when God answered my prayers, which built my faith into believing that no matter what happened, he was in control and had a purpose. It enabled me to survive and now, dare I say, flourish.

Take courage in the fact that God has not changed, even if he’s not doing what you want him to. He has not abandoned you but has a different plan. Look outside of your circumstances and see God at work. When God is silent, it does not mean that he’s absent. Your faith will ultimately result in great things for the kingdom of God. **JH**

Postscript: My wife passed away in 2013 at home after nearly six years of fighting. It took time, but our family recovered and began to move on. I remained in Japan, and God has since opened wonderful doors. I met a woman who became my second wife. Together, we formed a team from our local church and planted a new church, which is doing well in Kansai. If you are going through something similar, feel free to contact me. I’d love to talk. E-mail: mark@grapevinechurch.jp

Photo submitted by author

Mark Benton led a team from the US to Kansai in 1991. Since then he has been involved in church planting and pastoring, and is a member of The Foursquare Church. He serves with Reach Japan.

Child safety in Japan-based ministries

By David Marshall

Have you taken steps to protect the children in your ministry? Are you prepared for what to do if an allegation is made against you?

Reaching children with the good news has been a part of Christian ministry since the days of the apostles. The laughter of small people is infectious, and the faith they profess has a beauty different to the faith of adults. Christian ministries that reach children are appreciated in many places of the world as valuable to the communities they serve. Many Christians came to faith as children.

Unfortunately, children have not always been safe in such environments. Allegations against Christians and Christian ministries of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse as well as neglect have come to light in many countries, including Japan. Missionaries are not exempt from committing such evils, nor are pastors, youth workers, church members, or volunteers. Neither are missionaries exempt from false allegations. Are you prepared?

Steps to protect children

Taking steps to protect the children in our ministries is vital for two reasons. First, it shows the community around us that our behaviours are consistent with the gospel message we preach. Second, it protects the children in our ministries from people who would seek to harm them to satisfy their twisted needs. While each ministry will end up with approaches that suit their contexts, there are common steps that all should take, regardless of their circumstances.

Building an approach to child safety starts with creating a culture of belief. The adults in the ministry need to

believe that this could happen among them or to the children they serve. The abuser could be one of them. Or it could be happening to the child at his or her home or school and the ministry context happens to be the place it is brought to light. These issues are real, and we need to be prepared to respond to them.

Knowing your community resources is also essential. What are the laws in Japan? Are there more specific procedures in place in the prefecture or municipality you work in? How do you contact Child Consultation Centre (児童相談所) in your community if you have a concern? Many of these resources are available in English, but you do need to know where you can get help, particularly if you are an independent missionary or in a small localised ministry (see the box on the next page for information on Japanese resources).

For the non-Japanese people in your ministry, you have another layer of concern. What are the laws in your home country? Does your home country have an agreement with Japan that could see you prosecuted for breaking the law in your home country, even if what you do is not a crime here in Japan? Many countries have such an agreement. You need to know your legal situation in both countries. Contact your embassy or consulate to find out what safeguards they recommend for you or investigate their websites for country-specific information.

The Child Safety and Protection Network is one Christian organization that works with over 100 missions and

Christian international schools around the world to raise awareness of these issues and to train personnel in effective procedures. Your mission, if you have one, should seriously consider joining a group like this one for the encouragement, training, and networking provided (individuals can join, but they prefer organisations). In these more difficult times, their training is available online. There are a number of links on their site to other ministries and resources that will help you plan and prepare.¹



Child Safety & Protection Network

Elements of an effective child safety program

According to the Child Safety and Protection Network, there are seven elements of an effective child safety program. A short explanation is provided for each one. More information is available at their website.

- 1. Governance.** All the leaders have to be in agreement that this is important. Ensure there is a written policy, and maintain a code of conduct to be followed by the adults in the ministry or organisation.
- 2. Definitions.** The terms used need to be clear to all parties and regularly discussed.
- 3. Screening.** All the adults in the ministry should have their history checked as far as possible. Note:

while many countries allow independent background checks on potential employees or volunteers, Japan has privacy laws that limit what is possible. You can at least request to view a criminal history, but only the person themselves can ask for it, not a third party. For example, here are the Tokyo instructions: https://www.keishicho.metro.tokyo.jp/multilingual/english/finding_services/applications/criminal_record.html

4. **Training.** All the adults in the ministry should be trained in the protocols and the reasons for them. In addition, and as far as possible, the parents and children should have some of the procedures explained. This is a developing area in Japan, so acceptance and understanding will vary by location.
5. **Childcare protocols.** Written protocols are adapted to each ministry in its context. Such protocols are centred around the three principles

of child safeguarding: reducing isolation, increasing accountability, and avoiding situations where there is an inappropriate balance and/or use of power.

6. **Response process.** The policy should have a clear plan about what to do if allegations or incidents come to light.

It will not leave any room for individual discretion about what can be ignored, but rather have a group that decides what needs to be done, up to and including referral to Japanese authorities—either child welfare, the police, or both.

7. **Member care.** A way is needed to care for those involved in child safety incidents, including the children concerned, their parents, and those who looked after them.

Thankfully, most of our ministries proceed without incident in these areas,

Japanese resources for child safety

- » A brief report from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/human/child/initialreport/introduction.html>)
- » A translation of the Japan Child Welfare Act (http://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/law/detail_main?id=11&vm=2)
- » A summary by the US Library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/law/help/child-protection-law/japan.php>)

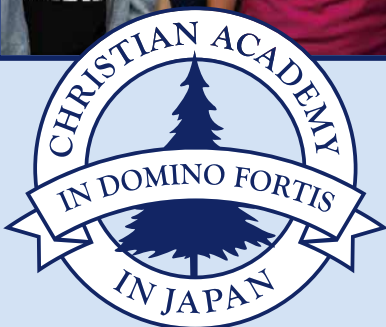
but there are enough tragic stories of children not being protected by the adults around them to make this an issue we all need to take seriously. Your ministry needs to have a plan. You need to have a plan. The children in your care need you to have a plan. **JH**

1. "Public Resources," Child Safety & Protection Network, <https://cspn.memberclicks.net/public-resources> (accessed September 11, 2020).

David Marshall has served with OMF International since 2000. Originally from Australia and married to Wendy, he serves as a teacher and administrator at Christian Academy in Japan. He's the child safety officer for OMF Japan.

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An impossible task

By Hoi-Yan Shea

If evangelism feels impossible, remember that with God, all things are possible

Evangelism is hard. As missionaries, we have the challenging task of proclaiming the gospel to a lost nation.

I have been working in Japan as a missionary for seven years, and it still terrifies me every time I share God's Word with people. The God of the Bible is so contrary to Japanese thinking and so foreign to their worldview. They are taught evolution from a young age. They view religion as irrational and contradictory to science. Traditional Japanese religions, with their belief in eight million gods, are deeply entrenched in their traditions and community life, especially in rural areas. There is much suspicion towards non-Japanese religions due to the impact of cults. The barriers are countless. No wonder sharing the gospel often feels like pushing against an immovable wall.

I have been meeting with three non-Christian friends to practise English and to read the Bible every other week. Even though I am a missionary and I love spending time with my friends, I confess that I dread the Bible time. I dread the polite silences—"I don't know what to say. It all seems unreal"—the subtle ridicule in the tone

of their voice which seems to suggest, "Are you really in your right mind to believe all this stuff?" and their outright dismissals—"This is no different to the Japanese mythologies." I am constantly tempted to be ashamed of what I believe in.

One evening, we were discussing the story of Noah.

I typically begin discussion with the question, "What did you think of the story? Do you have any questions?"

By then, these friends were quite comfortable in expressing their views, and it did not take long before there was a lively and heated discussion.

"Well, to be honest, I feel that God was a bit harsh and unreasonable to destroy everyone and everything."

"Yeah, what about the innocent babies?"

"And the animals. What wrong had they done?"

"And didn't God create everything including human beings? (We had recently read about creation.) How is this any different to parents killing their children because they had disobeyed or didn't meet their expectations?"

As I listened, many thoughts and counterarguments began to churn in

my mind. My instinct was to argue back, present my case, and insist on the credibility of my view. Instead, I replied, "Sure. I can see your point." It was all I could do to keep a check on myself and to acknowledge their opinions.

At one point during the discussion, Yumi paused and asked, "What do you think? Actually, I'm curious to know what *you* think about it as a Christian."

The three of them looked at me.

I was caught off guard. My heartbeat quickened as I offered a quick prayer: *Lord, give me the words to say.* I took a deep breath, then proceeded to explain my view with faltering words.

"Well, as we read previously, I believe that God made everything, including us. He rules over the world and gives us life and all that we need. Consequently, he deserves our respect and obedience." I paused to see their response. They were expressionless, so I continued, "When we don't acknowledge him as God or obey him, we deserve his punishment. In fact, if God had completely destroyed everything, he would have done right, and we could not have complained."

Proclaiming the gospel is not merely a matter of transmitting words

(although that is important). There is so much going on beneath the surface. It is a clash of worldviews. It is an attack on human independence and idolatry of self. It is an invasion into satanic forces and rule. No wonder we are met by so much resistance. And we must also deal with our own pride and inadequacies.

After responding to Yumi's question, I paused. I had no idea how much of it they had understood.

"I get it."

Yumi's response caught me by surprise.

"Now I understand that your response and interpretation is different to ours because your view of God is different. For us Japanese, God is not involved in our everyday life. We might pay a visit to the temple once or twice a year. Otherwise, we just turn to our gods when we are desperate for help. But for you, God is a great and an absolute being. And he is relevant to your everyday life."

I breathed out in amazement, thinking, *Wow. She's hit the nail on the head.* Yumi could not have understood as much had it not been revealed by the Spirit.

As missionaries, we have an impossible task, but we have a God and

Even though we may fail, God's Word does not.

Saviour for whom nothing is impossible. As Paul wrote, "Not that we are competent in ourselves . . . but our competence comes from God" (2 Cor. 3:5 NIV).

God has promised that as his Word goes out, it will accomplish the purpose for which he sent it (Is. 55:11). Even though we may fail, God's Word does not. The seeds of the gospel will

bear fruit in time—whether people are saved or not, whether conversion takes five, ten, or fifty years. That is not for us to say.

We are nothing more than broken vessels, but God in his mercy has chosen to reveal the glorious gospel of his perfect son through our brokenness, therefore we do not lose heart.

"What I really appreciate about you is that you listen and acknowledge views that are different to yours," Yumi said. I felt ashamed. Even during that evening, I could think of multiple times I failed to listen, spoke too quickly, and tried to insist on sharing my views with them. I was humbled and praised God that he had used me despite my pride and inadequacies. **JH**

Photo by Mirei Kondō

Hoi-Yan Shea has served in Japan with OMF since 2012. She was born in Japan and grew up in Japan/Australia. She is currently doing church planting in Yahaba in Iwate Prefecture.

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By Tim Clark

A powerful tool for ministering to people who are experiencing marriage breakdown that is now available in Japanese.

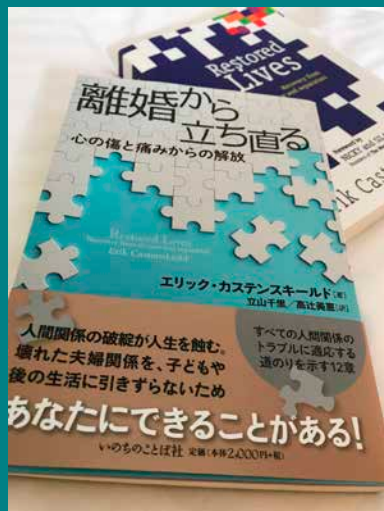
One day in 2001, I was surprised to see that my friend Toshi* was not wearing his wedding band. I had admired the good relationship that he and his wife seemed to have, so I asked about the ring. “On Wednesday, Maki suggested we divorce,” Toshi replied. “I agreed, so next Monday we’ll go to city hall and do the paperwork.”

I was saddened not only by what he said, but by how casually he approached this heavy topic.

Conversations with Toshi over the following year left me wishing that I—and the church—had more to offer this non-Christian friend.

Fourteen years later, my wife and I read *Restored Lives: Recovery from Divorce and Separation*, a book on divorce recovery written from a Christian perspective but in a way that is easy for non-Christians to read. We gave it to English-reading friends who had experienced divorce, and they were impressed by how deeply helpful it was for them. Word of Life Press agreed about the need for this resource and published the Japanese version in 2018.

Here are three reasons why we highly recommend this as a resource for



This book is a part of a ministry in the UK called Restored Lives (restoredlives.org). They run a recovery course in various locations, but the ministry has expanded rapidly this year as churches have begun offering it online due to the pandemic.

Restored Lives: Recovery from Divorce and Separation

By Erik Castenskiold, (Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, an imprint of Lion Hudson plc), 256 pp.

離婚から立ち直る: 心の傷と痛みからの解放
エリック・カステンスキールド(著)
立山千里・高辻美恵(訳)

friends who are contemplating or have experienced divorce:

1. The author sensitively encourages those who have any possibility of saving their marriages to do so.
2. The author writes from his own experience with divorce. He shares the shock of finding out his wife was unfaithful and how he experienced despair, which then led to God’s profound work of healing. He tells of waiting for his wife to return and of moving on after it became clear that she would not. One friend

who read *Restored Lives* said that it was helpful to read a book by an author “who could connect with me because of our similar life experiences.” This friend shared that other books he had read were by authors who had “better success in relationships” than himself. As he read the book he often thought, “Wow, that’s exactly how I felt.”

3. *Restored Lives* is a highly practical tool that can be useful as we minister to friends who are experiencing separation and divorce. Resources like chapter one’s “Journey of Recovery” diagram can stimulate good conversation and help us minister hope to friends who are in pain.

As Christians serving in a culture where shame is felt keenly, we can be safe people for friends to share their own stories of relationship breakdown. *Restored Lives* can be helpful as we seek to bring God’s healing and hope into the conversation and see friends experience more of the life that God has for them. **JH**

*Name changed.

Tim Clark is church planting with his wife Wakako in the Oizumi-gakuen station area in Tokyo. Their ministry is focused on developing and multiplying Community Groups. The Clarks are with Harvest Alliance International. Tim is originally from Oregon, US.



Author Erik Castenskiold presenting the “Journey of Recovery” diagram in Kobe. He traveled to Japan when the Japanese book was released, and spoke to 175 leaders in three cities.

Using dialogue in nonfiction

Here's a way to take your writing to greater heights

Dialogue in nonfiction transports us to a different time and place where the reader can experience the story, like in a movie. Used with discernment, dialogue can boost your writing to a new level.

Some people hesitate to use dialogue in nonfiction—after all, most of us don't record our conversations. So writing dialogue can feel like we're not being truthful. If you haven't recorded a conversation, there are other ways to use dialogue.

Retelling a true story

The most obvious is by retelling an actual story. In this case you may think you have to use actual quotes, but this is hard if you don't have a perfect memory. Instead you can use representative dialogue. You don't remember the exact wording, so you recreate it as well as you can. Debbie Adams recreated dialogue when she wrote this in *Japan Harvest*:

"We have heard from Arkansas: your daughter has been in an accident and she didn't make it."¹

Most readers will assume that some of the dialogue is representative.² When you retell a story to a friend, your listener understands that you're not quoting verbatim. This is a piece of dialogue that Judith Ricken wrote in a *Japan Harvest* article about an exchange at her local immigration office:

"Look I have number 2011 but I don't need it anymore because I have already got everything done, would you like to have it?"³

Do you intuitively understand that she's telling you approximately what was said?

But be careful not to make up comments or conversations that never happened—that is fiction.

Broad representative dialogue

A broader version of representative dialogue is this by Levi Booth:

When I meet a Japanese person, the conversation after the basic greetings often goes like this:

Them: "Wow, your Japanese is good."

Me: "No, no, no! I have to study more."⁴

Now that's not an actual conversation, but represents conversations many of us have had. By relating a shared experience, he used it to great effect to draw us in.

Imagine reading the gospels without any dialogue. For example, the story about the paralysed man would look different without Jesus' words (see Mark 2).

Tips to avoid mistakes

Here are other guidelines for writing dialogue:

- Share only what you need to communicate your message. Avoid sharing too much.
- Write realistic dialogue. This is hard. Writers are usually advised to spend time in public places "eavesdropping" on real conversations. That's hard if you don't live in a country that speaks the language you write in, but try it next time you overhear a relevant conversation.
- Write well. You can be too realistic in replicating dialogue. Good writing is not exactly how people talk. When we talk, we hesitate and repeat words, our grammar is often bad, and word choice is not always accurate. Don't write like that.
- Only include relevant dialogue. Small talk will cause readers to skip to the next piece of interesting information.
- Use unobtrusive dialogue tags (he said, she said). It is important to tell your reader who is speaking. But you can distract your reader by using other words like this: "I don't understand what you're implying," she puzzled thoughtfully." The dialogue is self-explanatory here and "said" is acceptable.
- Respect your reader. You don't need to spell out obvious details. If you tell a reader something they can figure out for themselves, you aren't respecting them.⁵

Next time you read a book with good dialogue, take note of what makes it good. When you read nonfiction, notice how the writer uses dialogue: how they've done it well, and what they could have improved.

Dialogue can give extra dimension to your writing. Give it a try. **JH**

1. Debbie Adams, "Standing firm in hard times," *Japan Harvest*, Winter 2020.
2. Boni Wagner-Stafford, "The Terrible and Terrific Truth About Using Dialogue in Nonfiction," <https://ingeniumbooks.com/terrible-terrific-truth-dialogue-nonfiction/>, August 28, 2018.
3. Judith Ricken, "Help with a visa extension," *Japan Harvest*, Spring 2020.
4. Levi Booth, "Forget excellence, pursue generosity," *Japan Harvest*, Summer 2020.
5. Boni Wagner-Stafford, *Ingenium Books*, "Getting Nonfiction Dialogue Wrong: 8 Bad Mistakes to Avoid," November 13, 2018.



Wendy Marshall is the managing editor of *Japan Harvest*. She's Australian and has been in Japan with OMF International since 2000 with her husband David. She also does mobilisation for OMF using social media.

More cultural lessons from *Masquerade Hotel*

Three further cultural points that can be gleaned from this detective novel



In a previous article (Winter 2020), I wrote about how the Japanese detective novel *Masquerade Hotel* shows the importance of apology in Japanese culture.¹ Here, I consider three other aspects of Japanese culture it reveals.

Sensitivity to non-verbal communication

In passages containing dialog, speech is often followed by a description of the speaker's tone of voice, facial expression, body language, or combinations of these. For example:

- “Mr. Fujiki said in a low voice” (67),
- “Naomi’s eyes were wide open” (62),
- “Mr. Fujiki knitted his eyebrows” (62), and
- “Mr. Fujiki’s face clouded over and he folded his arms” (62).

This is a writing technique used in both English and Japanese, but it seemed more frequent than I usually see in English novels, and it might be a reflection of the high-context nature of Japanese culture. In low-context cultures (such as most Western cultures), you can generally understand the message a person wants to convey mainly from their words alone. In contrast, non-verbal communication plays a bigger role in high-context cultures such as Japan’s.

There was at least one place in the novel where non-verbal communication changed how the listener interpreted what they heard. After being praised for his intellectual abilities by a colleague, Detective Nitta thought, “That’s just empty flattery” (375). But when he detected a serious glint in the eyes of his colleague, he reassessed his evaluation. Thus, non-verbal cues can affect how Japanese process the words they hear. While this is also true in low-context cultures, it assumes a far greater importance in high-context ones.

It’s important to learn to read the non-verbal signals that Japanese people give when speaking. We also need to be sensitive to how they might interpret our body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions.

Know your place in the hierarchy

Another cultural aspect that came out strongly was the hierarchical nature of Japanese society. Bosses used casual, almost rough, language when speaking to those under them and coworkers used normal, non-polite language with each other. Juniors used polite language when talking to their superiors and hotel staff used super-polite language when talking to guests.

This aspect of culture came out in the storyline as well. The main character grew frustrated posing as a hotel recep-

tionist, and so he and a colleague decided to do their own side investigation into one of the suspects. But when this came to light, instead of being praised for his initiative, he was reprimanded and told to stick to his assigned role. This contrasts with Western novels where a lone hero cuts their own path that goes in a different direction from that of the group.

The lesson for us is that we need to be conscious of where we stand in our hierarchies and be careful not to overstep our bounds. For example, giving suggestions about how to do things differently when working under a Japanese pastor might be interpreted as an attempt to usurp his authority.

Japanese morals

At one point, Detective Nitta said, “If a person has been brought up correctly, the difference between right and wrong will be so ingrained in them as to be common sense” (43). Thus, morality is what a person has been taught by parents and teachers when they were children. This suggests that it’s a common community standard rather than a principle based on an absolute reference point (which is similar to post-modern Western societies).

Later, Nitta recalls an incident that happened when he was a high school student. A fellow student was making fun of a trainee English teacher’s accent in front of the class and called upon Nitta, who was fluent in English, to read a passage from the textbook. Nitta was reluctant, but “his friends were egging him on and, he would definitely be labelled a bore if he stubbornly refused,” and so “there was nothing for it” but to read the passage (274). Reflecting on it later, he said, “It wasn’t as if I could have been the only good kid in the class” (275). This episode shows the power of peer pressure in Japanese society and how the opinion of the group can cause an individual to go against what they know is right and to do something they don’t really want to do. Peer pressure is not unique to Japan, but conformity to the group is a significantly stronger force than in the individualistic cultures of the West. **JH**

1. Keigo Higashino, *Masquerade Hotel* (Shueisha Bunko, 2014). 東野圭吾 マスカレード・ホテル (集英社文庫 2014).

Book cover image from Amazon



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Accessing the inaccessible

How digital ministry becomes an access point

Compassion for the lost can be overwhelming at times. Satan loves to tempt us to despair by reminding us of the vast lostness of Japan. And then we consider the variety of different situations that hinder access to the good news in Japan: people with *hikikomori*, hospital patients, those with disabilities, the elderly, the overly busy. Couple that with our lack of omnipresence, and it's enough to make you leave ministry feeling completely crushed.

Digital reach

But we are not left without hope to fight Satan's lies and temptations. Multiplication is the biblical model that we see used to exponentially grow the church. Can we use technology to further support this model?

In marketing communications, various forms of media are rated by their reach. That is, how many individuals did a marketing communication reach? A paper flyer may reach one person and be trashed, but magazines may be read then passed on to more people. This is especially true in the waiting room at the doctor's office. A high quality, glossy publication implies an important message and produces staying power. The audience's receptivity and retention of such messages are fortified by this quality, and it spurs a desire to pass on the information.

Digital communications meld the benefits of word-of-mouth and physical mediums. Email and social media tools like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, provide substance to word-of-mouth communications by enabling the sharing of context-rich content that, to a degree, anyone can access. In the digital world, direct connection with the original messenger is not always necessary to introduce someone to a message. Also, digital networks overlap, so a simple "share" or a well-placed advertisement can give the gospel access into people's realm of awareness. Added to that we can connect with some people more easily through digital means than any other—for example people with anxiety and various types of disabilities. All we need to do is produce good and accessible content and take time to identify networks and mediums that best reach these people.

Gospel extension through digital means

Digital ministry resources multiply instances of our gospel sharing efforts, even while we sleep. The internet's content is always accessible, so a one-time effort can lead to numerous engagements with the gospel for which we do not need to be present. Some ministries are currently experiencing view counts far greater than any engagement they saw in person.

As COVID-19 began to impact ministries, churches across the globe scrambled to find effective ways to continue ministry. Digital-only means of continuing some

semblance of worship, fellowship, and ministry quickly became the primary response. As a result, church members and leaders began engaging more in the digital space, which made typical church activities, discussions, and issues more visible to people usually outside of physical meetings. Not only are these online ministry moments happening in real time for anyone to freely enter, but some are also being recorded and preserved for later access, such as livestreamed church services.

One example is Tokyo Baptist Church (TBC). When the pandemic hit, like most churches, they halted all in-person activity. They also expanded their original scope of being a multi-site church—they began to view their online presence as giving access to homes across the country, allowing for remote membership (to a degree). Previously they'd used livestream for worship and they developed this further. Members and small groups were encouraged to Zoom for meeting and activities. And TBC started "hubs"—groups of people who watch the livestream worship service together on Zoom, then stay on the chat to discuss the content. TBC has seen new and increased engagement through these efforts locally in Tokyo, at a site in Tottori, and other places across the country.

This new level of reach has positive implications for evangelism among hard-to-reach people in Japan. For those who cannot participate in a live ministry event for one reason or another, accessibility to these resources means they can choose to engage with the gospel in their own time, when they may be more open and receptive to the good news.

Digital resources can help close the gap in direct engagement with those who are hard to connect with. The efforts we put into quality and strategy of the resources will only improve the chances that those who need to hear will find them. To help you explore further, I recommend an article called "The Ultimate Coronavirus Guide for Churches."¹ This guide provides comprehensive resources and instructions for developing digital resources in our current world situation. While focused on developing resources for American audiences, I believe it can be applied to the Japanese context. Every resource we publish is a great addition to a digital space open for engagement. **JH**

1. Ryan Wakefield, "The Ultimate Coronavirus Guide for Churches," Church Marketing University, <https://churchmarketinguniversity.com/the-ultimate-coronavirus-guide-for-churches/> (accessed Oct. 26, 2020).



Daniel Rice and his wife Tara (US) serve in Tokyo with the JBM. They produce a YouTube channel sharing about life and ministry: <https://www.YouTube.com/TheRicesInJapan>

“Any concern too small to be turned into a prayer is too small to be made into a burden.”¹
Corrie ten Boom

Prayer is...

I find scriptural word studies intriguing. A “word study” is where you study a single word used in Scripture instead of the larger context. It usually means that you check what the actual word was in the original language.

I am by no means a scholar in the Bible’s original languages. In fact, my total experience with Hebrew and Greek was one semester in seminary—for both! But that short amount of study was really just an introduction, and I have not gone any further. So, when I do word studies, I have to rely on the expertise of those who really know those languages.

The other day, I looked up “prayer” in an online concordance and I was surprised at what it said. Yes, I’ve known that prayer in Scripture is not usually (nor often) asking for things, I’ve noticed how Paul separated the concepts of prayer and supplication (Phil. 4:6, NASB), and I’ve known that prayer involves thanks and praise. I’ve also known that prayer is not twisting God’s arm to do what I want (like a cosmic vending machine), but Him changing me according to His will.

Even so, I was rather surprised to find the following description:

4336 proseúxomai (from 4314/prós, “towards, exchange” and 2172/euxomai, “to wish, pray”)—properly, to exchange wishes; pray—literally, to interact with the Lord by switching human wishes (ideas) for His wishes as He imparts faith (“divine persuasion”). Accordingly, praying (4336/proseúxomai) is closely interconnected with 4102/pístis (“faith”) in the NT.²

So true prayer is an interaction—between myself and God. It is a two-way street—a dialogue, not a monologue.

Scriptural word studies

If you’re not familiar with this type of Bible study, here is a short introduction. You can use any number of Bible helps (Bible dictionaries, lexicons, Bible handbooks, etc.), but I often just use a concordance—an alphabetical listing of all the words used in the Bible. Each word is displayed in a line from the verse in which it’s found, along with its Hebrew or Greek equivalent. And the concordance I use most, *Strong’s*, has a dictionary with descriptions for each Hebrew or Greek root word. Though there are a myriad of Bible concordances, most of them use the numbering system from *Strong’s Concordance* (which has 8,674 Hebrew root words and 5,624 Greek root words).

It involves sharing what I think and what I want with God. And He shares with me what He thinks and what He wants (through His Word). And in the interchange with God, my desires are changed to His. That’s why David could say in Ps. 37:4: “Delight yourself in the LORD; And He will give you the desires of your heart.” If I delight in God, if I find all my joy in who He is, then my desires will be His desires, and so, naturally, He will give me what I ask for because I am asking in His will.

As I spend time with God in prayer, He gives me faith—divine persuasion. This word “faith” also has an interesting description:

Faith (4102/pístis) is always a gift from God, and never something that can be produced by people. In short, 4102/pístis (“faith”) for the believer is “God’s divine persuasion”—and therefore distinct from human belief (confidence), yet involving it. The Lord continuously births faith in the yielded believer so they can know what He prefers, i.e. the persuasion of His will (1 Jn 5:4).³

Faith is not something I have to drum up on my own. Biblically, faith is never self-generated but is always received by believers. Faith, therefore, is always the gift (the work) of God from the moment we are born again. And it is cultivated by a life of prayer.

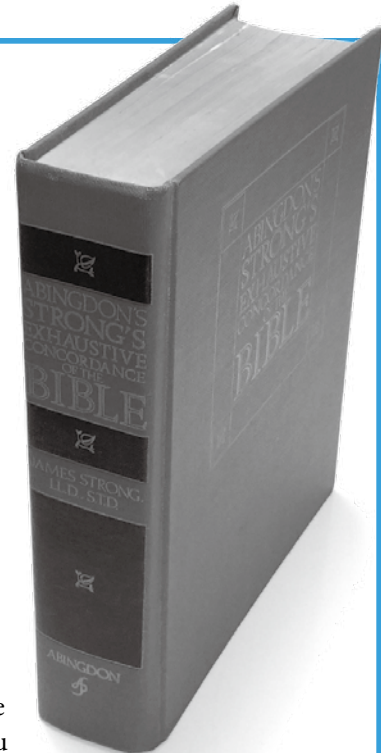
May we spend time in intercommunication with the Father and learn to walk in the faith He provides. May our faith lead us to “pray without ceasing” (I Thess. 5:17)—a continual consciousness of walking with God. **JH**

1. Corrie ten Boom Quotes, *Brainy Quote*, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/corrie_ten_boom_135077 (accessed Oct 11, 2020).
2. “4336. Proseuchomai,” *HELPS Word-Studies, Bible Hub*, <https://biblehub.com/greek/4336.htm> (accessed Oct 20, 2020).
3. “4102. Pistis,” *HELPS Word-studies, Bible Hub*, <https://biblehub.com/greek/4102.htm> (accessed Oct. 20, 2020).

Photo by Karen Ellrick



Ken Reddington, an MK, returned to Japan as a church-planting missionary in 1978. He is on the Servant-Leader Team of the Prayer Summit for Western Japan and secretary for the Kochi Citywide Pastors Group.



Called to leave Japan?

Deciding to leave the mission field is tough, but here are some helpful steps

Many *Japan Harvest* readers will have known God's call to serve him in Japan. That call may have come through various means such as Bible verses, prayer, or a natural interest in Japan. God's call is a wonderful work of grace, and we love to hear testimonies about it. What we don't talk about much, however, is God's call to leave missionary service. Maybe that's because we know Japan's vast need for the gospel only too well. Or perhaps we are over-conscientious, or feel guilty or ashamed about walking away.

But we should talk about it because the decision to leave missionary service is tough—probably tougher than deciding to come to Japan. My research backs up what other writers say about why missionaries leave missionary service: "People rarely [leave] for only one reason; they might have five or six reasons".¹ That makes leaving Japan more complex than coming—and missionaries need support and care as they wrestle with this decision.

Is God calling you to leave Japan?

Are any of the following statements true for you?

- You sense a general unease or malaise in yourself with your role or your organisation.
- Your family's needs—children or parents or both—are increasingly pressing.
- Personal or family physical or mental health issues keep recurring and remain unresolved.
- Conflict and a growing lack of trust in relationships are a concern.
- Finances are an increasing problem.

If these statements ring bells for you, how can you move forward? It may be helpful to ask yourself these questions about the issues you are facing:

- 1) Can they be understood or explained another way?
- 2) Can I find ways around or through them?
- 3) Can they be managed well in, or from, Japan?

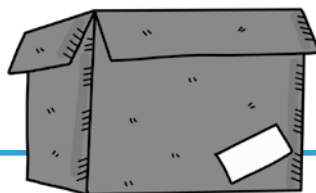
Here are two possible situations and questions you might ask about them:

Mental health issues: if you're struggling with this, have you explored possible causes with a counsellor (remotely or locally) or have you approached a doctor about medication? Is there a way around or through this struggle that could be tried in Japan?

Conflict with teammates (Japanese or missionary): if this is something you are experiencing, have you examined your heart and repented of your own sinful part in the situation? Have you asked for forgiveness or tried mediation? Is there a way through this situation that you haven't yet explored?

In order to answer the three questions above, you're probably going to need some help.

First, pray and seek God's will and direction in the situation you are facing.



Second, it is vital to find someone outside your organisation or situation who can listen, pray, and advise where appropriate. This person must be chosen carefully. Don't try to do this alone; you need accountability and spiritual support.

Third, if you belong to an organisation, discuss the situation with your leaders as early as possible. Give them the chance to understand, be involved, explain, and improve the situation where possible. This will benefit you, the organisation, and perhaps others who may have similar experiences.

How can you leave well?

Personally

The RAFT process of leaving is extremely helpful here: R=Reconciliation, A=Affirmation, F=Farewell, T=Think Ahead/Destination.² If you need to put things right with people, do it. It is hard, but the spiritual danger of not doing so isn't worth it. Take time to thank people who've meant a lot to you—it will bring you, as well as them, joy. Say goodbye to individuals, families, churches, and places. This may take money and time and may bring sadness, but it is essential for good closure. Finally, plan and prepare for what is ahead—homes, schools, employment, etc. And if you have kids, make sure to include them in this process.

Organisationally

It is crucial to debrief or have a review with your organisation. This provides an opportunity for you to reflect on your service—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and allows your leaders to respond. It may not be comfortable, but it brings closure.

Finally, "There is a massive gulf of difference between giving up and running away, and in moving on to a new walk of faith."³ My prayer is that this article helps you evaluate your missionary service, whether to stay in Japan and how to thrive in that decision, or whether to leave well, without guilt or shame, to fulfil God's calling elsewhere in His world. **JH**

A short list of helpful resources is available from the managing editor: wmarshall@jema.org.

1. Thomas Hale and Gene Daniels, *On Being A Missionary* (Revised Edition) (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2012), 408.
2. RAFT idea from Matt Neigh, "Closure – Building a "RAFT". Interaction International Inc., 1998, <https://www.mtwcare.org/uploads/8/9/8/6/89863841/healthyclosure.pdf> (accessed Oct. 22, 2020).
3. Janet Dallman, *Out On A Limb: A Devotional Guide for Missionaries* (Maitland: Xulon Press, 2016), 45.

Janet Dallman (UK) with her husband Peter, has been involved in church planting, student work, and caring for new missionaries with OMF since 1998. Recently she has served as OMF Japan's Pastoral and Spiritual Care Coordinator.

Dealing with uncertainty

Let's refocus on who we are in Christ

As I write this in August 2020, I am about to announce to our congregation the cancellation of our annual fall retreat. It will be a huge disappointment for many. When COVID-19 hit Japan, we were not sure if we could even plan this retreat. But as the state of emergency was lifted, and the new normal—going out with proper precautions—started to be encouraged, we decided to go ahead in hopes it would give the congregation time to catch their breath before winter. However, the number of cases started to increase again in July. But there was no clear indication that the country would go back into a state of emergency, and the decision of whether or not to do the retreat became more difficult. Many of you have experienced similar situations. We want to move forward, yet we do not know what we should plan. It's frustrating.

The root of this frustration is that we want to know what is ahead. We enjoy predictability, and many of us love planning based on this. We may even feel that, in order to be faithful Christians, we need to predict and plan well.

Biblical examples of living in uncertainty

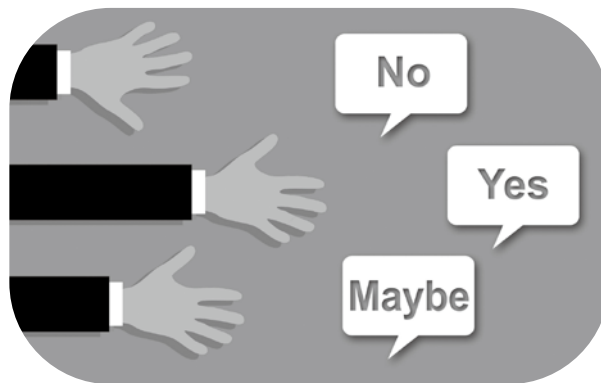
In the Bible, there are many cases where people were unsure about the future and unable to make a solid plan. Abraham left his home country “not knowing where he was going” (Heb. 11:8 MEV). He also didn't know how or when. He received a vision to become the father of nations yet did not know how or when this would be realized. When the Israelites were led by the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire in the wilderness, they did not have advance notice of when they would move location nor how long they would be staying in one place. There are many times when we do not know what is ahead of us and cannot even make a satisfying plan for tomorrow. But that is okay.

This does not mean that God wants us to be aimless. From the beginning of Abraham's journey, while he did not know where to go, God told him what he would be. Abraham knew that he would be a great nation to be a blessing to the nations around. When Abraham was frustrated that he didn't know the plan to increase his family, God showed him the unchanged vision that Abraham's descendants would become a mighty nation (Gen. 15). While God did not give Abraham a step-by-step plan, God again and again told him the bigger goal that he'd set (Gen. chap. 15, 17, 22).

This was also true for Israel in the exodus. Although God did not give them a specific itinerary for their journey in the wilderness, God, from the beginning, gave them their mission statement to which they were called—that is, to be God's treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Ex. 19:5–6). When we do not know what awaits us tomorrow and are frustrated that we cannot make a plan, God points us again and again to who we are in Christ and what our mission is. He does not always tell us about how, when, or where; but he asks us to focus on the larger vision in order to give us the patience and flexibility to accept whatever steps God chooses.

I am not saying that we should not plan. Actually, everyone has a plan. Even in the wilderness, Israel, not knowing how long they would stay in any particular location, still had a plan for the next day—to go out to gather manna in the morning. However, our planning has more limitations than we might think, even in a “normal” year. We cannot expect our plans to be unchangeable and completely

reliable. Rather, any plan that we make is under constant need of reevaluation and change. Our plans should be, before anything, plans to live in uncertainty. And within such uncertainties, the way God helps us is not by providing for us a predictable future. Instead, it is an ancient vision that God has promised in Scripture—that we are called to be his people. We are called to love God and love our neighbors.



Uncertainty in church planting

I think this principle of living in uncertainty is not limited to this unusual situation. The church planting journey is also filled with many unexpected challenges. Team members leave, a financial challenge strikes, the worship facility suddenly becomes unavailable, etc. The more uncertain we feel, the more we need to hear God's continuous assertion of his promise to make us, his blessed people, to be a blessing to others. The more we focus on this vision, the more resilience we can have in the midst of uncertainty. And when God opens a new door in his timing, we'll be ready. So, during this uncertainty of COVID-19, I would like to tell myself that this is a time to refocus on who we are in Christ. It is a time to dream God's vision for us. **JH**

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Kansai Christian Women's Conference 2021

Love in hard places

Teaching and encouragement
from the book of Habakkuk

Noriko Dethlefs

I was born in Tokyo but went to school in LA, NY, Tokyo and Sydney, then university in Sydney and Wollongong (UOW). I married Roger who was then a junior medical officer who dreamed of being a medical missionary. When Roger graduated as an ophthalmic surgeon we served in PNG for 5 years, then went back to Oz for some years while kids completed high school. Roger did short trips to help in hospitals in Bangladesh and Nepal, and I did post grad work and taught at UOW. When our kids finished school, Roger and I headed to Afghanistan with CBM (then Christian Blind Mission) for a little over 4 years, then East Timor and Fiji till retirement in 2017. We arrived in Japan February 2018 and have been staff with KGK and living with my mum to support her at home in Tokyo.



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