

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Japan: Historical Context; Present Trends; Future Prospects

REPORT

January 2013

Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

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INTRODUCTION

The Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research (ASTR) was commissioned to produce this report by Dr G. T. Ng, Executive Secretary of the General Conference (GC) and Dr Michael Ryan, the GC Vice President for strategic planning, to assist in a consultation about church growth in Japan, involving the Japan Union Conference (JUC), Northern Asia-Pacific Division and GC, to be hosted by the JUC in January 2013.

This document is an historical overview of general Christian and specifically Seventh-day Adventist mission in Japan. Part One is an analytical narrative, which draws out what I see as important insights into the history of Christianity in Japan. Part Two is what I call an historical-demographical analysis. It looks at Seventh-day Adventist statistics in Japan, but attempts an historical overview of them, and puts them in the context of wider Japanese demography, rather than only considering SDA and recent statistics.

ASTR assisted JUC in implementing a survey of its church members in the autumn of 2012. The third part of this Report (which is a separate document) is a preliminary report on that survey. It includes a very large number of tables and a series of observations or conclusions. Much more work could be done with the survey data; it is also the case, as often with surveys, that to gain full insight into responses to this quantitative survey, a qualitative phase might be desirable.

Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge the excellent assistance I received from Nathan Parker and Dr Benjamin Baker in undertaking historical research of Christian mission in Japan. Some of the statistics and charts used in Part Two of this document were prepared with the assistance of Joshua Marcoe and Gina John-Singh of ASTR, while Reiko Davis undertook proof reading.

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PART ONE

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Christian Missions in Japan

I treat the history of Christian missions in Japan in five parts:

- I. From the first Jesuit missionaries until the expulsion of Christianity from Japan (1539-1630)
- II. From the introduction of toleration of Christianity in the nineteenth century (Meiji period) through the first decade of the twentieth century (1850-1912)
- III. The arrival of the Seventh-day Adventist mission to Japan (1888-1912)
- IV. The period in which Christianity began to diversify but was to fall foul of Japanese suspicions of foreign religions, resulting in extremely hostile persecution during the Second World War (1912-1945)
- V. The post-war period of Christian apparent efflorescence and then sustained decline (1945-)

I. Christian Missions in Japan: 1549-1630

The first recorded contact between Japan and the West took place in 1542 when a group of shipwrecked sailors from Portugal landed on the coast of Japan.¹ Prior to this, the only knowledge Westerners had of Japan was through the pen of Marco Polo, who had never travelled there, and relied on second-hand information gathered in China.² Today, too, ignorance of actual conditions in Japan still can cloud Western judgment, not least on the vexed question of how Christianity in Japan might match the growth in Korea and China. In the sixteenth century, however, there was an answer to ignorance. The Roman Catholic Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) was founded, in part, as a response to the Protestant Reformation, but it also had as one of its chief objectives sending missionaries to the great civilizations Europeans had recently “discovered” in India and the Far East. One of the founding members of the Society of Jesus, Francis Xavier (1506-55), was commissioned by Pope Paul III and King John III of Portugal to go on a mission to the East.³

Xavier travelled to the East between 1541-52. He spent some years in India, attempting to evangelize without success. Discouraged, he travelled on to Japan, landing there on August 15, 1549 with two Jesuits and some Japanese attendants. Xavier was given bad information about Japan by a murderer on the run called Yajiro (also Anjiro) in 1548. Yajiro “had very little knowledge of his own country; he was not a highly educated man; his efforts at the translation of Christian terms into Japanese was to lead the missionaries into errors, which they were later deeply to regret (most notably his use of the Buddhist term *dainichi* to translate “God”).⁴ Another setback for these

¹ Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 154.

² *Ibid.*

³ Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, 1-13; Cary, *Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Missions*, 28-53; DuBois, *Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia*, 72-80; Miyazaki, “Roman Catholic Mission,” 3-6.

⁴ Miyazaki, “Roman Catholic Mission,” 5-6; Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 153-5.

missionaries was that they suffered badly from unfamiliar illnesses (as Adventist missionaries were to do 350 years later). However, several features of Japanese culture were in the missionaries' favor. In this period Buddhism had not yet become influential, the country was politically weak, and the people were open to new ideas. Similar factors were to exist during the sustained period of Christian growth in Japan in the late 1940s and the 1950s.

Before his arrival, Xavier accepted the missiological equivalent of the concept of the *tabula rasa*. That is, he believed there was nothing in the knowledge of an indigenous population on which Christian missionaries may build; rather, all must be leveled and rebuilt from the ground up. This had been his basis of operation in India (with notable lack of success). However, Xavier's exposure to the Japanese challenged this idea: "He was confronted by a civilization with so many elements of nobility in it, he saw that, while the Gospel must transform and refine and recreate, it must not necessarily reject as worthless everything that has come before. This new idea was to be fruitful in results – and also in controversies."⁵ Xavier stayed in Japan for over two years and, upon his departure, he left behind three large groups of converts. However, they probably did not possess a clear grasp the Gospel, and even more worryingly, "they probably imagined themselves to have accepted a new and superior kind of Buddhism".⁶ Although not the strongest start, a beginning had been made.

It would be possible to sum up Xavier's key progress in this way:

- He grasped the political and social situation in Japan
- He realized that it was impossible (and useless) to gain access to the Emperor or to the Shogun (the Mayor of the Palace)
- He determined that conversions among the lower orders of society would never lead to a dynamic movement into the Christian faith
- He learned that the only way forward was to convert the local rulers and to send the best and brightest Western missionaries who would adapt their customs and be strong in moral character to consistently live out their Christian faith
- He learned that the Japanese had a sophisticated culture and regarded reason as supremely important – they would convert if they were persuaded by reason.⁷

Up to 1593, evangelization was exclusively the job of Jesuits. Between 1549 and 1593 there was much success and increasing momentum of Christianity in Japan. In general, the first converts (or *Krishitan*) tended to be from among the poorer classes. In 1563, highly significantly, the *daimyos* (local rulers) began to convert. The first to be baptized among this number was Omura Sumitada (1533-87). Often, the conversion of the *daimyo* led to the conversion of whole local populations. However, the conversion of populations as a result of the conversion of the *daimyo* was not instant, but took several years. For instance, there were 5,700 Christians within Sumitada's domain in 1571. By 1575, that number had grown to more than 50,000.⁸ How many Christians there were across

⁵ Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 156. Cf. Miyazaki, "Roman Catholic Mission," 6.

⁶ Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 156.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

Japan in the early-modern era can only be approximated, but a Japanese scholar has recently estimated their numbers at 20,000 (1569), 130,000 (1579), and 300,000 (1601).⁹ This would have seen growth rates of 650 per cent in the 1570s, and 230 per cent (though shared across two decades rather than one) in the 1580s-90s. The population of Japan in 1600 was probably around 12,000,000.¹⁰ Thus in only 52 years, the space of two generations, Christianity had grown from being a religion with no indigenous adherents to commanding the devotion of around 2.5 per cent of the total population. This was extraordinary growth!

In 1579 the Italian Jesuit Alessandri Valignano visited Japan as a Papal Visitor in order to determine the best way forward for the Catholic mission to the East. His visit affected Christianity in Japan in three ways.¹¹ First, he determined that in all matters missionaries (and Christians) must adapt to local Japanese custom and practice. Second, he took four young Japanese noblemen to visit Europe in 1582. Third, he maintained that Japanese should be admitted to the priesthood. As a result of these recommendations a seminary was opened and in 1593 it began with 87 students and five novices. Of these, most were *dojuku* (believers who had reached an advanced stage in their catechism, and who had to take a vow of celibacy and pledge themselves to the mission until the end of their lives). In 1601 there were at least 250 *dojuku*, but none had yet been ordained, because there was still no bishop in Japan. A Catholic bishop, Pedro Martinez, finally arrived in Nagasaki on 14 August 1596. On 22 September 1601 the first ordination of Japanese priests was carried out: Sebastian Chimura and Aloysius Niabara. The former was to die as a martyr on 10 September 1622.¹²

As a result of these developments, and the energy with which the Jesuits applied themselves to the mission in Japan, by the end of the sixteenth century, there were, as already noted, an estimated 300,000 Christians. On the other hand, there was also a changed political situation. The local control of the *daimyos* was coming to an end because of the unifying control of the Tokugawa Shogun, Hideyoshi, in 1590, the first ruler to unify Japan for 500 years. As the power of the *daimyos* diminished, so, too, did the protection afforded to Christians and Christian missionaries. Hideyoshi was followed by his son Hiyadori, and then Ieyasu (1542-1616). Under Ieyasu's successor, Iemitsu (1603-51), the persecution of Christians was so severe that it undid the previous 50 years of missions work. Almost all Christians either apostatized or were killed.¹³

The persecution came in waves which began in the final decade of the sixteenth century and continued into the first two decades of the seventeenth. In 1587 Hideyoshi began by ordering the expulsion of all foreigners. By 1614 persecution against Christians was in full force. The degrees of its ferocity continued to ebb and flow until, by 1630, nascent Christianity was almost extinct.

The particular method of persecution was calculated to bring about the total annihilation of Christianity from Japan. The authorities did not want executions, but apostasy – apostasy having

⁹ Miyazaki, "Roman Catholic Mission," 7.

¹⁰ Biraben, "History of human population".

¹¹ Miyazaki, "Roman Catholic Mission," 8-11; Moran, *The Japanese and the Jesuits*.

¹² Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 158-9.

¹³ Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, 126-60; Cary, *Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Missions*, 135-241. See also Nosco, "Keeping the faith", 141-2; Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 159.

the obvious effect of causing the converted to waver in their new faith. The victims were brought to the edge of death repeatedly, only to be resuscitated, and to be tortured again thereafter. In April 1617 the first European martyrdoms took place – a Jesuit and a Franciscan were beheaded at Omura, and later a Dominican and an Augustinian. Japanese Christians were often crucified. To take one particularly gristly example, on one occasion 70 Christians at Yedo (modern day Tokyo) were crucified upside down on the beach at low tide and drowned as the tide came in. Fifty Christians were burned at the stake in 1623, and in the previous year 55 Christians were executed at Nagasaki. Apostasy among the Japanese was very numerous, but there were also many martyrs. In addition to 62 European missionaries, over 5,000 Japanese *Kirishitan* were executed.¹⁴

The exact reason for the persecution is not easy to determine. Many think it was because the Japanese came to believe the missionaries were acting as forerunners of a political conquest and that an overthrow would ensue. But there is an alternative point of view: “When all is said and done, Christians were persecuted because they were Christians and had introduced into Japan a law which turned the world upside down”.¹⁵ The reason for the expulsion, as described by Tokugawa Ieyasu’s edict dated 27 January 1614 was that: “The Kirishitan band have come to Japan, not only sending their merchant vessels to exchange commodities, but also longing to disseminate an evil law, to overthrow true doctrine, so that they may change the government of the country and obtain possession of the land. This is the germ of great disaster, and must be crushed.”¹⁶

The early history of Christian mission in Japan is the great “what might have been”. To be sure, the missionaries were Roman Catholics. But had Christianity taken root in Japan, the task facing Protestant and Adventist missionaries in the late nineteenth century could have been notably easier. Furthermore, one can only regret so many martyrdoms of so many believers in Christ; regardless of the fact that many had been taught by Catholic monks and friars, their faith was no less real and staunch. There were, too, other consequences. It was as a result of the extirpation of Christianity from Japan in the Tokugawa era (1600-1868) that Buddhism became firmly entrenched in the social system, especially as the religion whose rituals were associated with death and funerals. This status was made official in the first half of the seventeenth century, as all families were forced to affiliate with a Buddhist temple. One historian sums up the government adoption of Buddhism as follows:

The laws were enacted not to promote Buddhism as a religious faith but to tighten government control of the country, and were part of the move to exclude Christianity as an alien and socially disruptive force. Households, and all people in them, were obliged to register at a temple in their area, and all had to make at the temple an annual declaration of religious belief that involved a denial of Christianity. This declaration enabled them to receive a temple certificate (*tera ukejō*), non-possession of which was a serious crime.¹⁷

¹⁴ Nosco, “Keeping the Faith”, 143; Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 161; Higashibaba, *Christianity in early modern Japan*, 154. Cf. Nosco, “Keeping the faith”, 143.

¹⁵ Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 160.

¹⁶ Berentsen, *Grave and Gospel*, 15. Cf. Cary, *Protestant Missions*, 11.

¹⁷ Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, 85-6. The parallels he sees with Christianity in the days of the Roman Empire are striking. Cf. Torjesen, “Social and Historical Setting”, 185.

Sadly, the final word on how Christianity fared after the first 100 years of its introduction into Japan is told through the accounts of these martyrdoms. It was to be another 200 years before we hear anything about the movement. As Stephen Neill puts it, between 1650-1850 “Japan remained hermetically sealed” from Christian influence.¹⁸

II. Second Phase of Christian Missions in Japan: 1858-1912

The reintroduction of Japan to the rest of the world came through the oft-repeated story of the American Commodore Matthew C. Perry, who anchored in Tokyo Bay in 1853 with an American naval squadron, and forcefully brokered a relationship between the two countries. He demanded humane treatment of shipwrecked sailors, fuelling rights for foreign ships, and the residence of an American agent in Japan. Japan acquiesced to this overture—and then embraced Western industry and, to some extent, Western culture in an extraordinarily dynamic few decades. The advent of a new era of diplomacy and trade between Japan and Western nations also meant that after two centuries the Christian missionary enterprise had a job to do. In 1858 the first missionary of modern times, again a Roman Catholic priest, entered Japan.¹⁹

Although Japanese Christianity had, ostensibly, been extirpated in the islands in the mid-seventeenth century, there was an exception. In 1859 when the first Protestant missionary was allowed into the nation, he discovered the existence of the ancient Christian church in Japan. This was a group called *kakure kirishitan* (“hidden Christians” or 隠れキリシタン) who survived the persecutions by going underground. They knew about the Virgin Mary and the great “king of the doctrine,” the Roman pontiff. Otherwise, their knowledge was minimal, and they did not possess the Scriptures, “but they had kept the essentials of the faith”, at least from a Catholic point of view.²⁰ From a Protestant perspective, their knowledge of what constituted true Christianity was, to say the least, lacking.

In the nineteenth century, however, these Christians came into contact with French Roman Catholic missionaries who insisted that the *kirishitan* be brought into full conformity with Tridentine Orthodoxy. Although roughly 10,000 put themselves under the control of the French missionaries, many were suspicious. The Roman Catholic missionaries hoped for rapid conversions but were disappointed: “their experience was the same as that of all the other missions [in Japan]; there has never been a mass movement, and each conversion has had to be individually and laboriously won.”²¹

Neill remarked that it was no coincidence that Japan was rather quick to open her doors to the West yet again. He explained: “The renewal of contact between Japan and the West and the entry of the Christian mission were contemporaneous with, and in part the cause of, a revolution in the life of the country.”²² Since the start of the seventeenth century, Japan had been ruled by the

¹⁸ Cary, *Protestant Missions*; Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 280.

¹⁹ Kasahara, *History of Japanese Religion*, 495-96; Cary, *Protestant Missions*, 28-36.

²⁰ Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 412.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 414. This story is recounted at length in Cary, *Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Missions*, 266-93.

²² Cary, *Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Missions*, 326.

Tokugawa Shoguns (1600-1867). However, in 1867 the young Emperor Mutsuhito took power, also taking the name Meiji, and he continued to rule until 1912. Japan assiduously emulated Western nations, in an attempt to avoid the fate of the Chinese, and one aspect of this was allowing religious toleration. The treaty of 1858 made with the United States through Matthew Perry did not give rights to Japanese Christians, but did allow Americans to worship as they saw fit and to build suitable buildings for worship. The penal laws opposing Christianity were not rescinded until 1889 in Article 28 of their Constitution.²³ But through the influence of the Meiji, “public notices” proclaiming the death sentence for Christians “were quietly removed in 1873.”²⁴ Toleration was in theory, however. In practice, in this period of the “Meiji restoration”, devotion to the Emperor as a visible God was at its height and, at the beginning, Christianity was still illegal.

It was at this time that a wave of Protestant Christian missionaries began to arrive in Japan. Between 1859 and 1869 the Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Free Baptists, and Reformed set up mission societies to evangelize Japan. The work was slow – it mainly consisted of missionaries learning Japanese, translating the Bible into Japanese, and trying to win the trust of people who tended to be innately suspicious of Westerners. But gradually, a harvest began to come in. For instance, Channing Williams, the first missionary of the Episcopal Church, baptized his first convert in 1866. James C. Ballagh of the Reformed Church, an amazing example of godliness, baptized nine young men on 10 March 1872. He formed them into a church, called the *Kirisuto Ko Kwia* (the Church of Christ).²⁵

In 1871 Captain L. L. Janes founded a school in Kumamoto based on hard work and discipline. Within six years 35 of his students took an oath of fealty to Christ. Christ was to rule their lives “with a view to the emancipation of their nation – an interesting blend of Christian faith and national feeling such as was to be characteristic of much Japanese Christianity in the years that were to come.”²⁶

A few years later, in 1876, the Japanese government hired Dr. W. S. Clark of Massachusetts Agricultural College to head up an agricultural school in Sapporo.²⁷ Although not a brazen evangelist, he was an open Christian, and within one year, he had baptized his whole class of 15. After his departure, this class converted the next year’s class as well. “Revival” hit the next year in Kyoto, at Doshisha School. There was so much zeal for Christianity that academics had to be temporarily ceased; no less than 200 students were baptized. Neill writes the following suggestive paragraph about the nature of emotion within the Japanese context:

In Japan, emotion tends to be rigidly hidden away while a calm, smooth surface is maintained. Religion in Japan is frequently a highly intellectual matter, relying on methods of persuasion rather than of emotion. One wonders whether, under the calm surface, fires are raging, and that at

²³ Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 326.

²⁴ Kasahara, *History of Japanese Religion*, 500-1; Cary, *Protestant Missions*, 55-6, 65, 105; 76, Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 326.

²⁵ Kasahara, *History of Japanese Religion*, 513-15; Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 327.

²⁶ Cary, *Protestant Missions*, 100, 123-4; Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 328.

²⁷ Cary, *Protestant Missions*, 124-5.

times the satisfaction of emotional needs through religion is to be welcomed rather than suppressed? But perhaps this is just another Westerner's misreading! On the whole, Japanese Christianity has remained intellectual and individual, and its history is largely that of outstanding individuals who have influenced its course.

It must be noted at this point that even though the events of the 1870s were termed a "revival", nevertheless there has never been a mass movement of Japanese to Christianity. "The rugged individualism of the Japanese character seems to preclude the possibility."²⁸

The most notable Japanese figure in the early days was Shimeta Niishima (aka Joseph Hardy Neesima, 1843-1890), who was deeply stirred by reading about a God who was the creator of the universe. In 1864 he left Japan seeking to learn more about this God. He studied at Amherst College and Andover Theological Seminary in New England, and was eventually baptized, ordained, and accepted by the American Mission Board as a missionary. When he returned to Japan in 1874, his first goal was to found a Christian college based around the idea that all that was good in the ancient religions was to be linked to the Gospel. While it would not have been possible to take these steps without American money and western colleagues, it was a fully Japanese school and it was successful.²⁹

His successor, Kanzo Uchimura (1861-1931), was in Sapporo, and took over from Dr. Clark. The local Christians formed a church but had no connection with any denomination, only being willing to be led by their Bibles. They formed what they termed the "non-church" (*Mukyokai*) movement. Uchimura's philosophy was: "the truly Christian temple has God's earth for a floor, and his sky for the ceiling; its altar is in the heart of the believer; its law is God's Word, and his Holy Spirit is its only pastor." Uchimura was a great Bible teacher with a reputation for being able to draw thousands to hear him lecture in Tokyo. However, he was utterly resistant to the idea of formally starting a church.³⁰

The 1880s saw rapid growth in Japan. In 1882 there were 145 missionaries and just shy of 5,000 Christians associating with the Protestant church. A short six years later there were 451 missionaries and 25,514 members of different churches and denominations.³¹ With these numbers, the question of organization on a truly Japanese basis had to be addressed. Pope Leo XIII gave a full hierarchy to Japan in 1891, which included an archdiocese in Tokyo. At this time, there were fewer than 44,500 Roman Catholic Japanese. By 1910 that number became 63,000. The first modern ordination of Roman Catholic priests took place in 1883; by 1891 there were 15; and in 1910, 33.³²

Nevertheless, some Japanese saw no reason why their churches should be dominated by foreigners, as the examples of Uchimura and the *Mukyokai* movement indicate. Another leader who believed that in order for the Christian churches to become truly Japanese, foreigners must withdraw was Masakisa Uemura (1857-1925). He was ordained as a Presbyterian in 1879, but "he

²⁸ Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 327, 328.

²⁹ Cary, *Protestant Missions*, 114-18; Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 329.

³⁰ Ballhatchet, "Modern Missionary Movement", 49.

³¹ Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 330.

³² *Ibid.*, 414.

was convinced that the evangelization of Japan must develop from within, through the work and witness of Japanese themselves, and that it could not be greatly promoted by help received from abroad and in the main administered by foreigners." Dissatisfied with the ways in which the mainline denominations were controlling mission in Japan, in 1904 Uemura formed the first independent seminary in Japan, the Tokyo Shingakusha.³³

Indigenous Japanese autonomy was also promoted, eventually, as a result of the poorly coordinated mission efforts of the Episcopalians and Anglicans. Missionaries came from the United States, Britain, and Canada, eventually resulting in three different church streams. Eventually these were united through the work of Edward Bickersteth (1850-97). Bickersteth had been a missionary in India but came to Japan to serve as Bishop of the Church of England. Under his inspiration, in 1887 these churches united under the banner of the *Nippon Sei Ko Kwai*, the Holy Catholic Church of Japan. Although it was an Anglican church it made great efforts to be seen as an authentic Japanese church. In 1922 it ordained two Japanese priests.³⁴

Albeit a good beginning had been made in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a key Japanese leader pinpointed his concern that the gains were superficial and were not to be expected to endure. Uchimura's pessimism regarding the prospects of Western Christianity was expressed as early as 1886, when he wrote: "Which of the nineteen different Christian denominations which are now engaged in evangelizing Japan is to gain the strongest foot-hold there? In our view, – and let us express this view with the most hearty sympathy toward the earnest endeavors of the missionaries of all the denominations – none of them. One reason is that mere transplanting of anything exotic is never known of Japanese soil. Be it a political, scientific, or social matter, before it can be acclimatized in Japan, it must pass through great modifications in the hands of the Japanese."³⁵

The latter half of the nineteenth century certainly spelled the beginning of hope for the Christian church in Japan, but there was still much to be done.

III. Adventism comes to Japan (1888-1912)

The first Seventh-day Adventist missionary to the Far East was the legendary Abram La Rue, who arrived in Hong Kong on 3 May 1888 at the age of 66. He is known to have travelled widely during the next 15 years. Details are not certainly known, but while Hong Kong was his base, he is believed to have voyaged around much of East and Southeast Asia, and he certainly visited Japan in 1889 where he engaged in his customary distribution of Adventist literature.³⁶ The prominent American Adventist leader, S. N. Haskell, visited Hong Kong, Shanghai and Japan in 1890

³³ Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 330. See Ballhatchet, "Modern Missionary Movement", 48-60; Jennings, "Theology in Japan", 187-9; Kasahara, *History of Japanese Religion*, 517; Cary, *A History of Christianity in Japan: Protestant Missions*, 151.

³⁴ Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 331.

³⁵ Quoted in Mullins, "Christianity as a New Religion", 271-2, esp. 272 n.4.

³⁶ Handel Luke, "Hong Kong-Macao" and Masao Yamagata, "Japan", in Gil G. Fernandez (ed.), *Light dawns over Asia: Adventism's story in the Far Eastern Division 1888-1988* (Silang, Philippines: Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies Publications, 1990), 13-14, 36.

and reported: “We baptized one man in Japan. There are others there who are interested; and we learned that the Sabbath question has been discussed among the Japanese, and that there are some of them keeping the Sabbath.”³⁷ Nothing more is known of this convert, but in the circumstances, it is likely that he was of an expatriate—possibly reached by La Rue’s literature. Still, if the convert was Japanese, his or her fate is a fascinating question.

Organized Adventist mission lagged a little further behind. The first missionary the Seventh-day Adventist Church formally dispatched to eastern Asia was William C. Grainger, who was called to serve in Japan from the presidency of Healdsburg College. He arrived in Japan as the first missionary to that nation and the first official Adventist missionary to East Asia in November 1896. J. N. Anderson, the first ordained minister to enter China, arrived in Hong Kong with his wife and sister-in-law, Ida Thompson, in February 1902; Edwin H. Wilbur and his wife arrived that October and became the first missionaries to mainland China a few weeks later, in December; and the first missionaries to Korea, an American and a Japanese convert, visited there in 1904 and established a mission. The first Adventist local church was formed in Japan in 1899; the formal organization of the Japan Mission did not take place until 1903 or 1904.³⁸ In 1917 the Japan Mission became the Japan Conference; then in 1919 the Japan Union Mission, with fourteen churches, 305 members, 7 ordained ministers and 38 other denominational workers.³⁹ In 1982 the GC agreed to explore the possibility of reorganizing Japan as a Union Conference; two years later it voted: “To approve the request of the Japan Union Mission and the Far Eastern Division for the Japan Union to assume union conference status beginning January 1, 1985”.⁴⁰ Japan continues as a union conference today.

Up until the 1930s, the burden of the Adventist work in Japan was largely borne by missionaries, but as the suspicions of an increasingly totalitarian government became fixed on denominations dominated by missionaries (as discussed below), more and more indigenous workers moved into positions of leadership. The effects of World War II made missionaries essential again in the 1950s and a considerable number came in to join the indigenous work force; but their aim was to help the Japanese church achieve maturity, and this it did in the 1970s and 1980s. In any event, as Tadaomi Shinmyo observes: “From the beginning of the work missionaries and national workers united closely and worked together”. For much of the twentieth century, the church in Japan generally experienced growth, except during the disastrous years of the Second World War (this is explored more in part two). However, growth was never rapid, and Western-style evangelistic meetings had only limited success. Instead, institutions were important in helping the church realize such growth as it achieved. The first medical institution, Kobe Sanitarium, was founded as early as 1903. The publishing work was “one of the best ways for soul-winning service from the beginning” and Japanese-language periodicals continued to be printed during the war until

³⁷ Haskell, letter to W. C. White, July 19, 1890, in “Movements of missionaries”, *Review and Herald*, 67 (Aug. 26, 1890): 518.

³⁸ See Luke, “Hong Kong-Macao”, 14-15, Yamagata, “Japan”, 36-37, 66-67; “Statistical report of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination”, in *Review and Herald*, 81/33 (Aug. 18, 1904): 14; *YB 1904*, 74.

³⁹ Yamagata, “Japan”, 40; *Annual Statistical Report (1919)*: 8.

⁴⁰ GC Committee, Aug. 19, 1982, Aug. 23, 1984, Minutes 1982: 197, 1984: 269-70.

September 1943. In addition, although education did not play a significant role in outreach, it had an important internal role in sustaining Adventism in Japan.⁴¹

IV. Christian Missions in Japan: 1912-1945

The fourth section of this paper will first explore the vexed issue of reverence for ancestors. It will then examine the status of the Orthodox Church in Japan at the turn of the twentieth century. Next, it will discuss missional advances within other branches of Christianity before and up to World War II and the persecution unleashed during the latter conflict.

What was the status of Christianity in Japan in the first decade of the twentieth century? In the early twentieth century, Nobel Prize-winning missionary John Mott (1865-1955) declared that that intransigent opposition to Christianity in places like Japan had finally broken down.⁴² It seemed, at the turn of the century, that the Japanese were, in some sense, prepared to permanently tolerate Christianity.

The literature concerning Christianity in Japan repeatedly emphasizes that even though percentage-wise Christians have always been a small proportion of the total population, their influence is disproportionate to their numbers. A proof of this was the “Three Religions Conference” held in Japan in 1912. This conference brought together the three religions which were perceived to be the most important to Japanese society: Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity. At this time, Christians comprised less than 1 per cent of the population. Christianity was included partly because the Japanese were still fascinated by Western culture and industry and determined to learn as much as possible, in order to turn it to advantage. At least to a superficial view, Westerners all shared Christianity—it was logical, therefore, to wonder if there was not something about the Christian faith that was associated with technological advances. The inclusion of Christianity at the 1912 conference encouraged some Christians to become more visible. However, many Christians would have nothing to do with it. Why was this so? One scholar describes the conundrum for Japanese Christians in this way:

What is the function of religion? Is it to be non-interfering [as a public declaration had read], and to support a government in its ideas of progress? Every Japanese was determined to be a patriot, and was convinced that national honour and stability could only be promoted by the spread of the Christian faith. But signs were not lacking that Japanese nationalism might take a form in which it would prove to be incompatible with Christian loyalty.⁴³

A key problem was the fundamental incompatibility between the allegiance demanded by Christ and that which was demanded by the Japanese state – we might call this the perennial disjuncture between Japanese culture and Christianity: “The burning issue was the nature of the Shinto shrines, and of acts of reverence performed at them. In 1911 the government issued an

⁴¹ See Shinmyo, “History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Japan”, passim, but esp. 256-58, quotation at 257; Yamagata, “Japan”, 47-47, 55.

⁴² Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 395.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 332.

ordinance requiring of all schools attendance at the shrines and participation in the ceremonies.”⁴⁴ Whereas some Japanese Christian leaders, such as Dr. S. Motoda, thought this was acceptable, many others demurred. An issue was highlighted which has not been satisfactorily answered to the present day. Norbeck wrote: “The Christian neglect of attention to ancestors has been most unattractive to a society in which lines of descent have held great importance.”⁴⁵ He then continued by suggesting that the most successful Japanese Christians are those who create syntheses of Christianity with elements of native religion.⁴⁶ Having addressed one of the central points of controversy between Christianity and Japanese culture, where did the Orthodox Church stand in terms of missions at the beginning of the century?

In 1912, Japanese membership within the Orthodox Church stood at roughly 45,000.⁴⁷ The Russian Orthodox Church, which was strong in Manchuria and northern China (near the Russian border) but also close to Japan was not unnaturally the primary body that financially supported efforts to extend the Orthodox Churches into Japan. In the period 1912-45 the leader of the Japanese Orthodox Church, Bishop Sergie Tihomieroff (1871-1945), focused on evangelism and missionary work to reverse the decline in church membership. Just when the Church might have benefitted from this capable missions-minded leader, the Russian Revolution of 1917 occurred. One effect of the Revolution was that the Russian Orthodox Church could no longer rely on its erstwhile “home base” for support of any kind. The Orthodox Church became totally independent due to the atheistic nature of the Communist Revolution.⁴⁸ As a result of all resources being cut off, by 1918 membership dipped to under 27,000. By 1929 the number of members was about 13,000.⁴⁹ After the war, it placed itself under the aegis of the Sobor (synod) of North American Bishops. One scholar summed up the prospects of the Orthodox Church thus: “Today it is still groping, seeking the course to rebirth.”⁵⁰ Having highlighted one of the central problems with Christianity being accepted and having caught up on progress within the Eastern Orthodox Church, we turn now to a more in-depth description of how mission effort in Japan fared prior to World War II.

Christian missions efforts grew steadily between the years 1915-1940. One scholar argues that it was “marked by slow but steady progress, and an increasing concentration of both missionaries and Churches in the cities”. Famous leaders such as Toyohiko Kagawa (1888-1960) combined vigorous evangelistic efforts with focus on social issues. Sales of Kagawa’s novel *Before the Dawn* were immense, but this did not translate into permanent gains for the Gospel: “no great number of conversions took place through these methods; it was individual witness to individuals that seemed to be the chosen method of advance in this nation of individualists, in which religious feeling does not seem to have been at any time particularly strong.”⁵¹

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Norbeck, *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*, 76. Cf. Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, 50-1.

⁴⁶ Norbeck, *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*, 78.

⁴⁷ See Cary, *Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Missions*.

⁴⁸ Kasahara, *History of Japanese Religion*, 510.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 509.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 511.

⁵¹ Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 463.

World War II brought immense challenges with it, especially when we come back to the key question, for a Christian, of a person's loyalties being divided between Christ and his country. As a result, "the Christian is naturally the target for the suspicions of any totalitarian power".⁵² From 1940 and after, the work of the missionary became extremely difficult and restricted. In 1940 the Religious Bodies Law came into force, in which the government tried to force the unification of all Protestant bodies under government-approved leaders. The Anglican Church in Japan and the Holiness movement stayed out of this forced union and were legally dissolved. So, too, were the Seventh-day Adventists.⁵³ By 1940 almost all foreign Christian missionaries were interned and later deported.⁵⁴ Leadership devolved onto indigenous pastors and leaders, but as in the years before the Meiji Restoration, persecution again became the lot of many faithful Christians. Many missionaries had at least been able to leave the country. Japanese pastors and leaders suffered prison and sometimes death. Forty-two Seventh-day Adventist leaders were imprisoned; four "died of malnutrition or diseases".⁵⁵ As a scholar from a different faith tradition observes, it was the "Holiness Church, the Seventh Day [*sic*] Adventists, the Salvation Army and the . . . Jehovah's Witnesses" who suffered the harshest treatment of any Christian denominations.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, most Protestant denominations had yielded to the government demand for amalgamation and the *Nippon Kirisuto Kyodan* (Church of Christ of Japan) came into existence in 1941-2. This became the largest single body of Christians in Japan at that time. Even Adventists, bereft of their leaders, were forced to make some accommodations to government demands.⁵⁷

Whereas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Christianity's perceived "Western-ness" had been somewhat to the advantage of those trying to evangelize Japan, in the 1930s and 1940s it worked emphatically to the disadvantage of the most fervent and devout Christian believers, who were suspected of inclination to treason. Even so, many remained faithful and at the end of the war, there were probably still 200,000 Christians in Japan.⁵⁸

V. Mission in post-war and post-modern Japan (1945-Present)

In addition to the alleviation of persecution against Christians in Japan, the end of the war also brought with it a new approach to spreading the Gospel. Many American missionaries wanted to sell Christianity to Japan through linking its propagation with the spread of economic prosperity. Key American leaders were also on board with efforts to spread the Gospel in the reconstruction period in Japan, including President Harry Truman and other government administrators.⁵⁹

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Yamagata, "Japan", 44-46. Ion, "Cross under an Imperial Sun", 90-91.

⁵⁴ Norbeck, *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*, 74.

⁵⁵ Yamagata, "Japan", 46; see Shinmyo, "History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Japan", 183-91.

⁵⁶ Ion, "Cross under an Imperial Sun", 93.

⁵⁷ See Norbeck, *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*, 74; Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 464; Ion, "Cross under an Imperial Sun", 92;-93 Yamagata, "Japan", 46-47.

⁵⁸ Norbeck, *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*, 75.

⁵⁹ DuBois, *Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia*, 219.

Douglas MacArthur, the benevolent dictator of occupied Japan, was not neutral. He was ardently pro-Christian, believing “that Japan was in a spiritual vacuum and if Christianity did not fill it, it would be filled with Communism.”⁶⁰

With the shock of the collapse of the Hirohito regime in 1945, many Japanese seemed inclined to adopt all things American, even its religion. They were revolting against the system that had almost ruined them. Furthermore, Shinto had been abolished as the state religion, genuine religious toleration instituted as part of the new liberal constitution imposed by the Americans, and the Emperor’s divinity legally denied. The old bedrocks of traditional Japanese belief seemed to be crumbling. With food shortages, widespread destruction, and the erosion, if not outright loss, of national identity, consequent on the “humanization” of the Emperor and the complete withdrawal from empire, “many [Japanese] felt that their pre-war philosophy of life was now outdated and useless. During these years of social uneasiness . . . many turned to Christianity, looking for the bread of life to nourish their hungry souls.” And Western churches and charities, feeling there was a tremendous opportunity (and with the active support of Truman and MacArthur), poured money, missionaries and resources into Japan.⁶¹

Unsurprisingly, Japanese Christianity did grow. As previously mentioned, the number of Christians in Japan in 1945 has been estimated at 200,000. Within ten years of that, an informal census of memberships of a number of churches revealed a total membership of over 352,000.⁶² And yet ... the boom was not sustained. While it did not exactly turn into a bust, the breakthrough anticipated by many Christians (both foreign and Japanese) did not eventuate. The historian Stephen Neill writes with considerable insight of this fervid period:

It was thought that out of this mixture of frustration and hope a great Christian movement might develop. In this expectation almost every mission under the sun pressed into Japan, and the latest figures show more than 4,000 foreign Protestant workers in the country, almost all from America. As is characteristic of Protestant effort, this cataract arrived for the most part without mutual consultation and without planning. Almost all the new missions, like their predecessors, settled in the cities; and for all that the number of workers is so large, the evangelization of rural Japan has hardly as yet begun.

Neill went on to explain:

Moreover, the expected landslide never took place; the Japanese soon began to be occupied with their economic reconstruction to the almost total exclusion of everything else, and the rather superficial religious interest of the immediate post-war years soon died away. Baptisms were more numerous than before, perhaps twice as many as had been recorded annually in the years before the war. But it seems that in Japan, as always except in the days of the *daimyos*, progress comes through individual conversion and in no other way.⁶³

⁶⁰ Shinmyo, “History in Missiological Perspective”, 47.

⁶¹ Yamagata, “Japan”, 47. See Shinmyo, “History in Missiological Perspective”, 44-47; Sherrill, “Christian Churches in the postwar period”, 164-66; DuBois, *Religion and the Making of Modern East Asia*, 219.

⁶² Norbeck, *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*, 75. Shinmyo, “History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Japan”, table 28, p. 226.

⁶³ Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 464.

As the Japanese economy boomed, while the American and European economies misfired in the 1970s, the idea that Japanese should look to Westerners for any kind of answers lost its power. The Japanese, especially their young people, were fascinated with certain aspects of Western culture, creating ultimately hybrids such as the so-called Harajuku and Ganguro “styles”, or subcultures in urban Japan, and the J-Pop phenomenon, which in turn inspire imitators among Western young people. There is a kind of cultural feedback loop, but it is one in which there is almost no interest in religion. Japan, in sum, became postmodern, albeit in a distinctively Japanese way—a way that excluded Christianity.

Following the ultimately disappointing results of growth in what might be called the post-post-war period, what have the numbers looked like between the 1960s and the present day? In 1963, Japanese Christians numbered around 750,000 in a nation of 90 million. A few years later, in 1966, that number bumped up to just over one million.⁶⁴ But in 1985 the numbers of Christians in Japan were still just over one million.⁶⁵ While the causes for this are difficult to pinpoint, we can say that the disappointing growth of Christianity in Japan has not been from want of effort. After all, in addition to the efforts in the late nineteenth century, surveyed earlier, in 1966 there were 108 Christian mission bodies and in 1970 there were roughly 95 Christian denominations.⁶⁶ Throughout these years Protestants generally outnumbered Roman Catholics by two to one. Yet, we must again remember that despite these low numbers, “the influence of Christianity is far greater than this figure would lead one to suppose. Christians are a highly educated community, and members of the Church are to be found everywhere in positions of great influence.”⁶⁷

While there are encouraging signs that Christianity is seeping into the consciousness of the Japanese today, there is always an alarming note of syncretism. As one scholar writes:

Christianity has, however, added something to the overall picture. Jesus (along with Moses, Mary and other figures from the Christian tradition) has begun to take his place in the Japanese religious pantheon of the new religions, providing a channel whereby some Christian ideals at least may be translated into a Japanese context and expressed...White Christian-style weddings have also become increasingly fashionable over the years and probably account for the majority of wedding ceremonies at present. Each occasion has entered the social calendar to the extent that, although Christianity remains very much a minority religion, aspects of its ritual and festive nature have entered the Japanese life cycle: one may now be born Shinto, marry Christian and die Buddhist.⁶⁸

How then might we sum up the Japanese attitude toward Christianity today? Contemporary Japanese people seem to value religious activity highly, even while strongly resisting the concept of organized religion: “Christianity, because it cuts across vital social aspects of belonging, tends to be rather antithetical to Japanese feelings of identity. This lack of overall enthusiasm for *shūkyō* as organized religion is particularly strong amongst the young. Nishiyama Shigeru found, in a survey

⁶⁴ Norbeck, *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*, 73.

⁶⁵ Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, 6.

⁶⁶ Norbeck, *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*, 75.

⁶⁷ Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 465.

⁶⁸ Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, 51.

of 363 university students in Tokyo, that while they had high levels of interest in religious activities, they expressed extreme contempt for organized religion, with 92 per cent stating that they would not join any organized religious movement.”⁶⁹

Japanese sociologists of religion have long recognized that this general pattern of disdain for organized religion, denial of belief, and reluctance to affirm commitment to specific doctrinal systems, does not stop Japanese people from enthusiastically taking part in all sorts of religiously focused activities. “Consequently their research and the surveys they have carried out . . . are directed far more towards what people do than to issues of belief. Ōmura Eishō, for example, has commented that the Japanese view organized, structuralized belief-oriented religion with suspicion even while having high levels of religious activity.” He argues, from the statistics at hand, that the Japanese like religious events and activities but dislike organized and belief-centered religion. Thus, he asserts, a major theme of religion in Japan is its focus on action, custom and etiquette.⁷⁰

It is notable, too, that some “new religious movements” have drawn adherents in post-war Japan. However, as one scholar observes, they have emphasized “the importance of the ancestors as a source of benevolence when correctly venerated and as potential causes of misfortune when neglected. All seek to provide the means whereby their members may receive benefits in this life, surmounting illness and achieving success, peace of mind and happiness.” Mormons’ emphasis on baptism of previous generations make their beliefs fit very well with ancestor veneration. Often, too, “the this-worldly focus is given concrete doctrinal form.” This is true of Mormons, again, and of the Unification Church. “Tenriyō emphasizes this world as the location where humans have to find ultimate meaning and asserts the ideal of living a bright, happy life (*yōkigurashi*) in this world. In such ways the new religions as a whole have fitted in with the basic cosmological orientations of Japanese religion, building on, reinforcing and augmenting rather than counteracting its general outlooks.”⁷¹

A religion that does not accept these basic orientations and that instead attempts to change them “has been far less likely to prosper, as is witnessed by . . . the chequered and brief history” of Christianity in Japan. Well-funded and strenuous efforts in missionary outreach and in education, including “many of Japan’s best known schools and colleges [which] are Christian . . . have failed to make Christianity more than a minority religious view, with little more than 1 per cent of the population as adherents. Although Christianity has, in recent years, attained relatively high levels of empathy and admiration, especially among the young, because of its spiritual teachings,” Christian denominations have yet to translate these into anything more solid in terms of church members, primarily, it has been argued, “because being Christian can produce doctrinal problems *vis-à-vis* the ancestors and family obligations, and certainly involves some dichotomous problems concerning the this-worldly, causative and ethnic dimensions of Japanese religion.”⁷²

⁶⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 14-15.

⁷¹ Ibid., 51.

⁷² Ibid., 52.

Reflections and Conclusions

All this prompts the thought that perhaps some of the methods that are beginning to draw Western postmoderns are also worth trying in the Japanese postmodern context as well. There seems to be, in postmodern Japan, a similar antipathy to “religion” yet openness to “spirituality” (to put it in Western terms). Given the cultural feedback loop, it may well be that some aspects of Western culture could offer some prospect of a way of sparking interest in Japan—and, indeed, in the era of J-Pop (and its Korean derivatives, K-Pop and Gangnam Style), the reverse is also likely to be true. There may be value in energizing young Japanese Adventists by sending them as “missionaries” to secular postmodern Western societies, perhaps in an exchange with culturally sensitive Western people.

In light of the very mixed reception of Christianity within Japan from its introduction in the sixteenth century to the present day, what lessons can we learn from the history of missions in Japan? It appears that some adjustments can easily be made while others cannot. What follows are a few examples of each.

To begin, one cause for the slow growth of Christianity may legitimately be attributed to the practice in missions known as “paternalism,” that is, undue reliance upon a foreign source for sustenance. As late as 1966, 20 per cent of pastor’s salaries and more than half the funds of overall denominational budgets came from overseas sources.⁷³

These and other similar instances of active foreign participation in Christian activities continued to call attention to Christianity as a foreign religion and at the same time hinder its naturalization. Techniques of propagating Christianity and, frequently, the human agents involved have been poorly naturalized and therefore ill-equipped for their tasks. Christian churches have rarely been centers of community activity in the traditional manner of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples (though perhaps Seventh-day Adventist churches are an exception).⁷⁴ The foreignness of Christianity is not a new problem. The following concern was voiced by Ōkuni Takamasa in 1868: “Christianity is really a rather good religion, but the problems regarding its practice in Japan are that its headquarters are sited overseas. If people become intoxicated with this foreign creed and invest vast sums of money in it, it may well cause great harm to Japan...There are major problems attached to Christianity’s headquarters being sited overseas.”⁷⁵

Perhaps one of the greatest clues to missionary success in Japan is that acceptance of a foreign religion depends upon contextualization. One Western scholar observes: “As Christianity now stands in Japan, it is a religion that is well-respected, even admired, but seldom personally sought. Its hope for the future depends upon complete naturalization and, as with Shinto and Buddhism, upon modernization to suit the changing surroundings.”⁷⁶ Again, this may not be such an issue for Adventism, but a general problem seems to be Christianity’s perceived “failure to become naturalized in Japanese culture. [This] applies to dogma, rites, personnel, and organization,

⁷³ Norbeck, *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*, 77.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 77-8.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Breen, “Accommodating the Alien”, 192.

⁷⁶ Norbeck, *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*, 80.

all of which continue to give it a strongly foreign flavor. Traditional Christian views of the nature of God, morality, stewardship, and many other Christian concepts have been difficult to transplant into Japanese soil. . . Weekly or more frequent regular attendance of church members at ceremonies in which they play an essentially passive role strikes many Japanese as a burdensome task. The exclusiveness of Christianity is also often cited as a deterrent to its acceptance by a nation in which religious exclusiveness has been uncommon.⁷⁷ Perhaps there are lessons here that would be applicable to the Seventh-day Adventist Japanese context, but perhaps not.

On the other hand, there are some aspects of Christianity that have been distasteful to Japanese people which cannot be adapted, since we are obliged to remain faithful to the Christian Gospel. One of these concerns the exclusiveness of Christianity. There is a consensus, among Western scholars at any rate, that religious organizations “that demand single adherence have not as a rule, got very far in Japan, at least until recent times.”⁷⁸ But to depart from the exclusive claims of Christianity would be to depart from Christianity.

* * *

I close with some key observations, arising from this historical overview of Christian mission effort in Japan:

- There was never a mass movement of Japanese to Christianity: all missionaries have found it impossible to create “a mass movement, and each conversion has had to be individually and laboriously won.” Japanese leaders such as Toyohiko Kagawa (1888-1960) combined vigorous evangelistic efforts with focus on social issues. “But no great number of conversions” resulted from these methods; “individual witness to individuals” produced conversions. Such progress has come “through individual conversion and in no other way.”⁷⁹
- Given that this has consistently been so, should we perhaps *not* try to find a way to make major “campaigns” work in Japan, and instead focus on training and enabling every church member to witness personally, and effectively?
- Masakisa Uemura, leader of an indigenous Christian movement in the late nineteenth century, “was convinced that the evangelization of Japan must develop from within, through the work and witness of Japanese themselves, and that it could not be greatly promoted by help received from abroad [that was] in the main administered by foreigners.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁷⁸ Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, 8.

⁷⁹ Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 414, 463, 464.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 330.

- This may no longer be an issue for Seventh-day Adventists, but as it has regularly been a problem for other churches, and probably was an issue in our past, are there still aspects of Seventh-day Adventist practice that are associated with “foreignness”, but that could be changed without abandoning key doctrines?

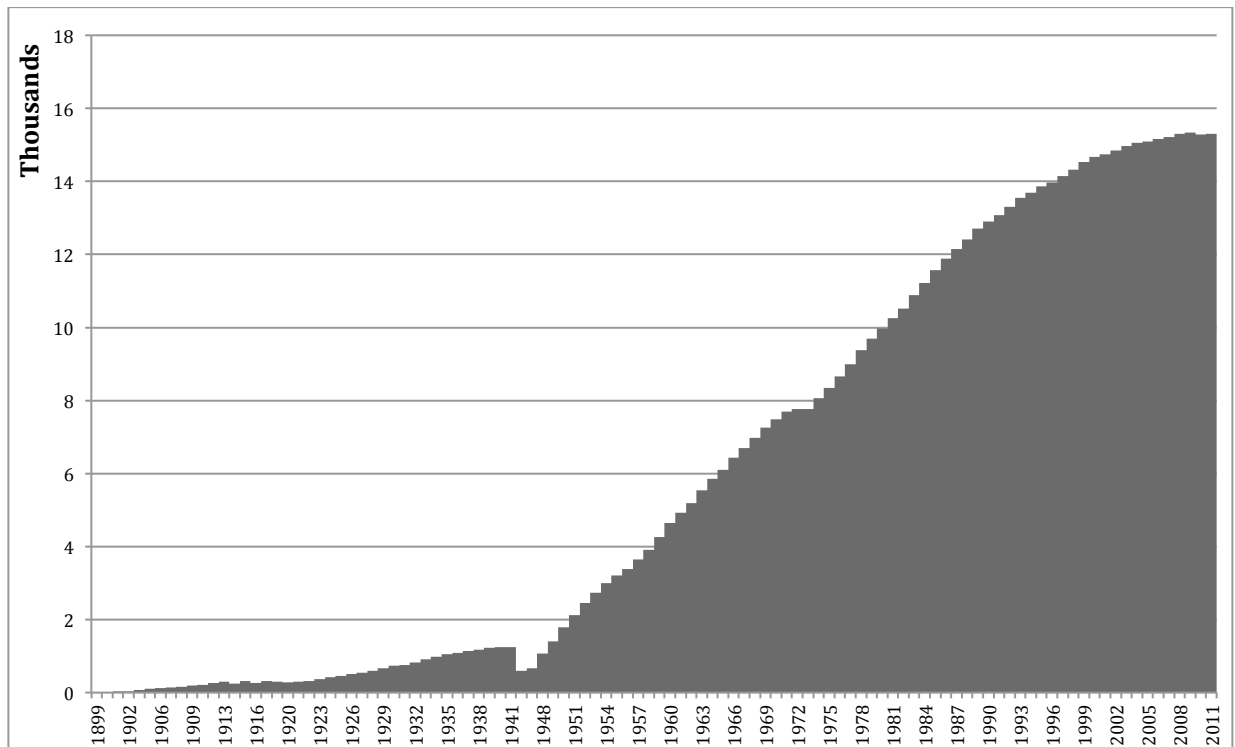
PART TWO

HISTORICAL-DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXTS

The 2010 Census revealed that Japan's population was 128,057,352.⁸¹ In comparison, at the end of 2010 the Seventh-day Adventist membership in Japan was 15,287. As of 30 September 2012, shortly before the survey of Japan Union Conference members was undertaken, those members totaled 15,250.⁸² This means it is likely that 2012, like 2010, will result in a net loss in membership, and an ending membership for 2012 less than that in 2009.

However, over the 116 years since Grainger arrived in Yokohama, the church has grown in Japan. The growth in net membership in Japan is shown in figure 1. If "there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10), how much rejoicing must there be over the total of 24,935 Japanese men and women who have been baptized or made profession of faith since 1896. Figure 2, over, shows the cumulative accessions over the 116 years of Adventist presence in Japan.

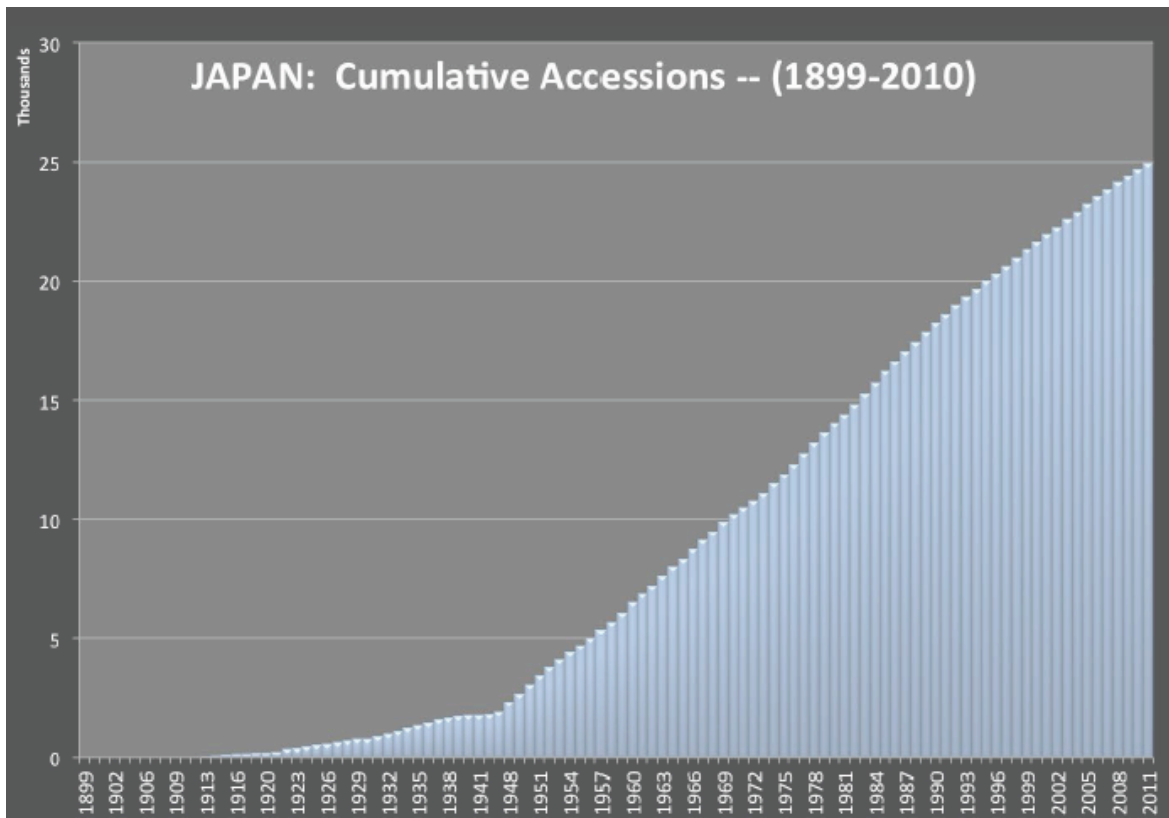
Figure 1. Japanese membership, 1899-2010



⁸¹ Statistics Bureau of Japan (SBJ), "2010 Japan Census", media release (Oct. 26, 2011), p. 1 [available to download <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/kokusei/pdf/20111026.pdf>].

⁸² *Annual Statistical Report* (2010): 22; current quarterly reports from Northern Asia-Pacific Division to ASTR.

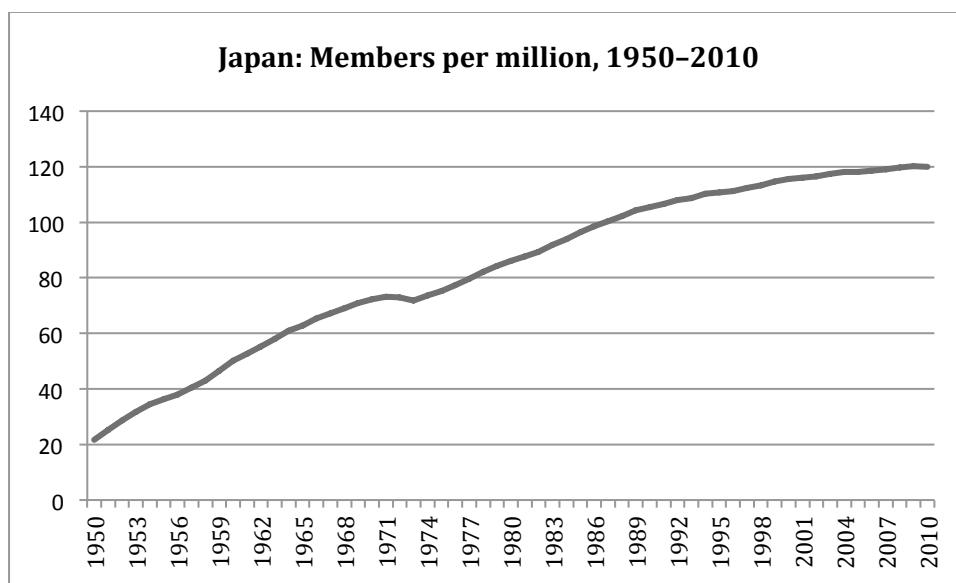
Figure 2



What, however, of the challenges? Of course, simple membership or accession figures only tell a limited story. It is essential to measure the impact of the church members on the society as a whole. To return to the Japanese census figures: when compared with Adventist membership statistics for the Japan Union in 2010, they tell us that Adventists comprised just 0.0194 per cent of Japan's population. That is, less than 12 one-hundredths of one per cent of the total population. Put another way, there were 8,376.87 Japanese people for every Japanese Seventh-day Adventist. This means that, of 232 countries and areas of the world as listed by the United Nations, Japan is in the 35 countries with the highest ratios of population to Adventists, including Islamic countries with harsh restrictions on Christian witness. In 2010, Japan Union was one of just 19 unions (out of 125) with conferences in which each church serves an average of one million persons or more: in East Japan Conference 1.1 million people per local church, in West Japan Conference 1.6 million.

An alternative way to measure the impact of the church is to assess the number of members per million of general population, which is perhaps instinctively more easy to gauge. Globally, the number of Seventh-day Adventists per million of population has risen from approximately just under 3 per million in 1863, when the denomination was founded, to around 46 per million, when the first local church was organized in Japan, to a nominal 2,455.5 per million at the end of 2010, and, as of June 30 this year, to just over 2,500 per million. Membership in Japan equated to 119.37 Adventists per million Japanese people (see figure 3, over).

Figure 3



It is appropriate to note that Adventists are not alone in facing challenges in Japan. All Christians together make up just 1.9 per cent of the Japanese population; and evangelical Christians together muster just one half of one per cent of Japan's people. Missiologists identify 53 people groups in Japan—and estimate that in 37 of these Christians make up less than 5 per cent.⁸³ As the narrative in Part One illustrated, Christianity has never been a mass movement in Japan; even in the seventeenth century, when it was approaching that, it was nipped in the bud before it could fully effloresce. Nevertheless, it is not, I suggest, the case that Adventists can simply feel that we are the victims of a set of dynamics that negatively impact all Christians. For there has been a decline in certain key metrics in recent years and so one must ask the questions *why* and *what can be done to reverse them?*

An area that I don't doubt is of concern to church leaders in Japan is that church growth was more dynamic in the recent past than today. Again, this is not a phenomenon limited to Adventists. Christians constituted around 4 per cent of the Japanese population around 1950-55;⁸⁴ but as noted above that has declined over the last 55 years. However, figure 1 shows that net membership grew consistently throughout the 1960s, '70s, and early '80s but since then has come close to stagnating, and, as noted above, the three years 2010–12 are likely to result in three consecutive years of decline.

This decline in growth is most clearly discerned not from a graph of net membership but of the growth rate. Figures 4, 5 and 6 chart the annual percentage increases, or decreases, in member-

⁸³ Johnstone, *Future of the Global Church*, 237, fig. 9.2, 186, fig. 7.34.

⁸⁴ See Statistical Research and Training Institute, *Statistical Handbook of Japan 2012* (Statistics Bureau, Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications), 14, table 2.2 (historical statistics); Shinmyo, "History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Japan", 226, table 28, "Statistics of Christian Churches after World War II".

ship for the church in Japan. Figure 4 shows it for the whole period for which we have Adventist statistics, in order to give a long-term perspective. Figure 5 charts it for the crucial 60-year period starting in 1951. Figure 6 (over) shows the figures since Japan became a union conference.

Figure 4

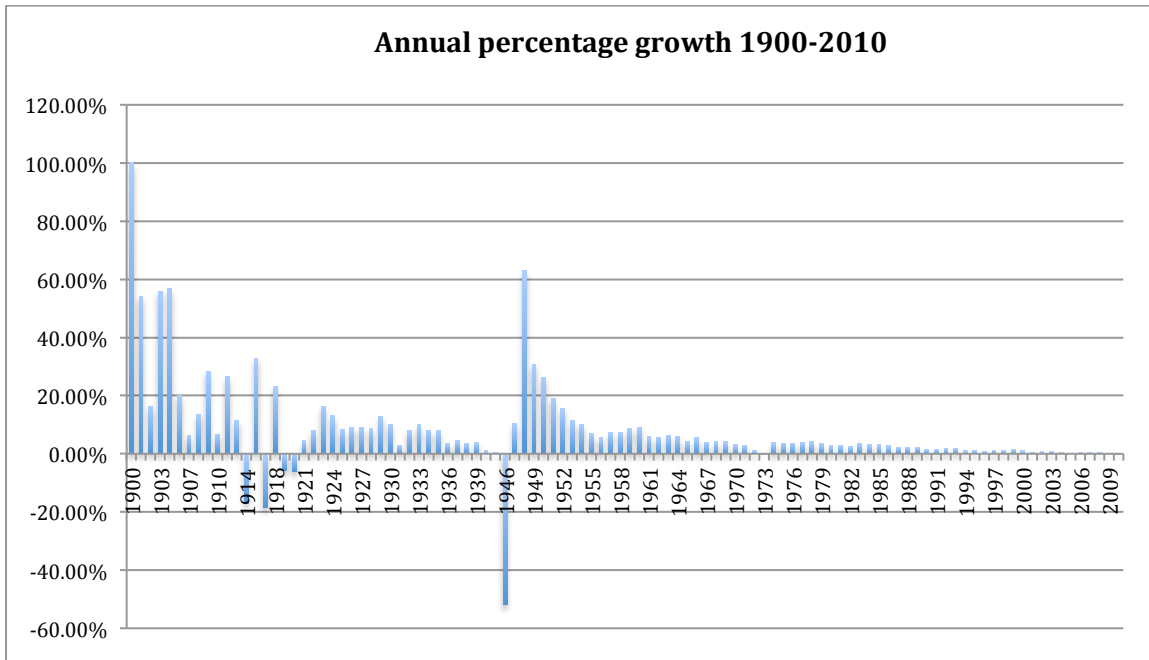


Figure 5

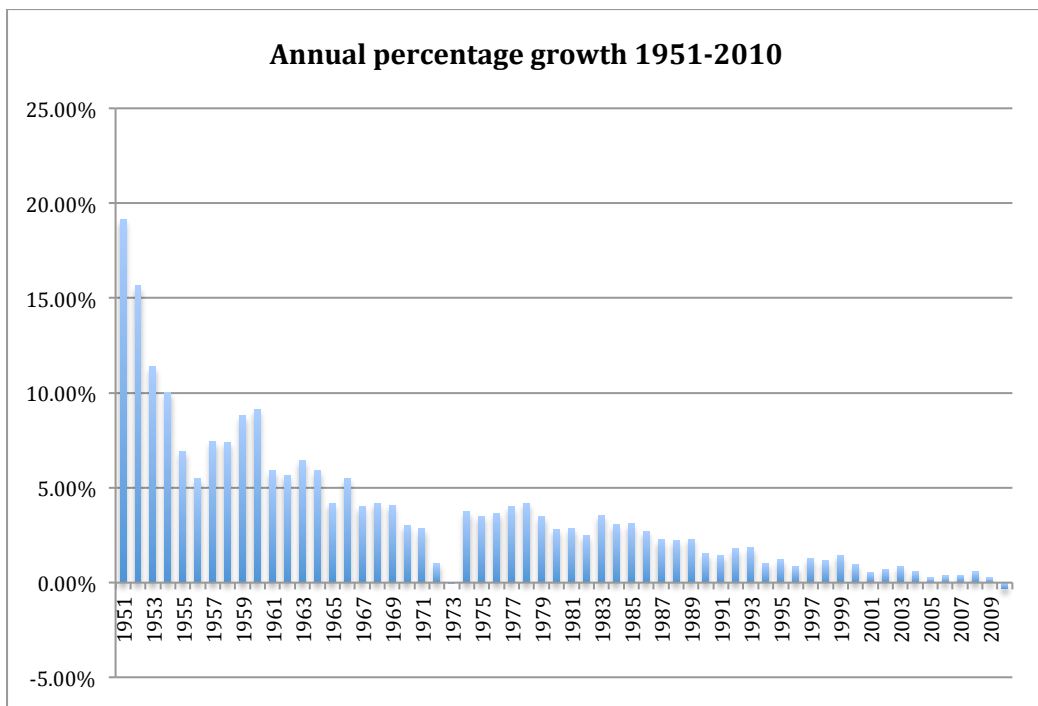


Figure 6

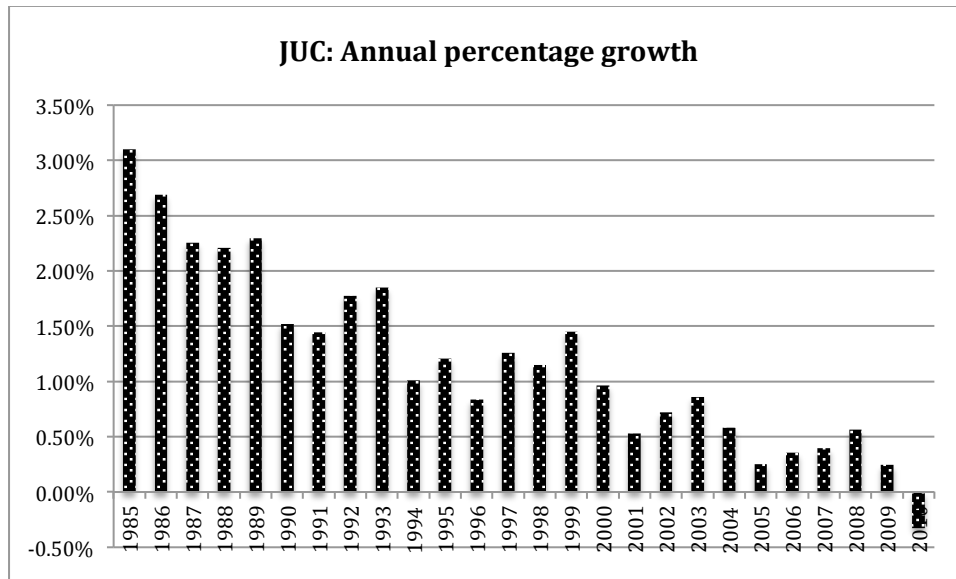
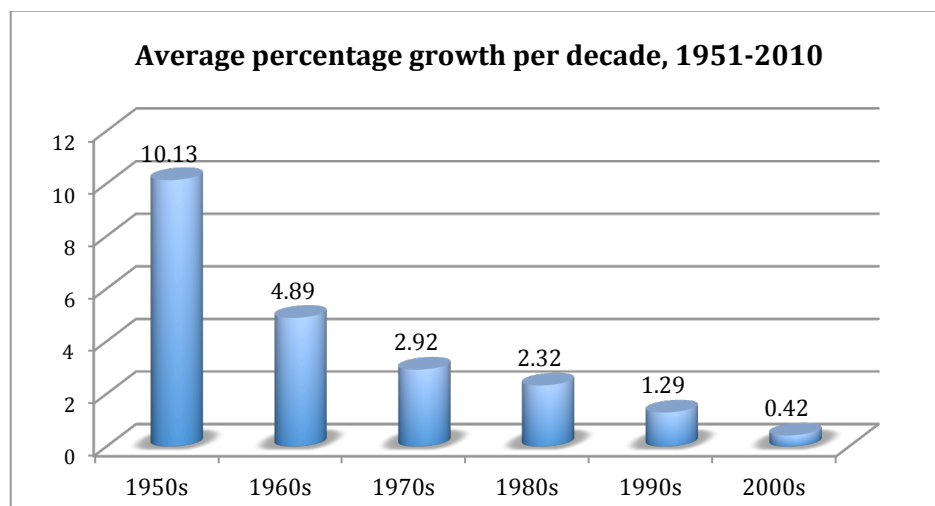


Figure 4 reveals apparently dramatic growth in the years before World War II, but it has to be borne in mind that the membership in Japan at this time was very small, making dramatic increases more possible (e.g., a 100 per cent growth in 1900—but from 12 to 24!). It shows the disastrous effects of the war but also the relatively swift recuperation. In order to be comparing like with like, figure 5 concentrates on the sixty-year period beginning in 1951. This reveals that growth was both relatively high and sustained throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. Growth remained steady if unspectacular in the late 1970s and the 1980s (after period of stagnation in the early 1970s), but the rate of growth was also decreasing, also steadily if unspectacularly. This is brought out more clearly in figure 6, which shines a spotlight on the last 28 years, since Japan became the Japan Union

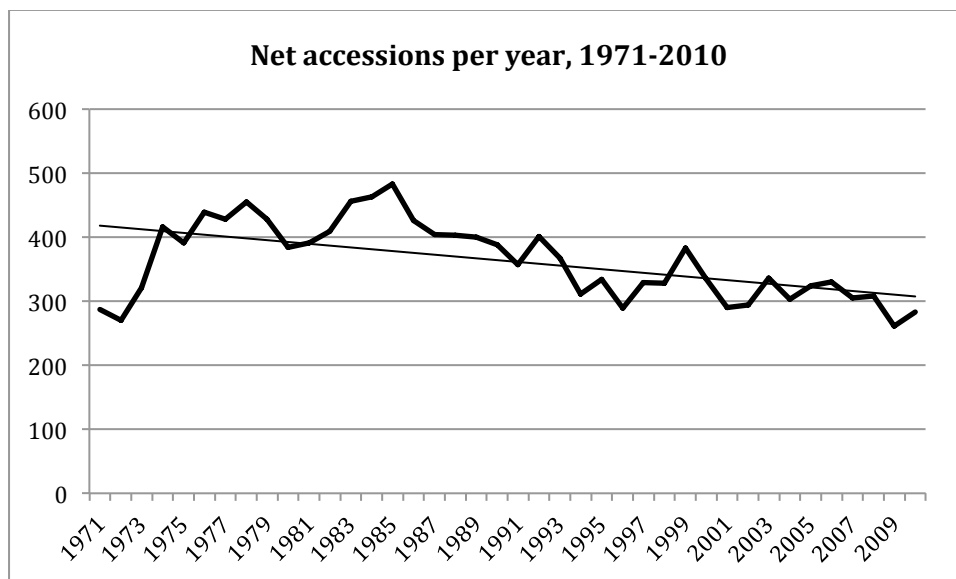
Figure 7



Conference. (This is an example of a coincidental, rather than causative relationship!) Growth has been roughly in consistent decline since 1985, with a short-lived partial recovery in the late 1990s.

In fact growth has not exceeded 4 per cent since 1978 and has not exceeded 5 per cent since 1966. Decade by decade averages (see figure 7, previous page) reveal the decline. Growth in the 1950s averaged over 10.13 per cent; in the 1960s, 4.89 per cent; in the 1970s, 2.92 per cent; in the 1980s, 2.32 per cent; in the 1990s, 1.29 per cent; and in the 2000s through 2010, the average growth was less than half a percent: 0.42 per cent.

Figure 8



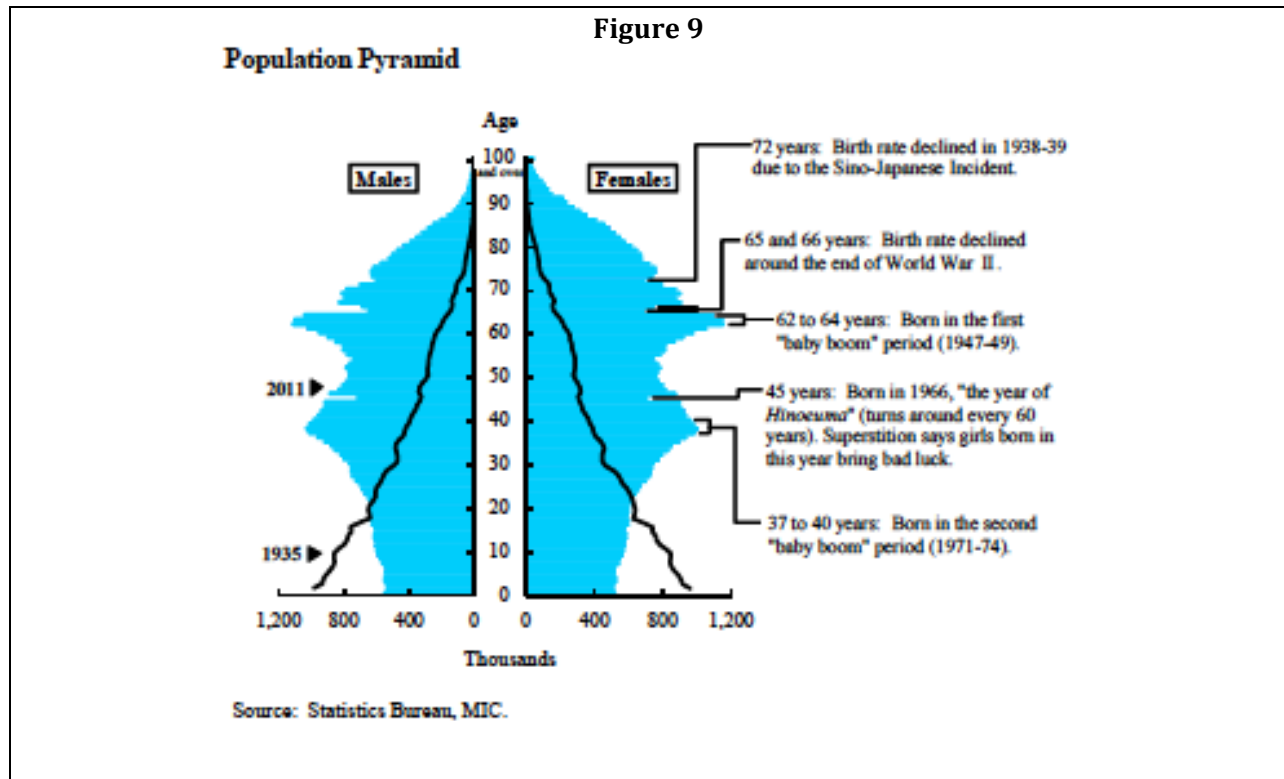
At the moment it is impossible to imagine Japan entering again a period like the decade or two decades after World War II, when Japanese people looked to America for guidance and for role models, which was when the most sustained significant growth was achieved in Japan. The trend not just of the last decade but of the last several decades is heading in the direction of sustained negative growth—of not just decline in the rate of growth, but decline in net membership.

There is a twofold threat here. First, as figure 8 (which shows the last forty years) reveals, the numbers of net accessions each year are in decline—the thick line plots the numbers each year; the long straight line shows the trend. But in addition to the diminishing attraction of Adventist outreach, so that numbers joining the church are in decline, there is also an aging membership, which means there is the prospect of a demographic crisis for the church in Japan.

This is partly a social phenomenon in Japan. Of the 128.06 million Japanese counted in the 2010 census, 29.75 million are aged 65 or over: 23 per cent of the total population.⁸⁵ The aging population of Japan, which inevitably affects the Seventh-day Adventist Church, poses a significant

⁸⁵ SBJ, “2010 Japan Census”; *Statistical Handbook of Japan 2012*, 14.

demographic problem, which is graphically illustrated in Figure 1 (taken from the official *Statistical Handbook of Japan*).



Japan experienced significant spikes in numbers of births in the late 1940s and again in the first half of the 1970s. From 1975 onwards the birth rate dropped and has continued to drop to the present day; at the same time the mortality rate also dropped until the early 1990s, when it began to rise again, “reflecting the increased percentage of the elderly in the overall population.” At the same time: “Average life expectancy in Japan . . . is today at the highest level in the world. In 2011, life expectancy at birth was 85.9 years for women and 79.4 years for men.”⁸⁶ The net effect of rising birth rates and (until recently) falling mortality rates is to create a remarkably aging population. The percentage of Japan’s population aged 65 years old and over “is the highest in the world.”⁸⁷

This is a challenge to mission, since there are inevitable difficulties reaching people who are in their senior years and have not yet been won over to Christianity. However, an aging population is a more direct problem for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Japan, because Adventist membership is more elderly than the population of Japan as a whole. There is a range of data for this conclusion. First, in the JUC survey (see Preliminary report) only 0.9—less than one in a hundred—of respondents were aged under 15, whereas in the Japanese population as a whole, the

⁸⁶ *Statistical Handbook of Japan 2012*, 15, 17 fig. 2.3, table 2.4, quotation at p. 18.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

equivalent figure is 13.2 per cent. Only 3.1 per cent of respondents to the survey were under the age of 25, while 52.8 per cent were aged 65 years or older—well over twice the 23 per cent of the general population aged 65 and over.⁸⁸ Now, it may well be that those willing to complete the survey were disproportionately from older church members; for even though the return rate was more than one in three of those attending church, it was roughly one in six of the entire Japanese membership—and while this is in fact a good rate of return, if older members are more likely to attend church the sample could still be skewed. Nevertheless, this remains speculation, and with the high return rates, even if the actual percentages mentioned are not accurate, the evidence for a church that is disproportionately older than the population at large is nevertheless considerable. Moreover, this is in accord with another piece of evidence: the mortality rate among Adventists.

Table 1.—Mortality rates in Japan and among Japanese Adventists, 2001–2010

Year	Beginning Church Membership	Approx. Population	General Mortality Rate	Reported SDA deaths	SDA Mortality Rate	SDA Mortality as % of General Mortality
2001	14,662	127,100	8.000	150	10.231	128%
2002	14,740	127,400	8.000	160	10.855	136%
2003	14,846	127,500	8.000	172	11.586	145%
2004	14,974	127,600	8.000	194	12.956	162%
2005	15,061	127,700	8.600	189	12.549	146%
2006	15,099	127,800	8.700	184	12.186	141%
2007	15,153	127,700	9.000	183	12.077	134%
2008	15,213	127,700	9.000	178	11.701	130%
2009	15,299	127,800	9.100	168	10.981	120%
2010	15,337	128,060	9.500	180	11.736	124%

As Table 1 shows, over the last ten years the mortality rates (i.e. deaths per thousand) among Japanese Seventh-day Adventists are, or consistently have been, higher than among Japanese as a whole—from 20 per cent to 62 per cent higher. This also indicates that the church membership is older than the population at large. Figure 10, which charts Japanese mortality rates from 1948 and Japanese SDA mortality rates from 1963 (the first time deaths were reported in the *Annual Statistical Report*), shows that Adventist mortality has exceeded general mortality in Japan since 1973. Thus, this is a systemic problem, which in all likelihood will only get worse. Japan is not alone in this. Not only are Western Europe and Australasia, for example, also characterized by aging populations, but in both regions Adventist members are also aging—and are more elderly than the population at large. That said, however, the contrast between general and Adventist mortality rates in Japan is particularly marked. When combined with the survey data it is telling a troubling story of an aging church: and perhaps even more than we might expect as a result of our health message.

⁸⁸ JUC Survey: Preliminary Report, table 5; cf. *Statistical Handbook of Japan 2012*, 16, table 2.3.

Figure 10

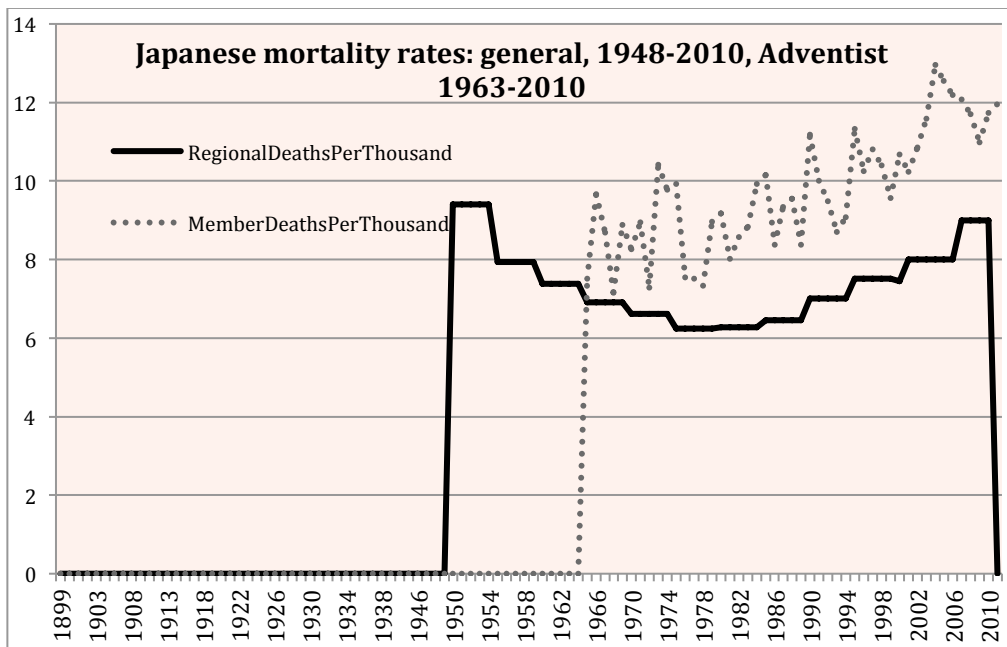
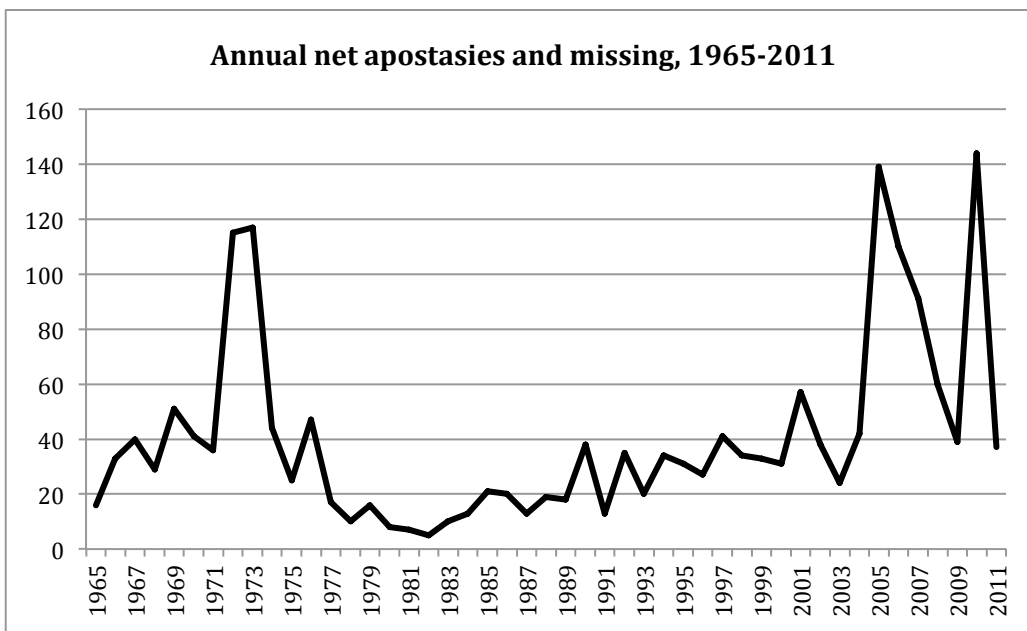


Figure 11

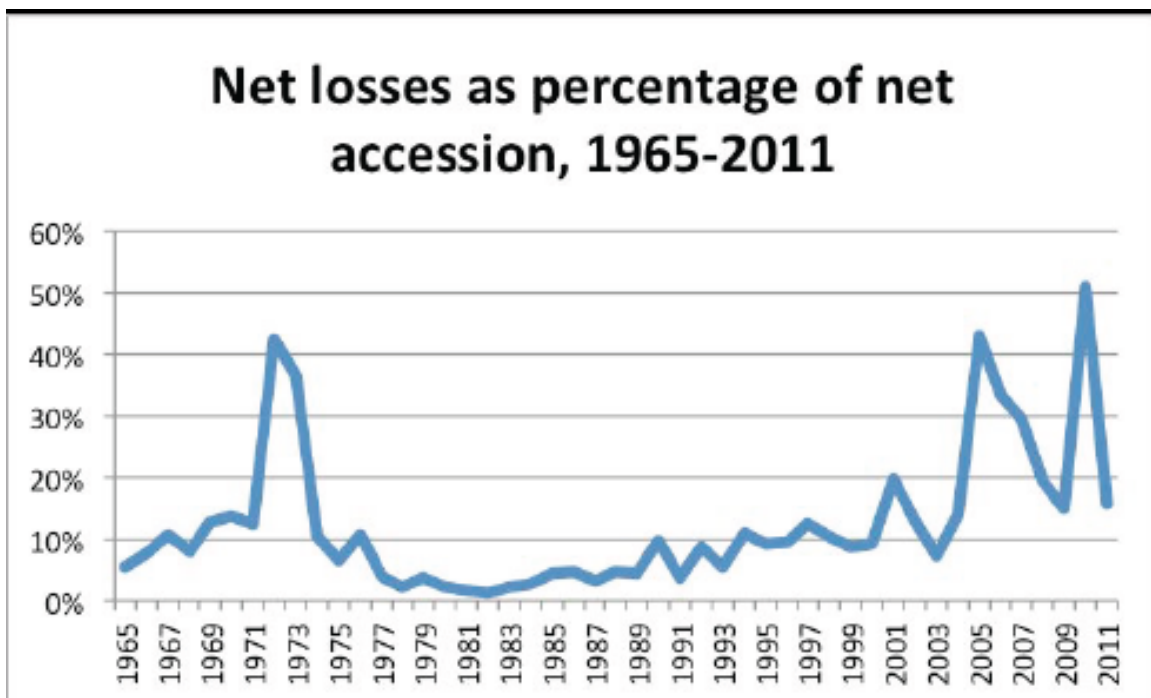


There is another point, which is the problem of those who, having become a church member, whether from our families or from outside the Adventist community, are then lost: whether through discipline by the local church, by conscious decision to leave, or just by gradually slipping away. In the late 1990s Masao Yamagata, writing a short “authorized” history of the Seventh-day

Adventist Church in Japan, felt obliged to highlight the problem “of backsliders”. Indeed, rather than ending on a triumphalist note (as many histories of the church do), he “conclude[d] by reemphasizing . . . the problem of backsliders”, stressing that “a significant number have ceased to practice the Adventist faith. A considerable number of fish have escaped the net while the Church has caught many in it.”⁸⁹ Figure 11 underlines his conclusion while figure 12 amplifies it. Figure 11 shows considerable fluctuation in the number of apostasies and missing, which is common; the spikes in the 2000s may well be evidence of membership audits being carried out. Nevertheless, the overall trend since the early 1980s has been upwards—not massively, but clearly.

Figure 12 charts net apostasies and missing each year as a percentage of the net of baptisms and professions of faith. In the early 1970s the Japan Union recognized a problem; indeed Yamagata refers specifically to the analysis that revealed a problem. Figures 11 and 12 indicate that whatever corrective measures were taken, they worked, through to around 1988. But since the early 1990s, net losses have been running increasingly high. From 1994 through 2011, the average annual proportion of net gains that was lost, through apostasies or missing--backsliders as Dr Yamagata termed them--was 18.39% per annum. That is more than one in six. In other words, at the moment newly baptized Adventists are sufficient to replace those who slip away, but since accession rates are falling, and the membership is aging, that may be in jeopardy.

Figure 12



⁸⁹ Yamagata, “Japan”, 49, 56.

There is a final point. The remedy for this situation needs to come from within the church in Japan. In some countries, notably Britain, Spain, France, the Netherlands and, yes, the United States, the church successfully evangelized expatriate communities. It is these conversions of immigrants that have kept the church in those countries, and doubtless others, growing. Sometimes, as in parts of Europe, growth comes predominantly, or almost only, among migrants, but at least that ensures the church has a footing in those countries, and with a “critical mass”, so to speak, it then has the hope of reaching out to the majority indigenous communities.

That is extremely unlikely to happen in Japan. Of Japan’s approximately 128,060,000 million people in the 2010 census, some 125,359,000 were ethnically Japanese.⁹⁰ This constituted a remarkable 98.8 per cent, making it one of the most ethnically homogeneous countries in the world. This state of affairs is reflected in the Survey of JUC members, in which the most common answers to a series of questions on attitudes towards minority groups is “Don’t know”. At times the “Don't know” responses were over 60 per cent.⁹¹ The percentages of “Don’t knows” are even higher still in response to questions about immigrant churches.⁹² The impression is that Japanese Adventists don’t really encounter that many minority groups.

Conclusions

Unquestionably, there are no easy answers to the problems that have been highlighted. There is room for encouragement, though. Japanese Adventists have one of the highest ratios of offerings to tithes anywhere in the world and this is typically an indicator of faithfulness to the church. In some years, the value of offerings has even exceeded that of tithes. This shows that church members in the Japan Union Conference are committed to their Church and to their Union.

Then, too, the survey of church members reveals a willingness, indeed a desire, to trust the youth with greater responsibilities. 64.7 per cent of respondents believed “Young people should be more actively involved in church”; yet less than half agreed or strongly agreed that the church does involve young people.”⁹³ Given the demographic situation, there is a real need to energize and empower Japan’s Adventist youth, and it is good news that the membership is already thinking along those lines and likely to be supportive of any initiatives to that end. For that matter, almost 60 per cent of Japanese Seventh-day Adventists agree or strongly agree that “The number of church plants should increase” and that “The Japan Union should invest in church plants.”⁹⁴

⁹⁰ SBJ, “2010 Japan Census”.

⁹¹ *JUC Survey: Preliminary Report*, 28, table 33.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 25, table 30.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 24, table 29.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26, table 31.

It may be that church plants are not, in fact, the best answer to the situation in Japan; but it is encouraging that Japanese Adventists want to do more to spread the Third Angel's Message and therefore will probably support new initiatives. Japanese Seventh-day Adventists clearly want their fellow countrymen and women to hear the good news of a risen Savior. Four hundred years ago, Christianity was spreading like wild fire in Japan—it can happen again, with God's power and the support of church members.

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