

## A Trend's Troubling Exception

# As Our Commitment to Asia Surges, Our Presence in Japan Declines

The people of Japan comprise a unique target for gospel outreach. That is because they are the largest people group basically unreached with the gospel that is completely open to missionaries, with freedom of religion guaranteed by Japan's constitution.

Over 70 percent of Japan's 127 million citizens claim no personal religion. Still, their identities are deeply tied to the rituals of polytheistic Shintoism, and most conform to the ancestor veneration of Buddhism. At the same time, the younger generation struggles with social anxiety (*hikikomori*) and an alarmingly high suicide rate.

Despite 500 years of Christian presence in Japan, only 1.5 percent of its people call themselves Christians (evangelicals account for about one third of that number). But the strategic potential of these Jesus followers to evangelize the peoples of Asia and beyond is impressive; they are recognized to be hard-working, well-educated, and financially strong.

Now is a pivotal time for gospel outreach in Japan. Churches remain few and small, with mostly women and children in attendance, a traditionally western format, and dependence on their pastors (or missionaries). Now, as a post-war generation of these retire, there are too few students in Japanese seminaries to replace them.

At the same time, Japanese who have studied and worked abroad, and been converted there, are returning, prepared to introduce new church patterns. They are organizing themselves as the Japanese Christian Fellowship Network. Together, they are nudging pastors to shift from functioning as solo performers to becoming equippers of the laity, with members fanning out to form house churches or provide elder leadership at a congregation's multiple locations.

Last March's earthquake/tsunami has led to unprecedented unity among previously splintered church groups, and to acknowledgment that deeper than the needs for relief and reconstruction is the need to build on increased receptivity to the gospel, especially in areas directly affected by the disaster, by planting new churches. This has led existing Japanese churches to appeal for more missionaries to capitalize on these signs of aawning new openness.

So why is the number of long-term missionaries in Japan small and shrinking? Basically it is because becoming an effective expatriate discipler there is a long, hard process, beset with socio-cultural, linguistic, and financial difficulties. Years are required to acquire fluency in the language and to fit comfortably within its complex culture.

College Church has a significant record of involvement:

\* Gene and Lois Taylor were our sponsored missionaries with SEND International for 35 years. They retired in 1997 and are now located in New Haven, Indiana.

\* Ray and Ruth Anne Leaf were also our sponsored missionaries with SEND for 37 years. They retired here in 2009.

\* College Church member Marian Hovey served with TEAM for 32 years and retired here in 1995. A congregation she ministered to flew her back last month to honor her during its anniversary celebrations.

\* Jim and Alice Rew served for 12 years: two as dorm parents at Christian Academy in Japan (CAJ) and, later, ten as our sponsored missionaries, serving as hosts at SEND's Tokyo guesthouse. They retired in 2008 and now live in Wheatfield, Indiana, where Jim continues desktop publishing *Japan Harvest*, the evangelical missionary community's own publication.

\* Stan and Faith De La Cour are currently College Church's only missionary family in Japan. So far they have served for 28 years, pastoring an international church.

What is inhibiting ongoing investment in missionary outreach to Japan? Foremost is the perception of its high expense. In Mercer's cost-of-living survey for 2011, Tokyo is included in the ten most expensive cities for expatriates to live. But then the same is true for our missionaries in São Paulo, Brazil and N'djamena, Chad. And missionaries typically live more frugally than the businessmen and diplomats for whom the survey was designed!

Over the last century, American Christians—with the dollar the dominant world currency—became accustomed to supporting missionaries overseas for less than they could subsist on here. That is no longer the case. We may be overdue to abandon a mindset geared to bargains and tax deductions. Instead, we could substitute the mindset of David, who declined an offer of free land on which to build an altar, telling its owner, “I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offering to the Lord my God that cost me nothing” (2 Samuel 24:24).

Pastor Tim Keller of New York City (which ranks in 32nd place in the cost-of-living survey) insists, “You can't influence the world for the gospel unless you influence the key cities. Tokyo is certainly one of the keys to reaching Asia and the whole world.” The strategy Keller espouses is, of course, no recent discovery. The apostle Paul focused his energies on Ephesus, with the result that the entire Roman province of Asia was evangelized (Acts 19:9–10). Renting the downtown Ephesus lecture hall for two years surely didn't come cheap, but what a Holy-Spirit-enabled return on investment!

So what can we do to help turn this trend around? Make the necessary investment to send a new generation of missionaries to Japan, committed to the long-haul process of becoming effective disciplers there.

One couple that has demonstrated the kind of single-minded, disciplined tenacity required is Jeff and Tamara Hershberger. Both grew up in the rural town of Eureka, Illinois (between Peoria and Bloomington). They knew each other throughout their elementary-school years. After high school, both enrolled at a junior college—Illinois

Central College—in Peoria, got reconnected, and began dating. Jeff was drawn to an elective class on world religions and in it experienced a dawning awareness of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Tamara (pronounced *ta-MAR-a*), agreed to join him in a search for life significance, and suggested they visit Eureka's Liberty Bible Church, where her sister was attending. Within three months both had absorbed the gospel message and individually surrendered their lives to Christ.

The couple's goals were transformed overnight. They were married at the age of 20 and, a week later with full-time Christian service already in view, started school anew at Calvary Bible College in Kansas City. Jeff majored in Biblical studies, while Tamara focused on Primary Education. In 2003, after both had graduated, they moved to Wheaton, where Jeff pursued a two-year course in Biblical Exegesis from the Wheaton Graduate School, and Tamara taught in area Christian schools. Jeff had read Kent Hughes's *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, so upon arrival they readily joined the College Church family.

After his graduation, Jeff was employed in the Tyndale House Publishers warehouse, which turned out to be a hotbed of missions-focused employees. One was Japan MK John Leaf, who encouraged Jeff and Tamara to join our Missionary Prep Program. Jeff, with funding from an anonymous donor, was part of the 2007 STAMP team, helping staff SEND's English camp at Okutama Bible Chalet. Alice Rew directed the camp, and Jeff also met Ray and Ruth Anne Leaf and Stan De La Cour.

The Hershbergers' first child, Marcus, had been born in 2006. In the summer of 2008, the family—Tamara was now pregnant with their second son Lewis—made a discovery trip to Japan to visit its churches and get a feel for where they might fit in.

That fall, Jeff, sensing his need for supervised pastoral training, became one of our pastoral residents, becoming exposed to all aspects of local church ministry. When they took an Introduction to Missions course taught in our church by Mark Papierski, who should be a fellow student but Marian Hovey! When the Rews and then the Leafs returned from Japan, Tamara picked up Alice Rew's enthusiasm for using calligraphy and origami sessions as outreach tools with women, and both received strong encouragement from Ray and Ruth Anne Leaf.

On completion of his residency, Jeff was employed last fall by Christian Art Gifts, and both he and Tamara began a one-semester Japanese language course at College of DuPage. Then in October, the Hershbergers launched into full-time support raising (except for taking an intense two-week Wheaton Graduate School language acquisition course last month). Support pledged for their first four-year term, including commitments from College Church and their Eureka home church, is approaching 50 percent of their requirement. And a Japanese-American congregation in Glenview has expressed interest.

But they will need to add support from individuals in addition to corporate church support to cover their initial two years of formal language school plus continuing

informal cultural acclimation. (Costs should moderate in a second term as their boys reach school age and Tamara can contribute a teacher's salary from instructing at CAJ.) The Hershbergers are busy lining up forays into New England, Missouri, Texas, and Florida. Once in Japan, they will be remarkably suited to provide backing for a promising crop of younger Japanese pastors eager to mobilize their members for gospel outreach.