

# Japan Denominational Statistics, 1991

Harry BURTON-LEWIS

AS HAS BEEN TRUE for several years, most Christian bodies in Japan experienced slow annual growth in 1991. Reported claims of church membership totalled 1,783,851 believers, or 1.439 percent of the national population. This total, which includes reports from marginal groups whose claims may be less than completely reliable, is an increase from 1.047 percent in 1982, 0.936 percent in 1972, 0.787 percent in 1962, and 0.462 percent in 1952. Some churches and mission groups demonstrate percentage gain but have not achieved sufficient numerical traction for statistically significant or accurate church growth studies. Although smaller denominations affiliated with the Japan Evangelical Association continued to post modest numerical increases, the increases with genuine impact on total Christian population are among the Roman Catholics and the mainline Protestants belonging to the National Christian Council of Japan. These bodies, with larger central offices that can efficiently screen local church reports, demonstrated a carefully tabulated membership growth of about 10,000 people last year. Approximately three-fourths of the 19,836 baptisms reported in 1991 were in Roman Catholic or NCCJ churches.

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The most reliable and authoritative source for statistics on Japanese denominations is the *Kirisutokyō Nenkan* (*The Christian Yearbook*), published each year under the auspices of a weekly Christian newspaper, the *Kirisuto Shimbun*. Nearly all church growth analysts depend entirely on the accuracy of these carefully compiled figures, but too often fail to credit the publication for its hard work in collating indispensable church membership data.

The yearbook presents annual reports for 170 denominations and independent churches, complete with addresses for congregations, institutions, clergy, and prominent lay people. The reader is cautioned to be analytical of memberships reported by certain groups, as in the case of the indigenous Spirit of Jesus (*Iesu no Mitama*) Church. This body regularly publicizes wildly deviant statistics, loosely based on whimsical counting procedures by some local leaders who base their membership claims on counting methods that enumerate living and dead relatives of believers. The Spirit of Jesus Church reported a national membership of 472,544 for the present annum, representing an astonishing increase of 40,000 believers in the last year. If true, this body alone would be considerably more numerous than the Roman Catholic total of 444,573. The yearbook presents these statistics as reported, with an asterisk to alert readers that these figures and those of some other groups are not considered

reliable enough to justify inclusion in the overall Christian statistical totals, so that church membership excluding marginal groups is reported as 1,040,986.

Acceptance of the accuracy for the various denominational head count claims would require the assumption that there is some form of responsible membership accounting structure, and that similar methods are employed by each reporting body. Certain small evangelical bodies and independent congregations, however, are not answerable to any form of external analysis and reports tend to fluctuate considerably from year to year.

To examine church growth factors in Japanese Christian denominations it is essential to soberly recognize the effects of fragmentation among the more than 160 mostly miniscule Protestant groups. Simply computing annual percentage increases (or decreases) for bodies with less than 5,000 members nationwide is a meaningless exercise unless protracted for at least a decade. Mergers and schisms (more the latter) have a dramatic effect on the overall annual statistics for the micro-denominations that have proliferated in Japan in the past five decades. Some of the smaller bodies include individual congregations that of themselves are actually a sizable proportion of the entire national membership total for the whole denomination. Among numerous examples of this phenomenon is the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Japan, which reports 1,618 members. The denomination's congregation at Kōza alone has 1,005 believers, nearly two-thirds of the national total. In many instances, factionalism has divided many Japanese Christian groups (there are, for instance, more than a dozen separate Baptist splinter denominations), so that loss of even a single congregation or relatively small additions or defections may warp growth figures extrapolated from simple calcula-

tion. This is one reason why observations based purely on annual denominational increase or decrease are effective only for bodies with memberships totalling 5,000 or more, or if protracted over at least two or three decades. Below those levels, churches have not obtained adequate traction to produce noteworthy statistical impact in the general Japanese population.

To illustrate, a larger group like the United Church of Christ in Japan (*Kyōdan*) has experienced the exodus of two different groups of churches in the past five years—The Uniting Church of Christ in Japan and the Holiness Federation. Each of these formed its own small denomination, although these new bodies are by no means the smallest in Japan. Yet the mass of the *Kyōdan*, with over 200,000 members, meant the departures were hardly even noticed and that the *Kyōdan* was easily able to absorb the impact of these losses and to continue to post growth figures. In fact, the *Kyōdan* membership increase of 2,139 believers last year (with 3,225 baptisms) was itself a figure larger than the entire national denominational memberships of all but the largest evangelical churches.

Additional statistical analysis yields interesting evangelistic audit data for denominations. The yearbook provides information on numerous other factors, including the number of baptisms. In most cases, the number of baptisms exceeds the overall membership increase for a denomination. This would indicate that evangelism and baptism of new believers is necessary to exceed attrition rates, most notably from the death of elderly members. Obviously, groups whose membership gains equal or exceed baptisms are experiencing a certain amount of transfer of already baptized Christians who held membership in other Christian churches. An annual report showing fewer baptisms than general membership growth thus reflects lit-

## 1991 STATISTICS FOR 20 LARGEST DENOMINATIONS

DENOMINATION	MEMBERSHIP	CHANGE	CONGREGATIONS	CLERGY/ RELIGIOUS
Roman Catholic	418,706	+4,940	1,095	10,124
United Church of Christ in Japan ( <i>Kyōdan</i> )	204,293	+2,139	1,707	2,155
<i>Nippon Sei Kō Kai</i> (Anglican)	57,772	+ 234	299	344
Japan Baptist Convention	30,242	+ 501	73	115
Eastern Orthodox	25,523	0	82	61
Japan Evangelical Lutheran	21,425	+ 498	138	160
Church of Christ in Japan ( <i>Nikki</i> )	13,824	+ 61	142	162
Seventh Day Adventist	12,893	+ 193	153	120
Immanuel (Wesleyan)	12,288	+ 63	117	262
Jesus Christ Church	11,896	- 4	117	244
Assemblies of God	10,492	+ 243	165	332
Holiness Church	11,354	+ 238	159	344
Reformed Church in Japan	8,671	+ 64	125	151
The Evangelical Alliance ( <i>Dōmei</i> )	8,040	+ 463	167	272
Salvation Army	6,654	- 593	70	220
Holy Church of Jesus	6,284	+ 114	98	204
Nazarene	5,544	0	76	100
Japan Baptist Union	4,816	- 56	73	115
Independent Churches Federation ( <i>Renmei</i> )	4,350	0	63	67
Korean Christian Church in Japan	4,246	+ 87	79	68

tle impact on the total growth for the Christian population in Japan. This phenomenon has been especially evident in smaller churches. Among several examples is the Evangelical Alliance Church (*Dōmei*), which baptized only 429 persons last year but experienced an increase of 463 members. This ratio might indicate a younger

overall age for believers, with less attrition due to the death of aging members, but if protracted would also signal a need for balanced evangelistic efforts to produce growth that is less dependent on transfers from other denominations.

The major charismatic or Pentecostal bodies, which have accounted for the bulk of

church growth figures in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and some Asian countries, experienced little or no membership expansion in Japan in 1991. The Assemblies of God, for example, added less than 250 believers nationwide. Some independent Pentecostal congregations funded and staffed by Korea-based groups have experienced spurts of growth that have not been sustained or that have encountered the schismatic tendencies mentioned above.

Other important barometers of local church strength are church school enrollment and the ratio of attendance at Sunday services to overall membership. Only the Roman Catholics, the United Church of Christ in Japan, the Baptist *Renmei* and the Anglican *Sei Kō Kai* report church school totals in excess of 5,000 pupils. Secular pres-

ures and school activities on Sunday are often blamed, and what this portends for the next generation of Japanese Christians remains to be seen.

As is true in other countries, the rule in Japan is that younger and smaller denominations enjoy a larger percentage of worship participation. Ratios vary enormously, with some denominations reporting that only about a third of their membership are in church on a given Sunday, while others claim that well over half of the membership attend weekly services.

The *Japan Christian Review* will annually track statistical patterns for the major Christian churches, and will seek to provide readers with yearly reports of important mergers or schisms that may be of assistance in assessment of annual data.