

Denominational Renewal or Fragmentation?

An Exploratory Study of Reformed-Evangelical Movements Within the United Church of Christ in Japan¹

Thomas J. Hastings and Mark R. Mullins

INTRODUCTION

IN APPROACHING THE question of “Reformed vitality” in the context of Japan, it is important to remember that all Christian denominations together represent a small minority religion of roughly one percent of the population. Our observations regarding the “vitality” or “success” of churches, in other words, are about a relatively small-scale operation and limited population. While the Protestant missionary movement has admittedly not met with widespread receptiveness and response, literally hundreds of mission churches have established a significant organizational presence in Japan and recorded varying degrees of success. At the outset it is noteworthy that at least until 1940, the national and mission churches associated with the Reformed-Presbyterian tradition were recognized as having the most successful work in Japan. These churches subsequently played a major role in the formation of the Nihon Kirisuto Kyōdan (United Church of Christ in Japan, hereafter Kyōdan).

In light of the size and marginality of Christian churches in Japan, it may be somewhat misleading to refer to the Kyōdan as a “mainline” denomination. Nevertheless it is the largest Protestant denomination in Japan and in many ways its current struggles resemble that of the so-called “mainline” denominations in North America. In addition to the conflict between more “liberal” social issue-centered groups and more

“evangelical” church-centered groups, this denomination also struggles with the legacy of diverse denominational traditions and polities represented by Reformed-Presbyterian, Congregational, Methodist, Holiness and Baptist subgroups. Previous sociological studies of the Kyōdan have focused on the internal conflict in terms of secularization theory and generational change (Reid 1991; Davis 1992). What has yet to be considered, however, is the question of the relative vitality of the various subgroups within the denomination. This paper represents an exploratory effort to address this issue with a special focus on the Reformed-Presbyterian subgroup within the Kyōdan during the postwar period. Following a brief sketch of the complicated history of growth, union, schism and conflict, we will seek to clarify the nature of the current divisions within this denomination and consider the “vitality” of Reformed-Presbyterian churches today.

THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF REFORMED-PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES

The first Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed missionaries arrived from the United States in 1859. Since Christianity was still a proscribed religion, these earliest missionaries were engaged primarily in language study and medical and educational work. In 1872 the first Japanese Protestant church was organized as the Nihon Kirisuto Kōkai (Japan Christian Public Church) in Yokohama

under the leadership of Dutch-Reformed missionary James Ballagh (this was a year before the Japanese government removed the notices proscribing Christianity). A year later the first Presbyterian Church was organized as part of the China Synod (Jennings 1995, 132). In 1877 these two streams decided to unite their efforts with that of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland mission and merged to form the Nihon Kirisuto Itchi Kyōkai (Union Church of Christ in Japan). In 1890 the name was changed to Nihon Kirisuto Kyōkai (Church of Christ in Japan).

While slow growth characterized the first two decades of Reformed-Prebyterian mission work, by the 1880s their various efforts began to meet with considerable success. Yamamori (1974, 49) points out that in the period of "openness to the West" (1882–1889) the Presbyterian and Congregational mission churches recorded phenomenal growth: "the Congregational Church from 1,000 to 9,000, and the Prebyterian Church from 2,000 to slightly less than 9,000." These two "mission machines," Yamamori explains (1974, 62), were more effective than other mission churches because they "had the greatest number of missionaries; trained the national forces quickly; organized more churches with many of them self-supporting; concentrated their forces in strategic places; [and] emphasized education...."

In light of recent discussions of church growth, it is interesting to note that in prewar Japan it was the older established churches rather than the smaller sectarian groups that were making significant headway. In fact Yamamori (1974, 105) refers to the Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational and Episcopal churches as the "expansionists" and the Southern Baptists, Disciples of Christ and Seventh Day Adventists as the "slow growers" in the period from 1901 to 1939. By 1940 the Nihon Kirisuto Kyōkai (Church of Christ in Japan) had become the largest Protestant denomination in Japan,

consisting of 359 churches, 339 clergy and 54,386 members. Though the Nihon Kirisuto Kyōkai or Kyū Nikki (referring to its prewar identity) had a Reformed-Presbyterian background in terms of its basic theological orientation and relations with missionaries, it was a Japanese church that was independent of the mission boards and had its own confession of faith (from 1890). Therefore, strictly speaking, we should not characterize it as a Reformed or Presbyterian Church in a Western sense but as a developing national church within the worldwide Reformed and Presbyterian stream.

The prewar "mainline" church growth in Japan does not necessarily undermine Dean Kelley's argument in *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (1972). Reflecting some of the vast changes in the Christian world over the past century, there are a number of reasons that may be cited for the success of the older established denominations. Firstly, especially prior to the modernist-fundamentalist debates of the 1920s, the older churches and their prewar missionaries in Japan tended, in fact, to be more conservative theologically. According to Drummond (1971, 282) these prewar missionaries also tended to be more open and "ecumenical" in spirit, a trait that likely appealed to well-educated Japanese Christians and "seekers." Finally, whereas "mainline" Protestant missionaries had been a numerical majority until World War II, the trend was reversed after the war with the founding of parachurch missionary fellowships and the commissioning of a new wave of missionaries with a decidedly more fundamentalist theological orientation and aggressive evangelistic approach.

Given this history of relative success for the older churches, the question that concerns us here is whether or not the Japanese churches with a Presbyterian and Reformed background that remained in the Kyōdan after the war exhibit any evidence of continuing vitality today. Before we consider

this difficult question, we first need to look at a rather complicated history, beginning with the founding of the Kyōdan in June 1941, six months prior to the outbreak of World War II.

CHURCH UNION IN WARTIME JAPAN

Some of the earliest missionaries and most Japanese Christian leaders had long dreamt of a united church that would transcend what was perceived as a narrowness in Western denominationalism (Morioka 1976, 65–86). While a “non-denominational” or “trans-denominational” orientation characterized some of the earliest cooperative missionary efforts, it was only a matter of time until the denominationalism of the missionaries won the day. By the turn of the century, most Western denominational traditions had established their own distinct mission churches on Japanese soil. In spite of the growth of these denominational traditions, many leaders associated with the various churches had visions of creating a united Japanese church that could transcend the distinctives and divisions that accompanied the Western churches. With the formation of the Nihon Kirisutokyō Renmei (Japan Christian Federation) in 1923, Japanese denominational representatives began seriously to study and discuss the possibilities of union.

While church leaders had worked for a united Christian witness for many years, it was not until the Japanese government forced the union that these diverse Protestant religious bodies actually came together. In the context of the rising militarism and nationalism preceding World War II, the *Shukyō Dantai Hō* (Religious Organizations Law) was passed in 1939, requiring religious organizations to comply with conditions set by the Ministry of Education in order to receive official recognition or legal status. Indicating that it would only recognize one Protestant denomination, the Min-

istry directed the various churches to form one religious organization. Denominational representatives met for serious discussion in August 1940, and on October 17 passed a resolution to unite their various churches. The following year all Protestant religious bodies—with the exception of a section of the Anglican Church, the Seventh Day Adventists and a few small evangelical churches that refused to cooperate with the government-directed church union—became part of the Kyōdan.

The churches in the Reformed-Presbyterian stream were an important component of the newly-organized Kyōdan with over one-quarter of the total 1942 membership (190, 447) coming from the Nihon Kirisuto Kyōkai. As noted above this church was originally formed from an earlier union of Presbyterian and Dutch-Reformed churches. The selection of Rev. Tomita Mitsuru, a Nihon Kirisuto Kyōkai minister, as the first chairperson of the new denomination is another indicator of the prominence of this church tradition at that decisive moment in history.

In light of the legal measures and government pressures mentioned above, it is not surprising that for many of the participating churches this was a less than happy union that resembled a forced or arranged marriage. From the beginning, as Reid (1991, 80) points out, the “Kyōdan rested on an uneasy combination of ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ motivation.” At least for its first four years of existence, the ‘secular’ demands of the state proved to be the most dominating influence. Government pressures intensified and Kyōdan leaders felt they had no alternative but to accommodate their churches to the nationalistic environment. Writing in the midst of this difficult period, Holtom (1943, 95) suggested that the overall weakness of Christianity made this pattern of response almost inevitable:

The Christian movement in Japan today is still too weak, in numbers as well as

influence, to take more than a subordinate position when powerful forces in the state set about turning all the resources of the national life into directions that cut across those along which the Christian church has traveled. Under the circumstances the church has only two roads open to it: persecution and martyrdom or compromise and accommodation. The Japanese Christian church has chosen the latter.

As a government-directed union of 34 denominations, the Kyōdan carried out virtually all its activities in accordance with government directives until the end of the war. On January 11, 1942, for example, representatives of the Kyōdan went to Ise Jingu (the major Imperial Shinto shrine) to report to the national gods the founding of the Kyōdan and pray for its development and contribution to the nation. The future development of the denomination until the end of the war was largely guided and controlled by numerous government demands. Before the end of 1942 (December 10) the head office of the Kyōdan instructed all churches to perform *kokumin girei* (the Shinto-based "Peoples' Rite") before each worship service, which involved bowing in the direction of the Imperial Palace, singing the *Kimigayo* (hymn to the emperor) and silently praying for those who had died in service to the emperor. Kyōdan chief Tomita also made his now infamous trip to Korea (then an imperial colony of Japan), during which he urged Korean Christians also to perform the *kokumin girei*.

Thus all aspects of church life came under the increasing scrutiny and control of the authorities. Hymnbooks were edited and shortened to about one hundred selected hymns; songs with references to peace or to God as Creator and Judge were excised (Iglehart 1959, 247-249). In order to show that it was fully behind the government's war effort, the Kyōdan even began a fundraising campaign for the military in

November 1943 for a war plane named *Nippon Kirisuto Kyōdan* ("Japan United Church of Christ"). By 1944 the government went so far as to issue themes for sermon topics to all the churches through the Kyōdan office. The general secretary of the Kyōdan even instructed the churches to choose another date to celebrate Christmas, since December 25 was to be observed as a national holiday honoring the former Emperor Taisho's birth. On the other hand, there was a famous incident that occurred in 1945 when Tomita and another Kyōdan leader, Murata Shiro, were called to explain the Kyōdan's catechism to the Ministry of Education. According to Drummond (1971, 266) the Kyōdan leaders "resolutely insisted that it was impossible to alter the church's belief in the resurrection of Christ and the subordination (in effect) of the emperor to God and his Christ. Tomita is reported to have said later to friends that at this point he was prepared to take his stand and die if necessary."

POSTWAR DEVELOPMENTS

Before we consider the question of Reformed-Presbyterian vitality in the current situation, it is first important to review the major trends especially in the immediate postwar history of the Kyōdan. With the establishment of religious freedom by the Allied Occupation Forces in 1946, many groups left the Kyōdan to reestablish their prewar denominational identities. The most significant departures were the Anglican Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Church, numerous Baptist and smaller Evangelical and Holiness churches. A small number of churches associated with the southern Presbyterian tradition (Presbyterian Church U.S.) left the Kyōdan to cooperate in the organization and development of a new church called the Reformed Church in Japan (*Nihon Kirisuto Kaikakuha Kyōkai*). Today missionaries from the southern stream of the Presbyterian Church USA, the

Christian Reformed Church and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church continue to cooperate and assist with new church development in this denomination.

In 1951, 30 churches of the Kyū Nikki (the Reformed-Presbyterian background Church of Christ in Japan that existed prior to the 1941 union) left the Kyōdan to reestablish the Shin Nikki. Though this rather late succession was a tremendous blow, a number of the churches from the Kyū Nikki opted to remain within the Kyōdan. Since it is the “vitality” of this remaining subgroup that we are concerned with in this paper, we need to tell their story in some detail.

It is important to keep in mind the desperate conditions of the nation at the end of World War II. Beginning in the summer of 1945 most of the major Japanese cities had been American targets for a series of widespread fire bombings prior to the two atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima (August 6) and Nagasaki (August 9). When Japan finally surrendered on August 15, its cities were in ashes and millions of people were left homeless and without work. In spite of generous Western humanitarian efforts there was mass starvation, malnutrition and disease. People were exhausted by the daily struggle to find enough food to survive and a general malaise had settled over the defeated nation. It was a time of national chaos. In these circumstances it was naturally difficult and sometimes impossible for church leaders to travel and hold meetings. This situation, as well as the above-mentioned dream of realizing a united church in Japan that transcended Western denominationalism, helps explain why churches of very different traditions chose to remain in the Kyōdan.

The fact that some churches opted to remain while others opted to secede indicates that the question of how to relate to this postwar church union called the Kyōdan was fraught with thorny theological issues for the former Kyū Nikki (Reformed-Presbyterian) churches. The basic position of these

churches was to identify themselves as “a church within a church-in-formation.” That is, since it had not yet reached a consensus on a normative and binding confession of faith, the Reformed-Presbyterian group could not officially recognize the Kyōdan as an authentic “catholic” church. The Kyū Nikki group, for their part, still had its Confession of 1890 to bind it together. Thus they felt a strong sense of responsibility to lead the Kyōdan out of chaos toward a more stable church order. In line with this purpose the Kyū Nikki had formed new cooperative church associations within the Kyōdan, beginning with the Tokyo Yokohama Shinkōkai (Faith-Sharing Committee) in 1946, superseded in 1947 by the Kirisutokyō Kyōryoku Dendōkai (Committee on Cooperative Evangelism; henceforth KKD) and again by the Tokyo Dendō Kyoku (Tokyo Evangelism Bureau) in 1951.

It is impossible to understand the former Kyū Nikki churches’ sense of responsibility without giving some consideration to their Reformed theological convictions. In June 1948, at the first national assembly of the KKD, the group stated its determination to “establish a ‘catholic’ church based on evangelical faith, committed to cooperative evangelism while remaining within the Kyōdan.” At its second national assembly held in October 1948, its creedal convictions were outlined more clearly, as follows: “We have formed the KKD for churches and people who profess the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. The KKD is determined to build a catholic church based on this faith foundation.” Again at its third national assembly in 1949 the following two principles were announced: 1) “We are committed to the creation of a living catholic unity in the Kyōdan,” and 2) “We will strive for the recognition of presbyterianism (*chōrōshugi*) as the most suitable church polity for the Kyōdan” (Kami 1996). Thus we can see that, from an early stage in the postwar period, the KKD took a strong stand on the normative and

binding power of the historical creeds of the church and the need for a Presbyterian polity.

We must recall that after the above-mentioned 1947 successions the postwar Kyōdan was comprised mainly of former Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian-Reformed churches, with a handful of Baptist, Holiness and Free Methodist churches. Given this diversity it is of little surprise that the KKD's convictions did not meet with an enthusiastic welcome from the other churches. The former Methodist churches were not against reaching a creedal consensus, but it was not a pressing issue for them. Former Congregationalists and Baptists, on the other hand, believed that each local church should have confessional freedom (Drummond 1971, 285).

Naturally the leaders of the KKD were acutely aware of these differences, yet they were still committed to remaining within the Kyōdan on the condition that the Kyōdan, in turn, would recognize the right of *kaiha* (former denominational associations) like the KKD to continue to exist. In fact, in its December 1949 report to the Kyōdan Executive Committee, the Kyōdan's Committee on Structural Reform reluctantly agreed to recognize the *kaiha*, stating that "as long as the *kaiha* continue to cooperate with all of the activities of the Kyōdan, we conclude it is impossible to deny their existence at this juncture, and we suggest that the Kyōdan itself should actively cooperate with this committee's decision" (Kami 1996, 6). Meeting in April 1950, the KKD responded to this tentative recognition with the following statement: "In light of the Kyōdan's public recognition of the *kaiha*, we who long for a catholic unity in the church commit ourselves to continued efforts to nurture the Kyōdan and believe that, for the time being, the operation of multiple church polities within the Kyōdan is vital for the process of building a true church and that this process will eventually

lead to the growth of a healthier Kyōdan" (Kami 1996, 6).

At this juncture it appeared that the principle of coexistence within a uniting church would win the day, yet in the months prior to the Sixth General Assembly of the Kyōdan in October 1950, the mood had shifted and there was a decision to retract the previous proposal of the Kyōdan's Committee on Structural Reform to recognize the *kaiha*. In its report entitled "Concerning the *Kaiha* Issue," the Committee on Structural Reform concluded "We are unable to publicly acknowledge a 'denominational-type church' like the *kaiha* with its closed, completed and exclusivistic tendencies." This report sent shock waves through the former Kyū Nikki churches.

The Kyōdan Executive Committee then created the Special Committee on the *Kaiha* Issue in February 1951, which issued the following comments on the former report's use of the words "closed, completed and exclusivistic" in regards to the *kaiha*: "If we publicly approve of the *kaiha*, which has a church-like identity, people's spiritual loyalty will be swallowed up by them and the Kyōdan will cease to exist except in name." Further, in relation to the Kyōdan's self-understanding of its confession of the Apostles' Creed, the committee said, "From the point of view of the gospel, creeds should be understood as confessions of praise in response to God's grace, therefore they should not be taken primarily as having the character of a kind of legal binding power.... Naturally, in the sense that the gospel that is confessed has the power to lead the confessor into obedience, the discussion of a concept of binding authority is permissible. But this sense should be strictly separated from the aforementioned legally binding power." As a result of this new direction, over 30 churches of the Kyū Nikki decided to secede from the Kyōdan and founded the above-mentioned Shin Nikki (Nihon Kirisuto Kyōkai, Japan Church

of Christ). The Kyū Nikki churches that remained in the Kyōdan had changed their association name from KKD to Tokyo Dendō Kyoku (Tokyo Evangelism Bureau) in February 1951.

In spite of these many departures the Kyōdan has grown throughout the postwar period. This growth, nevertheless, must be seen in relation to an overall decline from nearly 100 percent of Protestant Christians in 1942 to 34.7 percent of the total share in 1995. During this period independent evangelical and Pentecostal churches have fared considerably better than the older churches (Kumazawa 1995, 46).

The first decade or so following the end of World War II has been referred to as a “boom” for Christianity. From 1947 to 1951, for example, the Kyōdan recorded over 10,000 adult baptisms per year, established 156 new churches and saw Sunday school attendance almost double from 73,688 to 140,069. It is important to note, however, that attendance figures only increased slightly during this same period and the number of active members actually declined. As Lee (1967, 48) observed, the dropout rate suggests that “the weakness of the Church in the postwar period was not so much its inability to attract members, but rather its failure to retain the new adherents.”

Adult baptisms and Sunday school attendance in the Kyōdan peaked in 1951. Although the number of baptisms and Sunday school attendance has steadily declined since that time, figures for resident membership and church attendance increased until the mid-1960s. From 1967, however, these figures began to decline and the number of adult baptisms dropped sharply. The decade of the 1970s was one of intense conflict and turmoil for the Kyōdan and this is reflected in the drop in all categories of membership and attendance. Since the decline actually began several years before the crisis and conflict in the Kyōdan, Kaino (1992, 116) suggests that other demographic

and economic factors were also significant background to this decade of decline. The declining rate of growth over the postwar decades is also related to the number of new church starts each year. As Hugh Trevor (1994, 35) points out, “In the 1950s the denomination was starting 10 new churches a year; in the 1960s and 1970s this dropped to 5; in the 1980s to 3; and in the 1990s, so far to 2 churches a year.”

REFORMED-PRESBYTERIAN AND EVANGELICAL SUBGROUPS WITHIN THE CONTEMPORARY POLEMICAL SITUATION

In spite of the divisions and ongoing conflict, since the early 1980s the Kyōdan has shown some signs of recovery, as reflected in the figures for resident membership and church attendance. While these figures suggest a more stable membership and church life, the drastic decline in the church school population and the minimal number of baptisms recorded over the past few years raises some grave questions regarding the future of the denomination.

Within the denomination, however, there are several significant reform and renewal movements. The churches associated with these organizations appear to have stronger “vital signs” (membership, attendance, baptisms) than the average church in the Kyōdan. Like other similar movements, the following three subgroups within the Kyōdan have not yet received systematic attention.

1. The Zenkoku Rengō Chōrōkai (National Federation of Presbyterian Churches, henceforth ZRC) was founded in 1976 as the successor to the Tokyo Dendō Kyoku (Tokyo Evangelism Bureau) and represents an association of 64 churches with seven “quasi-presbyteries” in the Tōbu, Seibu, Mie, Wakayama, Hokuriku, Tōkai and Kanagawa regions. This group has a rather tenuous relationship with the larger denominational structure; it often refers to itself as “a church within a

church." While opting to remain in the Kyōdan like their above-described postwar predecessors, they partially recognize the legitimacy of the Kyōdan (e.g. their pastors take the Kyōdan ordination examinations). At the same time they continue to insist on the recognition of the historical confessions and press hard for a Presbyterian-style polity. There is some generational disagreement on these issues within the ZRC itself, with the older postwar generation, for example, tending to take a harsher stand in relation to the Kyōdan than the second- or third-generations. The ZRC publishes a monthly journal called *Senkyō* (*Mission*), some pamphlets with an evangelistic purpose as well as material describing the history of the group.

2. The Fukuinshugi Kyōkai Rengō (Evangelical Church Federation) is an evangelical association of 80 churches and 300 individual supporters (approximately 20 percent from former Reformed-Presbyterian congregations) that works for the political reform and renewal of the denomination.² This association publishes a church school guide called *Kyōan*, which is referred to below.

3. The Kaikaku Chōrō Kyōkai Kyōgikai (Conference of Reformed-Presbyterian Churches) was founded in 1985. This group is an informal association of over 200 churches (over 60 percent of Reformed-Presbyterian background) that promotes evangelism as the central activity of Christian mission and is committed to reaching a theological consensus on the basic Christian creeds. In addition to these reform-renewal movements there are another 80 conservative evangelical churches representing the Holiness subgroup within the Kyōdan. When combined, these subgroups represent some 40 to 45 percent of all Kyōdan churches.

To understand the existence of the ZRC and other renewal groups within the Kyōdan, we cannot ignore the strong polemical stance they take in relation to the *shakaiha* or social issue-centered pastors and churches group. The basic impetus for this polemic lies in the perception that, in the aftermath of the divisive student uprisings of the early 1970s, the leadership of the Kyōdan has been inordinately influenced by the *shakaiha*. The general consensus among the renewal groups is that the overly-politicized *shakaiha* leaders and churches are incapable of addressing the real spiritual needs of Japanese people today. Looking at the overall decline in baptisms, one renewal group leader stated that the Kyōdan needed more than a confession of its failure during World War II (a popular *shakaiha* issue); it needs a clear confession of its responsibility for evangelism (*dendō sekinin kokuhaku*). The emphasis of many *shakaiha* leaders is on a pluralistic "coexistence" (*kyōzon*) rather than calling people to faith in Jesus Christ. Another renewal leader referred to this preoccupation with coexistence as a kind of "evangelistic nihilism." In other words, without serious outreach and discipleship there will be no witness for the next generation (social or evangelistic).

Putting aside the polemic leveled by the renewal groups, one could make the case that these *shakaiha* churches and leaders represent a peculiar sectarianism of their own. That is, to be a member one must carefully "tow the party line" when it comes to one's convictions regarding the emperor, militarism, Yasukuni shrine and so on. The *shakaiha*'s outspokenness on these political issues certainly accentuates the church's tension with the larger society and culture and represents a "strictness" of sorts. When it comes to the Bible, confessions and sacraments, on the other hand, the *shakaiha*'s standards are ill-defined. Orthodoxy for the *shakaihai*, in other words, is defined pri-

marily in terms of prophetic witness and social praxis rather than theology.³

Although the Kyōdan is not yet declining like the mainline churches in North America, there are many parallels. Denominational publications are losing subscribers and the general office is already showing serious budget deficits. Subscriptions to the denominational magazine *Kyōshi no tomo* (*Teacher's Friend*) for Christian education and Sunday school programs have been in serious decline. The more evangelical *Kyōan* (*Church School Lessons*), published by the Fukuinshugi Kyōkai Rengō, on the other hand, has seen a significant increase in subscriptions. A number of churches that are not even associated with the evangelical-renewal movements are also subscribing to the *Kyōan* for their educational work. The Kyōdan's Ministerial Pension Fund is likewise in desperate financial shape. The renewal groups maintain that the predominance of the shakaiha leadership in church management positions is the main cause for this situation. They argue that financial sup-

port for political activities (i.e. opposition to the emperor system and to re-nationalization of Yasukuni Shrine) have drained the coffers of the funds needed for new church development, evangelism and support of pastors.

For this exploratory study we have only been able to obtain data on the ZRC (National Federation of Presbyterian-Reformed Churches) subgroup for 1983-1994. We discovered that the other subgroups do not keep separate data on their associated churches and we have been unable to create church lists of the other subgroups and pull the data from the denominational records. As may be seen in Table 1, membership figures and church attendance for the ZRC congregations over the past decade has been significantly higher (from 17 to 30 percent) than the denominational average.⁴ One must remember that the denominational average is based on data from all the churches in the Kyōdan (evangelical, Holiness, Reformed as well as the so-called shakaiha). If it were possible to separate the data for all of these churches,

Table 1. A Comparison of the United Church of Christ in Japan (Kyōdan) and the National Federation of Reformed-Presbyterian Churches (Zenoku Rengō Chōrōkai, ZRC) within the Kyōdan for Selected Years, 1938-1994.

Year	Number of Churches	Residents Members	Sunday Attendance	Church School	Adult Baptisms	Clergy	
1983	ZRC Kyōdan	42 1,677	3,333 (79.3) 99,842 (59.5)	1,839 (43.7) 57,002 (34.0)	2,065 (49.1) 59,124 (35.2)	90 (2.14) 2,932 (1.74)	? 2,022
1985	ZRC Kyōdan	42 1,691	3,424 (81.5) 101,032 (59.7)	1,932 (46.0) 58,068 (34.3)	1,884 (44.8) 51,009 (30.2)	99 (2.35) 3,188 (1.88)	? 2,053
1988	ZRC Kyōdan	59 1,702	4,397 (74.5) 102,452 (60.1)	2,599 (44.0) 60,522 (35.5)	2,031 (34.4) 41,387 (24.3)	103 (1.75) 2,869 (1.68)	? 2,114
1991	ZRC Kyōdan	61 1,707	4,406 (72.2) 102,771 (60.2)	2,605 (42.7) 60,833 (35.6)	1,233 (20.2) 33,999 (19.9)	79 (1.29) 1,982 (1.16)	91 2,159
1994	ZRC Kyōdan	64 1,721	5,383 (84.1) 102,665 (59.6)	3,249 (50.7) 60,802 (35.3)	1,100 (17.1) 27,348 (15.8)	121 (1.8) 2,243 (1.3)	103 2,181

The data is from the yearbooks of the United Church of Christ in Japan and the annual reports of the National Federation of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches within the Kyōdan. The numbers in parentheses are averages per congregation for the denomination as a whole and for the Presbyterian-Reformed subgroup.

the range of difference would undoubtedly be greater.

When it comes to church school enrollment, a factor that has a direct bearing on the future of a church, the range of difference between ZRC churches and the denomination as a whole shrinks considerably. Based on these statistics the ZRC churches within the Kyōdan do not appear to be significantly more effective in attracting children and youth to church programs. This is not just a problem for the Kyōdan. The declining birthrate and heightened competition with Japan's educational system has had a negative impact on all Protestant churches. Trevor (1994, 28) points out that there has been a drop of approximately 50 percent for all denominations, explaining that

the main reason has been the increasing pressure put upon even primary-school children (ages 6-11) to study at *juku* (entrance exam cram schools) to gain entrance to prestigious middle schools and some of the *juku* are on Sundays. Most of them are on week-days, but the children get so tired, they want to have Sundays free.... The loss of children is all the more serious because the majority of those who become Christians as adults usually tell of some favorable experience they had at a church when young, and fewer children in Sunday school now means fewer adults for the churches in the future.

While the rate of adult baptisms is slightly higher for the ZRC churches than the denominational average, the figures hardly suggest that this is a dynamic and growing subgroup. ZRC churches on the whole are larger and better attended, but this could suggest that they are effective at *preserving* the faith and rather ineffective in *extending* it to others. One observer has suggested that such churches may be *dentōteki* (traditional) but not truly *dendōteki* (evangelistic). Whatever the future may hold, it appears

that the distinctive emphases of the ZRC provides a more meaningful basis for congregational life than the orientation and emphases of the social-issue oriented shakaiha.⁵ While ZRC churches may be significantly stronger at the present time, the rate of adult baptisms per congregation and the overall drop in the numbers involved in the church school programs suggests that a decline in membership will begin in the not too distant future.

CONCLUSION

In this initial effort we have sketched the development of the Reformed-Presbyterian tradition in Japan and shown that there are grounds for making modest claims regarding the "vitality" of this subgroup within the Kyōdan. While contextual factors and demographic changes cannot be ignored, this exploratory study indicates that there are grounds for giving serious attention to the internal institutional characteristics of these subgroups in order to account for differences in organizational vitality.

To clarify some of the issues raised in this paper it would be helpful to gather comparative data for the shakaiha churches as well as the other subgroups within the Kyōdan. The denominational averages used for comparison in this study are based on data from all of the subgroups within the Kyōdan. If we had been able to obtain separate statistics for each subgroup, including the shakaiha churches, it would have been possible to make more meaningful comparisons. While a case has been made for the "relative vitality" of the ZRC within the Kyōdan, we cannot conclude that just being "conservative" or "traditional" will necessarily insure growth in the future. The demographic changes in Japanese society indicate that future growth (or even maintenance of the status quo) will require serious outreach strategies, concerted efforts in evangelization and systematic programs for

religious education and socialization. It remains to be seen whether the various Reformed-evangelical renewal movements will be able to revitalize a denomination that is about to enter a period of potentially life-threatening decline. The complexities of the internal political situation suggests to us that fragmentation, schism and decline may be the more likely scenario.

NOTES

¹ This paper was initially prepared for the International Conference on "Signs of Vitality in Reformed Communities," sponsored by the Free University of Amsterdam, Hope College, and Calvin College (Amsterdam, May 26-30, 1997).

² One informant pointed out that there are a number of *kakure rengō* or hidden supporters of this association. These are pastors who serve churches in presbyteries dominated by *shakaiha* (the group of churches that tend to define the mission of the church in terms of social activism). In such presbyteries, public support of the *Fukuinshugi Kyōkai Rengō* would likely lead to ostracism.

³ It is interesting to observe in this context that the accentuated tension with the larger society represented by the *shakaiha* group within the *Kyōdan* does not fit the generalizations regarding church growth and decline in the United States. Reviewing the research in this area, Roof and McKinney (1987, 20) point out that "those groups closely identified with the mainstream culture were in trouble, but those most distanced from it enjoyed continuing vitality and growth." In the Japanese context, it would be difficult to find any Christian group closely identified with mainstream culture (with the exception of several small independent and indigenous movements). All Christian bodies are in a state of relative tension with the larger society by virtue of being a foreign-born religion. The socio-political protests of the *shakaiha* churches puts them in a greater degree of tension with the larger society, but apparently to such extent that it is counter-productive and unlikely to contribute to church growth. While tension with the larger society undoubtedly contributes to a strengthening of boundaries and religious identity, in a situation like Japan, where Christianity is a new religion, it is equally important to find positive links and points of continuity with positive elements in Japanese society and culture. A religion that is totally alien

and a source of conflict is unlikely to attract many new converts.

⁴ In this exploratory study we are using membership figures, attendance and adult baptisms as the basic indicators of vitality. It should be noted that a few of the churches that joined the ZRC over the past decade come from non-Reformed (*Kyū Nikki*) backgrounds. Could it be that this ability to attract churches across denominational boundaries is another sign or indicator of vitality?

⁵ Our initial findings could be interpreted as generally supporting Kelley's (1972) thesis that conservative churches are stronger because they more effectively perform the primary function of religion by providing ultimate meaning to human life. Churches preoccupied with social issues and concerns, Kelley maintained, tend to be weaker and declining because they are unable to "undergird their activities with adequate grounding in ultimate meaning."

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