

Evangelism Among Japanese Evangelicals

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EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT GROUPS have continued to grow in Japan during the last twenty years. Many of them, according to *Christianity in Japan, 1970-90*¹, increased between two and four hundred percent. It is difficult to fully explain why. A few things can be said, however. Their theology plays a key role in this growth. Evangelicals believe that God has commanded the church to proclaim the gospel everywhere and without exception, and that God has given evangelism a high priority that no other activity can replace. They also hold that salvation can be found no where else than in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They further affirm that Scripture is a trustworthy guide to salvation in Jesus Christ alone and, thus, their trumpet sounds confidently. But theology is not the whole story. Perhaps a worship style that is warm, personal, and free from a "high" liturgy is equally important. Perhaps the relative youth of these groups—many started in Japan only after World War II—contributes to their dynamism.

And yet, considering the importance of evangelism to these groups, it is somewhat surprising how little solid knowledge we have about their sociological and psychological dynamics in Japan. The Church Infor-

mation Service, the Japan Church Growth Institute, the Kansai Mission Research Center, various departments of the Japan Evangelical Association, and others are now conducting research to provide us with scientific knowledge. Some data are now available, but the real fruits of this research still lie in the future.

At this point, our knowledge is more anecdotal than scientific, perhaps reflecting the priority these groups give to actual evangelism over research into evangelism. The Japan Evangelical Association has held several conferences on evangelism, which have publicized the goal of one church for every 10,000 Japanese. To achieve this in the foreseeable future, however, will require some structural changes among evangelicals. There are now about 7,000 churches in Japan. For a population of 130,000,000, there would have to be 13,000 churches. Where would the 6,000 new churches come from?

The traditional form of church planting envisions a pastor who has graduated from seminary starting a new church from scratch and gradually building a group. To achieve this goal in ten years, there would have to be more than 600 new seminary graduates every year—not counting those seminary graduates who go into (fully legitimate) ministries other than pioneer evangelism and not counting those who replace pastors who have retired or died. And of course some churches cease to exist each

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year. But, and this is the crucial point, the seminaries are not producing anywhere near 600 graduates per year. Currently about 150 new churches begin ministry each year in Japan. Assuming that every new church succeeds and that no older church dissolves, it would take 40 years to plant 6,000 new churches at current rates.

NEW STRATEGIES FOR EVANGELIZATION

Clearly, significant church growth in Japan will require additional strategies. One key is the mobilization of the laity, and in Japan that means women. Most Christian congregations in Japan are not lay-driven—whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, whether Mainline or Evangelical. The typical congregation gets its direction and vision from the pastor. Yet the stubborn fact remains that the majority of Christians are laypersons; and of these, somewhere between two-thirds and three-fourths are women. This may well be a good thing from the standpoint of the finances of the local church, since in Japanese households it is often the women who set the budget and allocate funds.

The laity, since they are already committed Christians, form the largest reserve of energy for evangelism. This means that effective evangelism in Japan must include a heavy commitment to women's ministries. Evangelicals are increasing their emphasis on women's ministries. According to Professor Minato Akiko of Tokyo Christian University, the challenge for Japanese Christian women is not so much "liberation" in the Western sense as the development of a "true independence."

Perhaps an anecdote from my own experience might illustrate what Professor Minato has in mind. One of the members of a congregation with which I was working in the mid-1970s was an elderly women, perhaps in her late seventies at the time. She

had been a Christian since her youth, having been baptized as a high school student, if I remember correctly. At one point, her middle-aged son needed to make some business presentations in English and thus required a native speaker to guide him. I was the reluctant draftee. Thus began a fascinating relationship. He knew that his mother was a Christian and spent a lot of time at church. He knew that the Christians had a Bible and that Jesus Christ was central to their religion, but that was all he knew. He was unaware that the Bible had an Old and New Testament; and he *thought* that it was Jesus who had been raised from the dead, but he did not *know* if Jesus had been dead for three days or for three years. In short, the larger family had assigned this Christian woman the task of supporting the values and traditions of that family. She did not have the independence to educate her own children in the Christian faith. Given a firmer sense of her own identity, this Christian wife and mother might have been more effective as an evangelist in her own home and family. (In fairness to this woman, her family grew up during the war years, which were not the best time for the Christian education of children.)

Professor Minato is herself a true rarity in Japan, a fifth generation Christian. But it is interesting that the first Christian in her line was a woman who was baptized only after the death of her husband and who thus had the freedom to raise her sons as Christians. Would that Christian heritage have gotten started if the first woman was not a widow with young children? Evangelism requires a deepening sense of true independence for Christian women. Like the businessman I tutored in English, Professor Minato was also a child during the war years. Unlike him, however, she suffered systematic discrimination as a Christian because she would not participate in her school's Em-

peror worship. Since both her parents were Christian, however, she had the support necessary to survive as a Christian.

The focus on women's issues is part of a larger package of social trends that impact evangelism. Japanese society is rapidly aging. Evangelicals have begun to devote energy toward meeting the needs of the elderly with projects such as King's Garden, a retirement center. The generation now retiring has been called the "lost generation" because their education suffered from the Second World War. Some evangelicals have begun seminars in settings outside the church buildings, such as at retreat centers. These seminars are designed to provide the retirees with the opportunity to approach the Christian faith from a more reflective point of view, in a sense quenching the intellectual thirst of a generation that had to postpone its higher education for a lifetime. At least in some cases, the attempt to evangelize through education for retirees and the needs of the elderly intermixes with the emphasis on mobilizing the women for evangelism. It is hoped that some husbands who are too embarrassed to follow their wives to a church building might be willing to accompany them to an academic seminar.

None of this should be understood as an evangelical retreat from traditional student evangelism. Evangelicals continue to run an alphabet's soup of organizations evangelizing among the youth. There is Inter-Varsity, Campus Crusade, Young Life, Hi-BA, and many, many more. The problem is not the evangelism of the youth. That has been quite successful. The problem is retaining these people, especially the men, after they have entered their careers and must live under the discipline of their business corporations or of their professional societies. Here again, the church must make some hard decisions. One route would be for Christian discipleship to help these young

Christian converts develop a sense of independence enabling them to retain their personal faith in the face of the enormous social pressure from the workplace (men) and extended families (men and women). The other would be to somehow harness the larger social forces of Japan to the Christian faith so that they buttress a Christian commitment rather than undermining it. Unfortunately, with one exception, no one has figured out how to implement this second option.

The exception is the Christian family. When both parents are active and committed Christians, there is a vastly greater probability that the faith will be passed on to the children, which is the most effective form of evangelism. This very fact, however, can put enormous pressures on the young woman who has converted to Christianity. The young woman's family gradually increases the pressure on her to get married, and she may feel her own desire to get married. But there simply are not enough Christian men in the churches nor in most Christian organizations. Eventually, her family arranges a relation with a young man who, while not opposed to her Christianity, is not himself a Christian. Her new husband and her family expect her to support the larger set of family values. And we are back to the problem I posed earlier — how to mobilize women to be effective evangelists in their own families when neither their husbands nor parents are Christian.

FOCUS ON CHURCH GROWTH

Many of the "old timers" report that in the last forty years evangelicals have gradually changed the spirit, style, forms, and ethos of their evangelism. Preaching on street corners, street meetings with trumpet and accordion, and passing out tracts to strangers have gradually given way to seminars and to

“friendship-evangelism.” The most profound shift, however, seems to be an ever brighter spotlight on the congregation itself as the agent of evangelism. Evangelicals now talk about planting, growing, and multiplying churches, with less explicit focus on leading isolated individuals to the Lord. There are a variety of explanations for this trend. While some evangelical groups had been in Japan for generations before the end of World War II, others began work in this country only after the war, and still other groups began their ministry in Japan only after the Communists expelled them from China.

When you are literally fresh off the boat, with no congregations to work with, you do what you can—which in those days included street evangelism. After congregations have formed, it is only natural to use these congregations as your base of operations. Some observers note that Japanese society itself has matured during the last forty years. What attracted positive interest in 1952 might simply create annoyance today.

Still another reason has been the development of the “church growth movement” in evangelical seminaries in North America during that same period. Lastly, the Japanese cultural preference for group identity and loyalty certainly played a role.

The current evangelical focus thus tends to be on church growth in which established congregations intentionally “parent” new congregations. A common practice is for the parent congregation to set a goal of, say, 75 to 100 fully involved people. When that goal is met, then the congregation might set aside 10 or 15 of these people—say those who live in a particular area or who express a willingness to participate in pioneer work—to begin a new congregation. The mother church then helps to pay the salary of the new pastor for a few years, and the experienced pastor provides guidance and support for the

new pastor. The new pastor may be a recent seminary graduate or he may be someone who has shown a leadership capacity in the mother church and who is well trusted. In that case, his education might proceed on a part time basis as he pastors this new congregation. The anecdotal evidence is overwhelming that most mother churches quickly recover their previous membership and even continue to grow.

It will be fascinating to observe this form of evangelism over the coming decades. Will traditional forms of Japanese social structure become more firmly rooted through this practice? For example, will the daughter church celebrate with a special service not only the date of its own founding but also the date of the founding of the mother church? And upon the death of the senior pastor of the founding church, will the daughter church conduct an annual remembrance service on the anniversary of his or her death? And if so, how many generations of churches will this practice cover—that is, will great-granddaughter churches conduct memorial services on the anniversary of the death of the founding pastor? How will loyalties to the senior pastor impact the role of denominational structures—or in the case of independent churches, or of groups with congregational polities, how will this set of loyalties affect the theoretical independence of each local congregation?

Along these lines, it is interesting to note that, despite the majority of women among church members and active participants, there seems to be no strong push for female pastors in the churches. The Pentecostal wing of evangelicalism seems to have more female pastors than other evangelical groups. The holiness groups have traditionally had no objections to female pastors. And the occasional female pastor may be found in many places in the evangelical world. But the women’s movement in the

Japanese evangelical world has chosen to put its energies in areas other than increasing the number of female pastors. In this area, at least, they have intentionally chosen not to challenge the traditional patterns of Japanese leadership.

The shift of evangelism to church growth—as opposed to the conversion of individuals who may or may not join the institutional church—is part of a larger set of developments. The Japan Evangelical Association was recently reorganized. Full membership is now open only to denominations and to groups of ten or more churches. Parachurch groups, the Japan Evangelical Missionary Association, and others are allowed only associate membership. There have been some rather cynical explanations of this change; such as, the Japanese who tend to have their institutional base in churches have finally grasped leadership of the Japanese evangelical movement away from the missionaries who tend to have their institutional base in parachurch groups and in mission societies.

The central reason for this change, however, is less cynical. The Japanese have committed themselves to the congregation as the central fact of Christian life and evangelism in this country. Parachurch groups, mission societies, and the rest are needed and welcomed, but they must be understood as contributing their energies into the life of the churches and not as alternatives to them. Thus the real message would be something like this: if a college student, who statistically is likely to be a coed, becomes a believer through the ministry of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, her Christianity is not complete until she has become a baptized member and an active participant in a local congregation.

THE JEA AND EVANGELICAL MERGERS

To put the role of the Japan Evangelical Association (JEA) into the context of the evangelical movement as a whole, it should be remembered that the Japan Evangelical Association does not include many of the Pentecostal groups. And the really “hard-core” fundamentalists have generally not been interested in participating in the JEA. Moreover, the mainline Protestant churches have significant numbers of pastors and laypersons who are fully evangelical but who are not represented in JEA. Thus the Japan Evangelical Association embodies the center of gravity in the evangelical world, but it is not totally inclusive of the entire evangelical movement.

This seems to be an age of church mergers and unions among evangelicals. For example, the SLOT consultations on merger (Send International, Liebenschell, OMF, and Team) are creating a group of about 150 congregations located from Hokkaido to Shikoku. It is hoped that this will create a more effective means of evangelization in Japan. It might help counter the “back door” syndrome in which people enter the church through the front door of baptism and public confession of faith and then leave through the back door of neglect or moving to a new area. Now at least, when one of their church members moves, there will likely be a related church not too far away from the new home. It is not known whether this will actually work or not, given the intense loyalty many Japanese Christians feel to the pastor who led them to the Lord and who baptized them. But the sheer force of numbers and a sense of participation in a larger movement should have some positive value on the life of these congregations.

Many Japanese evangelicals feel that the situation after the Second World War, when so many of these evangelical groups began their existence, was not natural; and they

feel that numerous, sometimes hair-splitting denominational divisions are not appropriate for Japan. In some ways, this parallels developments in the mainline denominations in Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. There is a remarkable parallel between the development of the mainline denominations in the 1930s and 1940s and the current stage of development among Japanese evangelicals. The mainline groups back then felt the need for cooperation and union. And it must be remembered that many of their pastors and missionaries—probably the majority—would be considered strong evangelicals by today's standards. The mainline groups therefore tried to create denominational unions.

Unfortunately the war intervened, and as a war measure aimed at controlling the Christians, the Japanese government forced all Protestants into a union. This union was unnatural, and most left it when free to do so after the war. The dubious origin of this union has poisoned the waters even for those who chose to remain together after the war (because they were heading in that direction even before the heavy-handed efforts of the government to force the issue). It is hoped that the mergers in the evangelical community will have a radically different character. They have been born completely without government input; and they are much more limited, with only closely related groups merging for obvious mutual benefit. Perhaps therefore these mergers will be more successful and more productive than the mainline mergers of half a century ago. It is now too early to assess their impact on evangelism.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

There are four topics whose importance for assessing evangelism among evangelicals I wish to acknowledge but which I cannot dis-

cuss in this article. First, despite the new emphasis on the congregation as the agent of evangelism, evangelicals still run and finance a large number of parachurch organizations. They are not going to disappear. A complete picture of the evangelical world would have to assess the continuing impact of these groups.

Second, Japanese evangelicals have recently paid more attention to social needs. Most evangelicals, contrary to popular stereotypes, have always acknowledged the legitimacy of Christian social service. Only recently in Japan, however, have the evangelical churches developed sufficient strength to support such activities on a larger scale. Japanese evangelicals have met these social needs in two ways: sometimes through participation in established agencies operating out of North America or Europe, and sometimes through the creation of new agencies. In either case, they continue to depend to a large extent on parachurch groups to meet these social needs.

It is the traditional position of evangelicals, however, that social work must not overwhelm nor detract from evangelism in the traditional sense of bringing people to an explicit confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Moreover, evangelicals have often insisted on including traditional evangelism as one of the goals inherent within the mandate of the social agencies. As the social conscience of Japanese evangelicals continues to ripen, it will be important to watch just how they integrate social work and traditional evangelism.

Third, there are more than three hundred Japanese evangelicals currently engaged in overseas missions. At Tokyo Christian University, there are two departments—one in traditional pastoral ministries and the other in "International Christian Studies." The International Christian Studies track prepares students to be missionaries, to work cross-

culturally, and to participate in Christian international organizations of various types. The larger picture of the witness of Japanese evangelicals must include a more detailed study than has yet been made of their overseas role, which is not new but which has been steadily growing.

Lastly, if you scratch an evangelical deeply enough, you will find someone committed to a personal relationship with God. This personal relationship is empowered by the Holy Spirit and is through Jesus Christ. The point to stress is that this is a "personal" relationship. A personal relationship may take place within the group context, but it must also be a relation between real persons. All the sophisticated talk about the role of the church in evangelism, all the in-

creasing awareness that the Christian life must be lived with the community of God's people, the church—this must not be allowed to obscure the evangelical commitment to people and their one-on-one relationship with God through their own confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This is still the heart of evangelical Christianity and the true bottom line of all their efforts at evangelism.

NOTE

¹ Compiled and edited by Kumazawa Yoshinobu and David L. Swain, (Tokyo: Kyo Bun Kwan [The Christian Literature Society of Japan]); distributed in the U.S.A. by Friendship Press, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1991).