



*Beautifully colored autumn leaves in Japan*

## The blessing of meeting [together] Encouraging one another to love and good works



**Izumi  
Akasaka**

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Individuals and governments are not the only ones who feel anxious when faced with totally unexpected situations—churches do as well. We have been forced to make a multitude of decisions, from how to prepare for Sunday worship to what to do about a wide variety of minor church activities. When the government declares a state of emergency and requests self-restraint, we must balance between our priorities as God’s people and our responsibilities as citizens. We continue in prayer daily as we seek practical ways to love both God and neighbor.

The *Shinkaiyaku Seisho*, Third Edition, renders Hebrews 10:25 as follows: ある人々のように、いっしょに集まることをやめたりしないで、かえって励

まし合い (Don’t stop meeting together as is the manner of some people, rather, encourage each other). It seems this translation has been helpful to some churches and caused tension in others. Let’s look again at “meeting [together].” The *Shinkaiyaku 2017* renders Hebrews 10:25 in this way: ある人たちの習慣に倣って自分たちの集まりをやめたりせず、むしろ励まし合いましょう (Don’t stop having meetings as is the habit of some people, rather, let’s encourage each other).

If we back away from the technical details of this discussion, it is clear we should focus our attention on *meeting* rather than *together*. We must not overlook the next statement: *encourage each other*. If we broaden our attention a bit to the larger context of Hebrews 10:19–25 (ESV), we see three exhortations:

- “draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (22)
- “hold fast to the confession of our hope” (23), and
- “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” (24).

The two items in verse 25: “don’t stop

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# Sunday "Zoom Church"– with no morning message! How one Japanese congregation responded to the COVID-19 pandemic

Gary Bauman, *Asian Access*

After over 20 years in the same location, from February 2, 2020, the members of Saikyo Hope Chapel in Toda City, Saitama Prefecture, led by Pastor Yoshiya Hari, found themselves renting one of two alternating local community centers each week because their building was being demolished.

### Loss of control

They struggled with the unfamiliar challenges of a mobile congregation—preparing the meeting place and setting up audio and video equipment every Sunday. Internet speed was a recurring problem. They had been broadcasting their service through Facebook Live each week, but now it was with an unreliable Pocket Wi-Fi connection. Periodically they lost the signal and Pastor Hari had to pause and restart his message.

### Recognition of needs

At the same time, the coronavirus was spreading. A growing number of church members were staying home to watch the livestream. By the end of March, the church couldn't even rent a community center.

They had lost the opportunity to meet physically, but Pastor Hari knew the members of the congregation needed a way to share their difficulties and pray for one another. So when they moved totally online on March 29, they switched to the Zoom video chat platform. Now people could meet from home, see each other's faces, and talk to each other.

### Experimentation with gatherings

The Zoom meeting was opened for informal conversation from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. but the congregation soon found that a large Zoom gathering was not good for chatting. So the youth decided to have their own meeting at 10 a.m. Online ministry for younger children was scheduled from 9:20 a.m. A church member aerobics instructor initiated an online exercise class from 10 a.m. The church's church planting team targeting the nearby Sakura Ward area began a pre-service prayer meeting.

### Development of leaders

When they started the fully online 11:00 a.m. service, at first the church used YouTube videos for the worship music. But then Pastor Hari thought, "We can use this unique time for training leaders." In the building, they had two main skilled worship leaders. But now people weren't so concerned about everything

being perfect. Pastor Hari began passing leadership of the musical worship time around, telling members they could lead in any way they wanted. They could use a YouTube video, play guitar or piano, or just sing.

Keisen Christ Church–Saikyo Hope Chapel Typical Weekly Worship (July 2020)	
<b>Friday</b>	Message video recorded and uploaded to YouTube
<b>Sunday</b>	
9–11	Various online groups meet
11:00	Opening prayer
	Worship song (led by rotating church members)
	Lord's Prayer (recited together)
	Church news, celebrations (birthdays, graduations, etc.)
	Group prayer (simultaneous prayers in each location)
	Offering (money physically set aside during worship song)
	Scripture reading (by Pastor Hari)
	Weekly memory verse (quoted or read in unison)
	Review of discussion questions (from message video)
	Divided into Zoom breakout rooms (3 to 5 people in each)
	Benediction (after breakout rooms return to large group)
1–2	Optional online lunch

### Delivery of content

Because of their struggles with Pocket Wi-Fi in the community centers, Pastor Hari decided to record his message each Friday. He realized he could do that anywhere. He told me, "Before the coronavirus, the message had to be in the church building. But if you think about the Sermon on the Mount, it's obviously outside. Jesus said, 'Look at the birds . . .'" So he decided to record the message in a setting that would fit the topic. He ended each message with discussion questions, uploaded it to YouTube, and asked congregation members to watch it on Saturday or Sunday before the 11:00 a.m. service.



2020/5/24

Pastor Hari preaches from Matthew 14:22-33  
Jesus Walks on the Water

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### Growth together

Now, at the time most congregations start listening to a message, Pastor Hari repeats the discussion questions he asked in the video. Attendees are divided into groups of three to five people and everyone is sent into Zoom breakout rooms for 35 minutes. There they discuss practical applications, share their current struggles, and pray for each other. Pastor Hari also joins a group as a participant, which he says is challenging, because it requires transparency: “I have to share myself—my burdens, my failings, my marriage . . . where I have to change!”

Asian Access missionary Jeffery Sonnenberg, who is involved in the church’s Sakura Ward church plant,

adds that this season has forced the church to ask “Why is it important for us to gather?” He continues, “It’s not to listen to someone give a presentation . . . it’s learning to interact on a deeper level.”

### Looking to the future

Pastor Hari would be the first to admit he doesn’t have all the answers. Our conversation ended with him saying, “This is an experiment. Talk to me again in a few months!”

(continued from page 1)

meeting” and “encourage each other” are subordinate to the third point. “Being together” or “how we meet” are not the main concerns of this passage. Rather, we are advised to draw near to God, to confess our hope, and especially to stir up one another to love and good works. That is the purpose behind meeting and encouraging each other.

Furthermore, Hebrews 3:13 says, “encourage one another daily”—which means we should do this not only in our Sunday worship or special gatherings, but day after day.

It is true that early Christians assembled “all together” or “in one place.” (Acts 1:15, 2:1, 44, 47 . . .) But even after they were scattered by difficulties and persecution, they “continued to speak the word of God” (Acts 4:29, 31, 6:7, 8:4, 12:24 . . .). When we trace the footsteps of Paul’s ministry, we find various ways the church gathered—in one location, in homes, in small groups, and so on.

So as you can see, how we meet is a secondary matter. Let us focus on the purpose of meeting, not on the style of meeting. In our present situation, it is important that we meet in some way and encourage each other “to consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.”

I thank God that we are given plenty of tools nowadays. It is a blessing to gather in one place. It is encouraging to meet face to face and to join hands in ministry. At the same time, it is a blessing to meet through the internet. I hear that in some cases the number of attendees at worship and prayer meetings has increased. Non-Christian family members can join the worship and some church members who had given up attending prayer meetings because they were too

busy now turn up in digital prayer meetings. Let us count the blessings of this unexpected time.

If our goal is not the meeting itself, but to encourage one another to love and good works and to daily love God and our neighbors in practical ways, there should be even more tools to implement that.

There is no clear explanation in the book of Hebrews as to why some stopped meeting together, but the dominant opinion is that they faced unexpected difficulties, such as persecution by the Roman Empire. Did these Christians give in to the power that was trying to take away their faith and hope, or love and good works?

Let us not give in to difficulties, but as the book of Hebrews says, let us “encourage one another.” In today’s society, we see not only foolish “self-restraint police” (自粛警察 *jishuku keisatsu*)\*, but concrete examples of love and good deeds, such as charitable giving and volunteer work. Christians, more than anyone, should want to take the initiative to be “salt and light” in this world.

So let us consider the “post-coronavirus world.” We will see drastic changes in society, economics, politics, international affairs, and every other area. Whatever we face, let us draw near to God with faith, confess our hope, and “stir up one another to love and good works.” To that end, I pray that church “gatherings” will be used more and more for that purpose.

\* Translator’s note: Those who take it upon themselves to enforce rules or official requests, for example, threaten people who aren’t wearing masks during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

(Translated by Tomoko Kato)

## Online Bible Class for Kids

Mitsuru Ishikura, OneHope Japan



### How it began

The coronavirus pandemic has forced businesses, schools, and churches alike to make greater use of online tools. Not all churches in Japan, however, have a member or two who are familiar with such resources. Many churches seem at a loss and have been feeling helpless. Children's programs have often received reduced priority.

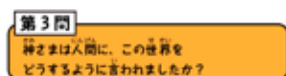
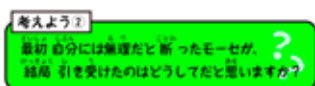
OneHope has been offering free children's resources, including manga and digital tools, for many years. As of July 2020, our *Bible App for Kids* had been downloaded over 45 million times all around the world. Now we have been given the desire to help local churches in terms of technology. So it was time for us to launch a free Sunday School program on YouTube. Thus began the [Online Bible Class for Kids](#).\*

### Program content

Like any educational offering on YouTube, there is a program navigator. I navigate users through each lesson as Mikkun, the class teacher. We first watch a Bible story—an official *Bible App for Kids* video. Then we ask three multiple choice questions based on the story. Following those, we memorize a Scripture verse with the help of an animation that gradually hides more and more of the verse.



The next part is called “Think about it!” Each child is challenged to place themselves in the Bible story and think about what is happening in this situation. These are open-ended questions with no “correct answer,” and so each child is encouraged to come up with a response in their own words.



1. いじめて OK
2. きちんとお話をする
3. 天の国を神としておがむ

If a respondent checks “yes” to the question “Can we share your answer in the next episode?,” we share it so that children can learn from each other.

### Local church support

We collect children's answers to the Bible questions via Google Forms. We have developed a system to forward the relevant

answers to their Sunday School teachers by email, because we value the connection between children and their church.

At a number of churches, Sunday School teachers and children watch an episode at a set time, and then connect on an online conferencing platform such as LINE, Skype, or Zoom, to discuss the answers to the Bible questions together.

It is not our intention to replace Sunday School programs at local churches. We hope that our YouTube program will motivate children to go back to church as soon as their Sunday School reopens.

When many churches began to cancel their Sunday School gatherings, we quickly produced the first episode for release on April 5. We announced the program on our official Facebook page and received 10 to 20 times more feedback than on our other posts. This convinced us of the great need for such a program. Also, a number of Japanese children living overseas appreciate our program as a Bible learning tool in their native language.

We have received comments from some students watching our program who have never been to church. This gives us hope that the program will serve as a frontline evangelism tool.

### Theological sensitivity

OneHope is an interdenominational organization. As this program is geared toward children, we take care that the broad spectrum of churches we serve are comfortable with the theological content in the episodes.



Since the episodes are limited to “one-way broadcasting,” we avoid touching on controversial issues and are careful with our word choices.

The *Online Bible Class for Kids* is intended to be a program for general use by many different churches. We hope each church will provide additional instruction on points of doctrine appropriate to their context.

The primary target audience is preschoolers to junior high students. We try to craft the Bible questions in such a way that they are relevant to all age groups—not too difficult for younger children, while not too easy or boring for older ones.

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## Delivering hope and wisdom from Kyushu

*Masanobu Ichiki, Kyushu Christ Disaster Relief Center*

*The 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake prompted churches in the Kyushu region to launch the Kyushu Christ Disaster Relief Center (KCDRC), which obtained NPO status in November 2017. In June 2020, Japan Update conducted an online interview with Masanobu Ichiki, General Secretary of KCDRC, to see how this ministry has been adjusting its strategies to deal with the compound disasters of both earthquakes and the coronavirus pandemic.*



**JU:** KCDRC was quick to integrate pandemic response measures into their disaster relief work. Tell us how that came about.

**Masanobu Ichiki (MI):** When KCDRC was launched, we focused on Kumamoto, where the 2016 earthquakes hit most severely. We have since helped people throughout Kyushu from time to time when large rainfall has caused substantial damage. In 2019, we worked in Fukushima Prefecture for a while following heavy rains there. We have always made it a point to extend help to places where help was slow in coming. When the COVID-19 pandemic began to affect everyone early this year, we had to cancel our fellowship gatherings in temporary and newly developed housing areas. We immediately sensed that we needed to pursue some sort of alternative in the face of such a large scale phenomenon.

**JU:** What did you decide to do specifically?

**MI:** We implemented a few initiatives. First, in May we hosted an online family life seminar. This featured Pastor and Mrs. Masuda of Grace Community Church in Sapporo. Second, we organized a tutoring program for children who were staying at home. For this,



we partnered with KGK, an InterVarsity-connected initiative in Japan. Third, also in May, we offered an online fellowship time with Dennis

Sarfate, Christian pitcher for the Softbank Hawks, our local professional baseball team. The event primarily targeted children. Fourth, on April 30 we

live-streamed Christian artist performances, including [well-known gospel singer] Misa Kamiyama.

In addition, in May and June we donated over 10,000 face masks to residents in temporary and newly developed housing as well as to care and medical facilities.

**JU:** What kind of feedback have you received so far?

**MI:** The family life seminar was well attended by more than 50 people, and it was good to share about issues and challenges among the attendees. We received a number of positive comments on the tutoring program. Children were craving conversation with someone and a tutor was just what they needed. Some parents were pleasantly surprised to see their children getting highly motivated for study.

**JU:** What challenges are you facing? Is there a way for our readers to help?

**MI:** COVID-19 initiatives are different from usual disaster relief work. It is hard to present the results of our work in any measurable way or in a visual format. Perhaps because of that, donations have not been as much as we had expected. From this experience, we have learned the importance of ongoing preparedness. Whenever a disaster hits, we should be ready to respond.

While we certainly appreciate donations, we ask for prayer as the most significant way to help. You may also support us by subscribing to our YouTube channel\*. In addition to Dennis Sarfate's video message and the live Christian artist performances, we have added a video interview with Ken Shigematsu, best-selling Christian author and pastor from Canada, speaking about life and God's wisdom in the new normal.

**JU:** Do you plan to continue the COVID-19 initiatives?

**MI:** The interview with Ken Shigematsu concluded our series of pandemic activities. We have resumed fellowship gatherings in the temporary and newly developed housing areas. We do plan to continue adding videos to our YouTube channel, to offer, for example, tips for spending time in an evacuation facility during the pandemic. We will be monitoring the situation and will respond as needed.

\* <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoNy2FdCE1GU5QUxBnPIT1w>

**70 years of evangelism through literature —  
The Word of Life Press Ministries story Part 1  
Rebuilding postwar Japan with the Gospel**

**The challenge in a country with one of the world’s highest literacy rates**

Sounds of reconstruction filled the air as an outpouring of missionaries set foot in postwar Japan. Their goal was to bring revival to broken spirits, and they began by building churches throughout Japan. In addition, these missionaries organized various mission associations in hopes of using various forms of media to reach as many people as possible. One thing that caught their attention was Japan’s remarkably high literacy rate, which led to the establishment of literature ministries.

**One piece of writing can change a person’s life**

“I was 17 years old, walking down the streets of Copenhagen, when someone handed me something. Realizing it was a Christian tract, I immediately threw it down to the street. But then I noticed that the person who had handed me the tract was silently watching me with tears in his eyes. The reality that someone would cry for me filled my heart. I went back and picked up the tract I had thrown away. I believe what Japan needs the most now is this kind of experience.” (From *History of Word of Life Press Ministries*, 1982)

T. J. Bach, general Secretary for The Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM), visited Japan in Spring 1950 to attend its annual convention. He passionately questioned the crowd, “What are your plans for literature ministries in this country with the world’s highest literacy rate?” On the spot, Bach appointed six young missionaries as literature evangelism committee members.



Among them was Canadian missionary Kenneth McVety who had just begun service in Japan

with his wife Olive. From that time on, literature ministry became McVety’s lifework.

The literature evangelism committee began their ministry by printing tracts. However, shortly after beginning their ministry, the committee chairman had

to move to Hida City in Gifu. McVety was asked to temporarily take the post, only to end up serving as chairman for the following 44 years.

With McVety in charge, Word of Life Press Ministries (WLPM) was established in Nakano, Tokyo on October 14, 1950. It was named by Alliance missionary Mabel Francis from the phrase found in Philipians 2:15–16: “Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life” (NIV). WLPM was built upon four main principles: (1) biblical faith according to the gospel, (2) non-denominational, (3) vision in evangelizing, and (4) obedience to God’s will.

Kaoru Kohama and Minosuke Tanno were two original members of WLPM. Kohama, who also served as an interpreter for McVety, became chief editor for *Inochi no Kate* (“*Bread of Life*”) while also serving as an excellent translator. He translated Oswald Smith’s *The Only Way* into Japanese as WLPM’s small, but first, publication.

**Cart remodeled and named “Fukuin-sha” (Gospel Car) to sell evangelical literature**

The Fukuin-sha (Gospel Car), a bicycle-drawn covered cart loaded with Christian literature became an important means for WLPM to introduce and sell its publications to people in



the early days. Books and literature were scarce after the war, and many people curiously gathered around the Fukuin-sha, pulled by a white man. Unlike many missionary groups that financially depended upon funds from their sending countries, WLPM decided to sell Christian books and pamphlets and use the profit to fund the work of evangelism. WLPM’s drive to publish useful Christian books that reach deep into the heart and nourish people’s faith has remained unchanged over these past 70 years.

*Christian Shimbun*, May 10, 2020

Translated and summarized by Hiromi Kiuchi

## Excited about a new beginning



Megumi Takahashi has been appointed as the new principal of Kansai Bible Institute (KBI). Earlier, she had served as a staff member at the Institute. Later she

became a missionary to Kalimantan, Indonesia, where she served from 2000 to 2017, mainly at ATI [Abdi Tuhan Injili] Theological Seminary.

“When I was first approached regarding this position, I was surprised. I wasn’t sure I was suitable for the role, but when Masakazu Fukuno (Chief Director of KBI) mentioned ‘a new KBI,’ my heart leapt,” recalls Takahashi. “You only get to live this life once, and it’s not often you get offered such an opportunity as this. So if God was leading me in that direction, I was willing to take up the offer,” she continues.

This year 14 new students enrolled at KBI. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the enrollment ceremony suddenly had to take place online on April 21, and classes commenced the following day. “It was a great help to us that one of our students had experience working in IT [information technology],” says Takahashi. She wants to “turn the negative into a positive” and use it as a starting point in her KBI ministry.

“I believe this current situation will help our students in their future ministries,” says Takahashi. “Due to the pandemic, Christians have been scattered instead of meeting in church buildings. What was once well organized has now been turned upside down. I believe God is at work through this. I feel God is leading us to reconsider the essence of true worship.”

Takahashi has had a long connection with KBI. When the campus was located in Nishinomiya, her father was the principal and the family lived on the grounds. At that time, she recalls, she wanted to get away from the school, but here she is again after all these years.

“Since we have been created in God’s image, we are the key to carrying out God’s work in this world as his representatives” says Takahashi. “The goal of evangelism is the completion of God’s Kingdom. This is also the mission for Bible colleges. KBI will consider how we can fulfill this role.”

While in Indonesia, Takahashi learnt that even if we are walking along a trackless path—lacking worldly possessions or even water, we can still smile. For Takahashi, inconvenient and dangerous situations could be “exciting” adventures. “No matter what may happen, it will work out somehow” she says. KBI has welcomed a determined principal who is excited about new things ahead.

*Christian Shimbun, May 3, 2020*

Translated and summarized by Grace Koshino

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### Current challenges

It took 15 hours to produce the first episode, which was 10 minutes long. We have since gotten used to the production process, and yet, we spend 20 to 25 hours each week to produce each 20 to 25 minute episode. Our staff members share the workload with the help of a team of volunteers. We hope to continue the weekly delivery of a Sunday School class episode for those kids who are looking forward to it and need it.

Occasionally, we have unexpected technical trouble, which delays the production process to such an extent that it seems like we will not be able to publish the next episode before the Sunday class. Time and time again, God has brought about a solution in response to our desperate prayers.

We have encouraged children in a number of episodes to trust in God, and not to rely on their own strength. That is precisely the primary message I need to hear as well.

### Looking to the future

We would like to keep on publishing weekly episodes, as long as there is need. We do not want ministry to the next generation to stop, just because we are not able to physically gather together. Our mission at OneHope is to provide local churches with ongoing support.

\* こども聖書クラスオンライン <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuZkiqPoeAn-PvAkrJX4cRQ>

## Please pray for Japan

1. Christian churches and Japanese society are still affected by the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) all over Japan and throughout the world. Keep praying that Japanese churches will stand firm in strong faith and that God will protect all the countries affected by the infection.
2. Pray that the Holy Spirit will work through foreigner-friendly ministries in Japan so that Japanese churches and ethnic churches in Japan might be united in the bond of love.
3. Pray that more “Kingdom-minded” collaborations will happen among different ethnic churches in Japan and Japanese churches. There are many opportunities including ministry to children of mixed marriages, etc.
4. Pray that God will raise up the next generation of Christ-centered, gospel-driven leaders among young Christians in Japan.

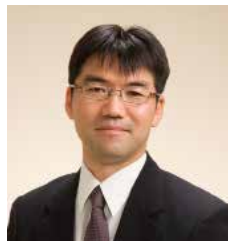
## JEA related schedule

<u>DATE</u>	<u>EVENT</u>	<u>PLACE</u>
Sep. 29-30	Tokyo Mission Forum for JCE7	Online
Oct. 27	Disaster Response Forum	Online
Nov. 4	Ethnic Ministries Network Japan	Online
Nov. 17-18	AEA General Assembly	Online
Dec. 14	JEA Board Meeting	Online

## Editorial

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19), our JEA churches and denominations have been affected in many ways. The 35th JEA General Assembly was postponed and became a document-based meeting. Many JEA meetings including the board meetings, are held by ZOOM. Many JEA churches are still closed and have online worship services, Sunday school classes, and prayer meetings. Japanese churches are spiritually suffering together with churches worldwide. However, I believe this is the time for us to learn how God loves us and how gracious He is. We are learning many lessons and experiencing God's presence in the pandemic.

Takahito Iwagami, Editor in Chief



<http://jeanet.org/>

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