

Japan Update

Autumn 2022 Number 83



A typical Japanese landscape showing a mixture of nature and human technology

Ministry possibilities using information technology



**Tadayuki
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I pastor a church in Sakaiminato City, a small bay town in Tottori Prefecture. For the past 13 years I also have been preaching at a pastorless mission church in Tottori City, 100 kilometers away. In the beginning, I drove to Tottori to conduct evening worship services, but it takes a minimum of four hours one way. As you can imagine, I soon got exhausted.

I wondered what to do, but then I found a way to use the internet for live broadcasts between Sakaiminato and Tottori. Although I had some knowledge of personal computers, no one near me was working with remote technology. So I tackled this

challenge without having any answers.

I made a lot of mistakes in the beginning, but gradually I learned how to handle it. Eventually I was able to apply this solution not only to worship services but also to gospel classes. Then I began to think about how to make fuller use of this technology. Looking around, I recognized there were people who were not able to come to worship services because they were caring for children or elderly family members, were sick, or had mental problems that made them panic in a large group.

Since the explosion of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote technology using unfamiliar equipment such as cameras and personal computers has been rapidly adopted by churches for their worship services. In other words, worship styles have greatly changed as a result of COVID-19.

This change of worship style should not be wasted by viewing it as simply a temporary way to get

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COVID-19 as a practice exercise

Koji Yoshida

Pastor, Atsubetsu Evangelical Christ Church

Pastor Koji Yoshida of Atsubetsu Evangelical Christ Church in Sapporo City, Hokkaido Prefecture, comes from a unique background as a public health physician. When COVID-19 cases began to increase in Japan in early 2020, Hokkaido was the first prefecture to declare a state of emergency. Pastor Yoshida shared with Japan Update how he has been able to draw on his expertise as a scientist throughout the pandemic period. Excerpts follow.

Japan Update (JU): Please tell us how the pandemic has affected, or not affected, your church.

Koji Yoshida (KY): In short, we never stopped gathering in person for Sunday worship. We made some changes, of course, such as not serving communion.

JU: How and why did you decide to continue meeting?

KY: Two things. First, a conviction based on Scripture, namely Hebrews 10:25. This verse came to my mind just before the worship service on March 1, 2020, the first Sunday after Hokkaido had declared the state of emergency. During the extraordinary church board meeting following the worship service on that day, I shared my desire to not give up meeting together all the more in such times as these. It turned out that one of the board members, a young lady, had also been pondering the same Scripture verse. That felt like a divine affirmation to me, and had a uniting effect on the church board.

The second rationale was my intuition based on science. As a public health physician who used to work for a healthcare center, I did some statistical math. In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the average number of positive cases in Hokkaido soon reached 50 per day. I estimated the actual number of positive cases was ten times as high, i.e., 500 per day. With a population of 5.8 million in Hokkaido, that would translate into roughly one positive case per 10,000 people per day.

Given an average worship attendance of 30 in our church, the estimated number of positive persons was 0.003. Thus, the probability of having a positive person on a given Sunday was extremely low. In addition, people who had some symptoms and/or who were close contacts with a patient

would not come to church. This would further reduce the probability. Therefore, with a reasonable level of effective infection prevention measures in place, I deduced that it was highly unlikely for COVID-19 to spread through people attending the worship service.

JU: I see God used your background! What other blessings has your church been enjoying?

KY: The greatest was that we were able to continue gathering for worship and greet each other in person Sunday after Sunday. We were blessed financially also, even with all the equipment we had to invest in, such as air purifiers, air conditioners, and things needed for streaming our meetings.

JU: Any challenges?

KY: A few members have not returned to in-person church attendance for a variety of reasons. We now email the sermon manuscript to church members. We also stream the Sunday worship service on Facebook. I try to keep in touch with everyone.

JU: We are entering the stage where churches must live with the coronavirus. Do you have any suggestions about how to do church from now on?

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Pastor Koji Yoshida

Ministry possibilities (continued from page 1)

through this crisis. I strongly hope that this big change will increase the number of churches that seriously try to distribute the gospel to people who have not been receiving it. I think this should be the basic attitude of churches, just like the people who brought the paralytic patient on a stretcher to the Lord Jesus Christ.

I believe information technology can help us complete our mission to reach out to people who

are not able to come to church services for various reasons, to support churches that are without pastors, and to fulfill our mission to bring people to the Lord. I really hope these technologies will be shared broadly among churches, and push the mission in Japan forward in both tenderness and power.

Translated by Tomoko Kato

COVID-19 as a practice exercise (continued from page 2)

KY: From the very beginning, our church sought ways to live with the coronavirus. While we still are not in a position to resume church-wide events involving a meal, we did have small group fellowships with meals together during the 2021 Christmas season. Groups of five to eight church members were each given a subsidy of 1,000 yen per person from the church budget toward a group meal. Each group decided how to spend the money. One group bought cakes, while another bought bento boxes. Yet another bought ingredients and cooked their own meal. Church members greatly enjoyed this, so we might repeat it this Christmas.

When we get together as a small group in our church, we do not use acrylic panels, which I believe are not effective from an epidemiological point of view. We do, however, take extra care for proper ventilation.

I might add that when I preach at the podium without a mask, an acrylic panel is set up in front of me in order to relieve the minds of those who have concerns.



Astubetsu Evangelical Christ Church

JU: Anything else you would like to share with our readers?

KY: I want to appeal to churches to use their approach to COVID-19 as a practice exercise. There will be outbreaks of other epidemics, if not necessarily pandemics. Global warming might bring hemorrhagic fever viruses to Japan. We must review and evaluate how churches have dealt with COVID-19 so that we will be better prepared next time.

Providing *ibasho* and *tamariba* for Japanese Christian youth

Dr. Naoki Okamura, Professor, Tokyo Christian University



The apparent weakening of Christianity in Japan is often attributed to the declining presence of young people in many local churches. Churches without youth groups are increasingly common. If this trend continues, many Japanese churches

will cease to exist in the not so distant future. In an attempt to understand and to reverse this trend, a study was conducted recently to explore how young Japanese Christians develop their faith in the midst of Japan's complicated and changing society. The study utilized a qualitative research method known as grounded theory, in which more than 30 young Japanese Christian students were interviewed at Tokyo Christian University. (TCU is an evangelical interdenominational Christian university that accepts students from over 20 different Christian denominations.)

To be involved, the students had to meet two conditions: 1) be in the age bracket from 18 to 23 and able to clearly recall their adolescent years, and 2) acknowledge to have become a believer before their adolescent period. The study participants were encouraged to talk freely on the following open-ended question: "Looking back over your adolescent years, what challenges and difficulties have you faced, and what has caused you to grow as a Christian young person?"

Through analysis of the compiled verbal data, three somewhat unexpected realities came to surface. First, while the difficulties and challenges they faced varied—from school choice to boy-girl relationships, the major difficulty they saw was not being able to share their thoughts and feelings freely with other Christian youth. This often caused a great deal of stress. Second, the most significant experiences that influenced them to grow as Christians took place in Christian camps and conferences, often during summer and winter recesses. Third, the actual changes that transpired were varied, from wanting to read the

Bible and pray for the first time on their own, to acquiring apologetic attitudes for not appreciating their home churches.

During the group interviews, the following open-ended question was posed as a follow-up: "Please try to characterize the Christian camps or conferences which impacted you positively as Christians." They were also encouraged to exchange thoughts and opinions amongst themselves. From their interactions, two terms stood out as key—*ibasho*, space where one can be oneself, and *tamariba*, "hang-out" space. As they attempted to further explain these terms, four important characteristics arose: 1) Essential components of these spaces are relationships and fellowship with people of their own age, 2) in these spaces, an individual's opinions and decisions are respected and valued, 3) evangelism can effectively take place in such spaces, and 4) these spaces can exist anywhere inside or outside of local churches.

It may be noteworthy to mention that out of the over 30 students who were interviewed, not one alluded to Sunday sermons or camp messages as having a significant impact on their faith journey. Of course, such data should not be taken as declaring sermons useless. It should, however, be viewed as affirming the advantageous impact of active interaction over passive involvement, especially in this age group.

After examination of the verbal data using grounded theory, the following proposals were made.

1) Recognize as extremely important that many Japanese Christians in their adolescent years struggle with a lack of interaction with other Christians of the same age. It is well known that for their psychological security many young people yearn for relationships with peers during these formative years. Many Japanese pastors tend to blame after-school schools (cram schools) or athletic programs for the drift of young people away from their churches. However, the absence of *ibasho* and *tamariba* may be the biggest reason why many of them no longer see their churches as meaningful or helpful places.

Extending God's Word into all places

Fumika Mizunashi, *Staff of High-school Born Againers*



hi-b.a. YouTube channel

When the coronavirus pandemic first broke out, the Japanese government ordered that all schools throughout Japan be closed. High school students had no choice but to study in isolation. Alone at home, they had to write daily reports. School events that students had looked forward to were all cancelled, such as Sports Day and once-in-a-lifetime school trips. Even if they wanted to share their disappointment with others, they couldn't meet up with their friends. Not only that, some students hadn't had a chance even once to go to their school, so they hadn't made any friends yet. It was in this environment that hi-b.a. started online ministry with a twofold desire—to share the gospel with students studying at home alone, and to provide those in isolation a Christ-centered place where they could feel a sense of belonging.

In this article, I would like to share specifically about our online Zoom meetings and our online

YouTube ministry. In our Zoom meetings, students would join online from wherever they were on weekday evenings. We sang worship songs together, read Scripture, exchanged updates, and prayed together. High school students from all across Japan (and at times from overseas) joined in and encouraged each other. Because the number of high school age Christians is in decline in Japan, isolation is a common problem that high schoolers face. Being the only Christian in a school or the only young person at a church meeting is not unusual. Meeting other high schoolers online who share in the same faith can be a huge encouragement. One student said, "I didn't know there were this many Christian high schoolers in Japan!"

We also started a YouTube ministry when the pandemic broke out. In this ministry we posted messages on our YouTube channel. Up until then, high schoolers had only had the chance to hear the gospel if they attended a meeting or event. But YouTube enabled students to hear messages whenever it suited them and choose topics that interested them. On our YouTube channel, we chose titles that were appealing to high school students and that they would want to share with others. Our staff would check the analytics of the videos to see which sections were the most appealing, and used that information to improve our next video.

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Providing *ibasho* and *tamariba* (continued from page 4)

2) Provide young Japanese Christians with spaces where they can just hang out and be themselves. This is critical for the church. On top of making good use of existing Christian camps, new and safe gathering spaces that are more accessible and can be frequented should be developed.

3) Train youth leaders who understand the special needs of Japanese Christian youth. The lead-

ers must be able to carefully listen and patiently observe each young person. They must also be less assertive and demanding in their actions. The core task here is to provide youth with ample opportunity to make sense of what is happening both around them and to themselves, and to apply in real life what they have learned as Christians up to this point in their lives.

Field report from Ukraine



The Funakoshis Photo by Hunger Zero

Masato and Miki Funakoshi, a missionary couple serving in Ukraine, visit Odesa once every two weeks

to hold a worship service with local believers. According to their May 14, 2022 report to Christian Shim bun, Russian missile attacks against Odesa have been growing in intensity. Following is a summary of their report.

On May 11, we were shocked to hear that Zakhar, an Ukrainian college student we knew, had been killed in action in Kharkiv. Zakhar was in the same class as our son Yūki in Sunday School and the church kindergarten. His family moved out of Odesa a little before Zakhar gradu-

ated from elementary school. From what we knew of him, he had not gone to church for years. We only hope that he had since come to believe in Jesus.

Several members of our church have been in military service. Please pray for those engaging in battles in the fields.

Odesa Church has been delivering food to churches in Mykolaiv, where there has been no water supply and a shortage of food and medical supplies. Please pray for the safety of the brothers delivering food.

In Velika Began in western Ukraine, 26 members of Odesa Church have been living communally. Some of them have been working with a Baptist church in a town near the Hungarian border, where a number of displaced people have arrived from all over Ukraine. Please pray that God will effectively use each of the Odesa Church members in Velika Began.

On May 8, we attended worship at Makariv Church, located in a Kyiv suburb. During the Russian invasion into Makariv, the church

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Extending God's Word (continued from page 5)

In addition to the above, we also used the LINE app to send Bible verses by text and we broadcast audio messages by radio. (Some high-schoolers have been worried about their per-packet charges, so we are trying to find ways they can have access to the Scriptures we send without waiting to pick them up when they're on a Wi-Fi connection.)

Online ministry has taught us the following two things:

First, access to God's Word does not need to be limited. Up until now, the sharing of Scripture has been restricted to a particular place and time. But through the use of an online platform it is available to anyone. This gave people the opportunity to join a meeting at any time. They could listen to sermons at a time of their choosing. This gives us a similar joy to what Martin Luther must have experienced when he translated the Scriptures, making God's Word available to many.

Second, we need to seek ways to best convey the message. Just as Paul "became all things to

all people" (1 Corinthians 9:20) so that he could reach certain people, we also must understand the culture and trends of today's high schoolers in order to reach them. In Japan, where the declining birthrate and aging of the population continues, high schoolers are bound to face even greater spiritual isolation. We would be grateful if people from all around the world would pray for the salvation of these young souls and of the Japanese people.

Translated by Grace Koshino



hi-b.a. online meeting

Field report from Ukraine (continued from page 6)

members were scattered and there had been no church services. Since mid April, however, the members began to return. On this Sunday, I was privileged to preach on Revelations 5 and to look up to our Lord the Healer together with the congregation. We were greatly encouraged by the experience. Please pray for Makariv Church and for the restoration of the local rehabilitation center.

Ukraine has been in desperate crisis as a nation. May the country be protected by God's mercy. May bloodshed and destruction come to an end as soon as possible. Even in the middle of crisis, we pray that more people will receive eternal life. Please keep on praying that the churches will be protected and strengthened and that missions advance in Ukraine.

Christian Shimbun June 5, 2022

Translated and summarized by Atsuko Tateishi

Andrew Marin on LGBT

In May 2020, Word of Life Press Ministries published the Japanese translation of Andrew Marin's book on LGBT issues, *Love Is an Orientation**. The book was originally published in 2000 in the U.S. Marin grew up in a conservative evangelical church, where he was taught and believed homosexuality was a sin. When three of his best friends, one after another, came out to him as gay, he began to ask God why he had given these friends to him. Marin's quest led him to move into a gay community.

Marin listened to the gay people he met and learned how they felt alienated by Christians in general. He developed friendships with people in the gay community and studied the Bible with them. Some came to believe in Jesus.

The book was initially criticized as liberal by evangelicals and as discriminatory by mainline Christians. In the midst of an increasingly polarized American society, however, the book had the rare value of giving voice to a conservative Christian who is building bridges to gay communities. Marin's conclusion is not about whether homosexuality is a sin. Rather, he concludes with a challenge for unconditional love.

"It's not the job of Christians to convict the GLBT community. That's the Holy Spirit's job. It's not the job of Christians to judge the GLBT community. That's God's job. It's the job of Christians to love the GLBT community in a way

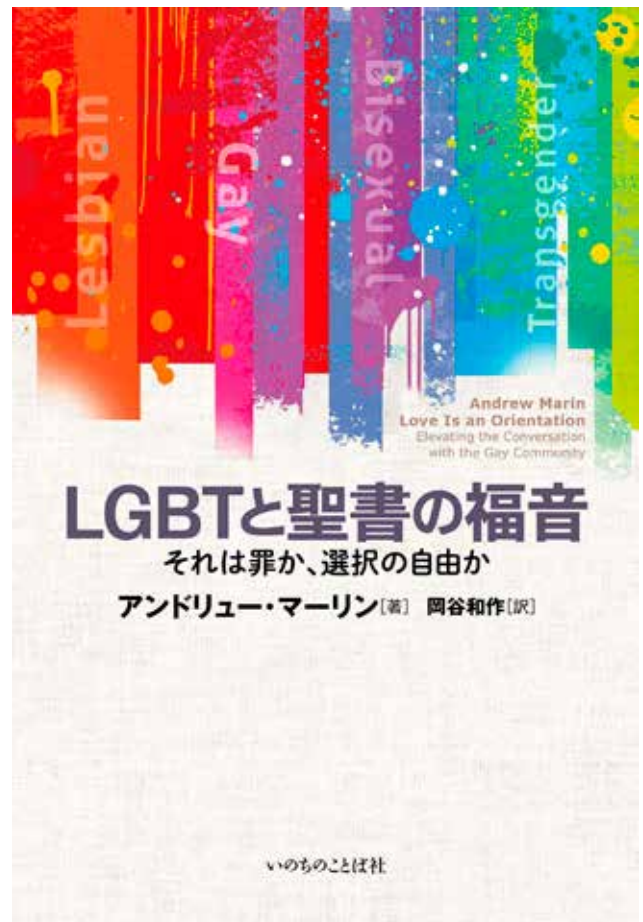
that is tangible, measurable and unconditional—whether we see our version of 'change' happening or not!

"That realization has led to my new definition of love: tangible and measurable expressions of one's unconditional behaviors toward another. My experience has revealed that in the minds of GLBT people, the word love has been rendered conditional: 'I will love you if I see you do . . . , or act like . . . , or sexually change' Someone can say the words 'I love you' until that person is blue in the face, but it will not matter one bit unless there are measurable, unconditional behaviors attached to those words."

* *LGBT to Seisho no Fukuin—Sore wa Tsumi ka, Sentaku no Jiyū ka*. 『LGBTと聖書の福音—それは罪か、選択の自由か』 [*LGBT and biblical gospel — is it sin or a matter of freedom of choice?*] (Tokyo: Inochino Kotobasha, 2020)

Christian Shimbun June 12, 2022

Translated and summarized by Atsuko Tateishi



Please pray for Japan

1. The Japan Evangelical Association is now preparing for the seventh Japan Congress on Evangelism (JCE) which will be held in Gifu in September of 2023. Please pray for JCE7.
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, and so on.
4. Pray for young Christians and 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. 19-20	JCE7 Preparatory Conference	Gifu
Oct. 17-21	Asia 2022	Bangkok
Oct. 13	JEA Women’s Forum	Online
Oct. 25	JEA Disaster Relief Forum	Online
Nov. 3	Ethnic Ministiries Network Japan and JOMA International worship	Online

It’s been almost two and a half years since the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Thank you for your prayers. Japan experienced its worst outbreak of these past two years in the summer of 2022. At this moment, the number of positive cases is slowly decreasing. Because of the reduced severity of the disease caused by recent variants, Japanese churches and Christian organizations have begun to cope with the presence of COVID-19. They have resumed face-to-face worship services, youth camps, and other events. We have learned many lessons and gained much wisdom during these past two and half years. This issue shares some of that information with you. Please keep praying for Japanese churches and Christians in Japan.



Takahito Iwagami, Editor in Chief

<http://jeanet.org/>

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