

Japan Update

Spring 2023 Number 84



Participants at Asia 2022 in Bangkok, Thailand (Photo by Christian Shimbun)

Penetrating Asia's heartlands with the gospel: A challenge to uninvolved, detached approaches



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The propositional approach and its challenges

For a long time, the evangelical church has held that the verbal proclamation of the gospel is at the heart of its mission. The gospel is considered absolute universal truth. Those who have accepted the “worded gospel” are expected to have left pagan religious culture, which was deeply tied to idolatry, and to have moved into a new redeemed Christian group rooted in Western culture. Western Christian culture has long been considered more biblical. At the same time, the godless culture of the recipient has been deemed more deviant, and new converts have been implicitly urged to move away from it.

Problem 1: The illusion of a “culture-free, pure gospel”

The first problem is the idea that the

gospel can be extracted from culture without being colored by it. When discussing the relationship between the gospel and culture, with this viewpoint a clear distinction is made between the two. Then, once we think we have a “universal gospel” divorced from culture, our remaining mission is to “propositionalize it” and pass it on to other cultures.

Problem 2: Cultural superiority lurking under reductionist conviction

The gospel expressed as a proposition is reductionist and fails to capture the richness of the gospel as a whole. The Enlightenment’s pursuit of objective and absolute knowledge distorts the understanding of the gospel and its presentation into excessive rationalism. This leads evangelists to a sense of cultural superiority and to a lack of respect toward other cultures and religions. This propositional approach to understanding the gospel concentrates too much on the importance of the individual—that is, private—sphere, and the public nature of the gospel is lost

Problem 3: The worded gospel being detached from life

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The blessings and struggles of a Japanese missionary in Southeast Asia

A Missionary to Southeast Asia



As far back as I can remember, I have believed in God the Creator and that he took on the form of a man to become Jesus our Messiah. I believed this because this is what my parents taught me. I experienced how the Lord worked powerfully in our lives by watching my parents,

so I didn't doubt my own faith. I simply accepted my parents' faith.

But when I entered elementary school, apart from my siblings there were no other Christians. I started seeing the difference between my family and other families, and for the first time, I saw my faith objectively. I thought, "I was brought up in a Christian home, so my parents taught me that Jesus is God. But had I been born in a family that believed in another religion, I guess I would have believed that another god was the real God. I wonder which is real?"

As I pondered this, I thought, "Surely the real God could save all people. If that is the case:

1. Religions that teach hardship and suffering as conditions for salvation must be false, since the disabled and elderly wouldn't be able to do such things.
2. Religions that require money must also be false since poor people would not get saved.
3. Religions that are limited to a certain region must also be false since not all the people of the world could be saved."

So even as a child, I remember thinking, "I'm so thankful my parents taught me to believe in Jesus, and I'm glad I wasn't wrong about it!"

In this world, some people do not have the privilege to hear about Jesus, depending on the circumstances of their birth. I myself am a missionary to an unreached tribe in Southeast Asia. When I was in Japan, I found it a hurdle to get people to understand the "One and only true God our Creator" when they believed in *Yaoyorozu no Kami* or the multiple gods of Shintoism. But the tribe I am reaching out to does believe in a Creator God. The problem is that Jesus is just a prophet to them and not God. Therefore they struggle to accept Jesus our Messiah who is the Lamb of God. Even though they should be close to receiving salvation, the "Deceiver" succeeds in deluding and sowing hostility in them, pushing them to the furthest possible position away from the gospel. When I carry the title "missionary," it is difficult to be accepted by these people, so I currently live among them

as a Christian teacher with a work visa.

The Unreached Tribes Evangelism Network transcends denominational lines with its vision to "evangelize unreached tribes and see them saved." Some in this network are pastors and seminary professors, but many work in their professions and as good neighbors reach out to share the gospel. People of various occupations, such as doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers, restaurant owners, businessmen, soccer coaches, and even retirees have gathered to reach out to the unreached tribes here. Together we pray and work to see people saved.

"Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'" (Matthew 9:37, 38)

These verses are what called me into ministry. But our current visible harvest is nothing large. Even when we are able to exclaim "Harvest!," it's as if we take three steps forward and two steps back.

But in the midst of this, I think to myself, "This isn't the first time something like this has been true. It's been true in Japan as well." Through the hardships of many missionaries and the endurance of many Christians, through many tears and many prayers, the gospel reached even me. I am encouraged when I think of those who went before me and whom I look up to as role models. The promise found in Psalm 126:5: "Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy" strengthens me and pushes me forward.

As I have served in this land, some missionaries have mentioned to me that they have heard "Japanese Christians may be few, but each is genuine." When I hear this, I immediately remember the churches in Japan that have sent me and support me. I feel proud that Japan, where the Christian population is said to be less than 1%, is sending missionaries out into the world and that its churches are playing a part in the Great Commission.

While praying for the salvation of the people of unreached tribes, I also pray for the salvation of my homeland, Japan. The harvest may not be large in either group, but we "walk by faith, not by sight." (2 Cor. 5:7) We must not be directed by either hope or despair, but look up to our Lord who is the truth, and walk in him.



Penetrating Asia's heartlands (continued from page 1)

Third, the gospel expressed in propositional terms allows it to be separated from the communicator's presence. In other words, a neatly worded, conceptualized gospel can easily be detached from the lives of believers or evangelists. Rather than living the gospel, the focus is on how effectively the gospel can be communicated.

Problem 4: A conceptualized and unattached gospel packaged in a foreign narrative

Finally, due to an excessive focus on verbal proselytizing, verbal proclamation without deeds may end up communicating an entirely different message. The goal becomes effective transmission of a "culture free" gospel "franchise," validated by success stories and market logic. Words and deeds have been separated. Something has taken place that was not seen in the incarnate Christ. Namely, the gospel has become detached from life and deeds.

The social service approach and its challenges

It is not that evangelical mission has totally ignored the action represented by social service. Nevertheless, in the propositional approach, "proclaiming the truth of the correct gospel" is what evangelism is all about. The propositional approach sees "living the gospel" through social service as meaningless if not preceded by verbal proclamation. See the table for the characteristics of the social service approach to evangelism.

The witness approach and the possibilities

Let us now discuss the importance of witness, comparing it to the two approaches already mentioned (see table).

Approaches to communicating the gospel			
	Proclamation	Social Service	Witness
What is delivered	The gospel as absolute truth.	Goods and services needed by the recipients.	People who are alive in the gospel.
Means	Correctly organized words of the gospel.	Actions providing goods and services needed by the recipient.	A flock of weak people living in the gospel.
Truth	Proclaimed directly with confidence, but disconnected from life.	Practiced and shown without directly telling Diluted into the common teachings of mankind.	Recipients engaged in discovering biblical truth revealed in Christ and embodied in personal testimony.
Direction	From those who know the truth to those who do not. (one-way)	Listen for needs, then from the strong to the weak. (two-way to one-way)	The recipient raises questions in a mutual dialogue. (two-way)
Attitude toward culture	Tends to be confrontational or even judgmental.	More likely to be receptive. More sympathetic than corrective.	New way of life offered while living in existing culture. New culture created together.

The third approach, witness, bears testimony to God's work in fellow human beings who have the same weaknesses. It is often accomplished through two-way dialogue. It is not a case of dominant and subordinate, one up and one down, but both sides standing before the light of truth as equals (see table). The truth revealed in the incarnate Christ is communicated as it is embodied in testi-

mony and revealed by the Holy Spirit through dialogue, thereby engaging the receptor in discovering the truth of the gospel. Let's look at the invisible power found in this approach.

The invisible power of witness

The first invisible power is that of *questions*. Proclamation-type gospel communication presents the gospel as the "answer." However, witness-style communication draws questions from recipients.

The second is the power of *rumor*. This dimension plays a major role in gospel penetration. Michael Green states that it was the power of rumor that enabled the early church to spread the gospel with such vigor. When a person lives in witness mode, one's presence has the power to speak without words. This often takes the form of rumors.

The third power is that of *shared weakness*. It is noble for the strong to support the weak. But in the Scriptures, people chosen for witness are quite weak. The disciples Christ called were "uneducated and untrained" (Acts 4:13).

Conclusion

Words without deeds and deeds without words do not have penetrating power. This is why witness is crucial—in which word is not detached from deed. The importance of witness does not negate the importance of proclamation and social service. Rather, witness creates desire for the proclamation of the Word of God.

The questions raised by witness draw people to the "pulpit table" where the gospel is proclaimed. Witness does not deny social service. Rather, such service given by people who love Jesus raises the great questions, "Why do they do this? What motivates them to do it?" These questions correspond to, and encourage the quest for, the gospel.

Therefore we need vertical "pulpit tables" where the gospel is proclaimed directly in words, and we need horizontal "relief tables," organized to provide relief to many people at once.

But large "relief tables" still do not provide the intimacy of "sacramental table fellowship." At these fellowship tables, pain, worry, anxiety, frustration, anger, and small expressions of gratitude and joy are shared over delicious, culturally familiar beverages or food. In an ongoing horizontal dialogue, people hear together the message of the gospel of the Lord Jesus from above and are transformed. This is key to the penetrating spread of the gospel.

Asia 2022: Session 3 Partnership with the global church: MENA and Asia

Hisao Tanabe, Pastor, Immanuel Seisenshingakuin Church



Hisao Tanabe speaking at Asia 2022

Today I want to talk to you about partnership between two regions of the world: MENA (the Middle East & North Africa) and Asia. I would like to speak on this theme using three key terms that I believe are foundational to MENA and Asia's work together. These three terms are persecution, alliance, and diaspora.

Persecution

The Open Doors ministry provides a ranking of the 50 most dangerous countries in which to be a Christian. Among those 50 countries, 19 are in Asia, 10 are in the Middle East, and 9 are in North Africa. In total, 38 out of the 50 countries on this list are in Asia or MENA. It is quite obvious that these two regions, Asia and MENA, have a common problem: persecution. Any partnership between these two regions must deal with this problem. What can we do?

First, can we learn together and share information about what is happening in churches in each region? Yesterday, we had the privilege to hear about persecution in Iran and Nepal. After that presentation, I talked with a fellow Japanese pastor and we agreed that we don't know much about persecution around the world. We are ignorant and indifferent about it. And because we don't know, we don't pray enough for the persecuted. If we are the one body of Christ, how can I say as a pastor of a local church in Japan that we are doing fine when a pastor in Iran has been arrested and put in jail?

Second, can we pray for one another and for those who are persecuted? If we learn, we can pray. "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." (Acts 12:5) There are always those who are in prison and under persecution. This is very much a picture of the church in both regions. "But the church is praying to God for him." This is us, too. The church in

Asia and MENA should always be praying for those who are persecuted.

Third, can we help each other by studying together for encouragement? We all need to be educated, and those who are in persecuted countries also need to be trained in how to live under persecution. The Asia Evangelical Alliance has a Religious Freedom Commission. The Commission provides seminars and workshops to deal with issues related to persecuted Christians: legal issues, human rights, and so on. This can be one channel through which to organize seminars or training sessions for church leaders or Christians who are living under persecution—so they can receive wisdom and encouragement to stay faithful. I believe persecuted Christians will be encouraged if they hear stories and testimonies from fellow believers who are persecuted in other countries.

Alliance

The Asia Evangelical Alliance has 19 national alliances in its membership. Among those, Mongolia is the newest member, and it was the Malaysian Alliance (National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia) that helped the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance get established.

Is it possible for both AEA and MENA Evangelical Alliance to work together to encourage and strengthen our alliances in each region? Can we work together to help any country in Asia or the Middle East or North Africa where there is yet no national alliance to establish one?

Diaspora

Currently, there are almost three million foreigners living and working in Japan. Most of them represent diasporas from Asian countries. But we also have people from the Middle East and North Africa. For example, more than 5000 are from Turkey, 4000 from Iran, 1000 from Syria, 700 from Tunisia, and 500 from Israel.

When it comes to Japanese living in other countries, there are more than 1400 in Turkey, more than 1200 in Israel—and more than 70,000 in Thailand! Did you know that Japanese who live in foreign countries have a better chance to come to faith than those who live in Japan? I believe the same is true with people from other countries. Whether you live in Asia or in the MENA region, you can share the gospel with a foreigner who could be a Muslim, a Hindu, or a Buddhist.

A Japanese person in Asia

Midori Yanagisawa, *Catalyst with Friends with the Voiceless International*



Yanagisawa at a village in Bangradish

I was raised in a then-typical Japanese nuclear family in a suburb of Tokyo. During my childhood, my parents used to take us to hatsumode, a New Year's petition at a Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple. I determined not to go during my high school years, instead wanting to accomplish something not by luck, but by my own effort. When I experienced a major failure despite my all-out effort, I lost my sense of purpose in life. I wondered about the presence of the "Transcendent," who would provide the meaning of life. Then God intervened in my life through a high school friend believer. I decided to follow Jesus as Lord with my whole life. While studying the Bible from a missiological perspective, Jesus called me with the commission, "serve the underprivileged of the world as I cared for them." After a few tests of my faith, God opened the door to serve in Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world in 1990.

I've learned that loving people as Jesus loved them means setting aside my viewpoint and seeing people as he sees them, gradually finding in them a portion of God's image from which he will restore each person toward wholeness. Poor women in slums, or mothers with malnourished kids in villages had been those whose voices were least heard in society. However, when given the opportunity, they did their best for the sake of their children. My eyes were opened to see that despite their torn clothing and outward appearance, inwardly they were bearers of God's image, and so creative! These were crucial opportunities in which I wholeheartedly tried to show my respect for them just as they were, whether from Muslim or Hindu families.

During my service at an international Christian organization, I gradually realized that efficiency was what drove management. Impressive reports required numbers. Though I wanted to spend more time with people so that they would discover and apply gradual change to their lives, efficiency interrupted that desire. This caused me a dilemma. This struggle urged me to ask for Him further. Amazingly, a Muslim female staff with whom I shared a flat happened to observe me having fellowship with the Lord as I daily read the Bible. A couple of years later I

was told by a senior missionary that this staff member came to the Lord as she saw my seriousness with the Lord and the inner peace I had at work. I praised God!

Possibly due to my training in Japanese society, I was inclined to perfectionism. I wanted to complete a particular project my way. However, God's way was different. During the course of the project, he moved me to a rural area where the most underprivileged live. They were an outcast group of Hindus, who were devastatingly rejected from the public sphere.

Later, following God's leading in the mid-90s, I was seconded to a new local organization working among outcastes. By then I had learned that as a believer discernment is critical. While praying, God led me to a young pastor who had just started a small house church in his village of outcasts. His passion for Jesus was so vivid. In my prayers I sensed that I was called to encourage the church through prayer, but not with money, since I had observed many church leaders succumbing to dishonesty. The pastor faithfully trusted the Lord, and 26 years later I could see that God had responded to his faithfulness. I saw the fruit of followers of Jesus, not only in his village, but in the broader area as well.

During my visit to Bangladesh in October 2022, I saw one senior leader who said my presence back then was so encouraging. He later became a cross-cultural evangelist. He confided that at one point an antagonist had physically attacked him and he had almost died. Even so, he is fearlessly committed to Jesus today.

As a tiny community of Japanese believers, we are often pushed into social situations where we must act differently from the majority. This has trained us as sober disciples of Jesus who have had to grapple seriously with his words in order to discern God's will. A focus on Jesus in our lives leads to seeing his works. Without that, we would wander around in our own weakness and succumb to distrust. When we are a weak minority, we must be patient so that we may have more opportunity to see God's works. This may be a hidden contribution Japanese followers of Jesus have to offer followers of Jesus around the world.

Recently I sense that each generation is entrusted with specific tasks in God's mission for a particular age. During my time I was called to serve the underprivileged. Now a new age is arising as God entrusts a new generation with different tasks in his mission. What shall I do as a Japanese

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Filipino-Japanese collaboration in the Evangelical Free Church



A Filipino service is held every Sunday at Ōharu Evangelical Free Church, a ten minute drive from Nagoya station. At the vibrant service, where the congregation jumps up for praise and worship, both Tagalog and English are used. After the service, people take photos and post them on social media. They share the lively atmosphere with their friends, encouraging them to come to the services.

Pastor Masamitsu Hattori first came across this formerly independent Filipino congregation in 2009 and has supported them ever since. The Japanese congregation in Ōharu traditionally held afternoon services, so they let the Filipino congregation hold their services on Sunday mornings. Later, under the name Immanuel Christian Fellowship (ICF), the congregation became a member of the Evangelical Free Church of the Philippines (EFCP) and formed a partnership with the Evangelical Free Church of Japan, Chubu region.

The main pioneering pastors of the Filipino congregation were Pastor Niño Solito and Pastor Noel Marcelo. The bond between the Filipino and Japanese congregations tightened after the Great East Japan Earthquake [2011] and Typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines [2013] through involvement in disaster relief efforts in each country. In 2018, Pastor Prisco Allocod (former chairman of the EFCP) joined ICF, forming a strong pastoral team. The congregation continued services during the coronavirus pandemic and currently holds eight services in various locations, mainly in Aichi Prefecture. ICF also holds a Japanese service, mainly for the Japanese husbands of Filipinas and their children.

At Ōharu Church, three Japanese pastors support ICF in addition to other regular church activities. Kyōichi Noguchi attentively takes care of Japanese families. Tetsuji Hikasa is fluent in Tagalog. Pastor Hattori, although “not good in English and Tagalog,” oversees overall planning. “Even if we cannot speak foreign languages, when we work as a team, we can evangelize to the world,” he says.

On September 20, 2022, Pastor Hattori spoke at the JEA Mission Forum on ministry cooperation with foreign language churches in Japan. “In the past, I had seen ministry in Japan and overseas ministry as separate things. Now, as more people travel globally, I have come

to see ministry in a new framework, which transcends borders.”

Referencing Leviticus 19:34, he said, “The Japanese Church has the opportunity to start looking outward instead of inward. This starts with showing an interest in foreign residents in Japan.”

Christian Shimbun, October 9, 2022

Translated by Grace Koshino

Futaba Kibou Christ Church dedication ceremony



Joy of dedication

October 29, 2022, the long-awaited dedication day of Futaba Kibou Christ Church*, was blessed with fine weather. About fifty attendees from not only Japan, but also as far away as Canada and the U.S., gathered to celebrate this joyful day.

During the first part of the ceremony, Rev. Masaru Asaoka (Board Chair of Japan Alliance Christ Church and Tokyo Christian Institute) led the service with a strong encouragement from Isaiah 43:19 entitled, “A way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland” (NIV). In the second part, Rev. Eiji Sumiyoshi reported on the founding of the church, and missionaries Seong Gwang Kang and You Young Kim, newly assigned to the church in April, shared their aspirations for Futaba Kibou Christ Church. Yukari Sato, music evangelist, led the final worship segment, which was followed by greetings from the guests.

After the dedication ceremony, attendees enjoyed the weather and fresh-from-the-oven pizzas in the church garden.

Current condition and future of the Futaba district

According to data posted on the internet, only 20% of the Futaba district’s former residents have returned. The schedule for the cancellation of evacuation orders and the resident return rate varies for each town. Some towns have already welcomed back former residents, while others hope to attract new residents through plans to recruit

companies and workers to their area. The nuclear decommissioning process is expected to take forty to sixty years. Each locality is working on reconstruction, but the future will continue to be difficult.

Hope in Christ throughout the Futaba district

The Futaba district suffered immense damage because of the Great East Japan Earthquake Disaster on March 11, 2011. The tsunami destroyed houses, and the area experienced radioactive contamination, leaving the residents in deep pain and despair. Some still carry bitterness and enmity toward Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO). Festivals and seasonal events have been suspended due to the evacuation and dispersion of residents, and the challenge for churches is to fit into the restoration process of local communities. Despite these challenges, Futaba Kibou Christ Church's mission is to proclaim the gospel and hope in Christ throughout the Futaba district.

*The church is located less than 5km from Fukushima No. II Nuclear Power Plant.

Christian Shimbun November 27, 2022
Translated and summarized by Hiromi Terukina

Under 40 IG:NIGHT Learning to lead praise and worship from the same perspective



IG:NIGHT*, a conference for Christians under age forty, started on September 3 online and ran for three weeks. Three worship groups, Ruah Worship, Third Place

Worship, and Abide in Me, composed of members in their twenties and thirties, led this cooperative event. About 200 people registered for the workshops that were conducted mainly online through a collaboration app. The sessions included performance, planning, songwriting, audio, video, and some interactive events.

On the last day, September 24, a praise gathering was

held in a church in Tokyo. Beginning from in-person preparation the day before, about 130 people gathered to learn and interact with one another. They came from various regions around Japan, including Tokyo, Miyagi, Aichi, Osaka, and Hyogo. Rhythm and arranging, loudspeaker and microphone placement, wiring, lighting, audio and video transitions . . . the participants actively listened to praise performances and various behind-the-scenes details supporting them, asking questions along the way.

Some of the comments:

“I had been trying to find how to stream [video] for a long time, and I was happy to learn about various methods here.” (man from Kanagawa)

“I have been practicing according to my own feelings, but the workshops taught me how to play and how to prepare my mind. I enjoyed the fellowship with people in my age group.” (woman from Osaka)

“I understand now how to operate video.” (student from Miyagi)

“The performance level was high and there were so many things to learn! I got interested in streaming.” (man from Saitama Prefecture)

Representative Yoshihisa Nakamura said, “I come from a rural town and in the past have felt it quite difficult to get to know people deeply at a meeting in Tokyo. This time I was happy to see that because people had met online beforehand, some had lunch together before they came to the conference hall. Those of us involved in organizing this event became good friends through various past worship gatherings that were arranged by our senior members. They were great role models for us. This time, I think we can serve the next generation.”

Regarding the workshops, he said, “not as instructors, but together with the registrants, we created from the same perspective. We composed new worship songs together, etc., in this ‘hands-on’ experience.”

*IG:NIGHT — Innovation Generation Night, a wordplay on the term “Ignite!”

Christian Shimbun, October 16, 2022
Translated by Tomoko Kato

A Japanese person in Asia (continued from page 5)

believer who has followed Jesus for more than 40 years? He is revealing that I do not have to impose my way of the past on the next generation in Japan or Asia. Rather, Jesus calls me to encourage others to trust in the Lord as

they grapple with the issues of the current age, just as he has patiently nurtured me up until now in discerning his amazing works.

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>
April 24	JEA Board Meeting	Tokyo
May 19-20	AEA D6 Family Conference	Online
June 5-7	JEA General Assembly	Kakegawa
July 25-29	Arise Asia 2023	Thailand
Sep. 19-22	The seventh Japan Congress on Evangelism	Gifu

The theme of Japan Update #84 is Japanese Christians among Asian countries. I attended Asia 2022 in Bangkok, Thailand last October. It was such a blessing for me to have fellowship with Asian evangelical Christians from 44 countries.



I felt Japan and Japanese churches are not isolated but have strong bond of love with the Asian brothers and sisters. In this issue I would like to share these blessings with you all. It is amazing to know what God has been working and is working in Asian countries. I believe God is challenging us to open our eyes to see not only our own country but also Asian countries so that we might be able to work together to establish the Kingdom of God.

Takahito Iwagami, Editor in Chief

<http://jeanet.org/>

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