

# To understand returnee Christians

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Supported by  
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for returning to Japan as a Christian.

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## Forward

We are a married couple who were involved in returnees' ministry as well as Japanese ministry in the UK as missionaries of Japanese Christian Fellowship Network. When we visited local churches in Japan, pastors and believers told us, "We do not understand returnee Christians well. Could you write some sort of guidebook?" Little by little, I wrote about our experiences given by God in our work. Thanks to the support given by Yuko Ozeki and other JCFN volunteers, I could finally provide it for the 2<sup>nd</sup> All Nations Returnees Conference scheduled in March, 2010. I truly thank God.

What is written is based on our experiences for the past 14 years, and in order to make it as useful as possible, I would like to hear experiences and comments from those who actually use this. I would greatly appreciate your input.

The term, "We," in the text means people who are involved in serving for the returnees' ministry. I thank God for giving me an opportunity to serve together with JCFN and Japanese Christian Fellowship Network in this way.

March, 2010 Yoshie Yokoyama

## 1. Who are returnees?

Let's look at two examples first.

### Case1 : Ms. A (single woman)

The first time in my life that I met a Christian was in the UK. He/She was very nice to me, and I started to go to church and learn about the Bible. It was a local church. Everything was in English. I learned English at a Christian English school in a college town. All of the teachers were Christians and I was staying with a Christian family. I had never met any Christians or visited a Church in Japan before. I felt drawn to the way that my teachers and my host family lived, and started to go to church whenever I was invited. There were about 200 people attending the church. Since it was located in a college town, there were many young people especially and the worship was led by a band set in front, with the music directed more towards the youth. People ranging from young children to the elderly attended the service, and everyone was singing with a bright smile looking up at the words projected on the screen. As I had a good command of English, I could understand the general meaning of what was said. By nature I say anything that comes into my mind, so I was comfortable to say what I felt. I attended a Bible study was making progress as I understood the good news (gospel) and wanted to believe. I was asked, "Do you believe in Jesus as your savior?" I answered, "Yes." Everyone was so happy for me. I learned about baptism, and I asked if I could be baptized. I was told that there will be a baptism two weeks later, so I was able to be a part of the ceremony. I came back to Japan 1 month after being baptized.

After returning to Japan I visited a church near my parent's place, but I was shocked at how different it was. The first service I attended was gloomy and rigid. There were not that many people, especially not many young people. When they worshiped, people would sing while looking down at the hymnal. I did not know any of the worship songs at all. Most of the people would look down or close their eyes when listening to the message. When I told the pastor, "I was baptized in the UK before I came back to Japan, "he was pleased and asked me, "Do you play the piano?" or "Do you like children?" When I told him that I did not have a Japanese Bible, he was surprised. Since I was in an English environment when I got to know the Lord and was first nurtured in my faith, I did not know how to pray in Japanese. As I listened to people pray in the Japanese church, I found it to be very difficult because of the kind of language and level of respect that was used. When I told people that, "I cannot pray," it shocked them again. Since that time I felt that they gave me the cold

shoulder. In the UK, both the pastor and the congregation would call each other by their first names, but in Japan it seems that I have to call the pastor, “Reverend so and so,” which makes me feel rigid as well. My experience at a Japanese church was very different than in the UK, so I am not sure if I would go back to this church. I would like to find a church with similarities to my church in the UK.

**Case 2: Mr. B (businessman, stayed in France for a few years as an expat)**

Since my wife was a Christian, we looked for a Japanese church upon our arrival in Paris, and I started to play the role of her driver. In the beginning, I would not enter the church building, and only started to join the fellowship as the next step. As I began to feel less alarmed, I found myself listening to the message and started to attend the service. As this church did not have a dedicated pastor at that point in time, usually, board members of the church, such as elders and servants, would take turns to preach, and whenever possible, pastors who were serving in different areas of Europe would come to preach. It was a blessing to have an opportunity to listen to the different pastors’ messages. I was moved by the dedication of the congregation to support and structure the church, which prompted me to know “the way of life to live up fully to what one believes.” Shortly thereafter, I started to read the Bible seriously, decided to become a Christian and was baptized. Both my wife and I immediately began to be involved in serving at the church and were living a fulfilling church life. The church had many comings and goings, thus I heard a lot of stories of brothers and sisters who shared the same experience as mine and who had gone back to Japan earlier. Churches in Japan seemed to be very different and I knew that it would be a challenge, but I went back to Japan with a determination to try my wife’ s home church.

Everyone at my wife’ s home church was excited that I had become a Christian and welcomed me. Although it was often the case that I did not agree with the differences with my church in Paris, I was able to talk to my wife and now I feel, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” There were two things especially that took time to get used to. After returning to Japan, I felt that “The church in Paris was really cross-denominational.” Both the preachers and members of the congregation were from different denominations. It may have been less coordinated, but there was freedom. Live and let live. I do remember that my wife was distressed every once in a while because of this. There were many different types of people and she was not able to accept some of them. At the church we currently attend, the phrase “teaching of the order,” or “for the order” is often used. I am not sure how these overlap with or differ from “for God.” That makes me feel

uncomfortable. Another thing is that certain roles assigned by the church are based on seniority. It is not something that is explicitly mentioned, but that is my observation. Important roles are assigned to long-time members/board members (executive members). A new member like myself could only be given a role as an usher. There were less people at my church in Paris and there was no dedicated pastor, so regardless of whether one is new or long-term member, I had the feeling that we were working together to structure the church. Now, I feel that I am somehow surviving in the Japanese society in church, rather than being part of the “body of Christ.” That may be just the way it is in Japan.

As you have just read, one who has heard the Gospel overseas and come back to Japan as a Christian is called a “returnee Christian.” Because their background and process of salvation is different from those who became a Christian in Japan, they may feel strange when visiting a church in Japan upon their return. Also the Japanese church members may feel something different.

## **2. How can I approach them? — “Are returnees space aliens” ?**

North and South, East and West in Japan. We experience culture shock even moving within Japan. When we move to a new location for school or work, we go through the process of adjusting to the local customs. We learn a new way to do things and get used to it when we come across the language and custom/tradition that we had taken it for granted did not work. The church setting is also like a small society. People coming from a different church background will experience a similar process of adaptation.

Meeting someone with a different background from ourselves could be sort of a culture shock, not only for the one visiting, but also for the ones who welcome them. There is a step-by-step process to welcome and walk with those who have a completely different way of doing things, different values and language, sometimes even the way they dress is different from what we think is common.

We often hear, “We have experience welcoming people who move from other areas of Japan, but we have no clue about returnees.” Some say, “Returnees are like space aliens.” Despite the confusion with such unfamiliar experiences, an increasing number of churches (believers/pastors) have the desire or wish “to understand the returnees who became Christians outside Japan,” or “to make them feel like they want to come back to our church again,” in various regions in Japan. This is great!

In order to understand their background and welcome them, it is extremely important to learn what kind of experiences those returnees had overseas and

how their faith was nurtured. The following are some of the keys to do so.

**Point 1. What kind of church has the returnee attended overseas?**

What kind of church did the visiting returnee attend during their stay overseas? Was it a local church, or a Japanese church (often called JCF, which is the abbreviation of Japanese Christian Fellowship)?

If it was a local church, it is most likely that the returnee knows about Christianity through mainly English. If it was a Japanese Church, the style of how they worship is similar to Church in Japan. (In most of the cases, however, churches except the ones in the west coast of the US are cross-denominational.)

Now, how about the age group, style of worship, types • the way of praise and size of the church that the returnee attended outside Japan? When you have this specific information, you can see the whole context of the returnee's experience in church outside Japan.

For those who only attended a local church, it is helpful if you ask him/her whether he/she has met a Japanese Christian before he/she came back to Japan or is reading a Japanese Bible. Some are involved in Japanese fellowship as well as attending a local church, and if that is the case, he/she could have experienced Christianity in Japanese considerably.

**Point 2. How about experience at church in Japan before going overseas?**

If he/she met a Christian, became friends or had contact with Christianity for the first time in their life during their stay overseas, it is apparent that the returnee had no experience at church • Christianity in Japan, so this should be considered when you guide him/her. If the returnee was a seeker in Japan, attended Sunday school when he/she was younger or is familiar with the Bible or service because he/she attended a Christian school, he/she knows what church in Japan is like to some extent, therefore confirming their prior experience is important.

**Point 3. How was he/she involved in church outside Japan?**

If the returnee attended a local church, he/she could have been treated as a guest (visitor). It is challenging for most Japanese to be involved in church activities in an environment where there are many people and a language barrier. Therefore it is possible that the returnee has no experience in serving.

Meanwhile, in the case of a Japanese Church • JCF, like the businessman in Case 2, often people are actively involved in serving soon after baptism (sometimes even during the stage of seeking) as the church needs to be supported by only a few people.

If he/she is saved at a Japanese church or fellowship such as a home Bible study hosted by a Japanese Christian, it is possible that the returnee was actively serving in the group. It is helpful to know this background information as well.

**Point 4. How did the returnee develop their faith? Baptism?**

You may think that the question to confirm the spiritual situation of the returnee should be asked earlier, but if the returnee says that he/she was “baptized” at a local church, it is different from the case that he/she is baptized after preparing for baptism and being taught what it means to be a member of church. Thus I believe that the earlier questions are more meaningful considering the importance of this issue.

In case of a Japanese church, many times, a Japanese pastor is providing some sort of learning opportunities before he/she is baptized, so you may confirm how he/she prepared, how much he/she was taught about church and being a member of a church.

If the returnee was baptized at a local church, since some church baptizes ones who wish to be “baptized,” like Ms. A in the first case, it is important to ask, “How he/she was prepared,” and “how the Christian life was led by those who were baptized at the church.” For example, in the UK, a so-called “Christian nation,” as a part of a state church tradition, baptism mainly means infant baptism, and it is common that even nonbelievers have their child baptized when he/she is a baby, just like Omiyamairi\* in Japan (\*Omiyamairi literary means a visit to shrine. It is a Shinto ritual that occurs when a baby is about 1 month old. They wear special white clothes for the ceremony, and have a special kimono draped over them. As the baby's grandparents hold him/her, the priest presents the news of the birth to the guardian spirit of the shrine, and offers thanks. He then asks the spirit to protect the baby and keep him/her healthy.). Those who were baptized as Christians attend the same “diocese” wherever they move to, therefore the sense as being a “member of a church” does not exist in general. (Of course, Baptist churches and established churches exist in the UK as well.) Although there is no such a diocese system in the US, Australia·New Zealand, there are many churches that are not conscious about the church membership system, therefore it is not rare to be baptized on the day when one prays for confession. Thus it is often the case that there is a significant difference between being baptized at a local church or at a Japanese church. At a Japanese church, being baptized means becoming a member of the church in many cases, however, baptism at church outside Japanese purely mean the confession of one's faith.

It is also a rare case, but sometimes when we ask the returnee about their confession of faith in detail, he/she just could not say, “no” when they were asked if they believe in God,” because his/her friend in the area took care of him/her very well and taught Bible politely with patience. This is difficult to understood by non-Japanese.

Churches in Europe and the US are individualistic and place importance on autonomy just like their culture. Service at church seems to be voluntarily in many cases. Therefore there are many Christians who do not serve in church, and it does not make them uncomfortable to be at the church. Even among Christians, there are different personalities and the stance that each church takes on where all these people should serve.

A "word" from worker  
Whenever we get an opportunity, we tell about "Japanese who cannot say no," to local Christians who are guiding Japanese.

When those returnees who have such experiences look at a Japanese church, they may be surprised to see that so many members of the church are involved in service. As Japan is the country where harmony has a high importance, it is often the case that the pastor or leader of the church asks members to be involved in necessary services and those who are asked accept it, and because of the relatively small scale of church, church activity is managed by many people involved at church.

How about the case for those who have not reached the point of baptism? In the case of a Japanese church, in general, their activities are similar to that of churches in Japan, therefore it is not so difficult to verify the level of the returnee by finding out what type of meetings he/she attended to what degree, and how much he/she is spiritually led.

In case of a local church, there are various meetings and activities for foreigners, so there are many different ways in involving church even if he/she says "I was attending church." Sometimes church offers English lessons for foreigners in the local area. For some cases they talk about the Bible prior to or following lessons, but depending on the policy of the church, there are churches that never bring in Christianity. At the churches that are seriously working on ministering to international students, dedicated staff takes care of the international students and holds meetings only for the international students. For example, some churches of Cambridge University in the UK host a meeting starting around 7:00 pm as a form of "coffee bar." The Christian Union of the university is picking up steam, where the students of Cambridge University also take part in. If Japanese students show up there, there is a chance for the Japanese student to speak with those Cambridge students and become friends. Meeting in the form of "coffee bar," is in line with the concept of friendship evangelism, it starts with becoming a friend, just like Jesus became our friend, and gradually talking about the good news to learn the Bible together. People can have a free conversation in the setting like a coffee shop during the first half of the meeting. Sometimes a skit that conveys the message of Christianity or music is played.

During the second half of the meeting, there is a call from the people there to, "please come to a different room if you would like to learn the Bible."

Those who are interested will move to that room. Christians whom they meet there invite seekers to worship at their church, or invite them for other meetings to lead them further. If the person has a high level of English proficiency, it is possible to move further, but if the English proficiency is not high enough, that person cannot have a good understanding even if the same actions are taken.

In the US, ministry to international students led by cross-denominational organizations is actively done as well. It is very common that those organizations build friendships and deliver the good news little by little while assisting international students with their reports in English, buying a car or helping them move, on college campus. They also make friends through a party or an event, and offer Bible study for those who have interest.

Many churches hold a "Mother-Child gathering." It is a place where children below preschool age and their mothers are gathered together to have children play together or to exchange information among mothers. Similar to the English lessons mentioned earlier, the Bible and gospel could be shared for in some cases but not others. With this gathering as a starting point, there are quite a lot of ladies who are led to baptism. Yet, if the person does not have much desire to seek for truth, and English proficiency is not so high, in many cases, they may end up just attending the activities.

A "word" from worker

We frequently refer "seekers" who are led by local Christians to churches. In most cases they are led by local Christians rather than himself/herself asking for the information as he/she responds "yes," when he/she is asked "would you like to go to church after you return to Japan?" by local Christians who are leading the returnee. These local Christians ask us for the information and we provide it. Since there are too many "seekers" who fall under this, we think deeply "how we can connect them to a church." I think it is a waste that the soul filled with abundant love and service of Christ is completely lost in Japan. I am led to think what is necessary, is it "low-key" ministry. Rather than delivering a message for ministry as a form of a "ministry meeting," and inviting people for a commitment, meetings that lead people to come to church and provide them opportunities to have contacts with Christians are needed, such as a bazaar • concert • gospel café. What is surprising for me when I met Japanese who are saved overseas is that significant number of them had never met a Christian in Japan. I think it is meaningful to expand the opportunity to meet with Christians through such "low-key" meeting.

Still, I am thankful if those people are given a heart to want to go to church after their return to Japan, thus we refer them to a church with our wish that "they attend church as long as possible." When these "seekers" say, "I was attending church outside Japan," it is helpful if we can find out what kind of meetings he/she attended, what was the expectation of the people who attended the meeting, to what extent he/she heard • understood the

Gospel/Bible and what is he/her looking for to attend church in Japan. It will be easier for them to attend if there is any meeting that is similar to what he/she has experienced overseas.

These are the 4 points that help you to find out the experience at church outside Japan and present status of returnees. In the following section, I would like to share my personal comments on returnees and church in Japan from a viewpoint of a person who is involved in Japanese ministry outside Japan.

### **Murmur by worker: Is a “returnee” an eccentric?**

As society in Europe and the US is basically founded on individualism, respecting individual dignity is a basic premise in the society. For example, disabled people are fully accepted in Europe, where nonbeliever Japanese start to have an interest in Christianity in some cases.

Many local Christians who desire to minister to Japanese show the overflowing love of Christ, and they accept those Japanese the way they are, try to understand, help, serve and deliver the love of Christ as well as the good news of Christ through the how they live. There are quite a lot of Japanese who seek for the truth out of the feeling of “I want to be like this person.

Japanese who leave their own country with the wish to gain something even though they have to overcome the barriers of language and culture may be considered as an “eccentric person” from the point of view of Japanese who do not have experience outside Japan. (It could be different with the case of overseas assignment of the company because they are sent for their company reasons.) Would it seem to be even more bothered because that “eccentric person” has “fuelled” his/her eccentricity in such a favorable environment and returns to Japan? I am not denying this because it could be the case of some people that taking it in such a way helped them to understand, treat and accept returnees, but as we are in a position to have direct contact with returnees, we have a different dimension to look at this.

Let’s assume that people who go overseas with their own will are “eccentric.” Yet, even these people are lumped together as “eccentric,” those who go overseas vary in reasons for doing so, such as studying abroad to develop one’s career, utilizing a working holiday opportunity to find one’s own identity, going abroad to reset one’s life, looking for breakthrough from sickness in one’s heart by leaving Japan or having a dream of living overseas even with a fake marriage. Furthermore, are those who do not have overseas experience “not eccentric” at all? In my personal observation, there are some “eccentric” people I cannot get over no matter how hard I try. Regardless of the overseas experience, there are people

who are labelled as “maverick outsiders” wherever they are placed.

As we are tackling the challenges of how returnees could put down roots at church or how churches can have a better understanding of returnees and help them, it seems that Japanese tend to prefer “homogeneity (i.e. people who have similar ideas or are placed in a similar position),” and it seemingly applies to churches in Japan as is. That could be found to be a barrier for new comers.

Please do not get me wrong. This is not a simple wish like, “I wish church becomes more like churches outside Japan.” Churches outside Japan have their own challenges. An English Christian who is very familiar with church in Japan says, “Church in the UK has a lot to learn from church in Japan. They should have some activities together as symbolized by the love feast held following Sunday worship service. It also happened that an Englishman who is a nonbeliever lives in Japan and was saved in Japan. Some American Christian’s pointed out a strong tendency that Christians in the US commercialize church, select a church only to fulfil their needs and change church easily if they cannot satisfy their needs, and value how Japanese Christians are conscious of the system of church membership, give tithes and offerings and serve for 1 church for a long time. Each culture has the expression of Christianity that is befitting it as well as how Church should be. However, as a general tendency, it seems that Japanese church feels is challenging to effectively approach not only to returnees but also to new comers. It could be due to the Japanese mentality which unconsciously wishes that strangers (new comers) will be like themselves. Yet, I think that, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:19 – 23, to learn how we understand and accept people different from us and to help them grow as a Christian is a significant step to capture even more people for Christ.

“To understand and accept returnees” may be a challenge for churches in Japan. That is why we believe that welcoming returnees to church is a blessing for churches in Japan. Through the experience of welcoming “returnees” to church and to love them as a part of the body of Christ and the process of hooking up with people who have different experience from that of our own, church can lay the foundation to accept people who are heterogeneous to us. Needless to say, it does not have to be “returnees,” but could be a “youth who has brown-dyed hair, got a tattoo and speaks a different language from us.” To be a friendly church “for people outside of church community.” To be a church that people who do not normally go to church visit for the first time and feel like “visiting again.” When this is realized, I think that will be the breakthrough to a commonly heard “cooped-up feeling that Christian society in Japan has.” Church will shine

the light of Christ on Japanese society as the body of Christ, which Jesus wishes. We sincerely hope to serve with churches in Japan to that end.

### **3. When a person feels, “I will come back to this Church”**

Returnees continue to gather at church, grow as a member of the church to be combined as an essential part of the body of Christ and receive blessings. Dedicate themselves. Become a pastor · missionary · worker for the Lord. God is equipping such resources. It is an awesome work of God. Returnees go back to Japan and visit churches. What are the keys for them to feel, “I will go there again” or “I would like to continue to attend there.” Let’s look at the cases of “I stopped going there because of this.”

#### **Case 3: Ms. C (single woman, saved and baptized in the UK and returned to Japan)**

It has been a few years since I returned to Japan. I visited several churches, but currently I am staying away from church. I am an introverted person, not good at expressing what is in my heart, and I had a very tough time to get used to live in the UK and it took me a long time. However, when I got used to, I had many people who had become “lifelong mates.” It was painful for me to leave the UK. Still now I take every chance to exchange emails with my friends in the UK. Upon my return, I visited many churches and tried to get used to it. I am sure about my salvation and I also served at the churches I visited. Yet, when I talk about my experience in the UK, which is very important for me, people at church does not show their interest at all. The impression I receive from their responses are, “Even if you say so, that is about there. Focus on what is in front of you. Forget about the UK. It is useless to talk about it.” That makes me think that I am denied and I feel like I cannot be myself, which makes me stay away from fellowship. I think that my current faith life is OK, and this is the only thing I can do.

#### **Accepting differences**

Ms. C’s personality of having difficulty in saying what she thinks seems to be one of the reasons that she was not able to come to stay at church. English Christians accepted Ms. C of few words with tolerance. They understood and loved her. However, the brethren in her home country treats her differently (refer to the sentences with dotted underline). They indicate to her with or without words that she cannot be accepted unless she becomes like them. Yet, what would have happened if they treated her with an attitude of, “It is OK for you to miss the UK all the time, you do not

have to be the same as us.”? Ms. C would have not felt like she was denied. How can we treat people in such a way?

### **For accepting differences**

#### **Always the case with reverse culture shock...Twitting by returnees lasts 6 months in average.**

Not all returnees keep talking about the life outside Japan for a long time like Ms. C, but more or less, every returnee will have a similar tendency. They have reasons to talk about their overseas experience. One of them is that their experience as Christian is only from outside Japan. Another reason is that is a form of reverse culture shock which every returnee goes through.

When people live in a different country ·language · culture zone, human being goes through the following 4 steps; (1) “excited: feeling like a tourist,” (2) anger or escape: what are these local people!? Or avoid having contacts with people,” (3) “depression: I cannot be like the people in this country no matter how hard I try,” (4) “Calmness: I can be myself.”

When Japanese go overseas, these are the 4 steps they have to struggle to go through, and eventually they get used to the life of the local area. Then when they return to Japan, they repeat the same process. Yet, that shock tends to be bigger than the one that they experienced when they went abroad because when they go abroad they are prepared to go somewhere with different culture to a certain extent, but when they return to Japan, they are often unguarded. Since they are returning to where they were familiar with, born and raised, they do not feel any worries, yet with that in their mind, when they actually return to Japan, their ideas and values are largely affected by that of the overseas culture and are not like that of their home country, which is shocking to them. In that process, there are some words and attitudes that may be difficult for “standard” Japanese to understand, but they gradually get used to the life in Japan naturally. It is just impossible to go back to how they were before they left Japan, and they settled “himself/herself who has overseas experience.” Even though there is some range for that period depending on a person, usually people calm down in 6 months after going through the following 4 processes; “excited: returned to Japan! I can eat nigirizushi and anything I like whenever I want to eat and as much as I want!,” anger or escape: why does not my friend understand me? (since there are some areas that only people who have overseas experience can understand.),” “depression: I became an “eccentric person.” I cannot fit in the society in Japan.” and “calmness: it is OK even some people think I am strange. I had good experience overseas and live and let live.”

In the process of reverse culture shock, these returnees held back when they are treated like Ms. C, as she was said, “Even if you say so, that is

about there. Focus on what is in front of you. Forget about the UK. It is useless to talk about it.” Even if you want to say such things, please bite back and just accept them saying, “Oh, I see. That is great. That is right.” In this way, they can feel, “I am accepted. What I experienced there was still good.” And can stay in the fellowship.

### **Well, we are in Japan!?**

We may hear the voice that says, “That being said, sticking to the past events forever and cannot focus on what is in front of a person is not healthy, so would not it be better for the person to have let bygones be bygones?” It could be true. However, experience of living abroad has a powerful influence on that person, and it already became a part of his/her personality. As it is written in Bible, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” (Romans 12:15), I think we can help the person to truly “live” the entire life including his/her overseas experience when we accept his/her ideas and feelings, stay there for him/her and treat him/her with the love of Christ.

### **When “In other countries,” is repeated, I feel that my church and the way as a Christian is denied.**

It this makes you feel such a way, I do not know how to apologize to you. Whether the person who talks about churches outside Japan is a returnee who does not know church in Japan or someone who knows both churches to a certain degree like us, he/she never means it. When we say it, it comes from our wish that, “please understand the differences. If you understand them, it helps you to understand and welcome returnees,” meanwhile, for the case of returnees, they may do so because of their simple desire to share their experience, the sense of nostalgia, as an expression of reverse culture shock or the frustration at himself/herself not being able to fit in a Japanese church in front of them. They may pour out, “I wish it were like church outside Japan,” even though they know it is impossible, but they are not denying or hoping it to be changed overnight.

### **About “culture and good news”: From a worker involved in cross-cultural ministry called overseas Japanese ministry**

Now, I think it is necessary to talk about the ideas on “culture and good news,” which is the premise of this work. In our work of overseas Japanese ministry, we always mention that there is the “true nature of good news (permanent)” and “expression in each culture (changed by culture)” to those who became a Christian outside Japan. When my husband and I studied at seminary in the UK and in the US, how we draw a line between these two was the major theme. Learning of Missiology was a big help. In the modern Protestant missionary history, Western missionaries brought in the culture of their homeland as well as good news to the country where they

were,. Therefore, the study to distinguish permanent things and things that could be changed by culture (things that are OK to be changed) was advanced. Currently, in the area of cross-cultural ministry, encouraging the expression based on each culture is becoming all the more valuable.

Christianity (Protestant) in Western countries is also Christianity that flourished in the culture. Before that time, Christianity was a culture in Near East and Mediterranean Sea regions. How the good news in Judaism culture recorded in the Bible and the good news in gentile culture are different is the basis when we think. Christianity was already introduced in the UK in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. As time went by, each era had the way of expressing good news. Mistakes that should not happen, such as confrontation against Catholic, religious oppression and bloodshed because of that, were experienced. Modern English church seems to deal with potential issues with the developed knowledge through the long history. It is not completed at all, but I think there are many things we can learn from them as older brothers and sisters with longer experience in Christianity.

150 years have passed since the good news was introduced to Japan through a missionary from the western nation. Although it was popularized and grew in the postwar period it seems to be still in the phase of “how to protect what was introduced.” We have to find answers as Japanese for issues in daily life and the issues of how to live in the environment with pagan religion by learning theology from Japanese perspectives. Western theology provided us the framework. We have to apply it to our reality as Japanese. That should be put into practice by each Japanese Christian. That is what we are thinking when we challenge our work.

The way · ideas of each religious community and denomination and the form of service·administration policy have historical necessity and a reason for existence. When a change occurs there, that is the time when a person becomes a living stone of the body of Christ and dedicates oneself, one who loves the body of Christ recognizes the needs of change, find way to change, find answers and put it into actions.

Whether the person is a returnee or not, a newcomer must respect and accept what has developed there, and he/she needs to be a living stone himself/herself. If wishing for a change, as a living stone, one must live together with other living stones, brothers and sisters.

Therefore, when we lead returnees, we try to deliver the message of ① it is a mistake to seek for a church that is similar to the one the person has experienced before returning to Japan, in other words, to distinguish the expressions brought by the nature of the good news and each culture, and teach him/her to seek for permanent things beyond culture (Bible, God in the Bible, faith to believe that Christ is the savior, and others) ② we try to teach, “you never lived in Japan as a Christian. Church in Japan teaches it and supports you. Learn deliberately there.” How our Lord will develop

churches in Japan? We are praying that He will returnees as a catalyst, but how would He give answer to it? I would like to look forward to it and protect, and sincerely obey with what is given to us as our role.

## 4.' "I never tried to live as a Christian" in Japan.' – How can we support?

### Case 4: Ms. D (single woman stayed 1 year in New Zealand with "Working Holiday")

After graduating from university, I worked for a company for several years, then I wanted to "find my own identity" with my savings, and I chose the working holiday program which allowed me to earn money while staying overseas. After arriving in New Zealand I was invited to attend English conversation lessons held at a local church by a person whom I met. It was my first time to have direct access to Christianity as well as to meet Christians. I was attracted by the way Christians lived, so I attended church and learned about the good news. I decided to be baptized and committed that "I will follow this from now on." Two months before my return to Japan I attended a Japanese service and had fellowship with Japanese Christians who were in my age and received information on church after my return.

What I was surprised when I came back to Japan was the **reaction of my family and friends**. My parents had already passed away, so I stayed at my brother who has a family. He is very understanding, so I did not worry. However, immediately after I arrived at his house. He told me, "Put your hands together in front of our parents family altar." I told him that I could not do it because I had become a Christian, which made him get emotional and told me, "Get out of my house." Since then, I asked a friend of mine to let me stay while preparing to become independent. Some of my friends also mentioned, "What? Did you become a Christian?" They seem to think that "religion" = "threatening if a person gets into it like Aum shinrikyo."

Everyone at church is nice, but I do not have anyone who is close to me. I found a job as an instructor of English lessons, therefore I am busy on weekends and after evening on weekdays, which makes it difficult for me to attend worship and fellowship. I feel I am separated and lonely. I am busy with my work and I cannot read the Bible much. I feel the distance between myself and God is becoming further.

Those who seek the Lord in Japan can solve the issues of relationship with family · friends and how they should live in Japanese society **in real time**

one by one, and receive baptism to lead their life at church. On the other hand, returnees seek and receive baptism outside of Japan. It could be described as “out of daily life” environment. Therefore the shock they receive when they were thrown into “daily life” environment at once is extraordinary. There are reactions that are much stronger than they expected in each circumstance, such as in relationships with family and friends, in their workplace and, and the person could lose his/her power because of it. As was the case of Ms. D, it is not uncommon that a person gets a job which forces him/her to work irregular hours.

It is important to understand that returnees could experience such things and they need support. In order to find out the situation, the following questions could be asked. It may be helpful to remember these questions in your mind and check them.

- What are the reactions of your family·friends after your return? How do you feel about them?
- Did you expect to receive such reactions? If it was not what they expected, help him/her to digest·resolve the gap and the shock.
- Are you bewildered with the busy life after your return? [Living overseas allows a person to have “time for himself/herself,” in other words, one can have time to reflect on himself/herself and face to himself/herself. The amount of information one can receive is less in the environment in foreign language anyway (In Japan the person can understand all information they receive but it is not the case outside Japan), and they can live relatively at their own pace compared with that in Japan. Yet, when they return to Japan, the amount of information they receive increases and they could be affected by that. Furthermore, they have to live in line with the environment with family·friends·region·school or workplace, thus they lose “their own time.” Many returnees feel that “Catching up with my busy life is the best I can do.”] We need to accept that confusion first and then gradually show them how they can live as a Christian with their busyness in Japan.

“I want to understand....” I cannot understand returnees’ feelings because I do not have experience living overseas. I want to help them, but I cannot.

This is what we often hear. Such situations occur frequently. What should we do?

It is very regrettable if Christians who have been baptized outside Japan cannot put down roots in a church when they return to Japan just because their feeling cannot be understood.

### **“Bridge for returnees” ministry**

In such a case, the “bridge for returnees” ministry is helpful.

- “Goal of the “bridge for returnees”: Help returnees to be connected to church, which is the body of Christ, in Japan and grow with Christians.
- Activity details of the “bridge for returnees”: To fill the returnee-specific needs, which only returnees can understand. If a church has a challenge to “want to understand, but cannot understand,” set off and connect to that church.
- Form of the “bridge for returnees”: Home gathering (for ladies who do not have much difficulty to gather during the day time during the week), small groups (for singles who have a job), and others.
- Qualifications for the host (person who serves in this work) of the “bridge for returnees”: The person who was a returnee himself/herself follows up new returnees in many cases. ① Rooted in church ② Church·Pastor understands and supports this work. Church prays and supports this work. It is ideal if the church recognizes that it sponsors the host for this work.
- Nature of the “bridge for returnees”: For many cases, it is cross-denominational, but some churches organize such a group internally.

University students Christians are energized by the activity of KGK (group of Christian students) and nurtured. Lady believers are encouraged at cross-denominational “ladies luncheon” and motivated to work hard serving in church.

Similarly, returnees need such a bridge where their feelings are accepted, light is given through the word of God and they are motivated to become involved in church.

#### **Case 5: Mrs. E (housewife)**

When my husband was assigned to work in the States I went with him. There I became involved in the fellowship at a Japanese church. I was baptized and returned back to Japan. I returned to a conservative region where I had lived before going to the States. Several years have passed since my return. I feel bewildered, but each church has its own characteristics and advantages, and I am blessed to be involved with fellowship at church, to serve and I am thankful each day. However, it could be due to the regional characteristics, but there are no other returnees in the area. I am afraid that people will think I am showing off or boasting if I talk about the States, so I keep everything in my heart in my daily life, which is painful. I hope that I can talk openly about the time that was a milestone for me in my Christian life. I really would like to meet and talk with other returnees.

The Christian in this case can be empowered and encouraged through the fellowship of the “bridge for returnees.”

If you feel that you want to understand the feeling of returnees but cannot, please take advantage of the fellowship of the “bridge for returnees.” If there is any returnee Christians in your church, who are suitable for this work, please encourage them to be used by the Lord as a host of the “bridge for returnees.”

There are believers who have a burden to help returnees even though they are neither returnees nor have experience living overseas themselves. God uses various ways to make returnees into the core body of church by using those who do not have overseas experience. Please encourage the believers who have such a burden to work as a “bridge for returnees,” and send them out.

Returnees who left church (believers•seekers) because they did not feel accepted are all over the nation. The “bridge for returnees” is required everywhere in Japan.

### **Bridge Builder**

The host for the “bridge for returnees” is called a bridge builder. This is a person who plays the role of a bridge between two points as well the bridge between the church and returnees.

### **Must-do's for Bridge Builders**

For the person who plays the role of a bridge, the goal is to help the one who crosses to get from point A to point B. In this case the goal is to help returnees get connected to a church which is part of the body of Christ and grow as a Christian. The goal is not to have them stay on the bridge. The goal is not having many people gather at the “bridge for returnees.” In order to continue to serve with a clear vision, fostering and training the Bridge Builders will be important.

## **Lastly : Think Globally, Act Locally.**

This is a phrase made popular in the environmental field. It means that a person considers everything, but takes action where they are at. In line with globalization, God has sent the Japanese all over the world and brought them back to Japan to bless the churches there. Each returnee is a laborer for the Lord based upon the Great Commission. They are called out by God to different regions in Japan and around the world. In this Diaspora tradition we do what we can where God places us. To that end, we cannot forget to look at both the universal church and each individual church. Each one has the responsibility to do what they can for the Japanese returnees. We trust that God will guide each returnee's life and lead them to a church where they can put down roots. Even if the returnee does not end up being connected to your own church, it will be good that they ultimately become connected to the body of Christ. I believe that the Lord will use those who minister to returnees in such a way.