

Pastor Nidaira and the Zushi Mission - An Interview

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Note: (The following interview was conducted in Japanese through correspondence and subsequently translated into English. Also, please note that my comments in the body of the interview are printed in italics)

INTRODUCTION

A Brief Look at Zushi and Its Environs

Sanbi (Praise) Lutheran Church is located in Zushi City, which is part of the state or prefecture of Kanagawa. As of February, 1997, the population of Kanagawa was 8,295,375, about 6.6% of the national total. With 3,147,991 households, the prefecture averages 2.64 persons per household. This represents a population density that is the nation's third highest after Tokyo and Osaka. The population of Kanagawa Prefecture has rapidly increased due to the massive inflow of people from Tokyo and other areas who are seeking housing. There has been a vast built-up of urban infrastructure, such as roads and public service facilities. Consequently, life has become considerably more convenient for the residents. At the same time, however, many social problems are arising, such as intensification of traffic congestion and deterioration of the environment for raising young people. In recent years, vulnerability to earthquakes is noted, since a large-scale earthquake is feared to hit the Tokai region including Kanagawa. Most recently however, the number of children in Kanagawa and the inflow of people to the region are decreasing, and an aged society with less children is expected to come after the population reaches its peak in the near future. For these reasons, the pace of the growth and expansion of the urban area in Kanagawa is expected to slow down.

The rapid economic growth of the region has had other mixed results as well. There has been an increase in the average income, while at the same time a new relativism in the people's sense of values. Although Japan has also been effected by the Asian economic recession, urban areas such as Zushi have been somewhat more resilient to its effects over against the more rural areas. Having gained "material wealth, an increasing number of people today want to realize their

affluence by achieving “spiritual richness”, such as purpose of life and a more comfortable, relaxed way of living.¹ Furthermore, people now have more free time than before because of a reduction in working hours led by the introduction of a five-day workweek. As a result, an increasing number of people spend more time and money on lifetime education, hobbies and leisure. As Kanagawa is next door to the capital and has a well-developed transportation network, many people commute long distances to offices and schools. Furthermore, since Tokyo has the most employment opportunities in a tight job market, the ratio of the daytime population in Kanagawa is low, compared with that of the population at night, and it has become a “bedroom community” of sorts.

INTERVIEW

The Mission in Zushi - Beginnings

1. Why did the LECC (Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church) choose Zushi as a mission field?

I don't know the reason. Before I became an LECC member, the synod was already doing mission work in Zushi. If this question is why they sent me to Zushi, there are three answers: 1) There were members of the LECC at Zushi already even though they were few in number. 2) There were many LECC members who were going to move into the Zushi area because of schooling or jobs. 3) There was no LECC church in Kanagawa prefecture at that time.

During my own time in Japan, I began to notice a trend that ties in directly with the second point that Pastor Nidaira made in the above answer - The Japanese people are slowly becoming more

¹ Kanagawa Prefectural Government, *Kanagawa Today* [www.pref.kanagawa.jp/e-index.htm]

mobile. Although the upward mobility of families is something we have seen in America for some time, this is a relatively new phenomena in Japan since the “Bubble Economy” burst in the late eighties. Nowadays, it is becoming more common for companies to force their employees to move from one address to another. To make matters worse, the concepts of job security and lifelong commitment to a specific company are falling to the wayside. Although not directly connected, the effect on the work of the LECC is becoming more apparent: Members are moving, and they are doing it more often. When a congregation member moves in America, it is somewhat easier to find another WELS church that is in the area. In some cases, if enough WELS members move to a certain area, they can provide a core for a new mission, and eventually a new congregation. In Zushi, as in the rest of the LECC churches, if a member moves away from the Tokyo area, services on tape and monthly newsletters are some of the only options available. It is lonely for the Japanese Christian, and this rising trend of upward mobility certainly is not helping to improve the situation. The main point I would draw from this dilemma is the importance of remaining in constant contact with those members who are living in areas of Japan that are not in the vicinity of the LECC.

2. When was Zushi first proposed as a mission field?

I don't know the reason. It was about 1980 when missions started in Zushi, but at that time I was not a Christian yet. If you want to know about old history of LECC, please ask Pastor Yoshida or Pastor Oshino.

3. Were there alternative mission fields proposed as well?

I don't know about the old days. If I talk about nowadays, Oyama city at Tochigi prefecture and Ryugasaki city of Ibaraki prefecture came up as a plan. And I was sent not only to Zushi, but

also Kawasaki City, Yokohama City, Kamakura City, and Yokosuka City which are cities located in the eastern part of Kanagawa prefecture.

Although, Zushi was chosen around 1980, Pastor Nidaira mentions several locations above as possible missions centers as well. One overarching theme I noticed in LECC mission strategy was networking. It seems most, if not all, of their congregations are kept rather close together. In WELS circles, a pastor can't help but acknowledge the benefits of study clubs and regular meetings with area pastors. In such settings, brothers can encourage one another and give advice on various issues. What is true for the WELS mission fields, becomes even more apparent in Zushi and the LECC in general. These locations allow both missionaries and national pastors alike to congregate more often. In a city such as Zushi, where the work can require a great deal of patience on the part of the shepherd, such networking can go a long way. The lesson for Christ's co-workers is clear - God's worker is not a rock or an island. If a called worker has the tendency of trying to solve his or her own problems, it can be disastrous on the mission field. God knows what his workers need, and so he tells us in Proverbs 27:17, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." God wants his people to stick together.

4. What determined your choice of location within the city of Zushi?

I don't know the clear reason. When I was sent to Zushi church as a pastor, there was already a church at the place where it is now. The reason why the church was established at the current location could be accessibility and money factors I suppose. [The Zushi mission] is called a church, but we are using one room with another group. We are using the room from 3 PM - 6 PM on Sunday and the congregation is paying the rent of 12,000 yen per month.

The cost of the facility rental mentioned above is about 100 dollars. While not a large sum in itself, the total is brought into perspective when one realizes that that fee covers one small room for four brief afternoons per month. This fact brings into light an unavoidable aspect of mission work in Japan - money. While financial concerns are nothing new to mission planning, it takes on more relevance in Japan where even the most basic items of food and clothing are two to three times more expensive. Although the sky-high real estate values of the eighties are long gone, building a church home requires careful planning to avoid excessive cost. In the case of Zushi City, it means renting a room until a permanent church home is feasible. There are several examples of this cost-consciousness in church locations throughout the LECC. At Heian (Peace) Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church in Ashikaga City, Pastor Oshino and his congregation have been blessed with a church building. However, a visitor will immediately notice that the church is built up on "stilts" and a small parking lot is located directly under the sanctuary. In Tomoshihi (Light) Church in Chiba, Pastor Yoshida conducts his mission work from his home. One room on the lower level of his house serves as the meeting place for Sunday morning worship and various Bible classes throughout the week. Again, while these physical building arrangements may not be ideal, they serve to cut cost while still enabling the respective pastor to carry on his work. While some may balk at the thought of conducting church out of one's own house, one will realize that at any given time, we use what the Lord gives us to the best of our ability. The Apostle Paul knew what it meant to carry out mission work under the gravest of circumstances and yet he still retained the secret of contentment - "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." Paul words continue to ring true in such far away places as Zushi and Japan as a whole. As I look at the example of the LECC, I would ask

that God give me and all his workers resourceful minds to see alternative mission opportunities and methods even when the money is lacking. I also pray that the Lord will move both believers in Japan and abroad to support our work there.

5. When did you first officially begin your work in Zushi?

April 1992.

6. Let's go back to first day you arrived at Zushi to officially begin your work there.

During your first several weeks in the city, what steps did you take?

I checked the addresses of the members who had not been to church for a long time, and I visited them. I conducted Bible class, which is called Adonai College, at Yokohama and Higashi-Kanagawa for two years with the support of three members who are living in Yokohama City. I also conducted correspondence classes, and family devotions for shut-ins. I wrote and distributed letters and newsletters of the church and I passed out tracts.

Challenges Related to Zushi and Japan

Location

7. Are you there any unique challenges for your worship services such as musical accompaniment, distractions, city noise level, etc.?

We have had no problems so far.

8. Has the Zushi mission had any role among the military base personnel at Yokosuka? If so, when did this work begin?

Even though it is called a mission for the American base people, it is actually a service in English for military personnel and their families who are already members of WELS or ELS. It is not a mission for other military people. However, I want to tell the Gospel whenever possible, so if I have a chance I will preach to them even if they are not WELS or ELS members. I had

opportunity to do this very thing two years before at the apartment complex for American military personnel and their families in Zushi city. At least three thousand Americans are living in Zushi. At that facility, two families (ten people) are members of WELS and ELS, and they are taking part in the worship services. Also, we sometimes have evening services in English for them at the military apartment complex.

9. Since Zushi is a port town, have you had the opportunity to do cross-cultural work? If so, when did this cross-cultural work begin?

The most important part of my job is to evangelize the Japanese who are living in the eastern part of Kanagawa prefecture. Through the Bible Class called Adonai College in Yokohama, one man was baptized. Other than that, adult baptisms included four people; special baptisms - two people; confirmations - one person; and infant baptisms - one person. By the way, Zushi is not a port town, but a sight-seeing place. It is also a “bedroom community” for those who are commuting to Tokyo or Yokohama.

10. Are there any factors in Zushi that provide unique mission opportunities?

1) I conducted a Christmas service in the American military apartment complex with the support of the Rupprecht and Richardson families. In the 1998 service, seven Japanese were present as well. In 1999, two Japanese also came to this celebration. 2) We are not doing these service now, but four years before we had Bible classes in English, Japanese, and Spanish, in addition to a private service for a Peruvian family living in Sagami-hara City.

11. The neighboring city of Kamakura has deep roots in traditional Japanese religions.

Has this affected your ministry in Zushi?

Yes. However, Kamakura [is not the only factor involved]. Family grave sites (*haka*) also have a very big effect on the mission in Japan. We often use the term “traditional Japanese religion,”

but most Japanese people are not eager Shintoists or Buddhists. The biggest problem for Japanese people in becoming Christian is that tomb of their ancestors and also the change in funeral plans that this will entail.

The Japanese word 'haka,' refers to a family tomb. This concept is quite different from the cemeteries we are used to in America, since all the family members will be cremated and then placed in the same location. The upkeep of the tomb is the sole responsibility of the next generation, in particular the eldest son. Consequently, if one is the oldest son or only child of a family, he or she is responsible for the care of the haka, and that means he or she has to be involved with the Buddhist funeral rite. Other Buddhist practices complicate the picture further. For example, several times a year, the whole family will come and use Buddhist-style rosaries and incense as they speak to their ancestors. In fact, Japanese even receive a new name which they are to use in the afterlife. If son or daughter declines these obligations, it is a horrible insult. It is the same as saying, "I no longer want to be a part of this family." Consequently, people hesitate to become Christian in view of all the results that will follow. All these traditions present a dark gray cloud for mission work, however there is a silver lining. There is a growing departure from such traditions that can be seen among the younger generations. Some people no longer have a family tomb. This trend is most apparent in the large cities of Japan, while the rural areas still cling more steadfastly to the old ways. This is another facet of Japanese culture that requires an extra measure of God-given patience on the part of the pastor.

12. What kind of neighborhood is your mission located in? (i.e. Residential, Business, Industrial, Shopping, Urban, Suburban, Rural)

It is a commercialized area.

13. How do people access your mission location? (bus, bike, walking, train, etc.)

They most often walk from the nearest train stations. It is a 10 minute walk from the JR (Japan Railway) Station, and a five minutes walk from Keihin Kyuko Line Station.

When Americans want to go some place, they go with cars. Of course, going to church is no different. When we go to hear the Word on Sunday morning, we use our faithful automobiles to get us there. However, due to its population density and to avoid 24-hour gridlock, Japan chose the train as its primary source of personal and commercial transportation. Although in recent years there has been a marked increase in the use of cars, it should come as no surprise that Pastor Nidaira lists the train stations first when it comes to the question of church accessibility. I had the opportunity to visit many of the congregations within the LECC and they are typically located next to at least one major train line if not more. Naturally, one does not need to be doing mission work in Japan to see the importance of placing a church near transportation hubs. When a group of Christians gather to decide a location for a new sanctuary, there are certainly any number of factors involved: land prices, demographics, potential growth for a given area, presence of other Christian church bodies, etc. It's is certainly a challenge to balance so many variables when making such a decision. However, proximity to major transportation lines must not be ignored. Convenience of location, albeit superficial, can play a significant role in initially drawing people to church. Such a consideration is never a replacement or even an aid to the all-sufficient power of the Gospel. However, it can go a long way in removing barriers for the unchurched.

14. What challenges has this mission location presented to you?

The location is not a problem so much as the fact that we can only use the church from 3 PM - 6 PM on Sundays. We can't use the room as we want, and we don't have parking space.

15. What kind of building does the Zushi mission currently have?

It's part of a rented building. The other rooms are offices. Other than the room for the worship service, we have a kitchen and a bathroom.

16. Do you have any challenges associated with the building?

Some of the challenges have already been listed in my answer to question fourteen. However, another challenge is that the room is on the second floor and we don't have an elevator. As a result, it is difficult, or at the very least, inconvenient for those who have disabilities. For that matter, the bathroom is not wheelchair-accessible either.

Politics

17. Are there any laws that make it inconvenient or even difficult to do outreach work in Zushi?

(No answer)

Economy

18. Has the state of Japan's economy in the last few years affected your work in Zushi?

I don't know about the LECC as a whole, but in Zushi two members lost their jobs from '98 to '99. That resulted in less people coming to church and less stewardship of talents and services from those members as well.

Religion

19. Have you experienced any challenges in connection with "new religions" or cults in Zushi?

Nothing in particular.

20. Have you seen any significant change in peoples' attitude toward religion after the Aum Shinri Kyo scandal?

Currently, I am looking for an apartment to move to. However, when I say that I am going to use the room as an office for the church, there are fewer landlords who are willing to rent out their apartments to me.

21. Were there any challenges specifically connected with Japanese traditional religions such as Buddhism or Shintoism. If so, please give one example.

My answer is the same as the one I gave for question eleven concerning Kamakura.

22. What is your idea of the common man's view of Christianity in Japan?

It is perceived as a Western religion. In the past, I was one of those people who thought that way. In general, people know the name of Christianity, but they don't know anything in detail.

For a fuller understanding of the above answer, it is good to have a brief look at the historical background of Christianity in Japan. In the mid-16th century, when the Europeans first made their appearance, there was little authority over foreign trade. The first Portuguese to be shipwrecked off southern Kyushu in 1543 found an appreciative Japanese reception for their skills in making firearms, which were soon spread throughout the region. The Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier arrived soon after in Kagoshima in 1549 and was followed by more missionaries who quickly converted the local lords. These local rulers were eager to profit from foreign trade and assistance with military supplies. The new religion of Christianity spread rapidly, gaining several hundred thousand converts, particularly in Nagasaki.

At first, Nobunaga, the current military ruler of Japan, saw the advantages of trading with Europeans and tolerated the arrival of Christianity as a counterbalance to Buddhism, which had become thoroughly involved in politics. Once Hideyoshi (Nobunaga's most skilled commander) had assumed power, however, this tolerance gradually gave way to the suspicion of subversion by an alien religion which came to appear as a threat to his rule. Edicts against Christianity were followed in 1597 by the crucifixion of 26 foreign priests and Japanese believers. Prohibition and persecution of Christianity continued under the Tokugawa government until it reached its peak in 1637 with the brutal repression of the Christian-led Shimabara Rebellion. This brought the Christian century to a sudden close, although the religion continued to be practiced in secret until it was officially allowed to resurface at the end of the 19th century. This bloody end of open Christianity ingrained itself in the collective consciousness of Japan, and it helped to augment the feelings of suspicion that the Japanese people felt toward all things foreign. If Christianity had not been so thoroughly crushed in the 17th century, then perhaps it would no longer be perceived as a foreign religion as is the case of Buddhism today. Although Japan was spared most of the negative aspects of imperialism that had stained the reputation of Christianity in other nations, this violent time served to distance the people of Japan from Western religions, a trend that can still be observed today. If one is to serve as a messenger of the Gospel in Japan, it is important to keep in mind that this distancing or distrust toward Christianity still exists, despite the fact that the specific reason may have faded into the past. In dealing with this obstacle, the pastor will pray for an extra measure of patience from the Spirit. At the same time, the Scriptures reminds us through the Apostle Paul, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." The Gospel is powerful. It is always effective as it turns hearts

toward repentance or hardens them in their lack of repentance. In a mission field such as Zushi, where converts trickle in ever so slowly, the power of the Gospel must ever remain before our eyes.

23. Have you been able to use the true meaning of Christmas as an outreach tool? If so, how?

For the most part, Christmas is used as a commercial tool, but there are people who want to know true meaning of Christmas as well.

Education system

24. Evolution is taught as fact in the public school system. What challenges has this presented to your ministry?

Just as with traditional Japanese religions and family tombs, evolution is one of the big enemies of the mission in Japan. The reason that many of those who learn the Bible don't believe Genesis chapter one without doubting is because they are taught that evolution is correct and after enough of this, they also believe that it is correct.

25. As you teach, how and when do you approach the subject of Creation?

It is different depending on the text that I use, but whenever I talk about God, I talk about creation regardless of how much that subject is covered in the text.

Outreach Tools

Media

26. What media have you used to make your presence known in Zushi?

Tracts, community magazine advertisements, person to person. If I had a place that I could use as I wanted, I would do many other things too.

27. Which media have you found to be most effective?

So far, in the case of Zushi, person to person has been most effective.

English class

28. The LECC has and continues to use English classes as an outreach tool. Has English played a role in your work in Zushi?

No, but now Beth Rupprecht is teaching one high school student. If I would have a place of my own, I would like to teach English too. There are many people who are interested in English. Actually, at the American military apartment complex, many Japanese people go to learn English everyday.

Pastor Nidaira's words reveal a continuing desire in Japan to learn the English language. I witnessed this first hand when I worked at Kumon, an educational company that, among other subjects, teaches English. Although there were always a number of students who were forced to learn English by their parents, I was always surprised each day to see how many students were willing to sit down and memorize English vocables and sentences. Naturally, this desire to learn English can be a good bridge for bringing individuals into contact with the Gospel. However, as I observed the English classes within the LECC, I found that the pastors never use English as a clever scheme to "capture" someone with the Gospel. They would always make it clear from the very beginning that the intention of the English class was to bring the message of salvation to the student. From this example, I could see how important it is that no matter what method may be used to bring people into contact with the Word, the teacher must always keep Gospel outreach as his or her only priority.

29. What role do you think English will have in the future of the LECC?

I think it is a good way to invite people. However, for the Japanese people, the Bible should be taught in Japanese.

30. What other outreach methods or tools have you used to bring the people of Zushi in contact with the Word?

(No answer)

Shut-in work

31. Is the Zushi mission involved with any distance learning or shut-in work?

As far as correspondence classes are concerned, there is a woman in Akita city who took a class with the Small Catechism as the text. She was baptized, and I visit her once a year and conduct a service with communion. As for shut-ins, there is an American with whom I conduct english services with communion. Concerning the Japanese people, I do such things as communion services and shut-in visits for prospects using easy to understand Bible stories, along with some casual chatting about everyday subjects as well.

Social Factor

32. Churches in America often have social outings such as potluck dinners or softball games to strengthen ties between members. Does your congregation at Zushi have such outings? If so, name a couple of examples.

Since Zushi has less members and many elderly and shut-ins, it is difficult to do social outings with only the members who are able to come. But we do have opportunities to get involved with the Tokyo church [Aganai (Redemption) Church - Pastor Habben]. Previously, we also had supper parties at my apartment, but now I have too much stuff and there is too little space in my room. There is not enough space to invite people.

Concluding Questions

People

33. Are there any specific individuals whom you consider to be instrumental in helping your work in Zushi? What was their contribution?

In the past, one member helped in putting together the church newsletter even though it's not being done right now. However, he will do it again if his job condition improves. Also, one male member is serving as organist. Another member gave special offerings to build a church. Other members help in passing out tracts.

34. One of two prevailing attitudes can be found among Christian congregations: 1) The pastor is looked upon as the only one who can get the work of the church done; OR 2) Members of the congregation take leadership roles and assist the pastor in his work of spreading the gospel. What kind of attitude have you witnessed in Zushi? What might be the reason for such an attitude?

I can't agree with this distinction. The members and believers who are growing in their faith don't know what to do even though they have the will to help.

The above dialogue, in and of itself, reveals a key difference in attitudes between established and mission congregations. I grew up in the Fox River Valley of Wisconsin, an area with one of the highest concentrations of churches in the Wisconsin Synod. I grew up in a setting where opportunities to serve were often quite abundant. The challenge was not the opportunities themselves, but the prevalent lack of desire to use those opportunities. Pastor Nidaira points out a significant difference in his congregation. While the desire may be there to serve the Lord, the number and variety of opportunities to put that desire to good use are not. While I was in

Japan, I noted that there were certainly some chances to help out in church work such as passing out tracts or helping the pastor with mailings. However, this is rather different than my current congregation on the south side of Milwaukee where it is quite common to have several leaflets tucked into the Sunday bulletin, many of which offer opportunities of service. It seems the best one can do in a mission setting is to constantly keep one's eyes open for skills among the members whereby they can serve their Lord. Some examples could be: 1) Prayer lists that guide the members in making requests on behalf of their mission congregation and for the church as a whole. 2) Helping the community (taking fellowship issues into consideration) in various forms of charity when calamities such as tornadoes or earthquakes strike. 3) Offering cooking classes coupled with a brief devotion. 4) Offering opportunities for members to send taped sermons and devotional materials to distant members or even to fellow believers in other mission fields (This would also serve to promote awareness of the communion of the saints as well).

General

35. During your years in Zushi, what would you describe as the most challenging aspect of your ministry?

As I wrote earlier, there is no facility that we can use as we want.

36. What have been some of your greatest joys during your ministry in Zushi?

Comparing to the American churches, the joys must be less. However, it is a joyful thing whenever I conduct a confirmation or baptism. Moreover, I have not only confirmed Japanese, but also Peruvian and Singapore people as well.

37. Comment on any unique aspects of ministry in Zushi that you feel have not been covered in the above questions.

Although Zushi congregation is small, four years ago we started a savings account to construct a church building. As a pastor, I was a very happy that it was the congregation, not I, who proposed this saving plan.

The above answer provides a glimpse into the future of the Zushi mission. We certainly pray, along with Pastor Nidaira, that the Lord continue to bless this outreach effort so that the Japanese people may be brought to know the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We also pray that the Spirit would pour out his gifts upon the hearts of the members there that they might be moved to establish and support a permanent church home in the city of Zushi. Of course, as we contemplate the future of Sanbi Lutheran Church, we can't help but think of the future of the LECC as a whole. Historically speaking, the synod's mission method has been to establish church bodies that can eventually support themselves both in terms of manpower and finances. However, the challenging mission field of Japan demonstrates that this ideal can't not always be met. After half a century of labor in the land of the Rising Sun, the synod's total number of communicants adds up to a few hundred souls. In a country where the cost of mission work is above average, one might ask, "How long is too long?" How long should we remain in a land where so many continue to see the Gospel of Jesus Christ as nothing more than the foolish jargon of a western religion? This is a difficult question to answer. However, the fact remains that while other countries may be too unstable or dangerous for our missionaries, Japan has allowed complete freedom of religion ever since its constitution was established after World War II. For nearly five decades now, this freedom has allowed our missionaries to sow the seed of the Gospel without hindrance. In a country where 99% of the people are ignorant of the Gospel, can we afford not to make use of the opportunity the Lord has given us while the door is still

flung wide open? None of us knows what the future holds in Japan. We may not always have such a full and free access to this harvest. As it is, our gracious God has given us the tools and the talents necessary to reach into this land with his soul-saving Gospel. He has already gathered a beautiful congregation of saints around his Gospel, a people who continue to ask for missionaries and pastors who can continue to serve them with Word and Sacrament. May God continue to make this outreach possible as long as the door remains open for us in Japan. May he continue to reach an ever increasing number of people in the land of the Rising Sun, so that countless multitudes of Japanese may also one day gather around the throne of God in the Kingdom of Heaven.