Missio Dei

Exploring God's work in the world

On Becoming A Missional Church In Japan

Michael J. Sherrill

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Missio Dei is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about *God's mission* in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the mission task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, "across the street, all through the marketplaces, and around the world."

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Foreword

The 19th century was "the great century" of world mission, according to K. S. Latourette, prominent historian of Christian missions.[1] With the expansion of western colonialism, world missions by the Western church went hand-in-hand virtually to the ends of the earth. The attitude of western missionaries was often paternalistic based on belief in the superiority of European Christian civilization. Over the course of various interactions between western missionaries and non-western peoples, the missionaries had both positive and negative effects.

The greed and violence of western powers eventually escalated into world wars. As a result of these moral failures, the western churches lost their spiritual vitality, and their role in world mission was profoundly weakened. Throughout the 20th century, the non-western church had been growing gradually. In the last quarter of the century, the number of Christians in the two-thirds world surpassed that of the western Christians.[2]

As the basic principle of my missiology, I am confident that mission is primarily the work of God — *missio Dei*.[3] So I see the hand of God in this process of world missions shifting from the western to the non-western church.

The younger church has been struggling to free itself from colonialism and superficial westernization and to realize its authentic Christian identity in the cultural context. As for the Japanese church, it belongs to the two-thirds world church, although Japan is a member of the largely western European Group of Eight (G8), an international forum of governments that represent about 65 percent of the world economy. Japan has tried to adopt modern western civilization since the Meiji Reformation in 1868, but on a deeper cultural level, Japan still retains many non-western values. The Japanese church is also struggling to seek for its Christian identity and to realize its role in the worldwide Christian community.

Concerning the present situation, I find this booklet by Mike Sherrill very significant. Based on his missionary experiences and scholarly research, he has observed and analyzed the Japanese church and its settings very deeply, and tried to present an authentic model of the Christian community. With respect to contemporary missions, his attitude is truly an expression of partnership and desire for the unity of the Christian church.

To be honest, such a model *should* be created by the Japanese Christians themselves. But I think his work could be a *kairos* moment, "God's timing" in 21st-century world missions. Sherrill does not force western values on the local church. Rather, he wants to find positive features of Japanese people and tries to energize them to create a spiritual community — a missional church, to use his words. It is not only a sign of a renewed attitude of western missionaries, but also of hope for their home churches, because western secularized, materialistic and nominal Christians themselves need to be revived again. The western church needs to regain the spiritual life and authenticity of the apostolic church. The concept of "a missional church" must be applied to all churches. Contributions by western missiologists such as Sherrill can be a good stimulus for the two-thirds world church to create its own missiology, theology and ecclesiology. But the two-thirds church needs a little more time. According to Roland Allen, a prophetic 20th-century missiologist:

"The only alternative is to abandon altogether that [paternalistic] position, and to admit that we cannot judge. We must begin with positive teaching, not with negative prohibitions, and be content to wait and to watch whilst the native Christians slowly re-create their own customs, as the Spirit of Christ gradually teaches them to transform what today is heathen, and tomorrow, purged of its vice, will appear as a Christian custom. … We cannot force them at a bound to adopt or reject at our command, even when the adoption or rejection seems to be an immense immediate step forward. If we are not prepared to do that, if we still accept the position of judges, and prohibit customs or restore them, to differ from the judgments of our predecessors and to build again the things which we destroyed is simply to reveal our incapacity to judge truly, and to make ourselves transgressors."[4]

I believe that on the stage of world mission in the 21st-century, the two-thirds world church will assume the leading role. The western church will also be renewed spiritually and be a true partner. I hope the world Christian community will realize the unity of the body of Christ beyond the denominational gaps. Otherwise the church cannot survive upcoming apocalyptic, eschatological disasters, nor be able to be an agent of God's saving act for suffering people. We should be renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit, lest the word of the coming Lord should become true: "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8)

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On Becoming A Missional Church In Japan

Michael J. Sherrill

In 1977, a young Japanese evangelist was sent to a rural area of Japan as a missionary. There he soon won several converts, and together they founded a church. With great zeal he tried many techniques to make his church grow. He held evangelistic meetings, distributed tracts, and evangelized one-on-one, but results were minimal. Growth came very slowly. Finally, with a particular concern for the lack of youth in his church, he decided to abandon these traditional methods of church growth. He took the few young people who were coming to his church and together they went out to meet people in public places, in department stores, parks, and swimming pools. Taking this relational approach, they found that people were more receptive to the gospel when approached on their own turf.

The church grew steadily for about 15 years to a membership of nearly 300, an unprecedented level of success for any Japanese church, let alone one in a rural seaside town. However, with this success came trouble. The pastor confessed that the growth produced in him a certain level of pride. This pride drew the criticism and judgment of other churches, and it also had a negative impact within the congregation itself. Members became disenchanted with exclusive repetitive theology and began to drift away to other churches. Consequently, the church and its pastor entered a rather painful transitional period.

Out of this period came a dramatic change of heart, especially in the pastor. He decided to abandon exclusive pastor-centered leadership and pursue a more community-oriented approach. This was accompanied by a radical change in spirituality and ecclesiology from an inward- to an outward-focused ministry. Through the period of transition, the congregation was reduced to just 60 members. Facing the task of rebuilding was daunting, but the pastor found encouragement in the fresh spirit of oneness in the congregation. He understood the importance of meeting people where they were and building relationships. This is the way his church had grown so well in the first place, but when the church became large, the system had broken down. As part of the recovery, the church leadership decided to restructure the church based on the cell group model.

The church leadership came to realize that when the church was small, it had experienced a strong sense of spirituality in the congregation. However, numerical growth had seemed to diminish this spiritual quality. The leadership determined that the cell model would perhaps best facilitate congregational growth while preserving the deep spirituality they all desired.

In 1995, the church formed its first leadership cell. Today, there are over 20 such cells, not including five additional ones that have become sister congregations. The main church currently has a membership of 140, with nearly 90 percent of the respondents under the age of 40. Males slightly outnumber females in the congregation, a rather unusual phenomenon for the church in Japan. In addition, 95 percent of the congregation's current membership became Christian as a result of the church's outreach and ministries.

The evangelistic vision of the church for spreading the gospel focuses on three areas: the local community, the nation, and the larger world.

The evangelistic vision of the church for spreading the gospel focuses on three areas: the local community, the nation, and the larger world. The church's vision statement expresses clearly and concretely how this will happen, by: (1) building a strong church active in the local community; (2) serving local churches in Japan trying to follow the cell group model; and (3) cooperating with churches in other Asian and Pacific nations. Such a vision rests on the understanding that the church must continually develop disciples who in turn develop disciples. Members are frequently reminded that everyone is a minister, each with a duty and calling to participate in spreading the gospel throughout the world. [5]

Japanese Self-Identity Is Undergoing Change

Being missional in today's world requires a shift from a *church-centered* understanding of mission to a *God-centered* one. The church is not, in this view, the *end purpose* of the gospel, but the *means* of the gospel for witnessing to a hurting world. A missional ecclesiology must be biblical, historical, eschatological and contextual. The final purpose of this new ecclesiology is the renewal of the church. Therefore, it is the role and responsibility of the church in every time and place to continually reflect on the gospel and on its own given context in order to discern what a faithful response should be. This process of missional reflection is of paramount importance to the church in Japan as it seeks to be a living witness to the gospel in its 21st-century setting.

An appropriate starting point for this reflection is a consideration of the individual in contemporary Japanese society. Japanese self-identity

has traditionally been derived from the individual person's group context. Put most simply, self is not self without others. This is reflected in the concept of *amae*, the instinctive Japanese desire for oneness and intimacy. "It is telepathic, pre-linguistic, and does not need the medium of language. It is communicated directly from heart to heart." [6] Perhaps *amae* denotes a certain self-indulgent dependence on others, but it is not about egocentrism or separation. It is about mutual identification. Through amae, the Japanese people are in touch with an individual's need for other people. This has been a key element in the glue that holds Japanese society together. In addition, each self has a double nature, or a two-layered structure defined as *tatemae* (formal behavior) and *honne* (inner feelings). The individual ego exists in *honne*, but the group ego in *tatemae* must take precedence.[7] This does not mean that individualism does not exist in Japanese society. It does exist, but in a very different sense than the notion of western individualism. Hamaguchi Eshun suggests that the term *kanjinshugi* (interpersonalism)[8] better describes the Japanese situation. A western understanding of individualism is characterized by a strong sense of self-reliance and egocentrism. In contrast, a Japanese understanding of interpersonalism is characterized by mutual dependence and relationalism. Masatsugu expresses this as a "group-directed individualism."[9]

The church is not the *end purpose* of the gospel, but the *means* of the gospel for witnessing to a hurting world.

This is still largely true today. However, one of the effects of postmodernity and the rise of popular culture in Japan has been a new trend toward a greater individuation of self. Craig Van Gelder argues that the contemporary self is characterized by "the possession of *personal rights*, perpetual consumption, development of a *constructed identity*, the use of *efficient technique*, and a search for *intense experience*."[10] These characteristics represent unresolved issues that fuel what is now known as "the postmodern condition," which includes:

- Endless choices made available by technology
- Loss of shared experiences
- Meanings conveyed as surfaces and images
- Transient relationships
- Plurality of approaches to sexual expression and experience
- An increasingly two-tiered economy with many dead-end jobs
- Personal spirituality without the necessity of organized religion
- Random violence and clashes between cultures
- Feelings of anger or resentment because someone has left us with a mess.[11]

In Japan, these unresolved postmodern issues are accompanied by a major shift in societal values. During the bubble economy of the late 1980s, permissiveness in Japanese society increased greatly in sharp contrast to only a few decades earlier. With the newfound wealth, consumption took center stage as the means of self-expression.

The relativization and weakening of values continued after the economic bubble burst in the early 1990s. However, from that point on, a new level of insecurity and uncertainty was introduced. The effect of these rapid changes is particularly visible in the younger generation, as Ulrich Möhwald has noted:

> In general, they strongly reject hierarchical social relations and structures, conformity, and respect for customs. … Their general value orientations are marked by a strong sense of self-interest and a tendency toward individualistic values that border on egoism. They show disregard for duties toward the family and tend to push for their own rights without regard for others. They display a strong orientation toward the hedonistic values of pleasure, amusement and consumption, and a relatively strong orientation toward acquisitive materialism and social advancement. They also tend toward instant gratification.[12]

Postmodern Society Presents the Church with New Opportunities

The church described in the opening section of this booklet works intentionally at understanding and meeting the needs of contemporary society. Considering that nearly 90 percent of the respondents are less than 40 years of age, this is a strong indicator that the church is connecting with the emerging needs of this generation. One of the needs felt by many people today is the opportunity to freely express themselves and to be released from social restrictions. Consider these testimonies from church members. “The atmosphere of the church is such that young age people feel free to come in.” “It is a good environment to praise for young people. Worship is filled with energy and the

cell groups work actively." "In a department store I believed in God and was saved. Then I was taught many things in the church." One way the church works at taking its faith into the public square is by conducting regular outdoor worship services. In some instances this means meeting on the boardwalk by the seaside where people are walking by. The members of this faith community are no longer content to wait for people to come visit their church. They go out and meet people on their own turf.

The postmodern context presents a significant challenge for the contemporary Japanese church. However, even in such a pluralistic, de-centered environment, the church is called to be a body that fosters unity and community-based Christian self-identity. The church living as a community of shalom addresses the contemporary quest for hope and meaning in life centering on relational restoration.

The communal pursuit characteristic of postmodern society is reflective of the communal character that has long been inherent to Japanese society. However, the pressures of modernization and rapid urbanization severely strained the social structures that heretofore facilitated the communal nature of Japanese culture. When examining the Japanese family system, two contradictory trends come to the surface. Some Japanese sociologists emphasize the stability of the Japanese family system, especially in comparison with other postmodern industrialized nations. In particular, they point out the comparatively low divorce rate and frequency of extended families living together.[13] Other sociologists describe what they see as the collapse of the Japanese family system. Okonogi Keigo renders the situation as *katei no nai kazoku no jidai* (the age of family-less families):

> When at home together, the parents may be watching TV while a son or daughter listens to a personal stereo at high volume. If someone wants a conversation, they call someone on their cell phone. Some people reassure themselves about this situation thinking that the family eats dinner together and they can talk then. However, according to data gathered by NHK, only 39 percent of families eat breakfast together and 17 percent eat dinner together. Each person is busy with their own time agenda. … It's like a hotel, people just sharing space. … Although they are physically together, their individual hearts are elsewhere.[14]

Many urban middle-class families function as families, but without the substance of an interactive family life. The phrase *kazoku o suru* (do a family) has been coined to describe the situation of a family pretending to be what it is not. With husbands at work until late in the evening, children at *juku* (evening exam school) and wives at evening functions, these families interact with each other very little, sharing a meal only a few times a week. Nevertheless, when they see each other on the weekend, they "pretend" that they are a family.[15] This means that although the frame of the family still exists, the individual members of the family are forced to seek social and emotional fulfillment in other frames such as company, school or social club. However, when it comes to nurturing emotional well-being and personal wholeness on a deep level, these frames often come up short.

This points us to an urgent calling of the missional church. It is the calling to be a community that fosters human wholeness in the contemporary context. This unprecedented opportunity can only be fully actualized through a missional church firmly grounded in its redemptive identity.

In contemporary Japan, increasingly a context of people who live in the present and who thrive on surfaces, images and experiences, the missional church incarnates a gospel that is built on a living history and offers hope for the present and future. Contemporary Japan needs a church that makes the gospel come alive in this way. Such a church, living out its faith in multiple locations as communities of shalom, can offer the direction, healing and hope that so many Japanese people desperately seek.

The Church Must Question *Nihonjinron* — the Theory of "Japaneseness"

The church is both social and spiritual. It is therefore very important for the church to understand the forces at work in the society around it. In any context, the church as a social community is at once both a *carrier* and a *transformer* of culture. The missional church, sensitive to what is missing in the wider culture, will function as an alternative community that is redemptive and life-giving in its social setting.

For the church in Japan, this means grappling with the misappropriation of Japan as a homogeneous society. Befu Harumi asserts that "racial and ethnic homogeneity in Japan is not an objective fact;

it is instead a construct of those who are motivated to promote a certain cultural conception of Japan."[16] This construct is commonly referred to as *Nihonjinron* — the theory of "Japaneseness."

One of the reasons such a concept would be promoted has to do with the search for identity on both the personal and national levels. "*Nihonjinron* as a *description of* behavior thus becomes a *model for* behavior. … Thus, intellectuals write *Nihonjinron* as a prescription for behavior. The government turns it into a hegemonic ideology, and the corporate establishment puts it into practice."[17]

This process has accompanied Japan's program of modernity since its beginning. It has been modified radically at times, but its purpose has remained the same: to somehow restore a sense of unity and identity in being Japanese. Without going into all the complexities of this issue, I raise it here as an important consideration for contemporary Japanese churches.

In order for the church to present itself as a viable alternative model for living, it must adequately understand the prevalent models operating in society. Currently, the notion of Japanese uniqueness and superiority stands on unstable ground. A church willing to engage society as a model of "redeemed Japaneseness" can lead the way for many to find unity, identity and renewal in the fellowship of Japanese Christians.

Finding Wholeness through Community Strikes a Chord in Japan Today

In 1967, a newly married Japanese Christian couple moved to an urban area and, with the help of a missionary couple, started a house fellowship in their apartment. After about two years, there were eight new Christians in the group. Through invitational evangelism, the church grew to around 60 by 1980 and then reached a plateau. In 1985, the church decided to undertake a three-year course in spiritual growth and began once again to expand in numbers. By 1994, the church had increased to 190 members. During this period, the major growth factor seems to have been the small-group

fellowships led by members in their homes. This approach multiplied highly skilled leadership in the church. In 1995, the congregation decided to restructure itself according to the cell-group model to serve their local area with a more holistic witness. Consider these testimonies from some of the members. "When I first came to this church, someone talked to me. Someone also sent me a card. Many people were friendly and soon I enrolled in a family cell." "I was saved because someone listened to my story." "Church members welcomed me and I experienced warm human relationships totally different from typical superficial relationships. Through them, I met Jesus and accepted him as my savior." "Through intimate fellowship in the church, I was able to change my inner self, even things I thought would never change." What is clear from these testimonials is how strong an impact a warm and secure environment has on people, and how effective is a relational approach to ministry.

The missional church is a community of salvation, a community living in active, faithful response to God's gracious reign over the earth. However, the church has tended to separate the *good news* of God's salvation from God's *ongoing redemptive activity* in the world where the church finds itself. This kind of separation is not biblical.

The church is not the *equivalent* of the reign of God. It is a *sign* and an *instrument* of God's reign. A church activated as sign and instrument approaches evangelism as more than member recruitment. It is an invitation to companionship, an invitation to join others in the redemptive community.

The notion of finding self-fulfillment and wholeness in the context of the group or community is not new to Japan. However, one of the effects of modernity has been a loosening of commitment to group ties. A consequence has been a decrease in the depth of social relations, a weakening of the sense of community that human beings need in order to feel whole.

Human wholeness comes through community. Human beings are redeemed in the context of a community that cultivates shalom. This is of paramount importance to the contemporary church in Japan.

Many Japanese people have heard the gospel message, especially through the hundreds of Christian schools in Japan. For many, however, it seems their experience of God stops at the cognitive level. Contemporary Japanese people need to see God in the character of the church and experience the love of God through the actions of

the church in order for the redemptive power of God to become real to them. The love and support of the community is not only for the members of the community. It reaches beyond the community to a hurting world.

This kind of community fosters a new social reality, a missional body characterized by its ability to redeem. Human wholeness fostered in community shows that reconciliation "is not an individual and private matter, but an ecclesial practice that fosters, shapes and sustains missional communities."[18]

Individuals grow spiritually and in other ways in the context of the community. It is the community that calls and empowers individuals to repentance, to "a new lifestyle of obedient faith and active participation in the community of faith whose common life is characterized by the twin features of forgiveness and liberation in Christ."[19] The goal is that community members lead each other to wholeness in life and fullness in Christ. This notion of mutual redemption fits well with the value placed on interdependence over independence in Japanese society.

Contemporary Japanese people need to see God in the character of the church and experience the love of God through the actions of the church.

The church as a redemptive community is also empowered to practice open hospitality to those outside the church community. This calling to hospitality challenges the church in Japan to grapple with the social construct *uchi-soto* (insider-outsider). This is a fundamental precept of Japanese social custom that influences both language and behavior in a way that shows familiarity and closeness with the insider, and polite regard for the outsider.

This natural tendency to organize people into in-groups and out-groups lends clarity to social relationships. However, keeping relationships "safe and comfortable" can also inhibit the potential growth of relational depth and sharing between groups. Crossing these delicate social boundaries is an area where the Japanese church is called to be radically missional. In a society of consumption, missional communities represent more than just another social organization offering spiritual goods and services to the consumer. They are communities of human caring that work at restoring healthy relationships: personal, social and spiritual. And in so doing, they foster personal salvation through the relational redemption so many contemporary Japanese people are longing for.

A Missional Church in Japan Will Need to *Model* the Life-in-Community It *Proclaims*

In 1979 ,a Japanese evangelist working with Harvest Ministries rented a classroom near an urban train station and began evangelizing in the neighborhood around the station. This work grew and changed facilities, but remained near the bustling station. In the early 1990s, the church began a discipleship training program, as well as a counseling service. Since then, these programs and services have grown in depth and breadth by capitalizing on the specialized gifts of the pastoral leadership and members of the congregation. It has been the vision of this church to be a place where those who are hurting and discouraged can come to experience God's love, peace and guidance. It is their vision to bring peace and harmony into families and relationships by leading people to walk with Christ in their daily lives. The church facilitates this through Bible studies, small groups, retreats and various seminars, with the goal of bringing people to maturity in Christ. Consider the following words from a few of the members. "My first time at this church I did not get a gloomy impression or feel melancholy. I felt relieved." Relief is something highly sought after in contemporary Japanese society. In part, this relief is derived from a new and empowering feeling of oneness. "When we decide to do something, everyone gets together to achieve the goal. Through cooperation, we share the joy." Families are also given close attention and support at this church. "On Friday nights parents and children get together to eat supper. This is good fellowship both for parents and children." Regular events like these not only give support, they make people feel valued. This is a key function of a truly redemptive community.

The missional church is an apostolic church, a servant community sent out with the message of the reign of God to a world with a very different set of values and priorities. In this sense, the church is *in* the world, but not *of* the world.

It is true that the church is called to communicate its message in the cultural forms present in its context. At the same time, Lois Barrett reminds us:

> (T)his message also points beyond its present culture's thought forms and customs to the distinctive culture of God's reign proclaimed by Jesus. For this reason, the church is always bicultural, conversant in the language and customs of the surrounding culture and living toward the language and ethics of the gospel.[20]

This makes it imperative that a church both *understand* the culture around it and *engage* that culture. At a bare minimum, this means getting to know one's neighbors. In Japan, especially in urban areas, there is usually little contact between neighbors extending beyond courteous greetings. "For a Japanese, brought up in a familistic atmosphere, the world beyond the family was a turbulent world, an *ukiyo.* …The only way to achieve security in that ukiyo was to forge relationships outside the family which were also of a familistic kind."[21] This necessitates the creation of defined social networks that emulate a village community, such as a *chonaikai* (neighborhood association) or one's place of employment. "The employees of large companies (and frequently their families too) are so deeply involved in their companies that they have no wish for close contact with their neighbors."[22] The company meets their need for community. This kind of community built on *shaen* (company ties) is what Chie Nakane calls *ba* (frame). The frame, which can be broadly understood as community, "binds a set of individuals into one group; in all cases it indicates a criterion which sets a boundary and gives a common basis to a set of individuals who are located or involved in it."[23] The church is also a frame, but in order to constitute itself as a viable alternative to people outside this frame, the church must behave as a living community reaching out to the society around it. Simply taking time to talk with the people who live nearby and getting to know them can make a striking impression of what it means to be a Christian neighbor.

In addition, these actions enrich mutual understanding of values and perceptions. In order to witness in a holistic way, it is essential for the people of God to share the hope that is within them. In so doing, they open the way for the Holy Spirit to impact those in their midst who feel hopeless, even though the believers themselves don't necessarily realize it.

Many Japanese churches work hard at creating events and opportunities for people to visit their church. They may hand out hundreds, even thousands of flyers, and they are grateful for the small handful of people who respond. Although their hearts may be in the right place, the gesture seems empty if it is disconnected from any effort to build

relationships in their community. Therefore, the church's task is to listen as much as it is to speak.

Another part of the church's role in contextualizing and authenticating the gospel message is to lead new believers to a communal identity in Christ that includes behavior in line with that identity. This is highly appropriate in a society that draws individual identity from group affiliation.

This means that the Japanese church must work carefully at fostering a holistic Christian identity for the community of faith and its members. Identity built in this way fosters a new way of life for the members. They become the people of God within contemporary society.

The urgency of the church's task to bring shalom to Japanese society can be seen in the growing trend of violence among youth.

In the New Testament, the history of God's liberating action became the primary paradigm for the salvation offered by Jesus. "The early church saw itself as God's contrast community whose life is itself a gift of grace. The images with which the church understood its identity and role were powerful symbols of its life as a new creation, a new humanity, the family of God."[24] As a family of God, the church in Japan must bravely venture forth as an agent of change in a society that is so desperately calling out for deliverance from the meaninglessness and emptiness of life.

The urgency of the church's task to bring shalom to Japanese society can be seen in the growing trend of violence among youth. This trend is of great concern to the society at large, but leaders in particular find themselves at a loss as to what to do about it.

The missional church knows that the only true solution to violence and hate is forgiveness and love. Therefore, it is the task for the Japanese church as a living community of shalom to model, especially to these young people, an alternative to violence and, in the process, to lovingly work at healing the issues that are feeding the violence.

This is what it means to be the bearers of a new humanity. A holistic witness demonstrates the liberating power of Jesus. This notion of liberation (forgiveness, freedom, release, reconciliation, peace, healing) gives depth of meaning to the notion of salvation to contemporary Japanese people.

Healing in all its forms is a concrete sign of God's presence and work in the world. Contemporary social ethics in Japan is largely built on a Christian foundation. This is a testimony to the voices of both the Protestant and Catholic churches in Japan on various social issues over

many years. However, reconciliation *between* churches or *within* the church remains a major challenge. This type of healing is greatly needed as well in order for the church in Japan to truly be a holistic witness of the redemptive potential of Christian community.

Shared, Servant Leadership Is Key

"I had good training as a disciple. Now I know how wonderful it is to disciple others."

In 1959, a Japanese Conservative Baptist minister, along with a small group of young Christians, established a church in a small university town. Through evangelism the congregation grew, and by 1970 they were ready to plant a new church. Then in 1976, they established yet another church, and this pattern of multiplication has continued to the present day. From its beginning, the ministry has stressed a deep reliance on the Holy Spirit and showing God's peace and joy to others. Internally, this provides strong encouragement for the members of the church. Externally, it attracts newcomers who want to experience the peace, love and joy of Christ. This emphasis on the empowerment of the Spirit seems to be the driving force behind the ministry's ongoing effort to cultivate shared servant leadership. As the church focuses on helping people to become what they are meant to be in Christ, individuals discover their personal ministry gifts and begin putting them into practice. Seeing people with complementary gifts working together encourages others to get involved and increases their ministry effectiveness. Consider the words of several members. "Our leaders stress that we live by trusting God thoroughly." "The church values God's word in the Bible. Members and leaders take responsibility to offer service." "I developed deeper spirituality through our 'mini-minister' training program." "I had good training as a disciple. Now I know how wonderful it is to disciple others. I also learned the mission of church planting." It is clear that the leaders of this church are cultivating a servanthood model of leadership by enabling members to discover their spiritual gifts and make ministry a part of their lives.

Shared leadership with a servant attitude is a key to forming missional church communities. The life and ministry of Jesus is the clearest example of what leadership in the church should look like today. Jesus called, led and formed his disciples as a community of God's in-breaking kingdom.

This places the church in an eschatological context. "The kingdom of God is not only the goal of all history and the reward of all believers, not only the norm by which all human behavior is judged, it is a new order which even now bursts in upon the present one."[25]

In other words, the church represents, in the here and now, God's ultimate kingdom plan already beginning to unfold. As such, the mission of the church is to emulate this new order and, in so doing, to invite humanity into it. Missional leadership is shaped by such a vision of the church.

Missional leaders are also shaped by a new view on education and training. In general, the church in Japan places strong emphasis on high-caliber training and credentials for leaders. These expectations, coupled with the hierarchical nature of Japanese society, perpetuate a wide gap between clergy and laity. All of these elements taken together sometimes interfere with the discovery of ministry gifts within the local congregation and stifle the vitality of the church. Still, the church in Japan seems to prefer a leader who can be considered a professional by societal standards.

The role and identity of the pastor in Japan have always been rather unclear outside the church community itself. This only intensifies the need to identify pastoral functions that are more acceptable and respectable to society.

Perhaps the most widely accepted role of the pastor in contemporary Japanese society is as officiate at weddings. This has come with the popularization of western-style wedding ceremonies. Although it is a striking indicator of the cultural functionality of religion in Japan, it has added a certain level of respect and visibility for Christian pastors in Japanese society.

Within the church itself, the pastor often takes on a role as expert teacher. As such, the pastor assumes the highest rank in a church hierarchy loosely modeled after the emperor system. Although rarely articulated in those terms, such a leadership style is what feels authoritative and familiar to most members.

Many Japanese pastors fall into the role of biblical scholar and expert defender of doctrine and tradition. The hierarchical structure of Japanese society readily facilitates the high-profile, authoritative role

of the pastor. However, this often dampens the life-giving force of the gospel message while short-circuiting potential ministerial gifts within the congregation.

Missional leadership emphasizes that the entire community of faith is ordained to mobilize and provide some level of leadership within the church. This calls for great care and intentional effort in discerning and organizing the gifts of the congregation to effectively lead the church as a community of faith.

It is also important to recognize the ongoing need for congregations to set aside one or more people as specifically designated leaders. Matthew 16:13-20 seems to indicate that Jesus designated Peter as the leader of the disciple band, thus establishing a basic level of organization before Jesus departed. Similarly, congregations also need a clear sense of who is in charge, one who is recognized as a leader, but who stands among equals. For Japanese pastors, this means releasing what often amounts to a tight control over their congregations. And for the members of these congregations, this means being willing to share responsibility for the leadership of the church with the pastor, while still respecting the pastor as a dedicated leader. This is an important way the church in Japan can model an alternative leadership to the society around it.

Leadership cultivated in community is not founded on a single individual, but on the complementary gifts of the entire faith community.

Here as before we are reminded of the eschatological nature of the church as a people always moving forward in God's redemptive story. The church emulates a new order, an alternative way of life within a given place and time. In this sense, one can consider the missional church community as a people on a journey. Outwardly, the missional community invites people outside the community into a journey with Jesus. Inwardly, the missional community calls for an alternative way of life and an identity based on the gospel. In this way, the Japanese church, as a missional community, can lead the way for Japanese people to enter God's kingdom as redeemed people, *truly* Japanese in God's eyes, members of God's family on a journey together.

Leadership cultivated in this type of community setting is not founded on a single individual, but on the complementary gifts of the entire faith community. Such a community rejects individualistic models of pastoral leadership. Instead, the missional community pursues a style

of team leadership that inspires the congregation and fosters a spirit of oneness. Strong team leadership will, in addition, extend beyond the local congregation to network with leaders of other congregations as well.

Rather than diminishing the identities and contributions of given churches by minimizing their particularities in relation to others, this kind of mutual embrace of faith communities in the wider church actually enriches the experiences of all congregations involved. In addition, in Japan, where society has received a highly ambiguous message from Christians who have not historically modeled cooperation or mutuality, leadership that fosters networks of sharing makes a powerful testimony of the transformative power of the gospel and concretely reveals the alternative social order that Christianity offers.

In Search of a Dynamic and Contextualized Japanese Church

The church referred to at the outset of this booklet leads the way for cell ministry in Japan and has clearly shown its appropriateness for the context. Many members of this church point to the introduction of cell groups as a major turning point for their church. Cell groups provide a setting for inviting friends into Christian fellowship. One member, who visited 12 different cell groups when he was a theology student, said: "Although each cell was comprised of various people and had a different religious atmosphere, I felt the presence of God strongly and found good friendship between sisters and brothers in all the cells." Other members said, "People accepted me in heart and recognized my good points." "People who gather here are exposing their own weakness. I was surprised at the gap between here and the world." Indeed, there is a huge gap between the authenticity of human relationships in Christian fellowship and what society typically has to offer. Cell groups often offer the dynamic contextual structure needed to make this experience a reality for the members of contemporary Japanese society.

A fundamental assumption of the missional church is that God's mission is carried out through a process of calling and sending a par-

ticular people to partner with God in the *missio Dei.* The western ecclesiology that is operative in most Japanese churches cannot adequately address the intricacies of contemporary Japanese society. There is an urgent need, therefore, for the church in Japan to explore and adopt a dynamic ecclesiology appropriate to the contemporary Japanese context.

Developing structures for the missional church must begin with reflection on God's intent for the church as shown in the Bible. Only then can organizations be designed so as to carry out that divine intent.

The structure of a particular church must emerge out of a gospel-based interaction with its cultural context.

According to biblical scholar Paul Minear: "A missiological reading of the New Testament makes clear that no one church form existed in that context. The early church was developmental in character and found expression in a number of different organizational arrangements."[26] Particular Christian communities took organizational forms that were relevant to their specific context:

> When Divinity was translated into humanity, he did not become generalized humanity. He became a *person* in a particular locality and in a particular ethnic group, at a particular place and time. … The first divine act of translation into humanity thus gives rise to a constant succession of new translations. Christian diversity is the necessary product of the Incarnation.[27]

The structure of a particular church, therefore, must emerge out of a gospel-based interaction with its cultural context. This process does, of course, entail a certain amount of risk. The church must maintain a focus on its character as part of God's reign because of the inherent tension between the gospel's impact on culture and culture's impact on the gospel. This puts the church in a constant state of conversion. The implication of this ongoing conversion process for the church is the imperative to continually submit its structural organization to the Scriptures as a guide to affirm what is good and transform what is not.

This also affects in a direct way the shape of church worship — one of the most public indicators of corporate identity for contemporary Christians:

> In an increasingly secularized culture, Sunday morning is more and more the one day of the week to sleep in or the last remaining avail-

able slot for park district sports. Without any more effort than simply getting out of bed and driving to a place of worship, Christians are simply distinctive. … Even something so apparently mundane as singing together sets Christians apart and influences character.[28]

Christian community frees the individual from individualism (western cultures), while at the same time releasing the individual from oppressive collectivity (eastern cultures).

These observations, though not originally written to describe Japan, might equally apply here. Corporate worship has a major organizing impact, clarifying the identity of the church both internally and externally. Many churches in Japan would do well to re-examine their worship — and their entire Sunday program — to discern how well these and other congregational activities truly reflect the character of their faith community.

It is absolutely essential that the worship be designed in a way that relates to the worshipper. This is especially important with regard to worship language and music. The deeply reverent and almost melancholy style of many Japanese churches certainly does relate to some worshippers and some seekers. Many other contemporary Japanese are turned away, however, by what they see as oppressive.

Postmodern society in general "has come to regard worship as the private, internal and often arcane activity of religionists who retreat from the world to practice their mystical rights. By definition, however, the *ekklesia* is a public assembly, and its worship is its first form of mission."[29] Worship is not only for God's called and sent people. It is also for the curious, the skeptics, the needy — any and all who seek wholeness in life. This understanding should inform how missional communities in Japan give shape to their worship and structures.

Fostering Interchurch Connectedness Is Central to Witness

In Japan, holistic Christian community frees the individual from individualism (western cultures) while at the same time releasing the individual from oppressive collectivity (eastern cultures). The universal claims of the gospel are still valid, but de-centered through the creation of multiple centers — communities characterized at once by the particularity of their context and their mutual embrace of each other in Christian love. One concrete representation of this is the Japan Cell Church Mission Network (JCMN),

an interchurch network of congregations that hold a common emphasis on relational ministry through cell groups. Churches of various backgrounds and traditions are linked together in a spirit of mutual embrace, support and sharing. In this way, the universality of the Christian faith is expressed in a pluralistic structure that embraces differences in tradition and theology, while at the same time affirming the uniqueness of Christ. From 1982 to 2000, mainline churches in Japan grew by about 6.9 percent, slowing considerably right at the end of the millennium. During the same period, evangelical churches grew by 43.2 percent. JCMN, which includes churches from both arenas, also experienced tremendous growth and vitality. Another interesting example of interchurch connectedness is the VIP Club. These are lay-led Christian meetings held in hotels and focused on attracting Japanese businessmen. Each month, VIP Club gathers more than 6,000 men in meeting centers in nearly 30 major cities throughout Japan with the hope of connecting these men to local churches.

Every Christian church in history becomes, at its formation, a part of God's ongoing redemptive story — a story that unites all Christians around a common belief in and commitment to the one God known to us in Jesus Christ. This does not diminish, however, the significance of the unique stories that make up each Christian community. Such a multiplicity of stories is, in fact, part of what unites the body of Christ.

It is imperative that Christian communities embrace one another in open-mindedness and love as common participants in the universal story of God's redemption of humanity. It would in fact be unbiblical for such communities to exist in isolation one from another. Any church claiming to be missional, therefore, will be, by its very nature, interconnected with other churches.

Yet this has been a major stumbling block to the general image of the church in Japan. The message of the gospel has been attractive. The life of Jesus has been presented in an inspiring manner. But the lack of unity among churches has deterred many Japanese people from seriously considering becoming a part of the Japanese Christian community. The remedy for this problem must be found in the pursuit of interchurch relationships that connect faith communities, both within Japan and around the globe. Missional church communities will model these relationships, reaching beyond the particularity of their given cultural contexts to establishing vibrant connections with the global church family.

The apostolic character of the church expressed in catholicity and holiness fosters church unity. Christ reconciles us, making us one in him:

> The connecting structures of the church, for their part, should express and implement the mutual interdependence of all the parts of Christ's body. … They should foster dialogue, enable contacts, provide resources to their communities, and encourage the public witness to the Lord who is the Prince of Peace and who breaks down walls of separation.[30]

Only when the church community in Japan discovers for itself the true unity, peace and joy found in Christ, and learns to celebrate its own diversity in a spirit of love, will it begin to effectively witness to the rest of Japanese society.

In Summary

Engaging society. The only way for the church to address a postmodern world is in resolving as God's people to be missional to the core. The very vitality and future of the church, in fact, depend on it. Participating in God's mission in the world must be at the heart of the church's purpose. In order to be faithful to that purpose, the church must continually reevaluate how it authenticates the message of the gospel in light of encroaching cultural influences. For the church in Japan, this means being an alternative community that brings life and redemption in the contemporary Japanese context.

It follows that the central vocation of the church is to cultivate a community of faith that is active on behalf of the society around it. Congregations need, therefore, to be publicly active as God's representatives, learning to communicate through both word and deed in a language that is relevant to their context.

Demonstrating reconciliation. While the church validates cultural identity, it also points beyond the present culture to a new culture under God's reign. This is how the church works at communal identity in Christ. Membership in this community redefines identity and reforms behavior. Who and what the community is and how it behaves become a part of the invitation to join in that community.

The community represents in a tangible way God's current reconciling action in the world. The redeeming power of God is at work not only in the society at large, but within the faith community itself. Redemption, or reconciliation, presented in this way as central to the gospel message fosters an understanding of sin as an offense that breaks the peace and harmony of the group. Such an understanding is readily translatable to the Japanese context where group harmony is a core

cultural value. A missional church in Japan, therefore, will best demonstrate the living reality of salvation through reconciled, transformed relationships within the community of faith.

Modeling Christlike leadership. Every church community needs strong leadership. But a missional church will reject a leadership style that is individualistic and authoritarian. Instead, it will seek to embrace and encourage a team style of leadership that emphasizes the need to put the variety of gifts among its members into action as a community in ministry together. In this sense, the missional church thinks of itself as a group of people on a common journey, with leaders and members complementing each other along the way.

One might anticipate this notion to come naturally for the church in Japan due to the strong group orientation of Japanese society. The church has, however, more often been drawn to a very hierarchical, authoritarian pastoral leadership model. This means that the missional model of church leadership may well serve as an important prophetic voice to help the Japanese church break free from oppressive leadership and move toward a faith community that mobilizes more fully the gifts of its members. Research on churches in Japan has shown that this type of shift is essential to the vitality of the church.[31] Rather than telling people what they should do, missional church leaders will model a Christlike example to follow, and members will learn to walk together with them in common pursuit of God's will for their lives.

Contextualizing structures. The need for healthy structural organization goes hand-in-hand with leadership. Church organization should develop out of reflection on God's intention for the church as God's instrument for witness. This requires careful reflection on the Scriptures as churches develop in their specific social settings. Structures should be relevant to their context, but also biblically grounded and capable of informing and shaping their context of ministry.

Seeking unity in Christ. One implication of this is that churches developed in various social contexts do not exist in isolation from each other. Each church must work in a local area with a view to the bigger picture of what God is doing in the world. The church can express itself in a wide variety of local ways. The ultimate redemptive reality, however, is that all of God's people have been made one together in Christ. The spirit of embrace, unity with respect for diversity, and mutual love are biblical descriptions of God's will for the church and will attract the attention of contemporary society, both in Japan and around the world.

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What were your thoughts as you read this booklet about the church in Japan? Did you feel lost, confused, distant or connected to the stories recounted here?

2. What parts of Japanese life seem most different from the setting where you live and work? What parts sounded most familiar?

3. The "postmodern condition" is described by Van Gelder in this booklet (p. 5) as characterized by *endless choices, surface meanings, transient relationships, plural sexual expressions and experiences, two-tiered economy, random violence* and *clashes of cultures.* Do you think these words describe our world today? If not, why not? What is missing from this list that you think is of even more importance?

4. According to Sherrill, many urban middle-class families in Japan live as families, but without the substance of an interactive family life. What does he mean by this? Is this equally true in the cultural setting where you live?

5. Sherrill believes that a missional church in Japan will be engaged in five principal activities:

   - Engaging society
   - Demonstrating reconciliation
   - Modeling Christ-like leadership
   - Contextualizing structures
   - Seeking unity in Christ

   Would you list these as the top five priorities for the church in North America? If not, what would you add or subtract to Sherrill's recommendations?

6. There are many quotes in this booklet from church attendees who describe their feelings about the communities of faith where they worship (e.g., "I had good training as a disciple. Now I know how wonderful it is to disciple others."). What do think members of your faith community would say if asked to describe their feelings about the church?

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On Becoming A Missional Church in Japan

Michael J. Sherrill

At a time when much of Japan has adopted modern western culture, the Japanese church struggles to seek a Christian identity that is unique and meaningful. In this booklet, Mission Network educator Michael J. Sherrill shares stories of how the church in Japan is working to develop a model for witness that draws on the depth of western Christian traditions, while developing its own distinctive style within the Japanese cultural context.

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