

# The Celebration of Christmas in Japan

by Mira Sonntag  
Tomisaka Christian

Center

Next year Japan will celebrate the 150th anniversary of Protestant mission to Japan. Christianity first came to these islands in the 16th century but was forbidden in the 17th century, and it was not until 1854 that foreigners were again allowed to enter the country. Still, it took the Japanese government another four years before the practice of Christian faith was permitted among the foreign community, which is commonly seen as the starting point of the second phase of Christian mission in Japan.

While the first Christmas celebration was reportedly held in 1565 by Father Frois, the first Christmas tree was brought to Japan in 1860 by a German count. Only gradually was any information about Christmas spread among the public, and in 1876 the Hori no Hara Girls' School of Ginza was the first Japanese institution to celebrate Christmas officially. From there, the celebration of Christmas slowly spread among the Japanese population, reflecting the spirit of the age. Due to the prohibition of foreign loanwords during World War II, Christmas (pronounced *kurisumasu*) was given the Japanese name *seitansai* (literally, "holy birth festival").

During the post-war years, Christmas became linked with company year-end parties, which start at the beginning of December and create the seasonal atmosphere of the late-night trains, with their distinctive alcoholic odors. It was during the 1970s (after the so-called "oil shock") that Christmas began to be celebrated by private families, with presents and such foods as cake with fresh strawberries (rare in the winter season), fried chicken, and pizza.

When the "bubble" economy filled the wallets of company employees and heightened the consumerism, the Christian message of love took on a new look. Christmas became established as a festive event for couples. For young people these days, the lack of a reservation to spend Christmas Eve with a Christmas sweetheart in some upscale hotel is as frightening as the idea of remaining single for life and being called a "leftover Christmas cake."

Within the overwhelmingly commercialistic atmosphere of Christmas, Christians try to attract non-Christian neighbors with candlelight services and church concerts. Many churches regard Christmas Eve as a special chance for evangelization. If we remember that even after 150 years of mission, Christians still number only 0.8 percent of the population and that many Christians live in non-Christian families, it seems rather natural that Christmas is not widely celebrated in Japanese homes. Besides, the traditional family New Year's rituals follow too closely afterwards. Therefore, churches provide members with a festive environment outside their homes on the Sunday before Christmas, when they can share all kinds of goodies in a celebration after the worship service. In larger churches, there are nativity pageants and presents from Santa for the children. Many churches have their own unique traditions, such as inviting a ventriloquist or, after receiving presents, giving Santa a small amount of rice in return, as I witnessed in Tokyo's Nishikatamachi Church. This practice is designed to teach children not only to receive but to give as well. The rice is then sent to facilities for children in need. At least for children, this method of giving may be more comprehensible than the rather symbolic donation of money.



## Executive Council Focuses on Church Policy Issues

The 3rd Executive Council meeting under the 2006 General Assembly met on October 22 and 23 in the Kyodan conference room, with 29 members in attendance. There were also 47 observers present, indicating the degree of interest shown by churches in addressing the motion by Moderator Yamakita Nobuhisa to recommend that Kitamura Jiro consider resigning from the ministry. This motion resulted from the discussion at the previous meeting in which Kitamura reported that he included in the communion service persons who had not yet received baptism. At the beginning of day two of the meeting, Moderator Yamakita explained his rationale for the motion in answer to the numerous requests, protests and questions sent to him or to the Executive Council as a whole from several districts.

After that, voices in support and opposition to the motion were presented in alternating fashion. Opposing opinions focused mainly on procedural issues and the desire to take the motion off the table in order to keep the dialog going. "To what provision from Article 35 of the Kyodan Bylaws does this apply?" "To which clause in the regulations does Kitamura's actions relate?" "Doesn't this touch upon the principle of freedom of thought and conviction?" "This is a mean-spirited motion. You knew beforehand that he was including those not yet baptized in an open communion and yet you set a trap for him by having him make a presentation at the meeting." This has caused a great deal of confusion in the Kyodan.



*Delegates heatedly debate move to seek pastor's resignation*

Moderator Yamakita replied to these voices of dissent by saying such things as: "I am simply fulfilling my role as moderator to pull things together. As the Executive Council, we can express our will, particularly as it relates to faith and order. We cannot neglect that the matter has finally reached the state where we can deal with this in the Executive Council. What is it that holds the Kyodan together? That is the most important issue facing this committee." Another

committee member stated, "Giving communion to those not yet baptized is something that has occurring in the Kyodan, which concerns me greatly. It is the clear policy of the Book of Order that only persons who have received the rite of baptism and made their confession of faith are to receive the elements."

Also discussed at the meeting was the recognition of the people who had passed the fall ministerial qualification examinations, with 13 being certified as licensed preachers and 53 as fully qualified pastors.

Other important issues discussed included the following: motions concerning the damage by both the Niigata Chuetsu and Noto Peninsula earthquakes, with reports from each of the committees dealing with the two quakes being approved. The relief work in both situations is facing severe difficulties. Also, the ongoing discussion on "Rethinking the Union (between Okinawa and mainland Kyodans)" was tabled and the issue of ordination for Kyodan ministers serving overseas was discussed.

This subject had been considered at the previous meeting when the issue of the full ordination of Akiba Mutsuko, who pastors the Japanese church in Berlin, Germany, was debated. Kishita Nobuyo, chairperson of the Commission on Ecumenical Ministries, explained, "Since she is not related to a particular district, there is no provision for the conferring of this status. The Berlin church has been continuing its worship services without being able to receive the sacraments of baptism and communion, and thus they are waiting expectantly for a resolution of this issue. The moderator then suggested that this situation could be resolved if he himself administered the ordination according to the directives of the Commission on Ecumenical Ministries. That motion was tabled for further discussion. Nevertheless, it was suggested that in the future, only those who are fully ordained should be sent overseas to serve such churches.

Motions on the various events surrounding the upcoming 150th anniversary of Protestant mission in Japan were passed, as was the motion to release a statement to both Japanese and overseas media expressing opposition to the reorganization of U.S. military presence in Asia and the desire to see the dismantling of U.S. military bases in Japan. The motion to have the Executive Council hold a study meeting on discriminatory remarks concerning homosexuals was rejected. (Tr. TB)

— Katsuyama Ken'ichiro  
Executive Secretary

## Kyodan Youth Visit Taiwan for 3rd "Youth Mission" Exchange

From July 28 to Aug. 6, seven Kyodan youth visited Taiwan to participate in the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan's Youth Mission program. Such ongoing youth exchange is one way of actualizing the covenant agreement between the Kyodan and PCT, as envisioned in the joint statement issued at the Kyodan-PCT Consultation in November 2005 and furthered by the Student Christian Fellowship (SCF).

In August 2006, the PCT sent ten young people to Japan, who met with youth in several Kyodan districts and deepened relationships every place they visited. This year, seven young people from Japan gathered with Taiwanese youth, beginning with a worship service and orientation in Taipei before visiting churches mainly attended by the aboriginal people in the middle section of Taiwan, thus deepening relationships in this important area in terms of

circumstances Taiwan faces. Although they became aware of many issues, they were also greatly encouraged by the companionship of Taiwanese young people, who revere the same God in their country, and returned back to Japan very excited by their experiences. Itan Pavavaljung, the PCT youth director, explained that the Taiwanese youth also gained much from the exchange, including growth in their Christian faith, as was expected when the exchange program was envisioned. Through such shared learning and interaction, mutual understanding among the youth is strengthened, thus further deepening their interaction. The prayer now is that this process will not stop, but rather continue.

Among the participants from each country at this year's event, three had taken part in last year's program in Japan: two from Taiwan and one from Japan.

Furthermore, this year, three of the seven participants were high school students. (The names of the seven Japanese participants are Akita Kimiko, Fumoto Haruo, Hironaka Yoshimi, Yokoyama Akiko, Tsukimoto Yuka, Wada Kentarou, and Nagao Yuki.)

The Japanese young people were recruited through the efforts of the Kyodan's Committee on Taiwan Church Relations, with the cooperation of the Kyodan-related Christian Schools Council on Cooperative Mission, whose assistance resulted in the important participation of the high

school students. The PCT national church structure includes a youth department, which oversees youth work in the churches and youth exchanges with churches in foreign countries. As for youth activities within the Kyodan structure, the emphasis has been on the development of youth as an educational group. Youth evangelism has also been viewed from an educational perspective. However, through such programs as the youth exchange with PCT, the Kyodan will hopefully be energized to become more active in this area.

— Kishi Norihide, chair  
Committee on Education



*Taiwanese and Japanese participants at the PCT Youth Mission exchange program posing for a group picture while in Taipei*

Taiwanese and Japanese history. The Japanese young people attended church services twice: once in a large church in Taipei and once in a church of aboriginal people. The service in Taipei was planned as a special worship experience for youth, so the Japanese young people were able to participate in many ways.

On behalf of the church that sent the youth, I want to express special appreciation for the kind assistance of Usuki Midori, pastor of the International Japanese Church in Taipei, who gave the orientation lecture on the first day and accompanied the Japanese youth throughout their period of stay in Taiwan. The Japanese youth reported that they were continually being stimulated every day to learn about the complicated

## Post-earthquake Situation at Noto Peninsula Churches

At 9:42 a.m. on March 25, 2007 an earthquake of magnitude 6 shook the Noto Peninsula. At that time the church school worship service at the Nanao Church was being held. Eight students were attending, along with four teachers. In the midst of the strong shaking, no one spoke a word. Everyone waited for the shaking to stop.

At Wajima Church, six children were attending church school. This was the day the minister was being transferred. However, though the morning worship was cancelled, a prayer service was being held. In that area many houses were completely destroyed.

In the same way, Hakui Church was holding church school worship and managed to carry on with the regular worship service. On the other hand, the Hakui Church Togi Preaching Point worship took place at 5:00 that evening. The building withstood the main quake, but afterwards, as the preacher and his wife were conducting worship, the next aftershock overturned furniture, knocked over the main pillar, and sent tiles falling to the ground. It must have been very frightening for the people.

The aftershocks continued off and on until the middle of April. Specialists came to check the situation. Wajima Church was repairable, while the parsonage had to be totally rebuilt. Repairs could be made to the Hakui building, but the Wajima parsonage, Nanao Church and parsonage, as well as the Togi structure had to be replaced. Needed repairs of related facilities were also identified.

Noto Peninsula faces the Japan Sea on the west coast of Honshu. There are three churches belonging to the Kyodan, along with one preaching point, two kindergartens, and a place for elementary school children to rest, study, and play. Equal in geographical size to Tokyo, this area nevertheless has few churches, preaching points or related facilities. Altogether, about 50 people gather for worship.

From years back, this peninsula was a place that carried on trade with the Korean Peninsula. Keta Shrine has a connection with the prestigious Izumo Shrine. There are shrines of many sizes, both large and small, which hold various festivals. Noto is called "The Country Area of Festivals."

Buddhism also, has deep roots in the region. The Sotoshu Buddhist sect formerly had its headquarters here. A number of temples of the Jodoshinshu sect can be found, so the area is also called the is also called the "Kingdom of Shinshu." In this way, Noto is known as a place where many religions coexist.

In 1896, Christian programs were started in Nanao by Protestant churches. The Methodist Church took the initiative and sent many missionaries, but persuading people to become Christian proved to be very difficult.

Nanao Kindergarten was founded in 1916. It had a good reputation. The high quality early childhood educational theories promulgated by the missionaries were warmly welcomed by the people of Noto, where there are many living religious traditions. Moreover, they taught children to pray and read the Bible. Though people in the district did not want to become Christian, they did want very much to have their beloved children receive a Christian education. In Noto, spreading the gospel has taken a very long time.

At the present time, the Noto Peninsula is known throughout Japan for its aging population. Young people have left and moved into the cities, leaving the region with a dwindling number of people. As these young people go off to study, they rarely return to their native area. There are few signs that this draining activity will reverse.

In the same way, this trend can be perceived in the churches. Children enter kindergarten, attend church school, and young people go to church and are baptized. Yet when they go off to the cities, only a few return to support their churches.

In these rough circumstances the Noto Earthquake occurred. For most of us, even thinking about the restoration of various facilities, such as the churches, preaching point, and parsonages, was impossible. With so many people living on pension income, the ability to achieve all this was beyond us.

However, what a blessed thing this has proved to be! The Kyodan's Chubu District has set up a committee to collect funds to revitalize the churches of Noto Peninsula. The Kyodan itself has set up appropriate committees and channels, raising 150,000,000 yen for this effort. We deeply appreciate this generous offering. Thank you so much!

We on Noto Peninsula are a tiny flock, but we have been led to a great sense of unity and oneness. With great thanksgiving, we praise Jesus Christ. We have now set out on the road to rehabilitation. (Tr. JN)

— Kamado Tatsuo, pastor  
Nanao Church, Chubu District

## Offshore Niigata-Chuetsu Earthquake Damage Report

At 10:30 a.m. on Monday, July 16, 2007, the ground of Niigata shook once again as the Offshore Niigata-Chuetsu Earthquake hit the area with tremors reaching a magnitude of over 6. Like the Niigata-Chuetsu Earthquake that occurred on November 23, 2004, this was a devastating earthquake.

“We had finally managed to repair the damage from the earthquake of three years ago, but this time we just cannot live here any longer. What in the world are we going to do now?” These were the words I heard in the city of Kashiwazaki. The situation there is very serious. “Try once again and do your best,” is not advice that can be carelessly given.

When the major tremor struck and houses began to fall, getting out of homes and buildings was about all that could be done. Sadly, the majority of victims were elderly persons who had difficulty in escaping. Clothes and valuables were covered with debris. In the midst of this chaos the question was raised, “If we ask, will the church be able to help?” This question came to the church the first night after the earthquake.



*A car supporting a house collapsed by the Niigata Earthquake*

Kashiwazaki Church is located in the most devastated area and was damaged itself, but the pastor, Usuda Nobuhiro, made a momentous decision and said, “There is no reason for the church not to respond to the voice of the community.” In support, the Kyodan's Niigata Subdistrict established a committee to develop a volunteer center, and with the full cooperation of Kanto District, the Kashiwazaki Church Volunteer Center was created. The Volunteer Center served the area for 47 days, and during that time 480 people utilized its services.



*Kashiwazaki Church Volunteer Center*

The destruction caused by the earthquake was made vividly clear as survivors searched among the debris for valuables, clothing, and documents. As we saw the joy on the faces of those whose albums had been found and returned, we realized that even when their home is lost, the family itself is the source of great hope. The sanctuary and educational building of the Japan Holiness Kyodan's Kashiwazaki Seiko Church was completely destroyed, but at least, we were able to send volunteers (across denominational lines) to help with the removal of the debris.

In addition to the damage suffered by Kashiwazaki Church itself, some of the homes of church members were completely or partially destroyed. With the aid of relief funds raised by the Kyodan, repair and rebuilding is taking place.

The issue of the Kashiwazaki nuclear power plant remains. As the media has revealed, news from the nuclear power plant was delayed following the earthquake, with local authorities being the last to be contacted. Local residents who watched the smoke rising from the power plant were filled with fear and anxiety. At the same time, due to the importance of the power plant in relation to the financial security of this area, it is hard for the people to voice their apprehension about nuclear power. Along with the damage of the earthquake, please remember this concern as well.

(Tr. JS)

— Iizuka Takuya, pastor  
Ryugasaki Church, Kanto District

# NCCJ Education Division to Celebrate 100th Anniversary

The Division of Education of the National Christian Council in Japan is marking the 100th year since the founding of its predecessor, the National Sunday School Association, in May 1907. As a member organization of the NCCJ Education Division, we in the United Church of Christ in Japan have shared in the course of this 100-year history.

Based on the theme, "Proceeding to Peace — 21st Century Christian Education," six projects have been planned in connection with the 100-year commemoration and, from April of this year, some are already in process. In addition to looking back at the course of Christian education in Japan over the past 140 years, the projects are aimed to promote thinking about current issues being faced and to open up new prospects for Christian education in the 21st century.

1. A special exhibition entitled "The Walk of Christian Education Beginning with the Sunday School" was held April 28 through May 12 on the third floor of the Kyobunkwan Book Store, with approximately 150 items on display.

2. On May 1 the Kyobunkwan released *The Walk of Church Education — the History of Christian Education Beginning with the Sunday School*, a laborious work of a 261 page book produced by the NCCJ Division of Education's Historical Compilation Committee.

3. A worship service commemorating the 100th year of the founding of the National Christian Council Division of Education, as well as a symposium on the theme "Proceeding Towards Peace — 21st Century Christian Education," was held on May 11 in the AVACO chapel in Tokyo, where 116 participants expressed heartfelt thanks for God's constant guidance.

4. A National Church Education Festival was held Sept. 16-17 at the Wesleyan Holiness Yodobashi Church. From as far north as Hokkaido to as far south as Okinawa, 158 Sunday school, church school, and children's church leaders from throughout the country crossed denominational lines to gather in Tokyo. Among them were over 50 participants from 26 Kyodan churches.

The festival was carried out through the cooperation of six denominations, including the Kyodan, under the theme "Let's Sow Seeds! —He who goes out weeping, carrying seeds to sow will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him" (Psalm 126:5). The purpose was "to have those who participate in church education gather across the boundaries of church affiliation and region to reevaluate the relationship of the church and education, to share mutual gifts, and to have a place to encourage one another."

The message that echoed in our hearts from the first day's opening worship service was that "in Bible times, and in other eras afterwards, the faith was passed on to the next generation even in the midst of great despair, for the very reason that there were persons who sowed seeds of faith. So, in the midst of today's problematic era, let us be persons who sow seeds of living strength and hope to our children and to other persons." Following that service, through games and singing, we met others for the first time and experienced close fellowship, becoming acquainted with each other, and having a good time together.

Both in the morning and in the afternoon of the second day, we separated into six study groups. Each person participated in the study groups of his/her choice: "A Shared Difficulty: Children Don't Come, It's Hard to Get Them to Stay," "What Are the Actual Realities Regarding Today's Children?," "Worshipping Together with Children," "Adult Education," "How Do You Use the Teacher's Magazine?," et. cetera. As leaders in church education, we engaged in a profitable time of sharing information in regards to problems we are actually facing now, diligent study, and discussion. And the message at the closing Commissioning Worship



Worship service commemorating the 100th anniversary



*The closing worship service: Participants respond to the message by gesturing as if sowing seeds together*



*The closing worship service: Worshipers singing new original praise songs*

Service, that "Whatever kind of situation you are in, continue to sow seeds; it is God who will nurture them," was engraved on our hearts, giving us new determination as we went off to our various places and causing many to voice the desire to take part in this kind of meeting every year.

5. As the 5th commemorative project, the gathering place was moved to the Kansai area, and from October 1 to 6 at Seiwa College, the Kyodan related training school for directors of Christian education. Through the auspices of the NCCJ Division of Education and the Seiwa Institute for the Study of Christianity and Education, a special exhibition, "The Walk of Japan's Sunday Schools and Church Schools Living Out a 140-year Period," was held. Divided into six eras, old pictures, teaching plans, children's hymnals, Bibles, Sunday school flags, documents and newspapers, etc. were displayed in an easy to understand fashion. Approximately 700 people visited the exhibition. "The content was excellent, and it was so very interesting I almost forgot the passing of time," was one comment that was heard.

On the last day, October 6, with Seiwa Professor Komi Nozomi presiding, the 100-year Commemorative Symposium, "For the Present and Future of Christian Education" was held in the Seiwa auditorium with three panelists and approximately 100 persons participating. One panelist, Seiwa Professor Hara Masakazu, in addition to looking back at the development of the Sunday school movement historically, reviewed all the various changes up to the present and expressed concern for the future issue of a movement of spontaneous, believers' leadership. The General Secretary of the NCCJ Division of Education,

Oshima Kaori, took up the 8th World Sunday School Convention held in Japan in 1920 and the 14th World Christian Education Convention held in Japan in 1958. While looking back at their effect on Japan's Christian world, she emphasized as the issue of the future the need of "driving forward education based on the Christian faith that values each person's integrity" as recorded in the National Christian Council Division of Education 100th Anniversary Statement: "On the occasion of reaching our hundredth year after our founding, with contrition for our past sins and resolution towards a new era." Then, the President of the College of Shizuoka Eiwa Gakuin, Okuda Kazuhiro, as the issue in the future of diversified church education, dealt with the possibilities of education that values each person and is healing.

6. As the 6th commemorative project, the release of a DVD, "The Walk of Christian Education which began with the Sunday School", made with the cooperation of AVACO (Christian Mass Communication Center), is planned for December 10. There is a wholehearted desire to have persons see with their eyes, hear with their ears and experience the 140-year walk of Christian education in Japan. (Tr. RT)

— Nishio Misao, member  
Suginami Church, Nishi Tokyo District, and  
100th Commemorative Project Committee  
NCCJ Division of Education

## One Day in the Life of the Kyodan General Secretary

In the morning, Pastor "M" came to discuss the situation at the church he serves, as they were in the process of arranging for a missionary to work with them. Pastor "M" had served for many years as a prison chaplain, and our conversation led me to consider anew how important it is to keep in mind prison ministries as well as the impact missionaries can have on the evangelistic outreach of the Kyodan.

Right after Pastor "M" left, representatives of "S" church came to my office to discuss issues surrounding the calling of a new minister. Searching for a new pastor of a church to follow one who had a long and distinguished ministry in the church is not an easy proposition. It reminded me of how much of a turning point the calling of a new pastor can represent in the life of a church and how much of a trial it can be for the church. And yet, it is in such turning points that God can work to realize his goals, which is what I wanted them earnestly to pray for. There are about 1,700 Kyodan churches, and so I was reminded that praying for each one of them is an important part of my calling as the general secretary.

Eating lunch, I began going through the mail, which included two or three district newsletters. By taking the time to read such newsletters carefully, one can become more aware of the activities of those districts. Article 6 of the Kyodan Constitution states that the purpose of districts is to serve as the vehicle through which the Kyodan can accomplish its calling as a church as well as to serve as the local community of member churches of the Kyodan. Thus, each district fulfills the role of helping each local church to fulfill its calling as a body of believers standing firmly on the Kyodan Confession of Faith. I sincerely pray the districts will keep that role in mind as they do their work.

My last duty of the day was to attend the Kyodan Board of Publications' directors' meeting. The Board of Publications produces the various printed materials the Kyodan needs. It also publishes Christian literature that helps the Kyodan fulfill its evangelistic goals. Within the structure of the Kyodan, office staff carry out the decisions made by the Kyodan leadership (including its standing committees). Departments such as the Board of Publications and the Board of Pensions also serve that purpose. In addition, there are special units, such as the Buraku Liberation Center and the Mission Research Center. These are all under the purview of the general secretary, so I am very conscious of the tremendous responsibility I have been entrusted with.

(Tr. TB)

— Naito Tomeyuki



**MERRY CHRISTMAS  
&  
HAPPY  
NEW YEAR  
to all  
KNL READERS**



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