NO LONGER STRANGERS AND ALIENS

A Retrospective of the Japanese American Church From Mission Congregation, Through Internment Exile, To Merger and Inclusion

Written for the California-Pacific Annual Conference Commission on Archives and History

By

Mark M. Nakagawa

February 2010

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The California-Pacific Annual Conference Commission on Archives and History has provided me with the occasion to present this paper, and I am grateful for this very special opportunity

There have been countless numbers of people over the years, those who are now in heaven and here on earth, who have encouraged, guided and inspired me to keep pressing forward with my interest in this special area of study: pastors, parishioners, colleagues, and many others whose experiences, stories and anecdotes informed my thinking and approach to telling this unique story.

Mere words of appreciation could never express my profound sense of appreciation and gratitude for what they endured, and most importantly, for all their courage in sharing all that they shared with me. I trust that they know how much I appreciate and value them for the knowledge, wisdom and faith they have imparted to me over the years.

NO LONGER STRANGERS AND ALIENS

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

Ephesians 2:19-20

The year 2010 marks the 70th anniversary since Japanese American United Methodists formalized the progression from their humble origins as immigrant house churches into full fledged, self-supporting congregations that participate in the total life of the United Methodist Church (UMC).

The historical experience of Japanese Americans in the United Methodist Church is rooted in two first-generation *("issei")* immigrants, Miyama Kan'ichi and Nonaka Kumataro, who arrived in San Francisco in 1875. The Reverend Dr. Otis Gibson, a Methodist preacher who was overseeing the Chinese Methodist Episcopal Mission in San Francisco, baptized these men in 1877. Although other Japanese Christians were in North America by that time, most records indicate that Miyama was the first such Japanese person to be baptized.[1]

These men sought to assist Japanese students who were immigrating to America, and they established the Gospel Society (*fukuin-kai*) in 1878 to carry out this mission. Miyama was named president, and this group met in the Chinese Mission sponsored by Dr. Gibson for the next eight years. In 1884, the California Conference of the Methodist Church accepted Miyama as a member, and he established the first Japanese church in North America in San Francisco.

Two years later, the Japanese mission work in California and Hawaii was organized as a district of the California Conference. Dr. Merriman C. Harris, who at that time was a missionary

in Japan and brought back by Bishop Henry M. Warren specifically to oversee this promising mission field, was appointed as Mission Superintendent.

In September 1888, the mission field was further organized as the Japanese Methodist Episcopal Mission. Property was purchased in San Francisco and a new church was completed and opened in 1894. By 1900, the Pacific Japanese Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church was formed. Within the first decade of that century, house churches were already established in various central and northern California communities: Fresno, Oakland, Palo Alto, Sacramento, San Jose, Selma, Stockton and Vacaville.

Soon thereafter, the evangelistic spirit of the immigrant *issei* Methodists spread to southern California areas such as Bakersfield, Brawley, Los Angeles, Oxnard, Pasadena, Riverside and Santa Barbara, resulting in the establishment of mission congregations there.

Mission congregations were also established in various areas of the Pacific Northwest: Ontario and Portland, OR: Seattle, Spokane, and Tacoma, WA. Japanese mission congregations were also present in the inter- mountain region: Denver and Pueblo, CO; Pocatello, ID; Ogden, UT. and Reno, NV. Dr. Harris served as Superintendent until 1904, when he was elected Bishop of Japan and Korea. In that same year, the Hawaii mission congregations formed their own structure and received a Superintendent to oversee that specific work.

Dr. Herbert Buell Johnson succeeded Harris the following year. He had been serving as a missionary in Japan, when he was recalled to the U.S. to oversee this dynamic, growing work. Johnson proved to be not only an efficient superintendent but also a tireless advocate on behalf of the Japanese immigrants, who were legally barred from obtaining U.S. citizenship and thus could not enjoy the rights and privileges that came with it.

Johnson's valiant and noble efforts would eventually take a toll on his life when he suffered a heart attack while traveling to attend an annual meeting of the Board of Home Missions and Church Extension. He died on November 24, 1925, after 21 years of serving the Japanese in Japan and America.

In a tribute to Johnson at his funeral, Bishop Charles Wesley Burns eulogized him as "a man who went down to his death amid the admiration of the rich and the benedictions of the poor."[2] Interestingly, during Johnson's superintendence the Methodist work among Koreans in Los Angeles began to appear in the annual reports of the Pacific Japanese Mission.[3]

The Reverend Dr. Frank Herron Smith was subsequently assigned as the Superintendent to oversee the Japanese mission churches. Smith had previously served as a missionary in Japan for 8 1/2 years, followed by 12 years of Japanese mission work in Korea and Manchuria. He was called back by the Home Missions Board in 1926 and placed in charge of the Japanese Methodist work in the U.S. west of the Mississippi.

The mission field began to bear so much good fruit, that it was reorganized as the Pacific Japanese Provisional Conference of The Methodist Church (Provisional Conference) in 1940. This elevated the importance of these churches and put them on a course that would one day result in their full merger into the Methodist Church denomination. It was also during this time that English-speaking pastors started being appointed to minister among the 2nd-generation ("*nisei")* children of the Issei.

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, HI, thrusting the U.S. into World-War II. Ten weeks later on February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the Secretary of War to establish military areas throughout the western United States.

As a result of this action, all "alien" and "non-alien" persons of Japanese ancestry were prohibited from living, working or traveling along the west coast. They were subsequently evacuated from their communities and sent to regional assembly centers, which in most cases were temporary quarters at racetracks and fairgrounds.

From there, the evacuees were dispersed among 10 internment camps scattered across the U.S. The toll on the Japanese congregations was devastating: of 37 Japanese churches that were established, 31 were evacuated and closed down for the duration of the internment.

Frank Herron Smith did not stay silent while his Japanese congregations were being carted off into exile. Like John the Baptist speaking the prophetic word from the wilderness, Smith spoke out as the lone Methodist voice against the evacuation and internment. In his testimony before the Tolan Committee in 1942, Smith spoke on behalf of the many Japanese immigrants and their American-born children whom he had come to know through his church work, citing their high level of citizenship and loyalty to America. He offered this testimony on behalf of those Japanese who were Buddhist as well as Christian.[4]

The evacuation and internment continued, but that did not stop the important ministry that had been in progress. Throughout this period of evacuation, relocation and internment, Japanese Methodist pastors continued their ministry within the confines of a barbed-wired existence, and also in various "free zones" where Japanese were allowed to live.

These suffering servants brought the ministry of the church inside of the camps by conducting worship services (including funerals and weddings), baptizing infants, counseling teens, organizing recreational and sports activities, and countless other ways. The tireless efforts of these pastors were reflected in the 589 baptisms that were conducted in 1943 among nine of the internment camps.[5]

The organizational structure of the Provisional Conference also continued in spite of evacuation, relocation and internment. In July 1942, the annual conference session convened under close military scrutiny within the Santa Anita Japanese Assembly Center, located within the Santa Anita Racetracks in Arcadia, CA. Bishop James C. Baker was admitted under close military guard to preside over the session, and Dr. Frank Herron Smith was allowed to act as Secretary. Smith later noted that this was the only "race-track" annual conference session in the history of the Methodist Church.[6]

In July 1943 and 1944, the Provisional Conference convened annual conference sessions at the Japanese Methodist Church in Denver, CO, which was outside of the military zone. Of the 63 pastors who had been interned, all but two were given temporary release to attend the conference. Lay delegates who were not interned also attended. The 1945 annual conference session convened in Oakland, CA. With the war drawing to a close, the evacuees were allowed to return to the west coast by this time.

Most of the evacuees did not have a home to return to or a welcoming neighborhood in which to resume their lives, let alone start all over again. Thus, the church became their home and community during this period of return and resettlement. Many churches had served as places to store the personal belongings of its members while they were interned. Now, these churches served as their places shelter and sanctuary.

The Japanese Methodists returning to the west coast were able to re-establish all of their former churches save for a few. In most cases, no church was as strong as it was prior to the forced evacuation and exile. Yet, these faithful Methodists made the best of their situation and began the long process of rebuilding their lives and their churches simultaneously.

As if the returnees did not have enough challenges to contend with, a new threat against their existence as Japanese congregations raised its head. Voices within the Methodist Church hierarchy began to speak out against "segregated Japanese churches" on the West coast, in favor of assimilating and integrating all Japanese Methodists into existing (Caucasian) churches. The Federal Council, Women's Society of Christian Service, and the Home Missions Council were among the organizations that advocated integrating the Japanese into existing churches instead of allowing and enabling them to re-start their own congregations.

While acknowledging the laudable goal of eventual assimilation of Japanese persons into the mainstream, Smith pointed out the importance of evangelism over integration. His response was based on the realities of the times as well as his concern for the religious and leadership development of Japanese Methodists, especially the up and coming Nisei generation.

Caucasian pastors were too busy running their own congregations to devote the necessary time and energy to "win over" Japanese converts, Smith said. At the same time, the success rate among Japanese pastors in winning over new converts was much higher than would ever be the case among non-Japanese pastors.

A corollary to this belief was that Japanese clergy and laity would have no opportunities to develop their preaching and leadership skills in a Caucasian church. The unfamiliarity of a non-Japanese church environment, not to mention language barriers, would make them feel like guests instead of church members, thus relegating them to second-class status.

Unlike many Methodist Church leaders of the time, Smith was sensitive to the importance of having a comfortable church environment in which to learn more about the Christian faith. He stated, "Methodist leaders in the Board and on the field believe in ultimate

integration but I believe that it will largely take care of itself and that evangelism must be stressed now. This is also the opinion of fully 98% of the Japanese pastors."[7]

It seemed wise, Smith argued, that Oriental and Latin-American conferences were allowed to remain in place during the war. Additionally, Chinese, Filipino, Korean and Mexican churches were still operating, as had the Japanese churches prior to evacuation. The Methodist Church could best help the returning Japanese by reconstituting their churches where a minimum number of families were present.

Smith was also aware of the continuing racial prejudice against the Japanese, which manifested itself in legal and non-legal forms. The anti-miscegenation laws of the time forbid marriage between Caucasians and Japanese, and he saw that as a reflection of overall racial prejudice against persons of Japanese ancestry even as it existed within the Church. To prove his point, he cited the example of a Methodist Bishop in Boston who refused to give an appointment to a Nisei pastor, on the grounds that a non-Christian would refuse to acknowledge that pastor as a bearer of the Gospel.

With support from Bishop James Baker and other superintendents who also had hands-on experience in organizing immigrant churches, the Provisional Conference continued with Smith guiding its work. Thus, the first post-war session of the annual conference was held in July 1946 in Oakland, CA.

During this session, the clergy and lay delegates received a surprise announcement that they hadn't expected. A poignant letter from Dr. Frank Herron Smith was read aloud to the gathering by Reverend Taro Goto, with the news that he (Smith) was forced to retire five years earlier than he had planned, due to health reasons. Smith's letter expressed his profound sense of gratitude for the privilege of serving as Superintendent beginning in 1926, at the same time

likening himself to Moses as one who would not be able to enter the Promised Land with his people.[8]

Bishop Donald Harvey Tippett proceeded to appoint Dr. Channing A. Richardson as Superintendent for three years. Then in 1949, Tippett appointed Reverend Taro Goto to succeed Richardson. This would be a historic appointment for the Provisional Conference, as Reverend Goto would be its first and only Superintendent of Japanese ancestry.

Taro Goto was born in Otaru, Japan, on the northern island of Hokkaido in 1902. His father, Katsuji Goto, had come to America in 1914 to work at the World's Fair in San Francisco. Later on, he worked as a laborer in the fields of Fresno, CA. The Japanese Methodist Church provided living quarters to the many laborers who were in that area, and Katsuji Goto was among them. In 1919, he returned to Japan for his family. He brought them to America, whereupon they settled in Fresno.

Rev. Goto was able to continue his education in America, and he attended a number of colleges and universities as a student: Murphy Institute in Tennessee, The University of North Carolina, The University of Chicago, and the University of Missouri. As a youth in Japan, he had attended a Dutch-Reformed Presbyterian Church. However, he entered the ministry in 1931, serving Japanese Methodist congregations in Portland, Spokane and San Francisco.

At the time of evacuation, Rev. Goto and his family were initially sent to the internment camp at Topaz, UT. Soon after their arrival, agitators within the camp threatened his life, and the government authorities whisked the Goto family out of Topaz overnight.[9]

The threat on his life was no isolated incident. It reflected a perception within the larger Japanese pre-war community that the Christians were "pro-American," and that they had cooperated with the government during the evacuation process. A similar life-threatening

incident towards a Japanese Episcopal priest took place at one of the two internment camps in Arkansas.

Upon leaving the camp, the Goto family intended to travel to Chicago where Rev. Goto planned to minister among the Nisei who had resettled there instead of entering an internment camp. On the way to Chicago, they stopped in Denver to attend the Provisional Conference annual conference session that would take place there. Rev. Goto became involved with a local Japanese congregation, and the family remained in Denver throughout the duration of the war. After leaving Denver, Rev. Goto went on to pastor the churches in Ontario, Oregon and Spokane, WA.

Upon his appointment as Provisional Conference Superintendent in 1949, the family moved to Lodi, CA. From there, Rev. Goto spent the next 15 years traveling throughout the nine states in the western U.S. where Japanese congregations were located. These trips often took him away from his family for weeks at a time as he traveled the long distances by car or train, never once being afforded the luxury of a plane ticket.

Like so many pastors of his era, Taro Goto was aided and supported in his work by his faithful wife, Alice. The two had met before the war at the Florin Japanese Methodist Church, in the heavily Japanese populated town of Florin on the eastern edge of Sacramento County. The family of Alice Yamada lived in Florin, where she attended the segregated elementary school there during her childhood.

The Yamada family was very active at the Florin church and Alice was a leader in the Epworth League, a Methodist young-adult fellowship group. She had met Taro Goto on one of his visits to the Florin church (he was serving the Portland Japanese Methodist Church at the

time), and they were married there on April 8, 1934. From that point on she became her husband's right arm in their ministry together.

One enduring example of Alice Goto's devotion to her husband and his work took place whenever his travels required stops in more than one or two cities. On the long train trips that took him throughout the western states, there would be frequent stops at the Sacramento train station on the way to a further destination. Through careful planning, she drove to Sacramento to meet him for this brief stopover, whereupon she gave him a meal and he gave her his dirty clothes in exchange for a fresh set. This scene occurred over and over during his tenure as Provisional Conference Superintendent from 1949-1964.

In May 1964, the 25th and final session of the Pacific Japanese Provisional Conference was held at Pine Methodist Church in San Francisco, the church that was started by Miyama Kan'ichi in 1884. By a formal vote taken on the second day, the clergy members dissolved the Pacific Japanese Provisional Conference. Each congregation merged with their respective geographic annual conference of the Methodist Church, and each clergy person also became a member of the annual conference.

This decision was not an easy one to reach. Clergy who were both for and against the merger let their reasons be heard. The primary argument in favor of merging into the larger Methodist Church structure was that it would provide more opportunities and a stronger support system for the congregations and the individual clergy members. The primary argument against merging was that it would result in Japanese congregations losing their ethnic identity and autonomy.

The decision to merge was ultimately made with the vision that it would insure a future for these churches by enabling them to participate fully in the Methodist Church. They would

now have opportunities to take part in ministries and programs offered by the larger church that they could not offer themselves.

The decision also reflected a generational shift that was starting to take place among Japanese churches, transitioning from a first- generation Issei "Japanese" identity to a second-generation Nisei "Japanese American" identity. This itself was an outcome of the increasing numbers of American born Nisei and their third-generation *("sansei")* children, some of whom were born inside of the internment camps. At the time of dissolution and merger there were 30 full ministerial members and one supply pastor, serving 31 congregations spread across six annual conferences in the Western Jurisdiction.

In the generation that has followed the dissolution and merger of the Pacific Japanese Provisional Conference, Japanese American congregations have undergone many changes and transitions. At least several reasons can be attributable to these changes: a generational progression that is now reflected in the fourth and fifth generations of Japanese Americans; the increasing rate of intermarriage between persons of Japanese and non-Japanese ancestry; a demographic shift of persons from urban and rural areas (where all of the churches started) into the suburbs.

These churches today continue to retain a good measure of their Japanese cultural roots and heritage, while also reflecting the vision that Frank Herron Smith saw during the difficult days of resettlement and rebuilding: "Regardless of the many difficulties, our pastors and people anticipate that the General Conference of 1948 will find us again a viable and efficient unit of our great church. We plan to serve not only those of the Japanese race, but people of all races, who live in the vicinity of our churches."[10]

In the midst of many challenges, difficulties, struggles and hardships throughout the past 70 years, Japanese American congregations continue the strong tradition of Christian witness that has been handed down to them by the saints who now rest from their labors. Through the tireless work, limitless vision, and unlimited faith of the laity and clergy who have come before them, Japanese American United Methodist congregations continue their strong legacy of Christian faith and witness at all levels of the United Methodist Church.

NOTES

[1] Ichioka, Yuji, The Issei, Free Press, 1991, p. 16.
See further, Lester E. Suzuki*, A Brief History of the Japanese American Church Work in America*, 1989, p. 2.

[2] *Tribute of Bishop Burns to Dr. H.B. Johnson*, Official Journal, the Twenty-Sixth Annual Session of the Pacific Japanese Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Sept. 3-6, 1925, p. 65.

[3] Official Journal, the Ninth Annual Session of the Pacific Japanese Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Sept. 4-6, 1908, p. 25.

[4] Testimony of Frank Herron Smith Before the Tolan Committee, 2-23-42.

[5] Frank Herron Smith, *Annual Report Given at the Pacific Japanese Provisional Annual Conference*, August 23, 1943.

[6] Frank Herron Smith, *A Methodist Conference Meets at a Race Track!*, Zions Herald, July 15, 1942, p. 687.

[7] Frank Herron Smith, *Pacific Japanese Conference Annual Report*, July 5, 1946.

[8] Frank Herron Smith Letter, 7-5-46.

[9] Alice Y. Goto, as told to Reverend Mark M. Nakagawa, Florin Japanese American Citizens League Oral History Project, December 3, 1992.

[10] Frank Herron Smith, *Pacific Japanese Conference Annual Report*, July 6, 1945.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

In addition to the sources cited in the Notes, these other documents and publications were also used as general references. I wish to acknowledge and thank the staff of the Holt-Atherton Department of Special Collections, University of the Pacific Libraries, University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA., where I began my initial research in 1989.

Gatewood, James Vernando, Resettled People, Unsettled Lives: Community Rebuilding Among Japanese Americans of the West Los Angeles United Methodist Church, 1945-1965, A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Asian American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles 2000.

Nelson, W.H., *The California Oriental Mission,* circa. 1915.

Smith, Frank Herron, Letter to Lieut. Gen. J.L. DeWitt, February 24, 1942.

Smith, Frank Herron, Letter to Attorney General Francis Biddle, May 8, 1945.

Smith, Frank Herron, Letter to Governor Earl Warren, May 29, 1945.

Suzuki, Lester, Ministry in the Assembly and Relocation Centers of World War II, Yardbird Publishing Co., 1979.

Suzuki, Lester, Bishop Merriman Colbert Harris, Japan's Most Beloved Caucasian American, Circa. 1986.

Takaki, Ronald, Strangers From A Different Shore, Little, Brown and Co., 1989.

Official Journal, the Twenty-Fifth Annual Session of the Pacific Japanese Provisional Conference of the Methodist Church, May 21-24, 1964.

Personal Justice Denied, Summary and Recommendations of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, edited and printed by the Japanese American Citizens League, 1983.