

God's Grace in Action in Mito

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God's management and directing of this world is awesome, not to mention overwhelming. I am always amazed when looking back at how God works things out. Divine intervention is all that can explain events that have taken place in the past. Seeing God's work in history helps bring to light God's Word. When we hear the promises that God is with us and that he is in control of the earth, our faith is strengthened; but it is strengthened even more so when we see God's promises active in history. Japan is a field where God has surely been working through his Word. This past year Grace Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church in Mito, Japan, celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of their church. The name Grace definitely summarizes God's blessings to this church in its beginnings and growth through the years. Actually, "grace" summarizes the whole mission in general.

The Japan mission had a very rocky start and almost came to a screeching halt. To some it may have seemed as though the Lord was closing this door to our synod. But God had other plans for the Japan mission. Plans that no one could ever foretell. Unexpectedly an experienced missionary and helper asked to join our synod. The timing could not have been better. The Lord's hand was miraculously at work here. God blessed our synod with Missionary Richard Poetter and his gifted helper, Mr. Ryuichi Igarashi. To see God's grace in action I think it is helpful to browse through the years up to the start of this mission church. I hope that the facts I share with you will reveal the working of our omnipotent ruler and director as he brought together the church in Mito. It truly is "God's Grace in Action in Mito."

A Rough Start in Japan

It would have been quite interesting to have watched and listened to the

General Mission Board as they considered sending the first missionary to Japan. The decision would not have been a quick and easy one. Following World War II the doors of Japan were opened for the world to come in. What a challenge -- a nation of millions of people who did not know of their Savior from sin. The statistics show that only one percent (1%) lay claim to some form of Christianity. Ninety-six percent (96%) of the people claim to be Buddhists, Shintoists and adherents of Confucianism -- usually all at once. Figures such as this would seem overwhelming to any Christian who looked at them, but inviting through the eyes of the Gospel. We had a opening into Japan through our military men who were stationed there. The 1951 WELS Convention decided to study the mission potential by sending a man to care for the service men while investigating the mission opportunities. Pastor Fred Tiefel received and accepted the call. He arrived in Japan in February 1952. Pastor Tiefel sent back reports that he could not keep up with the demand for his services. Many Japanese people were coming to study the Bible in English because Pastor Tiefel did not have time yet to learn Japanese well enough to use it in teaching.

The 1953 convention authorized calling a second missionary to the field. This missionary did not materialize until the spring of 1956. By this time some turbulent issues were taking place at home and also in Japan. The relationship between the WELS and the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod was deteriorating. Many were of the opinion that we were waiting too long to break with the Missouri Synod. Missionary Tiefel shared this opinion.

It appears that Missouri Synod missionaries in Japan were straying far from their synod's past teaching and practice. Observing this could only strengthen Missionary Tiefel's conviction that the time had come for the WELS to break fellowship with Missouri. Our synod in several conventions, however, was saying that the matter should be given more time. These

were, no doubt, the chief factors that led to Pastor Tiefel's resignation from our synod early in 1957. ¹

Losing a man was hard, but that was not the end of the situation.

What is more, when Pastor Tiefel resigned, that meant the end of our property holdings in Japan. By law, our Synod could not hold title to property in Japan because it did not have the needed three registered workers there to incorporate. All the property (a piece of land with the chapel and residence on it in Tokyo) was in the name of Pastor Tiefel. Without trying to judge his motives, the reason he gave for not returning the property to our Synod is that the Synod was no longer the one which had sent him to work in Japan, and this meant that Tiefel was the one who represented the "true" Synod in Japan. This ended our first mission effort in Japan, spanning the years of 1952 into the first part of 1957.²

What a rough situation the Japan mission must have looked to the synod at this time. Where was the Lord going to lead them? What was his plan? The Lord would show them that he was still in control. Although we basically had to start from scratch, the activity in Japan did not cease. A second call had already been given to Richard Seeger and accepted. He arrived in Japan in the spring of 1956 from the Seminary. Seeger's first two years consisted of language studies and some Bible classes taught in English. At the time it appeared that Seeger would be on his own for quite a while; but the Lord had plans to bring another worker sooner than expected.

Poetter comes back to the WELS

Our struggles with the Missouri Synod had cost a missionary and a solid mission base, but the Lord used it to provide us with another experienced missionary, Richard Poetter. Pastor Poetter grew up in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin

¹ Sauer, Theodore A. "To the Islands of Japan." To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People. Milwaukee: NPH, p 152.

² Bernhardt, William F. The History of our WELS Mission in Japan with Historical and Cultural Background. Essay file at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library, p 9.

as a member of St. Peter's Lutheran Church, which was a WELS church. He attended their school and moved on to Winnebago Lutheran Academy in Fond du Lac. After graduating from Winnebago, Pastor Poetter decided to study as a teacher at Dr. Martin Luther College. He studied at DMLC for three years and then received a call to teach at St. John's Lutheran School in Fairfax, Minnesota. Disagreement over the pastor's laxity with the Boy Scouts led Poetter to resign after four years. The Lord then guided him to enter the ministry. Because of his age Pastor Poetter enrolled at Concordia Lutheran Seminary in Springfield, Illinois. He served his vicar year in Arlington, Minnesota.

The Missouri Synod had decided to try sending men over as vicars in mission fields. They placed a man in an area with a translator. Poetter volunteered for this program in the middle of his senior year. He stated that he was interested in mission work and thought this would be the best opportunity he would have to get in. Poetter planned to finish his courses through correspondence. His ministry began in Japan in 1950. Missionary Poetter's first assignment was to a mission station at Kamo, in the Niigata Prefecture. While there Poetter met Mr. Ryuichi Igarashi. Mr. Igarashi served as his faithful translator and friend from that point on. Here Pastor Poetter also met his wonderful wife, Ikuko, a native of Japan who helped him tremendously in serving the Lord in the Japanese mission. Pastor Poetter related to me the difficulty he went through to get her hand in marriage. It was not as easy as dating her a few times and asking her father for her hand in marriage. Ikuko had become a Christian through the mission where Pastor Poetter met her. A couple things made this marriage difficult. First, they were obviously from different cultures, but that was nothing compared to the wall Pastor Poetter still had to climb. Ikuko's family was not Christian and they were a little suspicious and hesitant about their

daughter seeing an American. To get her hand in marriage, Poetter had to win the favor of the men in the family, that is Ikuku's father and brothers. He said it took time, but he finally got her hand. Ikuku has truly been a blessing to Pastor Poetter and also to the mission in Japan. She has served as a helper to her husband in Japanese and in the knowledge of her country, as Sunday school teacher, as secretary, letter writer and other services too countless to enumerate.

Pastor Poetter loved his work in Japan and had dedicated his life to the cause of Japanese missions, but he felt dissatisfaction with certain conditions in the Missouri Synod missions under which he was working. In November of 1957 while back on furlough Pastor Poetter spoke to several WELS men, Professor Vogel at the seminary and Pastor Nolting, about his discontentment. Nolting informed Pastor Shiley, who was the Mission Board Chairman, of Poetter's concerns. Shiley asked Vogel to contact Poetter about the situation since he had been Poetter's former pastor in Fond du Lac. In the meetings that followed, Poetter conveyed his desire to join the WELS because his conscience could not let him remain in the Missouri Synod. In the eyes of the WELS men who were working on this, it appeared to be a God-send. In a letter to Shiley, Vogel shared some of benefits Poetter would bring to the Japan mission:

He has familiarity with the country, its people and customs, which would make his a valuable adjunct to our missionary force in Japan. He has met Missionary Seeger in Tokyo and is acquainted with our former Missionary Tiefel. He also knows the problems we have encountered in our work in Japan.³

Our synod and Japan mission needed this encouragement. The blessing that Poetter brought to our synod is seen when you look at the experience he brought. The

³ Taken from a letter written from Pastor Vogel to Pastor Shiley. The letter can be found at the WELS archives in the Executive Committee's files.

Japanese language is very difficult and takes a full two years just to begin teaching and communicating adequately (not to mention the cost in that). Add to that the time it takes to call another missionary and send him over. We were looking at a possible three years before we could get someone to join Seeger in full-time mission work. Seeger himself would still be in language classes for another year. Poetter had all this. He had learned the language, worked among the people, had experience in Japanese mission work and was committed to spreading the gospel to a people in need of salvation. The timing of Poetter's move to the WELS could not have come at a better time as this quote from Shiley illustrates: "How down cast we were last year, but how marvelously the Savior has helped us."⁴

Poetter was an experienced veteran in this foreign spiritual battlefield. The leaders of our synod saw this experience and gave Poetter freedom in controlling the Japanese mission. In a letter to Missionary Seeger, Shiley said, "We gave the call to Poetter. We will let him settle on a place to go (he wants a place where no other Lutheran Church is) and do it. He has more experience than anyone!"⁵ Poetter basically had free reign of where he thought best to go with the WELS mission. With much prayer Richard Poetter accepted the call to work in the WELS Japan Mission on April 12 of 1958. In accepting the call he wrote:

Family of faith, confession, and practice of the brethren in the Wisconsin Synod particularly has drawn me to serve you in Japan. A church which is in the world, but not of the world is needed in Japan and everywhere. May the Holy Spirit fill our synod with the Pentecostal zeal to sacrifice and

⁴ Taken from a letter to Missionary Seeger on May 1, 1958. Found in WELS Archives.

⁵ Letter written on March 8, 1958. Found in WELS Archives.

to bring the gospel in ever increasing measure to the heathen in their darkness.⁶

Poetter Starts Work as a WELS Missionary

The Poetters arrived in Japan on August 15, 1958. After a meeting with Seegers and finding a home in Tokyo, they visited Niigata Prefecture where Ikuku's family is from. They had stored many of their possessions there. While in Niigata, Missionary Poetter contacted Mr. Igarashi to discuss whether he would like to continue working with Poetter. Igarashi gladly accepted. God added to our mission work by bringing Mr. Igarashi to our service. After returning to Tokyo, Poetter wrote to Shiley asking him to pay Mr. Igarashi a salary. The salary consisted of 30000 yen/month, which is equal to \$83.33, a very low price to pay for the skills he brought to us.

The minutes from the September 12, 1958, missionary meeting describes Mr. Igarashi's skills and willingness to join the missionaries.

Mr. Ryuichi Igarashi has worked with missionary Poetter for more than five years. He has proved himself an able worker in the church and proved himself to be a sincere Lutheran by conviction. He is trustworthy. His wife is a Christian and will be confirmed into our church. His baby boy is baptized and they are expecting another child. Mr. Igarashi is capable to interpret, teach Japanese, do secretary work for the missionary, teach bible class and do evangelistic work under supervision, conduct reading services, and superintend Sunday School, that is to say he has experienced all phases of mission work. He is adept in Japanese, Russian, and French and has a smattering of other languages. He has agreed to work with missionary Poetter again. I asked him to come to Tokyo soon to go on a survey trip of Ibaraki Prefecture.⁷

As the last sentence brings out, Missionary Poetter wanted to have Mr. Igarashi helping him as soon as possible. Just like the WELS was putting much trust in Poetter's decisions, the same went for Poetter's trust in Igarashi's advice.

⁶ Found in the WELS Archives.

⁷ Minutes can be found in the WELS Archive.

From speaking with Missionary Poetter I have the feeling that he did not make very many decisions without first consulting Igarashi. Mr. Igarashi was a very educated man and he also knew his country. It always helped to have another point of view. A national may bring out something you overlooked or look at things from a different angle.

Our missionaries wanted to use whatever assistance they could in making careful decisions about where to go and how to go about the work. It helps to remember that our mission board was not quite as mobil as it is today, nor was it as experienced. Our synod was just beginning to do more in foreign mission work. Communication was another factor that was not nearly as developed as what we have today. Fax machines and fiber optic phone lines were not even dreams yet. *Handwritten: Fax machines were around but not widespread in use* So the missionaries were on their own for making these important beginning decisions. Professor John describes the missionaries' beginning decisions this way:

As our two missionaries, Seeger and Poetter, settled in, they gave much thought and effort to the matter of choosing the area in Japan where we would carry on the main part of our work. Our missionaries seemed to be aware that the decisions they were making at this early stage would have a lasting effect upon our mission in Japan.⁹

Missionary Poetter and Mr. Igarashi went together to survey different areas to lay down the footings of a mission. As I referred to earlier, Poetter wanted to move into an area where there were no other Lutheran churches. The area that they decided to study first was the prefecture of Ibaraki. When they went into an area they did not go in without contacts. The Missouri Synod had run a program over the radio called "The Lutheran Hour." They encouraged people to contact them for more information. Through this program the Missouri Synod had a large amount of interested prospects spread all across Japan, but they did not

⁹ Sauer. To Every Nation. p 154.

have the man-power to work with all of these prospects. Missionary Poetter wrote Missionary Hass of the Missouri Synod about obtaining the names of those in Ibaraki Prefecture who corresponded with their Lutheran Hour program. Poetter described in a letter to the Japan Mission Board what he learned from Missionary Hass.

Missionary Hass told me later that as a branch of Lutheran Hour some meetings were being held in Mito and a Lutheran Hour rally was being planned. Please do not think of anything on the American scale, about 25 people. But this was not a regular part of their mission conference program, nor had they decided to send any missionaries into Ibaraki. In Mito about eight to fifteen people gathered once a week for a meeting. I now told them my plans to live in Mito or Tsuchiura. Tsuchiura had had meetings for a time, but at the present they are dropped, but there seems to be quite a few Lutheran Hour prospects. I was invited to meet with them. They agreed to suggest to their next area conference on November 10 to turn this work over to me. I was also invited to be present at their Lutheran Hour rally in Mito on October 25. They would introduce me then and give me this start with the group. I accepted gladly. They have not done much work there and there are no baptized people, all inquirers. A start like this may have taken a long time otherwise, therefore we have changed our mind a bit and would prefer to live in Mito at the start. That is the picture at present. In our planning and mission work we are trying to remember the bigger factors that should influence us: the need of the Lord's guidance, the resources of our synod, the expected man-power, the power of the gospel, etc. . . . Note -- While writing this letter a phone call came from Missionary Delbert Schneider, director of the Lutheran Hour here in Japan. He asked me again to be present at the Lutheran Hour rally at Mito, October 25. They suggested that at that time they would turn over the work to me. It looks as if Missouri will recognize the area as ours and will expand elsewhere. They are really shorthanded at the present time and cannot adequately serve the area. I do not think this implies any future complications either. I am grateful for this break and look upon it as an answer from the Lord. He is paving the way and was doing so even before we got here.⁹

Since the Missouri Synod was not concentrating much attention on Ibaraki Prefecture, it looked like a good place for the WELS to begin a concentrated effort. This area was quite different from Tokyo. It consisted mostly of farm land, yet there is an effort by the government to bring science and technology

⁹ Letter written October 21, 1958 by Poetter to the Japan Mission Board. It can be found in the WELS Archive.

to this area. "Mito, the second largest city in Ibaraki and its capital, had a population of 120,000."¹⁰ Tsuchiura was the other city that Poetter and Igarashi would look at. Another reason they chose Ibaraki may have been its proximity to Tokyo, where our base mission had been set up already. Poetter explained that they were very careful they did not spread themselves out too far.

In a letter written October 21, 1958, to the Japan Mission Board Poetter recounts some of the preliminary travels in Ibaraki Prefecture.

The most pressing interest is finding a field and working there. Here is a calendar of our activities pursuant to this goal. Sept. 29 -- Oct. 3: Mr. Igarashi and I traveled through Ibaraki Prefecture, primarily the cities of Tsuchiura, Ishioka and Mito the capital, looking for a house to rent. Oct. 6-7: went again to Tsuchiura to look at a house. Oct. 13-14: went with family over the same territory looking for possible houses especially in Mito. Oct. 15: met with missionary Leroy Hass, chairman of the Japan mission for the LC-MS and Missionary George Shibata, chairman of the Tokyo conference, LC-MS, to learn more about the results of Lutheran Hour broadcasts in the Ibaraki Prefecture area. Ibaraki has a population of 2,064,000 and has about one missionary for every 60,000 people. It also has some other established Christian churches. I have not been able to find out how many Christians there are, but I imagine that it is a little less than the average of 1/2 of 1%. I drove the car on these trips. There are some good stretches of road and some very poor. They are working on the roads and in several years there will be a good concrete road all the way to Mito. It is 80 km to Tsuchiura and takes about 2.5 hours from where we live in Tokyo. It takes 1.5 hours by train.

In each place we bought maps, visited the city hall for information, visited real estate agents for houses for rent, inquired of local conditions at the inns we stayed at, looked at churches and inquired as much as possible. In Tsuchiura there is a TEAM missionary couple living in a suburb who are quite new yet and studying the language. Several small Japanese churches are not very active according to reports. For a time I thought this was the best place to start, the population is about 70,000 and there are other nearby towns and villages. We looked seriously for a house to live in and if there were a house available we would move there. One possible house is still being investigated, but we can not meet some of their conditions honestly. Besides, the house is more of a shack.

Seventeen km and 40 minutes farther north is Ishioka, a town of about 35,000 people. It very much resembles the town that I had lived in previously in Niigata Prefecture. But the smaller the town the harder it is to find an empty house. Any number of places are for sale, but very few for rent, especially to a foreigner. At the same time we are looking

¹⁰ Ibid. p 155.

for a house we are keeping our eyes open for a place in these towns that could be used to begin meetings there. We intend to begin mission work in at least these three places to begin with. Ishioka did not turn up anything we could live in at the present. We are willing to live in a very poor house to begin with, but the places that were shown us were not livable for man or beast. But there seems to be good prospects there for mission work for anyone who likes to work among rural people and is patient, sowing the seed and waiting for results. In the long run these rural people are more steadfast in their faith once they are converted.

Next we went to Mito the capital, thirty km farther north, fifty minutes. Mito has a population of 120,000. It has many good high schools and a university. We saw many, many students on the streets. Students from the entire surrounding countryside come here to study. Years ago Mito was the stronghold of one of the most powerful feudal lords of Japan, therefore feudalism is still strong in Ibaraki. During World War Two she was shelled thoroughly by our warships and almost entirely destroyed. Therefore today, rebuilt, it looks new and young and it seems to be vigorous and progressive. The first Japanese atomic plant is located there. There are some active Christian churches there. Certainly there is room for more Christian work. The people are openly friendly and well mannered, much more so than Tokyo. It is about three hours by train to Tokyo. Because the town was destroyed during the war, housing is still short there. We did see one place that we could have gotten into with a shoe horn last week, but the agent assured us that he thought he could find something a little bit bigger in a week or two, so we are hoping and praying. Mito has many shrines and temples. They were destroyed mostly during the war, but the fact that many of them have been rebuilt shows that heathenism is strong here. We would like to go into such an area as this.

Either Tsuchiura or Mito seem to be a center from which we could start and gradually work out. Seems that in whatever place a suitable house is available, there we will live and commute to the other place also working and investigating toward the time when we can build a house for the missionary and find land for chapel and kindergarten, etc.¹¹

From this point they began to lean toward Mito as the center to settle down and work out of. For future plans, Poetter thought Mito would work well. It is located about 100 km from Tokyo along a national highway. After establishing a center in Mito, they could begin to work on cities along this highway between Tokyo and Mito. The major cities that they would have their eyes on would be Matsudo, Tsuchiura and Ishioka. This plan would keep us from starting churches "helter skelter" all over Japan. At this time our synod was not financially

¹¹ Letter found in WELS Archive.

equipped to be spread too far and if churches are spread apart the members do not develop a feeling of closeness as easily.

Time began to draw short for the Poetters because their lease in Tokyo was coming due. Although things looked tight, the Lord provided a place for them in Mito. Seeger and Poetter went house hunting again in Mito and found a home that had previously been a dentist clinic and home. The dentist had died and the owner wanted to sell the home and property. They figured it would cost about \$10,000 for the property and \$5,000 more for renovation. The home had a room large enough to hold services in. For the time being the owner would allow them to rent. The missionaries quickly sent this information to Shiley, the Japanese Board Chairman, for approval. The Board thought the place would be great, but advised the men to ask for a year lease if at all possible. One of the problems that the mission at this stage faced was that it could not hold property as an official body. They were not incorporated yet. To become incorporated they needed at least three full-time workers. If they were to purchase property, it would have to be put in the missionary's name. Events that had taken place in the past made the board very leery about doing that. For now this would be the Poetter's new home and worship center. The WELS mission had now entered Mito.

The Beginning of the Church in Mito

Church services were inaugurated in Mito on November 2, 1958. Missionary Poetter met with seven souls at the home of Mr. Tamura. Poetter and his family moved into their new home in Mito on the fourteenth. As was mentioned earlier, none of the people in Mito were baptized, but almost immediately five requested baptism. Poetter started special classes for these people soon after this first

meeting.¹² The church may have started on a small note, but it was solid. The men and women who were present had come on their own to join others in studying the gospel. The Lord had opened t/their hearts with his message and led them through difficulties to join together in this group. For the thirtieth anniversary of Grace Church, members put together their recollections of the church and how the Lord guided them to join.¹³ A couple of the accounts come from members who were present from the start. Their accounts will bring together how God had formed this small group and the joy they felt when Missionary Poetter and Mr. Igarashi joined them.

In 1956 when Japan was at last beginning to rise from the ashes of war, when the sound of rebuilding could be heard in Mito, the Lutheran Hour began to radio broadcast a Sunday worship service (sermon). It began with "A Mighty Fortress is our God" followed by a sermon which shook the starving souls of listeners and gave us strength and a living courage. Also to those who wished to learn more, a correspondence course was sent. Through this the students were united in desiring more. In this way we were led to desire to become a station of the Lutheran Church. The Tokyo Lutheran Center repeatedly asked us to find some place to rent for meetings. As a result of this urging, it was resolved with expectation to light a small flame in this corner of Mito.

Finally in the Tamura home the first meeting was held. All who gathered were deeply moved heartily welcoming this start. After that, four teachers, two at a time, took turns coming to Mito and the worship meetings continued. At that time the train line to Mito was not yet electrified. From the Tokyo, Ueno station to Mito it took three hours and another hour for city transportation, and they did this for us. The livelihood of the people was extremely limited, a shortage of clothing, food and shortage of dwellings, rationing and of course roads were not paved, electric products were not manufactured. In this state of nothing, one thing I cannot forget is holding meetings without Bibles or hymnbooks except one possessed by the Tamuras. We all gathered around this one book and worshipped. The one hymn we knew well, "What a Friend We have in Jesus," was sung loudly by the young men and women. Everyone listened closely to the sermon, taking notes. There were many questions and answers. After worship in the afternoon we would go to the T.B. sanatorium and various hospitals and talk to patients about the contents

¹² Information taken from minutes of missionary's meeting on November 26, 1958. Found in WELS Archives.

¹³ The translations of this booklet are included in the appendix of this paper.

of the sermon or write to people about it, or write a postcard to those who did not attend that day, inviting and giving guidance.

In 1957 the Mito meeting little by little, became more settled with the desire to reach more and more people with the Gospel so we rented public halls and held evangelistic meetings. We printed matter of information and tracts and distributed them. But Ibaraki Prefecture (in which Mito is located) is very feudalistic, Mito being the sight of the Tokugawa castle, the populous being more or less a closed society with closed minds and territory. It was very difficult to increase the number of converts. In those days Christianity was considered a heretical religion or the religion of white-eyed foreigners (foreigners had been shut out of Japan for hundreds of years) so our efforts were not rewarded much. This was the situation in December when the blessing of God was given to this little flock. (that is) We were thankful to celebrate Christmas in these humble circumstances.

In 1958 the number of people attending church grew little by little and under these cramped conditions the voice became louder to have a more suitable place of worship. Our deceased brother, Ryuichi Igarashi, came to Mito and the church in Tamura's house to consult with us about finding a place to start a church. We began to look for such a place. The first time Missionary Poetter came to our meeting, as he preached in Japanese, all were filled with joy and expectation of things to come. At last the time had come for a church in Mito. The Poetter family moved to Namimatsu district in Mito (renting from dentist Mori next door). This was the birth of the church in Mito known as Mito Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church.

Looking at the circumstances of Grace Church now and reflecting on the circumstances in the early years it seems like a different world. In the period right after the war there was a lack of many things. Now I pray that faith in God may deepen, the light that at last was lit will never go out but be sustained and nurtured, and that the Gospel may go forth to many people, I pray.¹⁴

The Lord touched many hearts through the message broadcast over the Lutheran Hour. The fire started in these hearts did not lie idle, but drove these starving souls to hear more. Toshiko Saito, who is still the church's secretary, shares how the Lord touched her heart and made her zealous to hear more and to join other Christians.

The first time I learned of the Bible I was in a hospital and listening to a broadcast of the Lutheran Hour from my bedside. The first word I heard from the Bible was Matthew 4:4 -- "Man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

¹⁴ Tamura, Yasuko. "Megumi Church's First Steps." The Path Walked by Grace Lutheran Ev. Christian Church. Appendix.

This Word lingered in my heart. I thought I would like to read the Bible too, so I began to study the correspondence course offered by the Lutheran Hour.

At that time I learned of the meeting in the house of Tamura. So I hurried to attend the meeting. A missionary from Tokyo was leading the class. It was a small gathering of Mr. and Mrs. Tamura and a number of inquirers. I saw the zeal of the Tamuras. We read the Bible, sang hymns and prayed. I was soon attracted by this atmosphere. It was just 36 years ago, 1957, when I was twenty.

In 1958, Pastor Poetter and Mr. Igarashi came from Niigata to evangelize here in Mito City and to hold worship services of the Lutheran Church at the Namimatsu-cho location. Here I received Holy Baptism in 1960 (the year 35 of Showa).¹⁵

With missionary Poetter and Mr. Igarashi settled in Mito, the church began to meet regularly and to work on spreading the gospel message to others. The average attendance began to grow. On November 30, twelve people came to the Sunday meeting; and by December 21, the number had steadily grown to 21 people. Christmas was just around the corner and this little group had some big plans in store. On December 23, nine members went caroling. On the 24th, they brought Christmas to thirty homeless children and closed the day with a meal together. Christmas morning a service was held for the neighborhood children and another service was at an area orphanage in the afternoon. On the evening of Christmas Day, 25 people came together for a service and fellowship.

The Mito people were also actively helping missionary Poetter and Mr. Igarashi with evangelism and office work. They helped with the printing, distributing and mailing of the literature. A large majority of evangelism was done through the mail. Many prospects from the Lutheran Hour were left to contact, some living quite a distance from Mito. Among these prospects were contacts in Tsuchiura, Daigo, Ishioka, Utsonomia and a few other small towns spread through the Ibaraki Prefecture. Some of these contacts had begun to set

¹⁵ Saito, Toshiko. "Under the Wings of the Lord". The Path Walked... Found in the appendix.

up meetings. A Japanese airman organized regular meetings in Tsuchiura which Poetter or Igarashi would lead. A lady in Daigo also requested to have the missionary's services. She said she had eight people who would come to the meetings. The group began to meet occasionally. Missionary Poetter described the evangelism work in a letter from January 19, 1959.

All of these openings and responses have developed from letter evangelism. I print my sermons and other materials and send them out to many contacts. This type of evangelism is a great aid and a necessary part of our work, but it takes time and help. Writing a thousand Japanese addresses on envelopes takes time, even for the Japanese. Fortunately there are a few in the Mito group who are willing to help -- mostly students. We pay them a little. Because the contacts lie all over the prefecture, I cannot possibly reach all of them and they cannot possibly reach me. So I am beginning a correspondence course for them. Pray for results.¹⁶

From all this activity Missionary Poetter mentioned that he feels confident the Lord is leading them to preach the gospel where he wills. The Lord was truly blessing this small mission.

One concern that bothered missionary Poetter at this time was housing. The owner of the "dentist" home that they were in wanted to sell this property. He did promise that he would give them one month's notice if he sold the property. Poetter did not feel very comfortable with this situation, nor was the board giving much encouragement. In a December 27th missionary meeting it was noted why the missionaries would like to find property, buy it, build and settle there.

We cannot be constantly shifting about from place to place expecting contacts to follow or look for us, losing previous interests and contacts, and starting over in a place frequently. A missionary's home becomes a place which everyone beats a path. Every move involves legal changes in foreigners, car, and property registration, to say nothing of the wear and tear on the missionary family. It is not good for a missionary and family to be insecure and not knowing when they will have to pick up their tent and pitch it elsewhere. We wish it were that easy. It is necessary that houses be constructed and we do not feel the reason of not being

¹⁶ Letter found in WELS Archives.

incorporated is an excuse. Property can be transferred. We ask that two houses be built in 1959.¹⁷

God allowed the mission to stay where it was for five years, then they moved to a permanent place.

As the people continued to join together at the mission, it seemed they grew closer to the missionary than to each other. Missionary Poetter wanted to work on moving the people toward closer fellowship with each other so they could speak of their problems and matters of faith. It takes time for Japanese to accept each other and develop a group feeling. To help this bond to grow, meals would often be set up after services. In this first year a summer Bible conference was set up.

Summer Bible conference is designed to give an opportunity to the many people we are in contact with to gather with the missionaries for several days of worship and fellowship. In July we held our first attempt at this type of meeting. About 30 people were gathered. Saturday and Sunday were spent together at a sea-side inn. It brought many of us together for the first time. Seeds of future plans, closer fellowship and study, and cooperation were planted. Next year the group plans to spend 3 days together. People who gathered were from towns and villages from those 2 prefectures (Ibaraki and Tochigi) and from Tokyo.¹⁸

Spring Bible conferences were also started where the people could get together and study. These centered around the individual churches. The conferences were so important to the spiritual health of the people. Not only did it help them grow closer, but it also helped them learn the basic stories of the Bible. These men and women had not heard much of Christianity, the ten commandments, or even Bible stories. The Bible conferences helped give the people extra training. Pastor Oshino remembers attending the first Bible conferences.

¹⁷ Found in WELS Archive.

¹⁸ Letter written September 30, 1959 by Poetter. Found in WELS Archive.

Grace Church has memories for me, intimate memories, a church I could never forget. Beginning thirty years ago the spring Bible Conference was often at Mito. Shortly after I was baptized and confirmed I attended the conference. After the conference ended we all went out into the streets of the city to evangelize. Out of the blue in the middle of the city I was asked to witness to my faith. What I said, even now I cannot recall - I was so nervous and tense.¹⁹

The Japanese society was not the easiest to do mission work in, as I have alluded to throughout this paper. The pagan religions are a natural part of life. Anyone who drops their pagan beliefs is often put down or ostracized by family and others. Yet, that is not the only challenge that orthodox Christian missionaries had to deal with.

As you no doubt have gathered there is no great rush to the Christian Church in Japan. The Protestant Church is celebrating its 100th anniversary in Japan this year. The growth of the church has been slow and laborious. The foundations were not sound as "until half a century ago the typical Japanese Christian was thought to be an invincible Puritan who never drank or smoked." Obedience to many man-made commandments was the mark of a Christian. Christ and him crucified was there but not predominant. The Lord has indeed permitted much suffering to Japanese Christians of the past to purge them of this false leaven. As if combating Shintoism, Buddhism and hundreds of other so-called "new" religions in Japan were not enough, we must also speak the truth to the Japanese concerning Christian sects. Put yourself in the place of a heathen Japanese and ask if you would not be confused, to say the least, by a missionary of Christianity who not only uproots heathen religions but explains about false doctrines in the Christian churches in Japan. But this is the very blessing which we have to offer the Japanese.²⁰

How wonderful it is to hear the testimony of Mrs. Takaku years later speaking of the same difficulties and how important God's Word is. Surely these are words of comfort to a missionary's heart knowing that the Lord worked as he promises.

To think Pastor Poetter has lived forty years in Japan! He came to Japan after the end of the war when Japan was still experiencing frequent atrocious and dark events. It is hard to imagine the difficulty of his labors as he sowed the seed one by one. It must be hard for you to

¹⁹ Oshino, Pastor Fukuichi. "Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of Grace Church". The Path Walked... Appendix.

²⁰ Letter written by Poetter on September 30, 1959. Found in WELS Archive.

understand the people's dissolute hearts, the chaotic society, the increasingly straightened economic condition in those times, living as we do today. Also in those days, numerous so-called new religions sprang up so that people's hearts were only misled. In such a state of things the Word of the one true God was sown with perseverance so that we could see this day with immeasurable joy. This is God's great blessing. I pray that this blessing may be shared with countless souls.²¹

Through all, the Word of God continued to be proclaimed, studied and shared. The mission continued to see more people come in its doors to hear the message. In September of 1959, this little church enjoyed their first baptism and wedding. Miss Miyoko Funatsu was baptized September 6, and on September 8 she was united in marriage to Mr. Donald Sartori (Armed Forces) of Fond du Lac, WI. The members continued helping with evangelism efforts, some even brought their friends and family members. The Lord blessed the mission and worked through his Word, even allowing the mission to relocate to a permanent place.

Evangelism at this place by Grace Church has (helped it) reached its thirtieth anniversary. We thank God for his grace and protection and also praise him from the heart. The first time I entered the door of Grace church, former teacher, missionary Poetter held meetings in a rented house in Mamimatsu-cho (a division of Mito)(about 1960). It happened to be the day of baptism of one of our faithful members. The reason I went to church was to gain some knowledge of the Bible teachings never thinking that I would become a Christian. One year passed. I felt the Word of God working strongly in me. Till now my heart had been like a hardened path, a rock, like soil choked with thorns. But now I realized that God Himself had changed my heart to good soil.

Several years passed. Then the Mito church relocated to its present location in Ishikawa, Mito. A church and parsonage were dedicated Dec. 1962. The Lutheran Ev. Christian Church (LECC) was incorporated as a religious corporation in order to possess property. In 1965 the present church was built and dedicated. The Word of God sown at the Mito church was spread throughout Ibaraki Prefecture, and meetings were established in many places. Also, members spread abroad to neighboring prefectures.²²

²¹ Takaku, Sumie. "Approaching the Thirtieth Anniversary." The Path Walked... Appendix.

²² Yoshida, Pastor Tadashi. "The Seed of the Word of God Fell on Good Ground." The Path Walked... Appendix.

Missionary Poetter was finally granted his wish to settle in a permanent place. Grace Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church is still in this same location proclaiming the message of the gospel. In 1962, as Pastor Yoshida mentioned, our Japan mission filed for incorporation. William Bernhardt, in his compilation of the history of Japan, traces the steps of the incorporation.

The Mission Council (a group organized in 1961 consisting of missionaries and church leaders) approved the articles of the Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church. Mr. Yamada, a lawyer, and Deacon Igarashi guided the Mission Council in this step so that the articles would conform to Japanese law. April 9, 1962, on this day the Delegate Church Council in Japan was formed. On April 29, 1962, the DCC took a happy and big step by God's grace; it accepted and adopted the articles of incorporation for the Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church in Japan. This took place at Mito in conjunction with the Spring Bible Conference. . . . The church properties previously registered in the names of our missionaries were now listed under the incorporation of the LECC. In regard to this matter, the DCC resolved to accept these properties "with the moral agreement that the LECC shall administer them according to the wishes of the WELS." (The articles of incorporation were approved by the government of the Ibaraki Prefecture on January 29, 1963.) The LECC closed 1962 by gathering to dedicate the mission house and chapel in Mito on December 30th; the cost was \$23,000. The Lord was with his people, his promise to all who faithfully use his Word and sacraments prevailed.²³

Missionary Poetter was chosen as the chairman of the synod and remained in that position until 1990 when he retired.

By examining the years leading to the beginning of Grace church in Mito, we have seen God's grace in action. What more can we do than praise him with our whole heart!

The Lord has truly blessed the work in Japan. It is easy to see in retrospect how at times it looks as though all is going downhill, that God directs everything to work according to his will. The Lord brought Grace church together and has continued to guide it through the years with his Word and workers. He has kept the church strong through the difficulties of language, the

²³ Bernhardt, William. The History of Our WELS... p 11.

hardships of life, the pressures of pagan religions and whatever stumbling blocks that may have come along the path. The church continues to grow even now. God's Word is being proclaimed in its truth and purity. When the Word is present, the Holy Spirit is at work. With this we can have confidence that many more will come to faith through the work of the Spirit. Through the years the saving message that has been proclaimed in this church has touched many hearts. Although many may have moved on to different areas, they continue to remain faithful to God's Word. May God continue to bless the many souls who have received nourishment from his Word as it was proclaimed in Mito.

APPENDIX

The following articles are translations taken from the thirtieth anniversary booklet, The Path Walked by Grace Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church; Thirtieth Anniversary Observed in the Lord, which was prepared for the special service. Missionary Richard Poetter translated these articles into English.

Approaching the Thirtieth Anniversary

by Sumie Takaku

(teacher of the Japanese language to missionaries)

No matter when, no matter where, God watches over and guides our lives. He has walked with us the long months and years (now thirty) to this year, so that we may celebrate our thirtieth anniversary with a heart filled with joy and thanksgiving. It is difficult to express in a few words one's feelings about the memories, the depth of God's love toward Grace Church during the thirty years. I do not know much about the early times but met Pastor Poetter shortly after he moved to Mito City.

To think Pastor Poetter has lived forty years in Japan! He came to Japan after the end of the war when Japan was still experiencing frequent atrocious and dark events. It is hard to imagine the difficulty of his labors as he sowed the seed one by one.

It must be hard for you to understand the people's dissolute hearts, the chaotic society, the increasingly straightened economic condition in those times living as we do today. Also in those days numerous so-called new religions sprang up so that people's hearts were only misled. In such a state of things, the Word of the one true God was sown with perseverance so that we could see this day with immeasurable joy. This is God's great blessing. I pray that this blessing may be shared with countless souls.

Today Japan has been reborn as an economic giant and has made great progress in culture, science and medicine. Also food is plentiful, materials overflowing, all of this is a gift of God. But we who are satisfied (contented) only with these things are losing the most important thing.

Everyday on television news and in the newspaper we see the violence of youth, crime, cruel bullying, meaningless murder, so that we cover our eyes from ever-repeated events. Only an outwardly abundant life without having that which is most needed by people I feel strongly leads to the loss of the food necessary for a spiritual heart. The bread of life, that is the Word of God, this one true Word of God, heard by people, believed by people, lived as the true Way by people, gives salvation to people and thus the darkness changes to light by the goodness of the Gospel.

Reflecting on the past thirty years, around the church are fields, there are people and houses here and there, transportation is still

inconvenient, from the standpoint of environment changes that one could not imagine have taken place, but God's eternal changeless love from the seed sown has produced the Grace Church of today. We give endless thanks for God's love and blessing making this thirtieth year anniversary celebration possible. May Grace Church grow and expand even more from now on, this I pray in the name of the Lord.

"The Seed of the Word of God Fell on Good Ground."

by Pastor Tadashi Yoshida, of Chiba Light Church

Luke 8:5-8 -- "A farmer went out to sow his seed. . . . other seed fell on good soil.

Pastor Hering of Mito Grace Luth. Ev. Christian Church, members, seekers, all:

Evangelism at this place by Grace Church has reached its thirtieth anniversary. We thank God for His grace and protection and also praise Him from the heart. The first time I entered the door of Grace church, former teacher, missionary Poetter held meetings in a rented house in Mamimatsu-cho (a division of Mito)(about 1960). It happened to be the day of baptism of one of our faithful members. The reason I went to church was to gain some knowledge of the Bible teachings never thinking that I would become a Christian. One year passed. I felt the Word of God working strongly in me. Till now my heart had been like a hardened path, a rock, like soil choked with thorns, but now I realized that God Himself had changed my heart to good soil.

Several years passed. Then the Mito church relocated to its present location in Ishikawa, Mito. A church and parsonage were dedicated December 1962. The Lutheran Ev. Christian Church (LECC) was incorporated as a religious corporation in order to possess property. In 1965, the present church was built and dedicated. The Word of God sown at the Mito church was spread throughout Ibaraki Prefecture and meeting established in many places. Also members spread abroad to neighboring prefectures.

There was a period during which theological training was carried out in a basement room of Grace Church. At one time there were four seminarians studying. For a time I moved to Tokyo leaving the seminary but then returned to study in Mito. About that time an offset press was acquired. Our printing program took on new life. Today we have the print shop in Tsuchiura City and can do much more. To think of it I get nostalgic. One time when we three seminary students were to print the Christmas edition of our church paper we fought desperately into the wee hours of the night with the balky old printer.

In this way the history of the Mito church is deeply related to me personally and to the whole church body. Even if the building changes, equipment changes, membership changes, the flow of people will continue I am sure.

May God guide and keep Mito church in His grace and continue to bless her richly. On this joyful anniversary I pray it and permit me to add my blessing.

Under the Wings of the Lord

by Toshiko Saito (church secretary)

The first time I learned of the Bible I was in a hospital and listening to a broadcast of the Lutheran Hour from my bedside. The first word I heard from the Bible was Matthew 4:4 -- "Man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

This Word lingered in my heart. I thought I would like to read the Bible too, so I began to study the correspondence course offered by the Lutheran Hour.

At that time I learned of the meeting in the house of Tamura. So I hurried to attend the meeting. A missionary from Tokyo was leading the class. It was a small gathering of Mr. and Mrs. Tamura and a number of inquirers. I saw the zeal of the Tamuras. We read the Bible, sang hymns and prayed. I was soon attracted by this atmosphere. It was just 36 years ago, 1957, when I was twenty.

In 1958, Pastor Poetter and Mr. Igarashi came from Niigata to evangelize here in Mito City and to hold worship services of the Lutheran Church at the Namimatsu-cho location. Here I received Holy Baptism in 1960 (the year 35 of Showa).

At that time a Miss Watabiki who was doing secretarial work at the church quit and I was asked to take her place. In 1963, the legal office of the church (LECC) was established and the missionary and church moved to the present location in Ishikawa, 1-Chome. At first the office also served as chapel and we were the third couple to be married there. Then for some years I stayed home to take care of the small children. After this interlude I again engaged in the church office work and have continued to this day.

Today, reflecting on the past, I have had many experiences. I have had some trials. But always at those times the Lord was with me, giving me comfort and peace; and I realize I was kept under the wings of the Lord.

Now we are celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of our church. "Man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." Making this verse a memorial, and by the help of the Holy Spirit, I want to witness to people who do not yet know the Bible.

Megumi Church's First Steps

by Yasuko Tamura

In 1956 when Japan was at last beginning to rise from the ashes of war, when the sound of rebuilding could be heard in Mito, the Lutheran Hour began to radio broadcast a Sunday worship service (sermon). It began with "A Mighty Fortress is our God" followed by a sermon which shook the starving souls of listeners and gave us strength and a living courage. Also to those who wished to learn more, a correspondence course was sent. Through this the students were united in desiring more. In this way we were led to desire to become a station of the Lutheran Church. The Tokyo Lutheran Center repeatedly asked us to find some place to rent for

meetings. As a result of this urging, it was resolved with expectation to light a small flame in this corner of Mito.

Finally in the Tamura home the first meeting was held. All who gathered were deeply moved heartily welcoming this start. After that, four teachers, two at a time, took turns coming to Mito and the worship meetings continued. At that time the train line to Mito was not yet electrified. From the Tokyo, Ueno station to Mito it took three hours and another hour for city transportation, and they did this for us. The livelihood of the people was extremely limited, a shortage of clothing, food and shortage of dwellings, rationing and of course roads were not paved, electric products were not manufactured. In this state of nothing, one thing I cannot forget is holding meetings without Bibles or hymnbooks except one possessed by the Tamuras. We all gathered around this one book and worshipped. The one hymn we knew well, "What a Friend We have in Jesus," was sung loudly by the young men and women. Everyone listened closely to the sermon taking notes. There were many questions and answers. After worship in the afternoon we would go to the T.B. sanatorium and various hospitals and talk to patients about the contents of the sermon or write to people about it, or write a postcard to those who did not attend that day, inviting and giving guidance.

In 1957 the Mito meeting little by little, became more settled with the desire to reach more and more people with the Gospel so we rented public halls and held evangelistic meetings. We printed matter of information and tracts and distributed them. But Ibaragi Prefecture (in which Mito is located) is very feudalistic, Mito being the sight of the Tokugawa castle, the populous being more or less a closed society with closed minds and territory. It was very difficult to increase the number of converts. In those days Christianity was considered a heretical religion or the religion of white-eyed foreigners (foreigners had been shut out of Japan for hundreds of years), so our efforts were not rewarded much. This was the situation in December when the blessing of God was given to this little flock. We were thankful to celebrate Christmas in these humble circumstances.

In 1958, the number of people attending church grew little by little and under these cramped conditions the voice became louder to have a more suitable place of worship. Our deceased brother, Ryuichi Igarashi, came to Mito and the church in Tamura's house to consult with us about finding a place to start a church. We began to look for such a place. The first time Missionary Poetter came to our meeting as he preached in Japanese, all were filled with joy and expectation of things to come. At last the time had come for a church in Mito. The Poetter family moved to Naminatsu district in Mito (renting from dentist Mori next door). This was the birth of the church in Mito known as Mito Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church.

Looking at the circumstances of Grace Church now and reflecting on the circumstances in the early years it seems like a different world. In the period right after the war there was a lack of many things. Now I pray that faith in God may deepen, the light that at last was lit will never go out but be sustained and nurtured, and that the Gospel may go forth to many people, I pray.

Be Strong in the Lord

by Mrs. Chieko Takahashi (wife of elder Takahashi)

My husband died in 1989. I knew everyone must die, but after they are gone often for the first time one realizes how much one owes the departed and how good he was. Ordinarily things pass on without taking any particular notice of them but today I think of that day which has passed and spontaneously bow my head in thanks.

My husband from the time we were married was a man of faith who whenever he had spare time would read the Bible. The books he purchased were always related to Christianity. I was raised as a Buddhist. I learned only a little about Christianity when I was a student. I hardly knew anything about it.

I think it was in January of 1960, when I went to the church at Naminatsu-cho, Mito City for the baptism of my infant daughter, Eriko, that I first met Pastor Poetter.

Then several months later in September of 1960 my husband met a terrible accident which left him disabled for full-time work. His was a long fight against illnesses and a long period of rehabilitation. During this time, mother and daughter at the urging of Pastor Poetter and Mr. Igarashi moved to Mito. There I received Holy Baptism.

I am indebted to Pastor and Mrs. Poetter and Mr. Igarashi for their great assistance and I am deeply grateful to them. "I will be with you, I will never leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous." Joshua 1:5,6. I received this verse in a letter from Pastor Poetter as comfort and encouragement for our family. This verse is nourishment for my heart in my daily life.

In Retrospect

by Mr. Kohichi Iimura (Grace Elder)

There is a maxim, "ten years is an epoch," but a long space of time, thirty years, has flowed by. Calling up the thoughts of it, it seemed long and it seemed short. In either case, indeed, there are a great number of matters beyond enumeration that happened. "Faith comes by hearing," are gospel words I heard from the radio on the Lutheran Hour at that time. Mr. Utsukisaki introduced me to the Mito church and I joined the church. In 1963 (38th year of the Showa Era) on the 24th of December, on Christmas Eve, I received Holy Baptism. From that time to the present I have represented the congregation at the meetings of the LECC (synod). I owe this to my senior elders, Igarashi and Takahashi. But both of them have been called to heaven, and in addition my teacher, Pastor Poetter, returned to his homeland. For a time I wondered what was going to happen next. But the Lord has preserved our church. Now I apply myself to backing Pastor Hering as the center. I'm sorry and realize I have been somewhat careless and procrastinating and feel ashamed. In the matter of composing a history of the congregation I am doing a self-examination and asking you to give me guidance. I rest my pen.

Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of Grace Church

by Pastor Fukuichi Oshino, Ashikaga City, Peace Church

Grace Church has memories for me, intimate memories, a church I could never forget. Beginning thirty years ago the spring Bible Conference was often at Mito. Shortly after I was baptized and confirmed I attended the conference. After the conference ended we all went out into the streets of the city to evangelize. Out of the blue in the middle of the city I was asked to witness to my faith. What I said, even now I cannot recall -- I was so nervous and tense.

25 years ago I took a wife and we lived in Mito. Theological training was in a basement room under the chapel. Including me, four of us students studied there. At this time our teacher was Richard A. Poetter, missionary-pastor of Grace Church, chairman of the LECC, with the additional post of head of theological training -- very busy. On Sundays I usually attended Grace Church, fellowship with the members and enjoyed the church life. The members of these days are today leading an active faith-life. I am thankful to God for that.

Also from now on I pray by the grace of God, Grace Church will grow and increase. Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, all of Grace Church on your 30th anniversary I offer you sincere congratulations. I close with the Word of God in Mark 4:30-32, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

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