

Reaching out to the Japanese

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Introduction

If you've always wanted to become a missionary but haven't received a foreign call yet, just take a look around you: God is bringing the foreign mission field to you. Drive through any metropolis in the United States, and you undoubtedly will find neighborhoods where you can satisfy your appetite for katsu-don, curry, or conch, thanks to the wave of immigrants moving into this country. America has always been a melting pot, and immigrants seeking better jobs, students looking for education, and foreign companies sending their employees to this country continues.

The latest wave of immigration has presented our country with many tough questions over which it has wrestled. It has also brought opportunity to mission minded Christians. Many of the people coming to live in this country have never heard the Easter message that Christ lives; a situation that provides a ready-made mission field. A unique outreach opportunity is there for those who are willing to jump into a world of unfamiliar sights, smells, and sounds. Our synod has been promoting cross-cultural work by providing many useful tools and guides to help congregations and individuals get started. This paper is an attempt to add to that list of resources by providing some ideas on how to reach out to the Japanese living near you.

Why the Japanese?

Why reach out to the Japanese? I admit that when you think about doing cross-cultural work in this country, you usually think of reaching out to Hispanics or Vietnamese because they make up a significantly larger part of the population and are here to stay. A 1996 statistic reports that there are only 274,000 Japanese living in the United States (Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8), and 84,544 of them are students who may be here for only a year (Japan Information Network, 1). If the Japanese make up a relatively small percentage of foreigners living in this country, why expend the time and energy to reach out to them? Consider this. Less than 1% of all Japanese are Christians. Therefore, out of the 274,000 who live in the United States, fewer than 2,740 of them are Christians. That leaves 271,260 prospects. But is it worth reaching out to the Japanese people if they are only here for a few years? While this may seem like a disadvantage, look at this way, every few years God is "pounding the pavement" to bring you a new group of prospects!

There is of course a more important reason that motivates us to reach out to the Japanese, "God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (I Timothy 2:4). Christ has paid for the sins of every person in the world, including the Japanese.

Unfortunately this is a message which many Japanese have not had the chance to hear. While the Japanese are required to take philosophy or religion courses at school and may know a little about Christianity, the little that they do know is a far cry from the truth. Most remember hearing that Christ died, but they are unaware of the purpose behind his death. Nor do they realize that he has risen! Because they believe that Jesus is still dead, the average Japanese thinks of Jesus as a great teacher and role model. In that sense they compare Jesus to Buddha, the founder of the Buddhist religion who set the example for others to follow (Ayabe, 108). Why reach out to the Japanese? They are sinners, in need of a savior from sin. They are sinners whose sins have been forgiven. They are sinners who have not heard the message of forgiveness and hope.

Why Reach out to the Japanese in America?

While it's obvious that we will want to reach out to the Japanese because they are sinners in need of a savior, we need to answer the question of why we should reach out to Japanese while they are in America. After all, don't the Japanese enjoy freedom of religion in their country? Aren't there missionaries and Japanese pastors who are better equipped to share the gospel with them in their native tongue? While it's true that the Japanese can learn about Jesus without the government's interference, unlike Laotians and mainland Chinese, it is a fact that the Japanese remain subject to the control of culture and family in their native land.

There is a Japanese saying that illustrates this cultural pressure. "The nail that sticks up will be driven down." It means that if you are different, Japanese society will pound you down until you conform. Japanese Christians are different from the rest of Japanese society. When Christians do not participate in religious traditions that many Japanese mistakenly consider cultural traditions, they are looked down upon and often ostracized. For example, at a Buddhist funeral service everyone is expected to offer incense to the spirit of the deceased in an act of worship. Refusing to offer incense is considered a snub to the family. Japanese Christians living in Japan will be faced with the constant pressure to conform, but Japanese living in America probably will not have to deal with this pressure since they will be surrounded by Americans, not their fellow Japanese.

Of course just because a Japanese lives in America does not make him more inclined to believe the gospel. St. Paul makes it clear that all people are born dead in their sins and transgressions (Ephesians 2: 1). As long as the Japanese are dead in their sins they too will be hostile to God and will refuse to submit to his will (Romans 8:7). However, a Japanese person living in America may be more willing to study the Bible simply because his family and culture are not dictating what he can and cannot do.

Building a Bridge

Once you have decided to reach out to the Japanese living around you, where should you start? Perhaps the words of Japanese seminary student Mitsuo Haga will help answer this question. "Most Japanese are shy. They will not open their hearts to you until they have become your good friend. When they trust you deeply as a friend they will listen to what you have to say."

Building a bridge to the Japanese heart is a very important part of gaining their trust. To the Japanese, simply "getting to the point" reflects an uncaring attitude (Reynolds, 162). Unfortunately, we Americans find our patience tested by this approach since we would rather get to the task at hand than beat around the bush. Therefore patience and persistence is the key to building a bridge to the Japanese heart.

What kind of things can we do to build up a meaningful friendship with the Japanese? Begin by putting yourself in their shoes. If you were an exchange student in Japan, or working there, what would you like your Japanese neighbors to do for you? Perhaps you would appreciate a little help in performing everyday tasks like going to the supermarket, the bank, or the post office. A little help in these tasks can go a long way in alleviating stress, while showing that you care and that you can be trusted.

Another way to build a bridge is to invite the Japanese into your home to experience your culture. Although Japanese students and workers may be surrounded by Americans every day, they may never really experience "American" culture. It's estimated that only 10% of foreign visitors in this country ever see the inside of an American home (Tomhave, 15). A student may be here to study American culture but never experience it because no one has thought of inviting him over for a birthday party, a Fourth of July celebration, a Thanksgiving, Christmas, or an Easter dinner. Inviting someone over for a religious holiday has two benefits. It not only shows that you care, it also affords the perfect opportunity to share your faith as you explain the reason for the celebration, and its significance to your faith.

Another way to build a bridge is to offer to tutor someone in English. You can offer to help a student tackle his daily assignments in school, or teach the housewife a little English while her husband is at work and the children are in school.

If you enjoy cooking consider offering “American cooking” classes coupled with an English lesson. Mrs. Habben, wife of Missionary Kermit Habben, has used this outreach approach for over ten years in Japan. Once a month she offers a class in “American cooking” to all those interested. Her aim is to invite each cooking class student to come to a Bible class which meets on the days there is no cooking class. Even if those cooking class students don’t ever come to the Bible classes, by emphasizing the Christian holidays in her cooking class Mrs. Habben has been able to witness as she explains the reasons for celebrating Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving.

Offering to teach English using the Bible as your textbook is a wonderful way to reach out, but be careful that you do not do this in a deceitful way. In other words, do not offer to teach your friend English and then try to “slip” God’s Word past that student. Be up front and tell your student that you are happy to teach them English but would like to do it using the Bible as a text book since you want them to know about the wonderful hope that you have. Failure to do this creates a misunderstanding, and can lead to resentment towards you and God’s Word.

Since the Japanese are very curious people who love to learn about other cultures, they may be open to an invitation to study the Bible as a way of studying the “culture” and “religion” of their host country. This is often a good way to get Japanese living in Japan interested in studying the Bible, and it certainly can be a way to attract your Japanese neighbor to study the Bible with you. Of course as you teach the Bible, it will be necessary to stress that Christianity is not just the religion of the West, but salvation for the whole world.

There are many ways you can build a bridge to the Japanese heart. Use your talents to reach out to those whom God has placed in your care. Whatever you do to build a bridge, always keep in mind that your goal is to share God’s saving truth with your new friend.

Understanding the Japanese World View

Once you have established a bridge and are ready to share God’s Word with your new Japanese friend where should you start? Let’s look at a few things that you may want to keep in mind as you witness. First of all, what should you know about the Japanese view of religion? What is their perception of God, sin, and eternal life? Is it important to be familiar with Buddhism and Shintoism, the two main religions of Japan, to answer these questions? Let’s hear what seminarian Mitsuo Haga has to say about that. “Japanese people don’t know much about Buddhism or Shintoism. These religions have become a custom for most Japanese. Therefore, it’s more important that you know how these religions relate to their customs and world view.”

Sufficed to say, Shintoism is the worship of the gods in nature, while Buddhism is the worship of one’s ancestors. This perhaps oversimplifies the two religions, but the Japanese themselves do not know much beyond that about these religions.

Since the Japanese believe that the gods are everywhere in nature, they usually do not have any trouble believing that God exists. In fact they believe that there are over 80,000 gods who have unique powers and characteristics. Japanese believe that if you want economic success you should run to the snake god. If it’s success at school you want, then you need to run to the goddess of mercy. There is a saying that goes like this, “*Suteru kami areba tasukeru kami ari.* (If there is a god that fails you, there is also one that will save you)” (Ayabe, 105). While the Japanese believe in many gods, the idea that there is one God who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient is foreign to most Japanese.

Like any other false religion, the religions in Japan promote work righteousness. “The Japanese have a very strong sense of self-help, similar to the idea that “God helps those who help themselves” (Ayabe, 105). The Japanese generally believe that as long as you continue to be a good neighbor and don’t cause *meiwaku* (trouble), things will go well for you.

While there are some very “religious” people in Japan who still make pilgrimages to temples in remote mountains and purify themselves by standing under waterfalls of ice cold water, the majority of the people are “superstitious” rather than “religious.” Just about everyone carries a good luck charm, but if you should ask the

average Japanese whether or not he really believes in the charm's power to ward off evil, he will tell you "No." Yet he will be quick to add that he carries it "just in case."

Getting into God's Word

While we can spend more time analyzing the Japanese mind, we will never change their worldview unless we touch the Japanese with the gospel. When you are ready to share God's Word with your friend, start with the book of Genesis.

Someone who has no clue about Genesis should start here since this answers the problem of sin and the need for a Savior. After a study on how God laid out in history his plan of salvation in the Old Testament, I would go to the New Testament and show how Jesus perfectly fulfilled those prophecies (Hering).

Missionary Habben comments that the Bible study entitled "The Promise" by Pastor Harold Essmann is a good way to get from Genesis to Jesus. He also recommends Professor emeritus Paul Eickmann's "The Wonderful Works of God." These and other Bible lessons are available to you in Japanese through the World Mission Collection at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library.

As you begin to teach your Japanese friend the truths of Scripture, you will quickly find that he or she will have very little Bible history knowledge, if any at all. One novel way you can bring your Japanese friend up to speed on Bible history is by purchasing a Bible "comic book." Comic books are very popular in Japan, even among the adults. There are illustrated Bibles in Japanese that read like comic books and allow the reader to cover a lot of Bible history quickly in a simple way. Although I don't know if those books are available for purchase in the States, a missionary in Japan would be able to purchase one for you.

Difficulties

Now that you are underway with your Bible study, let's take a look at a few concepts and terms that may cause some misunderstanding in your study with your Japanese friend. One important biblical concept that will take some explaining to the Japanese is "sin". To the Japanese, *tsumi* (sin), in a legal context, means "the breaking of the law" (Ayabe, 120). Therefore, when you read passages such as Romans 3:23 which state that all have sinned, your Japanese friends may be taken aback. They may think to themselves. "All have sinned? How can that be? I have never been arrested before. I have never sinned." It will be important to clearly explain that God's definition of sin is any thought, word, or deed that is contrary to God's Word, or a failure to live up to it. Passages like Matthew 5:21 ff., which teach that even evil thoughts are sinful in God's eyes, will help drive this point home.

Another difficult concept for the Japanese to grasp is that God is a God of love. When the Bible compares God's love to that of a father's, Japanese don't always understand the comparison because they often view their fathers with fear, not love. One man even said that he had never told his parents before that he loved them, and they had never expressed their love to him either (Habben). This is not uncommon in Japan. The Japanese say that things to fear are '*Jishin, kaminari, kaji, oyaji* - (earthquakes, lightening, fire, and the old man) (Ayabe, 109). The Japanese concept of love is that of spoiling a child which leads to a sense of duty, rather than an unconditional love which leads to joyful service. What a wonderful opportunity you have to teach your Japanese friend the true meaning of love. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (I John 4:10).

Another difficult concept for the Japanese to grasp is the biblical teaching of forensic justification, namely, that God has declared us not guilty for Christ's sake. Interestingly enough, the written language itself can help in explaining this concept. Besides their own two alphabets, the Japanese have borrowed Chinese pictographs called *kanji* which represent words and ideas. The *kanji* for "righteousness" is made up of two other *kanji*. The top character stands for "lamb" while the bottom character stands for "us." When you put those two

together, “the lamb” over “us” you have the word for “righteousness.” What better way is there to describe how God declares us righteous in his sight by the blood of the lamb which covers us! Pastor Akagami comments that the *kanji* for righteousness reveals the Bible’s teaching *pittari* (right on) and is uncannily descriptive (Habben).

Yes, it is strange that the *kanji* for righteousness is so accurate and picturesque in describing how God declares us not guilty. Is it a coincidence? There is an interesting book, co-authored by a Missouri synod missionary to China and a Chinese pastor, which explains the origin of the Chinese written language that developed around the time of Abraham. There are a few *kanji* that suggest that the creators of the Chinese written language were acquainted with the biblical account of the creation and the flood. For example, the character for the word “ship” is made up of the three characters for “boat”, “eight,” and “mouth.” What big boat do you know of that had eight mouths in it? The answer of course is Noah’s ark! Why did the creators of the Chinese language choose the character “eight” to make up the character for “ship”? Why not use the character for “one hundred”? No one really knows, but the authors of this book show that there are other characters that reflect a knowledge of Biblical accounts, and it is their theory that the early Chinese knew the accounts of creation and the flood (Kang, xii).

While there are other characters that show a connection between the Chinese language and the written Word of God, we must keep in mind that this does not prove that the Bible is true. However, it is a way to get the Japanese mind thinking a little bit. If you have an interest in the written Chinese language or are studying with someone who knows Chinese characters, pick up that book and read it. The title is “The Discovery of Genesis” by C.H. Kang and Ethel R. Nelson. You can find the book in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library.

Since the Japanese world-view has been affected by Buddhism and Shintoism, another concept that will take careful explanation is that of the resurrection and eternal life. Japanese believe that after death the spirit of the deceased continues to haunt the earth for a period of time. A careful study of the biblical teaching of eschatology will help the Japanese understand that after death their spirits do not roam this earth before departing to another world. It will also help the Japanese understand that on the last day Jesus will raise the bodies of those who are his and make them glorious and immortal.

There are other concepts such as Savior, Trinity, and redemption that will take special explanation. The key is to go slowly and be patient. Don’t be surprised if your student doesn’t ask many questions at first. It may take a while for your Japanese friend to become comfortable with your style of teaching which may be quite different from anything he has experienced in his education.

The Farewell

Unless your Japanese friend has immigrated to the United States, there will most likely come a time when you will have to bid your friend farewell. If the person you have studied with has been brought to faith by the work of the Holy Spirit, one can only thank God that he used you to lead this person to faith through the study of the Word. As it becomes clear that faith has been planted in the heart of your student, begin to prepare that friend for reentry into a heathen culture. Continue to remind that new Christian that just because he or she has been baptized, things may not suddenly get better in life. Encourage him to stay faithful in the study of God’s Word and the use of the Sacraments. Give him the addresses of our churches in Japan, and be sure to pass that convert’s, or prospect’s name on to a Japanese pastor or missionary so that they can continue to work with your student.

Life as a Christian in Japan will be tough. The temptation will be strong to revert to the old ways of going along with native customs even though many of them are tied to the pagan religions. Remember, “The nail that sticks up will get driven down.” Your new friend will be a nail that sticks up. Instead of apologizing for that, encourage your new friend to stick up for Christ boldly as John and Peter did when they stood in front of the Sanhedrin as recorded in Acts 4. Before your friend leaves, read through Acts 4. Impress upon him that he has a Savior worth sticking up for because he is the only Savior from sin and death, and his friends and family need to hear about Jesus. Remind your friend that just as God equipped Peter and John to be bold

witnesses, he has equipped him to be his witness. Jesus has given us two important promises that we need to continue to focus on when we witness. First of all, Jesus has promised to be with us always (Matthew 28:19, 20). He has also promised to send the Holy Spirit to give us the very words to speak when we have the chance to stick up for Christ (Matthew 10: 19, 20). Remind your friend that when he continues to focus on these two promises, he may continue to be pounded on, but he will never be pounded down.

Conclusion

God has certainly blessed us with a message to share with the whole world, hasn't he? Not only has he given us the message, he has also given us the field in which to work. While world missions used to be oceans away, they are now at our doorstep. Take advantage of the outreach opportunities around you. Look for the Japanese family or student in your neighborhood and become a part of foreign missions at home.

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