

The Development of a Church Body in Japan:
The Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church

by

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"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28:19,20.

Introduction

The Lutheran Church in America which began mission work and helped establish a new church body in Japan, now known as the Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church (LECC), is the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). The WELS reopened the mission by sending Missionary Richard Seeger, a newly graduate of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, who arrived in Japan in April of 1957. The Tokyo area was designated as a temporary base of our new mission. In the July meeting of the Executive Board for Japan Mission, Pastor H. Shiley, Chairman, Pastor Wm. Lindloff, Secretary, and Mr. R. Milbrath, layman, passed a resolution which recommended further expansion of our field. The resolution stated as follows:

We recommend to the August convention of Synod, that we in the near future expand our work in Japan by calling other men to the field.¹

In August 1958, Missionary Richard Poetter, a former missionary in Japan in the Lutheran Church of Missouri Synod (LCMS), arrived in Japan as the second WELS missionary to join forces with Missionary Seeger. With the recommendation of Missionary Poetter, his former fellow worker in the LCMS, Mr. Ryuichi Igarashi, also joined our two missionaries as a full-time lay worker in our mission operation.

As we see the beginning years of the reopened mission, the WELS, then known as the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, was a real blessing to the Japanese field. The WELS contributed greatly by sending its own missionaries, and administered nearly all financial matters toward its development and expansion, especially in the early years. As a result, the small mission field grew into a full-fledged church body which was able to govern itself.

The main concern for this paper is to show various events that led to the establishment of the church body in Japan, particularly in view of the development of its incorporation, namely the "Articles of Incorporation" of the LECC.

I. Early Signs

Pastor E. Hoenecke, Chairman of the General Board for World Mission, then known as the Board for Foreign and Heathen Mission, once wrote in a report:

The Lord has blessed our (WELS) work... He has given us consecrated and devoted men at the front line, men who with their faithful wives and families are remaining at their posts of duty in our place because the Lord has

called them to go forward with His saving Gospel. We have asked these missionaries to continue to work forward ever greater self-support of the work in the foreign fields, so that we might be ready to go into new fields when the Lord sends us. Is it not right that we at home will pray more fervently and give more generously to hasten that day.²

The spirit for mission efforts in Japan was on the incline, and the outlook for materializing a church body became more clear. The earliest signs of developing a church body, which eventually transpired into drafting the "Articles of Incorporation," occurred on September 12, 1958. Our staff of missionaries, Seeger and Poetter, officially held a meeting, which in turn marked the first of a regular meeting of our Japan missionaries, later known as the Mission Council.

In the meeting the importance of forming a legalized church body in Japan was discussed among the two. This was a major concern, especially for the occasion of purchasing a property for the mission. It meant that for the time being, they were to register the property under the name of a missionary who would be operating the mission on the purchased land. Since it was resolved that a survey trip of Ibaraki Prefecture was to be conducted in the near future for the purpose of finding a permanent base for mission operation, and since there was nothing in the laws of Japan that would hinder them from incorporating the existing field, the two missionaries urged the Executive Board for Japan Mission to pursue the matter.

After conducting three survey trips in Ibaraki Prefecture, a nucleus of interested people was found in Mito City, the capital of the prefecture.

In October a letter by Missionary Poetter sent to friends in the States said:

Just North of Tokyo along the Pacific Ocean is Ibaraki Prefecture. No doubt you will hear this name frequently in the future. We have made frequent excursions into this territory as far north as the prefectural capital, Mito. At present we are looking for living quarters in Mito. We hope to make this city of 120,000 people the base of our future mission work.⁴

By November of 1958 worship services began, and the Poetters moved to Mito City in a rented residence. Other areas in which the missionaries drew their interests were Daigo and Tsuchiura in the same prefecture.

At about the time when the first major evangelism program was being carried out, which involved mailing literary materials to about 700 contacts in the prefecture, a special meeting was called in February 3, 1959. In the meeting, the two missionaries decided to ask the Executive Board for Japan Mission to purchase property and build a house in Mito for the Poetters and also in Tsuchiura for the Seegers. In May the Board responded by providing two guiding principles for the missionaries to follow. According to the first principle the mission is:

To be operated with the goal of the idigenous church in view. By that we mean, we (WELS) supply the original workers, and as soon as possible our men are to train native workers to carry on the work. We would supply our missionaries with homes until a nucleus to take over more of the work.⁵

The goal proposed future establishment of a native church body in Japan. Furthermore, the WELS encouraged the operation to be more indepen-

dent, gradually replacing our missionaries with trained native pastors, as long as the field persisted on growing into a larger scale. However, the most seemingly important factor concerning the two missionaries at the time was that the Board approve to grant aid for building their homes.

The second guiding principle is stated as follows:

All of us (Board) have not altered our opinion about the location of our mission... We are happy with the choice of Mito and Tsuchiura, etc. All of us feel that Seeger should leave Tokyo as soon as a third man is available. The new man can take over the work begun in Tokyo and study language... Our three men should be fairly close together for consultation, furlough, mutual strengthening, and above all, to be the future theological faculty of the Japanese students.⁶

The WELS was not only inclined to add a new missionary to the staff, but also to look ahead in forming a worker training program on the field for future native pastors. This was a definite step toward forming a church body capable of producing its own ministers.

From the Spring of 1959 to the Summer of 1960 the mission grew steadily in threefold. First of all, the areas of concentration spread into five more cities, Ishioka, Hitachi, Shimotsuma, Oarai, located in Ibaraki Prefecture, and Utsunomya in the neighboring Tochigi Prefecture.

Secondly, a number of baptisms and confirmations took place, first of which an infant was baptized in Mito in May, 1959. In addition to the church, two adults were baptized and confirmed in November, which marked the birth of a congregation in Mito. In July of 1960 four adults were baptized and confirmed, which also marked the birth of a congregation in

Tsuchiura.

Thirdly, at the August 1959 convention, the WELS authorized to call a third missionary in Japan. Missionary Luther Weindorf was added to the missionary staff with his arrival in August, 1960. All of these events certainly helped the further growth of the mission. But most importantly, a nucleus of members, future members of the LECC, was born.

II. The Visitation

On August 22, 1960, a day after the Weindorfs arrived, the WELS visitors, Pastor H. Shiley and Pastor E. Hoenecke, arrived in Japan for an instructive visitation. During their stay a three day conference was held between the Japan staff and the visitors in Nikkatsu Hotel at Tokyo. The Japan staff attending the conference consisted of Missionaries Seeger, Poetter, and Weindorf, Mr. Igarashi as literary assistant, and another native member. According to Pastor E. Hoenecke, the conference:

Discussed all the matters which were on the minds of our missionaries... in three meetings which we have held, at one of which the Japanese representatives were invited and took part in the discussions.⁷

During the conference an important resolution grew out of the consultations, which read as follows:

Be it resolved by our Japan Missionary Conference that we (Japan Staff and Visitors) urgently petition the Board for World Missions and the Board of Trustees to permit us to draw up the necessary legal papers for incorporation in Japan under Japanese law and after the approval of the prepared documents from the above Board we be permitted to take the final steps of submitting the documents to

the Japanese government and securing their approval.⁸

After the visitors returned a permission was later granted by the WELS to this resolution. The preliminary work began for the incorporation of the church body. The field visitation by the WELS representatives resulted in making a big progress toward the birth of the national church, the LECC.

In responding to the successful visitation Missionary Poetter wrote a letter to the President of the WELS, President O. J. Naumann, saying:

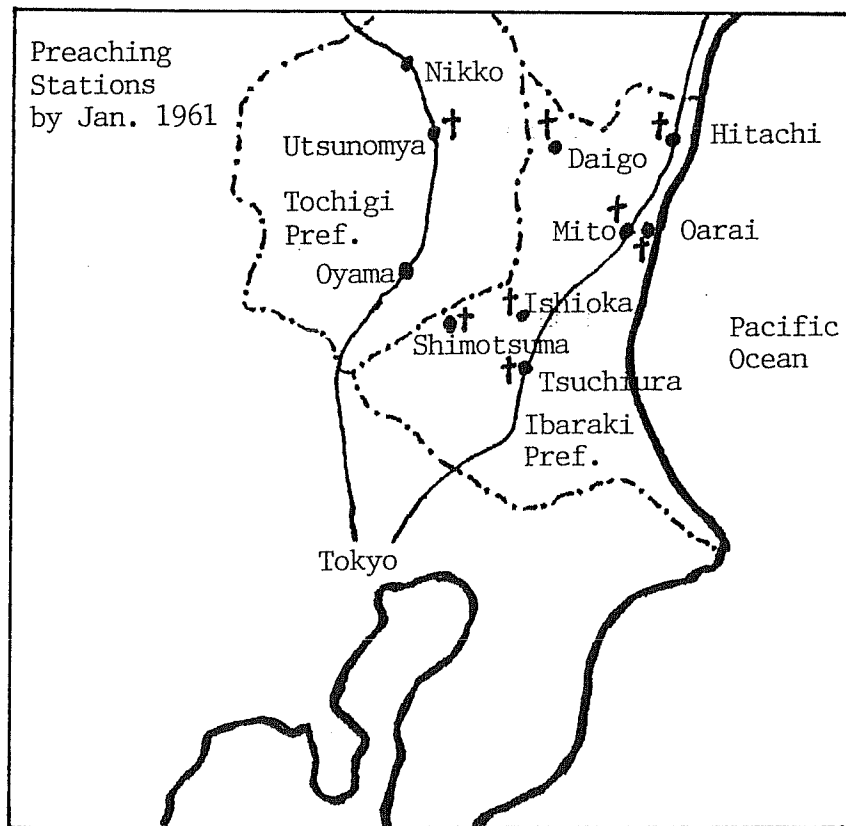
The visit of the Rev. Edgar Hoenecke and the Rev. Harry Shiley to the Japan Mission field of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod was a blessed one for our small mission force far removed from the mother church... When we think of many blessings of these past days, worshiping together, priveleged to be refreshed and strengthened by the Word of God preached by Rev. Hoenecke and Rev. Shiley, praying together for the salvation of souls in Christ in Japan, fellowship and convivial company, priveleged to review our course here in Japan with our mission board leaders and to plan for the further conquest by the Gospel, we can but say numble thanks to the home church and encourage them to continue a policy of personal contact with their mission field through their mission leaders and chosen leaders of the church... We hope and pray that the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod will understand and receive joyfully the reports of Rev. Hoenecke and Rev. Shiley and see the need for placing a minimum of five missionaries in the Japan field.⁹

The hope of receiving additonal men was eventually accomplished after the church body was established in Japan.

III. Organizing Efforts

Along with the progress in incorporating the church body and also a hopeful increase of the missionary staff to a total of five, the mission operation began to organize in two areas. One was the overall mission strategy and the other was the organization of the Mission Council.

In September of 1960 a mission strategy was adopted to concentrate their work on the two major highways stemming north out of Tokyo. One of them passed through Tsuchiura, Mito, and Hitachi in Ibaraki Prefecture, and the other through Oyama, Utsunomya, and Nikko in Tochigi Prefecture. This strategy was adopted for the reason that they were the only Lutheran body operating in the two prefectures.



The first signs of organizing the Mission Council, originally started as a regular monthly meeting of Japan missionaries, began in October of 1960. In the meeting the rules for the office of the chairman of the Council were established, and Missionary Poetter was elected as the first chairman for the two year term. In January of 1961 the Mission Council made the first attempt in compiling a budget. The budget for the fiscal year 1961-62 was drawn up and solidified. Finally, on November 15, 1961, the Mission Council was formally organized. The members were to be the active missionaries on the field and the native men of the church "deemed responsible by the majority of the active missionaries."¹⁰ With this decision Mr. Igarashi was chosen as the first native to enter the membership of the Council. It was in this meeting that another important matter was discussed which pertained to the progress for incorporation. It was decided that Lawyer Yamada was to draw up the legal document of the religious incorporation under the assistance and guidance of the Council. By this time, it was noted in the minutes that congregations were born in Hitachi and Utsunomya, and the Japanese church periodical, Church News, began publication.

Everything seemed to come together with all the necessary ingredients, such as the governing body, the administration, the congregations, the publication, etc., to form a respective church body in Japan. Yet, in a report the chairman of the Mission Council pointed out that:

We do not have a single piece of property or one chapel in Japan. How we love to come home on furlough to worship with you in your beautiful churches. Many of our makeshift meeting places are really a hinderance to our work. It is difficult for people to come into little

rooms in someone's house which we had rented for an hour... We really do not want to build churches, that is, church buildings as you conceive them in Japan. What a station needs to get is \$1000 for land and \$1000 for a small building which they can make a bit churchly and call the house of God... We realize Synods budget is limited... We recommend our need to the Lord.¹¹

The purchasing of any land was delayed until the church body was fully ready to be incorporated with the exception of the little chapel in Utsunomya, which was dedicated in May, 1961. The matter of purchasing land was one of the major concerns of the missionaries, ever since the first meeting of the missionaries was held. There were all together three choices that developed in the course of the past few years.

The first choice was that each property was to be registered under the individual missionary operating on the land. Such was the case with Missionary Tiefel, the first contact missionary in Japan, who purchased a land in Tokyo under his name. But after leaving the WELS, the congregation, the property, and all copies of the materials produced at the cost of the WELS were lost. To avoid any possibility of such instances the choice was never highly recommended.

The second choice was that all properties were to be registered under a foreign incorporation. The law required the minimum of three responsible officers. This choice was annulled, because they feared that for some reasons the staff of three missionaries may be decreased at any time in the future.

The third choice was that all properties were to be registered under a incorporated body in Japan. Since this choice was very favorable, the Mission Council urged the WELS in 1958 to pursue the authorization

for incorporating the church body in Japan.

IV. The Church Body Established

The year, in which the new church body in Japan was found, was 1962. The Mission Council met on March 8, and proposed the finalized document of the "Articles of Incorporation of Shukyo Hojin (Religious Corporation). This was approved by the Council, and recommended to the WELS for adoption. Shortly there after, with the approval by the WELS, the church body was named the Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church in accordance with the incorporation paper. It was of utmost importance to include the word "Christian" in the title, for it identified the church body from other secular and religious organizations in Japan. The other words in the title were practically meaningless to the Japanese people.

Another historical event occurred on April 29, 1962. When the Church Delegate Council of the LECC held its first meeting in Mito, the LECC was formally established. The seven delegate members were Missionaries Poetter and Weindorf, Mr. Igarashi, and four other members of the existing congregations. The primary concern at this meeting was to present and to study the legal document. After its adoption the Delegate Council acted accordingly. The delegates elected Missionaries Poetter and Seeger, and Mr. Igarashi as responsible officers with Missionary Poetter being the representative officer. All other matters that were implemented in the document were also adopted.

Then the motion was made and seconded to:

permit the WELS to register its property in Japan under the Incorporation of the LECC with specific moral agreement that the LECC shall always administer the property

according to the wishes of the WELS.¹²

Within six months the land in Mito was purchased, and was registered under the Religious Incorporation of the LECC, which was finally approved by the Ibaraki Prefectural Government on January 29, 1963.

Endnotes

1. Seminary Students. The History of the Wisconsin Synod in Japan. Book I. pg 33.
2. Poetter, Richard. Yearly Notes. 1958 pg 1.
3. Ibid.
4. Poetter Richard. A letter to friends. Oct. 30, 1958.
5. Poetter Richard. Yearly Notes. 1959 pg 3.
6. Ibid.
7. Hoenecke, Edgar. "The Northwestern Lutheran." Nov. 6, 1960.
8. Poetter, Richard. Yearly Notes. 1960 pg 1.
9. Poetter, Richard. A letter to Pres. O. J. Naumann. Sept. 20, 1960.
10. Poetter, Richard. Yearly Notes. 1961 pg 1.
11. Poetter. Richard. Report: The Work and Goals of our Church in Japan. 1961.
12. Poetter, Richard. Yearly Notes. 1962 pg 1.

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