

The 24th JELCW Newsletter

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Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church Women
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Overall theme: “Living Together in the Grace of God”

Subtheme: “Encouraging Each Other in Hope and Joy, We Work Together for Peace on Earth.”

*Scriptural Theme: “Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him”
—Romans Chapter 6: 8*

To You

Lord, what is next?



Rev. Hirotaka Tokuhiko
Pastor, Gifu Church
Ōgaki Church

A year has passed since I came back to Japan from Brazil where I served for 10 years. I appreciate all the prayers and support I received from the JELCW during those years.

It was a great relief when the Japanese-language congregation in Brazil grew enough to be independent and self-sufficient, which was only the beginning of another struggle of mine: to tackle various problems in the slums. I preached to children and parents, and though I sometimes quarreled with them, we forgave and helped each other. We shared laughter and tears and became an irreplaceable family. They taught me, healed me and helped me to grow.

Since ‘we are the ones who have died with Christ and believe that we will also live with him,’ we are expected to learn the life of Christ and follow it. Each one of us has a special ability and interest different from those of others. When all of our various lives are combined and united, we can be closer to the life of Christ as a whole.

In addition, your existence and the work you do is important part of it and precious. When you think to yourself ‘Why do I have to face all these difficulties?’/ ‘Why does my church confront one hardship after another?’ why don’t you ask God ‘Do I have a mission here?’

The difficulties I faced in Brazil crushed me, then released me and helped me grow. I even could enjoy all these hardships. I think God is now preparing some new assignments for me to solve. None of us can see our lives accomplished before we die. Life is a repetition of difficulties, which I think should be called blessings.

It is April now; time to start something new. Let us walk together by asking ‘God what comes next?’

Reports from the Districts

East District Women's Group/EDWG

- Hitherto and hereafter-

Naomi Ichikawa, President

After I started to work as the president of EDWG, I clearly realized that every activity done up until today was handed down by our sister members' sincere works and prayers. I had often heard about the past activities in our district, but I have to admit I did not know what was exactly done. When I appealed to the members for goods for events, a lot of handicrafts made with great care and time were offered. I thought I could hear their prayers inside the offerings. I strongly felt a necessity to let all the members know of our fellow volunteers' heartfelt activities so that we can better develop a circle of voluntary works.

At the autumnal district meeting, we discussed how to connect all the districts' events so that each district regards them as its own. Due to the shortage of time to discuss, we sent out a questionnaire to collect the members' opinions and distributed the meeting minutes. We were grateful to have JELCW president Ms. Nakahara till the end of the meeting.

We have started to be connected and walk together believing that the Lord is always with us.

We would like to make a step forward to answer the theme 'Turn our eyes more to society'.



Tokai (East Pacific Coast) District Women's Group/TDWG

-Joy of having sisters in faith-

Shigeko Sakai, President

The first meeting of the 22nd TDWG was held at *Kakegawa-Kikukawa* Church on November 16th, 2019. There were 48 attendants from 19 churches in the *Tokai* District.

After the opening worship, Pastor Hiromichi Yokota gave a speech on his experience of refugee support in the Republic of Burundi. It was such a touching story that we were inspired to do something. The attendants were divided into three groups to discuss our future vision and also to talk about how to choose the next executive members.



At the beginning of the discussion, I said that the declining number of members is unavoidable and common to all churches, but I hoped the discussion would be a productive one, which it turned out to be. It was very encouraging to hear some members mention that we in our 60s, 70s or 80s still have energy to do voluntary work instead of the young people who are busy with work or raising children.

Receiving the blessings from God, we are ready to go forward with the joy of having sisters in faith.

West District Women's Group/WDWG -Dogwood Gathering-

Shigeko Sakai, President

On September 23rd, the Autumnal Equinox, we held a retreat called 'Dogwood Gathering' at Saijo Church.

Dr. Urara Masaki from the *Kobe* Lutheran Seminary and *Kansai* Bible Seminary was the speaker. She spoke on the theme 'We live with Christ in the power of God' and the subtheme 'To Mary, Martha and You'. She earnestly interpreted how we should be as Christian women.

We, who live for the moment in communities, at home, church, and in the workplace, are Mary as well as Martha. We would like to move ahead with the power of God to return the blessings.

The number of WDWG members is very small but we are trying to do our very best. We will keep on marching together with Dr. Masaki's message in our mind.

Pastor Suzuki and our brothers helped us prepare for the retreat amidst a typhoon, and we were able to hold it on a sunny day just after its passing.



Kyushu District Women's Group/KDWG -Sharing the blessings-

Miho Hirayama, President

In the morning of September 26th, the chairpersons of KDWG had a meeting where activity reports from each district were shared and later in the afternoon, a joint retreat with the *Kumamoto* Area's 'Autumnal Gathering' was held.

We have been supporting the 'District Summer Camp for Junior and Senior High School Students' for years. A mother whose son attended the camp gladly talked about her son's growth through the camp and also the blessing of providing a church as a camp site in return. It was lucky for us to be able to hear this mother's feelings and thoughts in person, not in a written form. We also shared the reports from the *Fukuoka* Area and the *Chikugo* Area. Hoping that the 25th JELCW meeting will be successful, both the former and the current executive members spoke.



In the afternoon, Ms. Kazuko Matsuzawa, a representative of 'Tomoni-ikiru (Live Life Together)' spoke of its educational support in a northernmost prefecture of Bangladesh. We hoped that we could put our prayers into action.

As a flock praying together, we had the opportunity to share in our blessings. And now, we will leave for tomorrow full of energy.

Turn Our Eyes More to Society Our Neighbor Minorities

There are people trying to find a place and time where they can be themselves struggling with internal conflicts and feeling difficulties to lead everyday lives. Hard to be understood, they are also exposed to the bias against them among ordinary people.

Though, the issue of minorities might be a very delicate and difficult theme to discuss, let us just listen very carefully to the voices of the contributors. May there be a society where each individual is respected!

Living in church as a Christian with a diversity of genders and sexualities

Mio Aoki
Kengun Church

For the past half century, I have been suffering from living as my true self. I am a transgender woman, a so-called 'sexual minority' in Japan.

"Repent! Otherwise evil destroys you."

Haunted by these words, I tried not to disclose my situation even after I was baptized. I thought my very existence went against the Bible and my parents' wishes. "Am I an evil Christian attending worship in church, who will not repent for the rest of my life?" I prayed and prayed seeking an answer to my identity.

I had no one to whom I could express my anguish or consult with except a friend I've had since my childhood, who suggested that I keep it to myself.

Badly depressed, I attempted suicide. I entered a rehabilitation facility and transcribed the Bible like a child in starvation, day after day. I did not tell anybody about my agony. I kept praying so that I could get over it. A pastor visited me, but I could not confess.

"Will I be forgiven? Where should I go for help if I am expelled from church?" With a resolute determination, I visited a pastor to tell him that I am transgender.

He most calmly responded to me. I learned later that he had a deep understanding of people like me. I was awfully grateful that I had been baptized in a Lutheran church. At that time, I did not want anybody to know about my identity, but a huge natural disaster made me disclose it.

A horrible earthquake occurred in Kumamoto in 2016. I evacuated to a designated shelter, but I could not bring myself to share a room or take a bath with men because of my gender identity. My body shape had started to change due to a long estrogen administration. I hesitated to use either the men's or women's restroom. I was practically kicked out of the shelter. Having nowhere else to go, I visited my church to survive. I had no choice but tell the people there that I am transgender.

Later on, the pastor suggested to me that I join the Women's Group of the church and I followed his advice.

Some say that it is a distinction, not discrimination. I think both are the same in a sense of color coding. I am engaged in LGBT enlightenment activities. A lot of people listen to me with great interest. What makes me sad is that most of them feel sorry for us and show us a pitiful look. We are not pitiful souls. All we want is to be treated normally just like others.

In Japan, LGBT is thought of as a gender identity disorder, a kind of illness. The WHO declares that a gender identity disorder is not an illness and denying it is a violation of human rights.

Outsiders even called me 'rotten apples hanging around a church' last year, but I strongly believe that Jesus loves people like me as well.

I am leading my life as a queer person with resolution and pride just like Jesus was in ancient days.

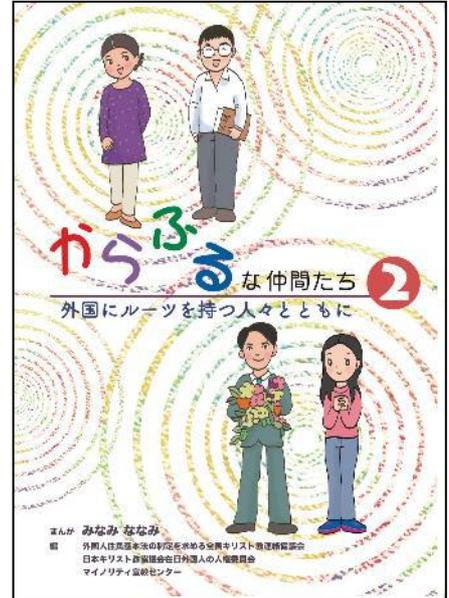
Introducing Minority Mission Center

Rev. Li Minseng
Pastor, *Den'enchofu Church*

In 1977, the UN Human Rights Subcommittee expressed the view that ‘minority’ does not only mean a group of small number of people but also those who are in a vulnerable position and rarely have an opportunity to express themselves. In that sense, a society that listens to minorities may be ‘the one where people in a powerless position are not excluded but a variety of individuals’ voices echo one another.’ The four pillars that support our concept are ‘A Fight against Racism’, ‘Education Program for Youth’, ‘Development of Spirituality for Conciliation and Peace’ and ‘Spreading the Concepts Both Domestically and Internationally,’ aiming at achieving a peaceful society richly based on a multiethnic and multicultural co-existence.

It may sound a little contradictory, but staying close to minorities means being aware of ‘how seldom we listen to them.’ That means ‘to face our own human frailties’ unable to be the one we wish to be. Only when we acknowledge our weaknesses, we can respect the diversity in our society.

We started a program in the autumn of 2017 named “Colorful Café.” We listen to life stories of people who have roots in foreign countries and compile them into *manga* (comic book.) We issued two volumes named “Our Colorful Friends.” We distributed one of each, so please have a look at it.
(NCC Human Rights Committee for Foreign Residents in Japan)



Introducing Six JELC Churches Registered as Tangible Cultural Property

In order to raise public awareness of and interest in the preservation and utilization of cultural properties, historical buildings over 50 years old are registered by the Agency for Cultural Affairs.

With *Kurume Church* and *Kumamoto Church* now having been registered, the JELC currently has six registered churches. The following is the introduction of them in order of the registration.

=*Ogi Church (Ogi City, Saga Prefecture)* =

Constructed 1938

Registered December 11, 1998

Ogi Church is a wooden architecture with a gable roof (*kirizuma-yane*). The western side of a one-story chapel is semi-circular where the altar is. The eastern side of the church has a two-storied hall connected to a rectory. The site area is 247 square meters.

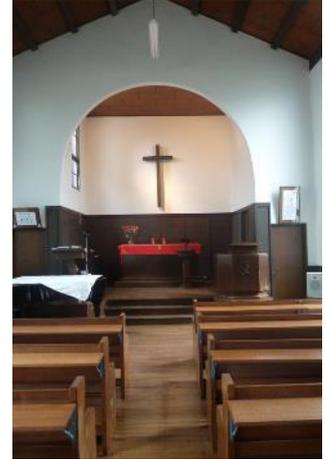


=**Ichikawa Church (Ichikawa City, Chiba Prefecture)** =

Constructed 1955

Registered October 23, 2008

The beginning of *Ichikawa Church* was brought about by Missionary A. Paulus who started a worship gathering at her residence in Kōnodai, Ichikawa City. Later, a building in the area that used to be a military barrack was used as a place for worship. In 1955, *Ichikawa Church* was constructed near a river. In 2012 it underwent a thirteen month-long renovation and is loved by the people in the community.



=**Fukkatsu (Resurrection) Church (Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture)** =

Constructed 1953

Registered August 13, 2012

‘The church itself, as a piece of architecture, preaches the gospel’- that is what I learned when our church was registered. God has been leading more people to the church than we thought. We can see the architect Mr. William Merrell Vories’ way of living and his philosophy based on faith here and there in church. We are pretty sure God deems our church to be good.



=**Okazaki Church (Okazaki City, Aichi Prefecture)** =

Constructed 1953

Registered December 24, 2013

Designed by Mr. Vories, it has rough white walls and its roof is made of salt-grilled red bricks. There is a small steeple with a cross on the roof. On the ceiling inside, we see a wooden king-post truss which gives us a sense of ascending. Sunrays from slit windows on either side of the altar light up a communion table and a cross above and behind the altar.



=**Kurume Church (Kurume City, Fukuoka prefecture)** =

Constructed 1918
Registered March 18, 2019



We gratefully celebrated a centennial dedication anniversary in November of 2018. Our joy was doubled by the registration of our church as a tangible cultural property next year. Actually, it has been 119 years since *Kurume* Church started its missionary work. *Nichizen* Kindergarten, located on the same site, is 105 years old. Surrounded by tall modern buildings, the red-bricked church exudes an aura of faith.



=**Kumamoto Church (Kumamoto City, Kumamoto Prefecture)** =

Constructed 1950
Registered December 5, 2019

Every morning, the radio broadcasts traffic information around *Suido-cho* crossing, which is very close to where *Kumamoto* Church is located. It will say, for example, ‘*Suido-cho* crossing is congested for so-and-so kilometers.’ Almost everyone in Kumamoto City knows where our church is. It was burnt down by air raids in 1945 but was restored in 1950.

In 2016, a big earthquake badly damaged the church, but thanks to the sincere prayers by many people, it returned to the good condition it was in before. (The history of 122 years’ missionary work was not interrupted)



Succession of Faith Inside a Bulb

**Ai Miyashita
Kengun Church**

Two children of mine were raised in the Sunday school of *Hiyoshi Church*. We moved to Kumamoto one year after the Fukushima nuclear accident in 2011.

My daughter belonged to an art club in her junior and senior high school days, and she goes to an art college in Kyoto now. When she came back to Kumamoto for the coming-of-age day, Pastor Yasui blessed my daughter in a *kimono*. Pastor Yasui chose the hymn ‘Inside a Bulb’ for her which has been sung by the church choir a lot after the 2016 earthquake. The words of the hymn seemed to fit her feelings, for she looked deeply moved. She was given time to talk to the people in church from the altar. She told what it had been like to have a noticeable birthmark and to be raised in a single-parent family, but still connected to church and she now understood they were all part of God’s plans.

My son was always nice and kind to his sister, trying to protect her from her fears. He caused me a lot of worries and grief but now goes to Japan Lutheran College in Mitaka City, Tokyo.

The 2020 spring is filled with joy thanks to the prayers and the supports of many people my family and I have met in Kumamoto.

Square of Everyone’s Voice

Bell of Love—donated by the then-president Kennedy Saijo Church Women’s Group

The ‘Gathering of Dogwood’ of the West District Women’s Group was held at *Saijo Church* last fall. It was our first time to hold such a big gathering, but with great help of from the male members, cooperative spirits among the church members seemed to be strengthened. The gathering was also an opportunity to introduce our church bell donated by J.F. Kennedy in 1962. When Pastor Olsen went back to America temporarily, he told his friends it was a pity that a church in Japan did not have a church bell. Hearing this, a boy wrote to President Kennedy asking him to send a bell to the church and the president did send one responding to the boy’s innocent request.

We have been ringing the bell at the beginning of worship for 58 years, always remembering the boy’s faith.



<Good News!>

On March 20, 2020, there was an ordination at *Hakata Church*. Ms. Maho Morishita, who visited Sabah Theological Seminary with the JELCW’s executive members in 2019, was ordained as a pastor. It is our great joy to have a new pastor.

May she be richly blessed, guided, and helped by God!!