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Forward

My husband and I were involved in Japanese ministry in the UK as missionaries of the Japanese Christian Fellowship Network. When we visited local churches back in Japan, pastors and believers often said that they didn't understand returnee Christians very well and wondered if we could write some sort of guidebook. Little by little, I wrote about the experiences God has given us in our work and thanks to the support of Yuko Ozeki and other JCFN volunteers, this booklet was completed in time for the 2nd All Nations Returnees Conference held in March 2010. For this I truly thank God.

What is written is based on our experiences over the past 14 years. In order to make it as useful as possible, I would like to hear the experiences and comments from those who actually use it. I would really appreciate your input.

The term, "we," in the text means people who are involved in serving in ministry to returnees. I thank God for giving me the opportunity to serve together with JCFN and Japanese Christian Fellowship Network in this way.

March, 2010 Yoshie Yokoyama

Lastly : Think Globally, Act Locally.

This is a phrase made popular in the environmental field. It means that a person thinks globally but does what they can and takes action where they are. In line with globalization, God has scattered Japanese all over the world and, using the means of migration, told them about Himself and brought them back to Japan to bless the churches there. Each returnee becomes a labourer for the Lord in response to the Great Commission and is sent out to different regions in Japan and throughout the world. In this Diaspora mission work we do what we can where God places us. To that end, we cannot forget the 2 aspects of unchanging universal church and each individual church. It is given to us, as it is shown, to do what we can for each returnee. We look to God and entrust to Him to guide each returnee's life and lead them to a church where they can put down roots. Even if the returnee does not end up being connected to ones own church, it will be good if they ultimately become connected to the great body of Christ. We are expectant that the Lord will raise up people who will walk with returnees.

In many churches there are returnees. There are also Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos and others. There are disabled people. White and blue colours also exist. There are also the elderly and young people. In the Body of Christ there is great variety of people and they are used as Christ's witnesses in the world. We are looking to the Lord of mission to further promote this work.

1. Who are returnees?

Let's look at two examples first.

Case1 : Ms. A (single woman)

The first time in my life that I met a Christian was in the UK. The person was very nice to me, and I started to go to church and learn about the Bible. It was a local church and everything was in English. I learned English at a Christian English school in a university town. All of the teachers were Christians and I was staying with a Christian family. I had never met any Christians or visited a Church in Japan before. I felt drawn to the way that my teachers and my host family lived, and started to go to church whenever I was invited. There were about 200 people attending the church. Since it was in a university town, there were particularly large numbers of young people. The worship and praise was led by a band from the front, with the music directed towards the youth. People ranging from young children to the elderly attended the service, and everyone sang with smiling faces as they looked up at the words projected on the screen. As I had a good command of English, I could understand the general meaning of what was said. And as I am the sort of person who says anything that comes into my mind I felt comfortable about saying whatever I felt. I attended a Bible study, came to understand the gospel and wanted to believe. "Do you believe in Jesus as your saviour?" I was asked. I answered, "Yes." Everyone was so happy for me. I learned about baptism, and asked if I could be baptized. I was told that there would be a baptismal ceremony two weeks later and was able to be included. I returned to Japan 1 month after being baptized.

After returning to Japan I visited a church near my parent's place, but I was surprised at how different it was. The first service I attended felt gloomy and rigid. The congregation was small and there were few young people. When they worshipped, people sang while looking down at a book. I didn't know any of the worship songs at all. When listening to the message most of the people looked down or had their eyes closed. When I told the pastor, "I was baptized in the UK before I came back to Japan" he was very pleased and asked me, "Do you play the piano? and "Do you like children?" However when I told him that I did not have a Japanese Bible, he was very surprised. Since I had been immersed in English I didn't know how to pray in Japanese. As I listened to people pray in the Japanese church, I found it very difficult because of the kind of language and level of respect that was used. When I told people that I couldn't pray it surprised them again. After that I felt that the attitude to me became somewhat cold. In the UK, both the pastor and the congregation would call each other by their first names, but in Japan it seems that I have to call the pastor, "Reverend so and so," which makes me feel rigid as well. My experience at a Japanese church was very different from in the UK, so I am not sure if I will go

back to this church. I would like to find a church similar to my church in the UK.

Case 2: Mr. B (businessman, stayed in France for a few years as an expat)

Since my wife was a Christian, we looked for a Japanese church upon our arrival in Paris, and I started to play the role of her driver. In the beginning, I would not enter the church building, and then only joined in the times of fellowship as the next step. As I began to feel less wary, I thought I'd try listening to the message and started to attend the service. As the church did not have a pastor at that time, it was usually the church officers who took turns to preach, and whenever possible, pastors serving in different areas of Europe would come to preach. It was a blessing to be able to listen to the different pastor's messages. At a time when there was no pastor I was moved by the dedication of the congregation to support and build up the church, which prompted me to want to know, "a lifestyle committed to living out what one believes." Shortly thereafter, I started to read the Bible seriously, decided to become a Christian and was baptized. Both my wife and I immediately began to be involved in serving at the church and live a fulfilling church life. The church had many comings and goings and so I heard a lot of stories of fellow believers who'd had similar experiences to mine and who had gone back to Japan. Churches in Japan seemed to be very different and I felt confused about some things but I went back to Japan with a determination to try my wife's home church.

Everyone at my wife's home church was excited that I had become a Christian and welcomed me. Although it was often the case that I did not agree with the differences with my church in Paris, I was able to talk to my wife and now I feel, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." There were two things especially that took time to get used to. After returning to Japan, I felt that "The church in Paris was really interdenominational." Both the preachers and members of the congregation were from different denominations. It didn't seem to be so well organised, but there was freedom. Live and let live. Yet I remember that my wife was distressed every once in a while because of this. There were many different kinds of people and she was not able to accept some of them. At the church we currently attend, there is an emphasis on the teaching of the denomination and doing things "for the denomination". I am not sure how this overlaps with or differs from doing things "for God," and that makes me feel uncomfortable. Another thing is that certain roles assigned by the church are based on seniority. It is not something that is explicitly mentioned, but that is my observation. Important roles are assigned to long-time members and church officers. A new member like myself can only be given a role as a greeter. There were fewer people at my church in Paris and there was no pastor, so whether one was new or a long-term member, I had the feeling that we were working together to build the church. Now, I feel that I am somehow surviving in the Japanese society in church, rather than being part of the "body of Christ." That may be just the way it is in Japan.

As you have just read, someone who has heard the Gospel overseas and gone back to Japan as a Christian is called a "returnee Christian." Because their background and process of salvation is different from those who became a Christian in Japan, they may feel strange when visiting a church in Japan upon

If you feel that you want to understand the feeling of returnees but cannot, please take advantage of the fellowship of the "bridge for returnees." Send returnees to us. If there are any returnees in your church who appear to be suitable for this work, please encourage them to be used by the Lord as a host for the "bridge for returnees."

There are believers who have a burden to help returnees even though they are neither returnees nor have experienced living overseas themselves. God uses various ways to bring returnees into the core body of church by using those who do not have overseas experience. Please encourage the believers who have such a burden to work as a "bridge for returnees," and send them out.

Returnees who have left church (believers and seekers) because they did not feel accepted are all over the nation. The "bridge for returnees" is required everywhere in Japan.

Bridge-builder

The host for the "bridge for returnees" is called a bridge-builder. A bridge connects two points. It's a person who shoulders the role of the bridge connecting the church and returnees.

Must-do's for Bridge-builders

For the person who plays the role of a bridge, the goal is to help the one who crosses to get from point A to point B. In this case the goal is to help returnees get connected to a church. The goal is not to have them stay on the bridge. The goal is not having many people gather at the "bridge for returnees" meeting. In order to continue to serve with a clear vision, developing and training Bridge-builders will become important.

“Bridge for returnees” ministry

In such a case, the “bridge for returnees” ministry is useful.

- “The goal of “bridge for returnees”: to connect returnees to church.
- The activities of the “bridge for returnees”: to meet the returnee-specific needs, which only returnees can understand. To assist churches that want to understand, but cannot understand, and connect returnees to them.
- Forms of “bridge for returnees”: Home meetings (for ladies who can gather at day time meetings during the week), small groups (for singles who have jobs), and others.
- Qualities of hosts (people who are burdened for this work): Someone who is a returnee himself, in many cases such a person follows up new returnees.
 - ① Rooted in a church
 - ② Church – pastor understands and supports this work. The church prays for and supports the work. The ideal situation is if the church has an awareness of sending/sponsoring the host in this work.
- Nature of the “bridge for returnees”: interdenominational.

University student Christians are energized by the activity of KGK (Christian student group) and nurtured. Lady believers are encouraged at interdenominational “ladies’ luncheons” and motivated to work hard serving in church.

Similarly, returnees need such a bridge where their feelings are accepted, light is given through the word of God, they obtain vitality and return to church. It’s necessary to have this kind of bridge for returnees.

Case 5: Mrs. E (housewife)

When my husband was assigned to work in the States I went with him. There I became involved in the fellowship at a Japanese church. I was baptized and returned back to Japan, to a conservative area where I’d lived before going to the States. Several years have passed since my return. I have felt bewildered, but each church has its own characteristics and good points, and I am blessed to be involved with fellowship at church and am thankful to serve there. However, it could be due to the area but there are no other returnees around. I am afraid that people will think I am showing off or boasting if I talk about the States, so I keep everything in my heart in my daily life, which is painful. I hope that I can talk openly about the time that was a milestone for me in my Christian life. I really would like to meet and talk with other returnees.

The Christian in this case can be revitalized and encouraged to return to the centre of church life through the “bridge for returnees.”

their return. Also the Japanese church members may feel something different.

2. How can I relate to them? —“Are returnees space aliens”?

North and South, East and West in Japan. We experience culture shock even moving within Japan. When we move to a new location for school or work, we go through the process of adjusting to the local customs. We learn a new way to do things and get used to a new language, human relationships and customs that we had previously assumed didn’t work. The church setting is also like a small society. People coming from a different church background will experience a similar process of adaptation.

Meeting someone with a different background from oneself can be a sort of culture shock, not only for the one visiting, but also for the ones who welcome them. There is a step-by-step process to welcome and learn to live with those who have a completely different way of doing things, different values and language, sometimes even the way they dress.

We often hear, “We have experience of welcoming people who move from other areas of Japan, but we have no idea about returnees.” We’ve even heard some say, “Returnees are like space aliens.” Despite such unfamiliar experiences an increasing number of churches (both lay people and pastors) want to understand how they can welcome returnees. They want to know how to make returnees feel they’d like to visit their church again. This exciting development is happening in various parts of Japan.

In order to understand their background and welcome them, it is extremely important to learn what kind of experiences those returnees had overseas and how their faith was nurtured. The following are some of the keys to do so.

Point 1. What kind of church has the returnee attended overseas?

What kind of church did the visiting returnee attend during their stay overseas? Was it a local church, or a Japanese church (often called JCF, which is the abbreviation of Japanese Christian Fellowship)?

If it was a local church, it is most likely that the returnee knows about Christianity mainly through English. If it was a Japanese Church, the style of how they worship is

basically similar to churches in Japan. However In most of the cases, however, churches are inter-denominational.

Next, what about the age group, the style of worship, the kind of praise songs used and the size of the church that the returnee attended? When you have this specific information, you can see the span of his experience in church outside Japan.

For those who only attended a local church, it is good to ask him if he met a Japanese Christian before he came back to Japan. Also ask if he has a Japanese Bible and whether he's reading it. Some have been involved in Japanese fellowship as well as attending a local church, and if that is the case, he could have had quite a lot of spiritual nurture in Japanese.

Point 2. How about church experience in Japan before going overseas?

If she met a Christian and became friends or went to church or had contact with Christianity for the first time in their life during their stay overseas, it is clear that the returnee had no experience of church and Christianity in Japan. You need to guide her with this in mind. If the returnee was a seeker in Japan, attended Sunday school when younger or is familiar with the Bible or church services because she attended a Christian 'Mission school', the situation is rather different. It's important to find out about these things.

Point 3. How was he involved in church outside Japan?

If the returnee attended a local church, it's likely he was treated as a guest (visitor). He may well have had no experience of serving in church. Indeed it's not uncommon for returnees to have no understanding of serving at all. Meanwhile, in the case of a Japanese Church (JCF) like the businessman in Case 2, people are often actively involved in serving soon after baptism (sometimes even during the stage of seeking) as the church needs to be supported by only a few people.

If he was saved at a Japanese church or fellowship such as a home Bible study

able to join in the life of the church. Returnees seek after God and receive baptism outside of Japan. This can be seen as something occurring outside of everyday life and therefore when they are suddenly thrown into everyday life it's a great shock. The reactions they face are much stronger than they expected in each circumstance, such as in relationships with family and friends, in their workplace and their locality. They can get disheartened just because of this. As was the case of Miss D, it is not uncommon that a person gets a job which forces them to work irregular hours.

Please help returnees as they experience this "gap and shock". In order to find out about their situation, the following questions could be asked. It may be good to remember these questions and/confirm them.

- What are the reactions of their family and friends after returning to Japan? How do they feel about them?
- Did they expect to receive such reactions? If it was not what they expected, help them to digest and resolve the gap and the shock.
- Are they bewildered by the busy life after their return? (Living overseas allows a person to have "time for oneself," in other words time to reflect on oneself and face up to oneself. In a foreign language environment the amount of information they can receive is less (In Japan a person can understand all information they receive but that's not the case overseas), and comparatively speaking they can live more at their own pace. Yet, when they return to Japan there's a great amount of information Furthermore, they have to live in line with their surroundings, with their family, friends, region, school or workplace and thus they lose the time they had for themselves. Many returnees feel that, "catching up with my busy life is the most I can do.") We need to first accept their confusion and then gradually show them how they can live as a Christian in the midst of Japan's busyness.

"I want to understand...." I cannot easily understand returnees' feelings because I do not have experience living overseas. I want to help them, but I can't.

This is what we hear. Such situations occur frequently. What should we do? It's a great pity if Christians who have been baptized outside Japan cannot put down roots in a church when they return to Japan just because their feeling cannot be understood.

4. How can we support someone who has never lived as a Christian in Japan?

Case 4 : Miss. D's experience was similar to Miss A's. She's a single woman who stayed in England for over a year on an internship programme

After graduating from university, she worked for a company for several years and then, wanting to use her savings to find her identity, chose to live overseas and take part in an internship doing voluntary activities. After arriving in Britain she soon found that her English language school was a Christian school. Her host family was also Christian. It was her first time to have direct contact with Christians and Christianity. She was attracted by the way Christians lived and so attended church and came to understand the gospel. Thinking that from now on she would commit herself she was baptized. Two months before her return to Japan she twice attended a Japanese service in London, had fellowship with Japanese Christians of her own age and received information about churches for when she returned to Japan.

"What I was surprised about after returning to Japan was the reaction of my family and friends. My parents had already passed away, so I stayed at my brother's and his family. He is very understanding, so I thought it would be all right. However, immediately after I arrived at his house. He told me to put my hands together in front of our parents (Buddhist) family altar. I told him that I could not because I had become a Christian he became emotional and told me to "get out" Since then I've been staying with a friend while I look for a place of my own. A number of my friends have withdrawn from me, saying, "What? Have you become a Christian?" They seem to think that "religion" means something like the Oum Shinrikyo sect* with the fear of not being able to get out of it. (*an extreme Japanese religious sect responsible for gas attacks on the Tokyo underground system in 1995)

Everyone at church is nice, but I do not have anyone who is close to me yet. I found a job teaching at an English language school and so I am busy at weekends and after evening on weekdays, which makes it difficult for me to attend worship and other meetings. I feel I am extremely isolated and lonely. I am busy with my work and I cannot read the Bible much. I am gradually drifting away from God."

Those who seek the Lord in Japan can solve the issues of relationships with family and friends and how to live in Japanese society as they come across them. As they solve them one by one, and become convinced personally they are baptised and

hosted by Japanese Christians, it is possible that the returnee was actively serving in the group. It is helpful to know this background information as well.

Point 4. What kind of life of faith does she have? Responding to the question: "Are British churches so different?"

You may think that the question to confirm the spiritual situation of the returnee should be asked earlier. However, especially if the returnee says that she was baptized at a local church, you should be aware that things are different from Japanese churches with the thorough baptismal preparation and learning about the meaning of church membership. For this reason I believe that the earlier questions listed above are more meaningful considering the importance of this whole issue of where the returnee stands in their faith.

In case of a Japanese church (JCF) the (Japanese pastor) prepares the candidate before baptism, so it's probably good to find out how much she has learned about church and being a church member.

If the returnee was baptized at a local church, since some churches baptize anyone who simply wishes to be baptized, like Ms. A in the first case, it is important to ascertain how she was prepared and what her church life was like. For example, in the so-called "Christian nation," of the UK, as a part of a state church tradition, baptism usually means infant baptism, and it is common for even unbelievers to have their child baptized as a baby, just like Omiyamairi* in Japan (*Omiyamairi literally means a visit to a shrine. It is a Shinto ritual that occurs when a baby is about 1 month old. They wear special white clothes for the ceremony, and have a special kimono draped over them. As the baby's grandparents hold the baby, the priest presents the news of the birth to the guardian spirit of the shrine, and offers thanks. He then asks the spirit to protect the baby and keep her healthy). Those who were baptized as Christians attend the same "parish" church wherever they move to and therefore the sense of being a "member of a church" is not very common. Of course, since there are also Baptist churches and various independent churches in the UK. There are Japanese who receive baptism lightly without any deep understanding. At a Japanese church, being baptized means becoming a member of the church in many cases, however, baptism at church outside Japanese purely mean the confession of one's faith.

(It also sometimes happens that when we ask the returnee about their confession of faith in detail, they just couldn't say, "no" when asked if they believed because their

British friend had taken care of them very well and had carefully and patiently taught them the Bible. British people don't understand this sort of thing.)

A "Words" from a worker
Whenever we get an opportunity,
we tell about "Japanese who
cannot say no," to local
Christians who are leading
Japanese.

Churches in the UK are individualistic and place importance on personal independence just like their culture. Service at church too often appears to be done from one's own volition rather than a response to being asked. Therefore there are many Christians who do not serve in church, and it does not make them feel uncomfortable. Even among Christians, there are various kinds of people; churches allow things to be like this.

When those returnees who have such experiences look at a Japanese church, they may be surprised to see that so many members of the church are involved in serving. As Japan is the country where harmony has great importance, it is often the case that the pastor or leader of the church asks members to be involved in necessary services and those who are asked accept it, and because of the relatively small scale of church, church activity is managed by many people involved at church.

This also reflects the methods of education used in different countries. In the UK the education system is such that from a young age children have their own opinions and ideas ... how to build on theory ... having persuasive power ... are discussed ... do a thesis-method of education. It seems that someone's had a good education when they clearly hold their own opinions and are able to properly/accurately express them.

How about those who have not reached the point of baptism? In the case of a Japanese church, in general, their activities are similar to that of churches in Japan and so, I believe, it is not difficult to verify where the returnee stands by finding out what type of meetings she attended and how much she was involved, and how much she is spiritually led.

In case of a local church, there (may also be) are also various meetings and activities for foreigners, so there are many different ways in being involved with church even if she says she had attended church. Sometimes a church offers English lessons for foreigners in the local area. In some cases they have a talk from the Bible before or after the class but depending on the thinking of each church, there are churches that never bring in Christianity. At the churches that have a focus on ministry to international students, specialized staff take care of the international students and hold meetings that

theology provided us with the framework. We have to apply it to our actual situation as Japanese. This is to be put into practice by each and every Japanese Christian. That is how we are thinking as we engage in our ministry.

The methods and thinking of each denomination and each church's style of service and policy of administration have historical inevitability and have a reason for existence. When change appears here, a person becomes a living stone in the body of Christ and commits himself, people who love the body of Christ acknowledge the need for change, look for ways to bring it about, find answers and put them into practice.

Whether the person is a returnee or not, a newcomer must respect and accept things as they are and become a living stone himself. If he hopes for change, as a living stone, he has to live together with other living stones, who are his brothers and sisters.

Therefore, when we as a couple lead returnees, we try to communicate: ① it is a mistake to try to find a church that is similar to the one experienced before returning to Japan: in other words seek to distinguish the essence of the gospel and its cultural expression and look for the unchanging things that go beyond culture (Bible, the God of the Bible, faith to believe in Christ as saviour, other) ② they have never lived in Japan as a Christian and that it is the Japanese church which will teach and support them. May they slowly and carefully learn there. How will our Lord develop churches in Japan? We are praying that He will use returnees as a catalyst, but how will He answer this prayer? With expectation we are watching, and desire to faithfully obey with what has been given to us.

About “culture and the gospel”: From a worker involved in diaspora ministry among Japanese overseas.

Now, I think it is necessary to talk about ideas concerning “gospel and culture,” which is the underlying premise of this work. As mentioned earlier, regarding how to advise returnees, we point out that there is the essence of the gospel (which doesn’t change) and how the gospel is accommodated to each culture (change according to each culture). When my husband and I studied at theological schools in the UK and in the US, a major theme was how to draw a line between these two. Studying missiology was a great help. In modern Protestant history of mission, western missionaries brought in the culture of their homeland as well as the gospel to the country they ministered in with believers pressured to adopt these ways. People have had second thoughts about this and accordingly study to distinguish between unchangeable things and things that can be changed by culture (that it’s OK to change) has moved forward. Currently, in the area of cross-cultural ministry, encouraging the expression of the gospel in each and every culture is becoming important.

Western Christianity (Protestant) is also Christianity that flourished in the western culture. Before that Christianity was encultured in the Near East and Mediterranean regions. In the Bible we see how the gospel is formed in both Jewish and Gentile culture. How the two are different is the foundation of our thinking. In Britain, Christianity had already been introduced by the 4th century. As time went by, each era had its way of expressing the gospel. There were also mistakes that shouldn’t have happened, such as confrontation with Catholicism with the religious oppression and bloodshed because of that. The modern British church seems to deal with the issues that come along with the wisdom that it has cultivated throughout its long history. It is not at all perfect, but we think there are many things we can learn from these brothers and sisters with longer experience of Christianity.

150 years have passed since the gospel was introduced to Japan through western missionaries. Although it became widely accepted and grew in the postwar period Christianity still seems to be in the phase of protecting what was introduced.” As Japanese we have to study theology and find answers to problems of daily life and how to live in an environment with other religions from a Japanese perspective. Western

are only for international students. For example, some churches in Cambridge host a “coffee bar” meeting starting around 7:00 pm. The Christian Union of the university is flourishing and the students also take part. When Japanese students go there, they have opportunities to speak with these students and become friends. The “coffee bar,” format is in line with the concept of friendship evangelism, it starts with becoming a friend, just as Jesus becomes our friend. Then gradually it leads to talking about the good news and then learning about the Bible together. People can have a free conversation in the setting like a coffee shop during the first half of the meeting. Sometimes a skit that conveys the message of Christianity or music is played.

During the second half of the meeting, there is an invitation for any who are interested to move to a different room to learn the Bible. Christians whom they meet there invite them to worship at their church, or invite them for other meetings to lead them further. If the person has a high level of English proficiency, it is possible to move on, even quite rapidly, but if not that person cannot grow in their understanding, unless their English improves at the same rate.

Many churches hold “Mums & toddlers groups” where children below preschool age and their mothers gather so that the children can play together and mothers can meet and exchange information. As with the English

A “Words” from a worker

We frequently refer “seekers” who are led by local Christians to churches. In most cases they are led by local Christians rather than himself/herself asking for the information as he/she responds “yes,” when he/she is asked “would you like to go to church after you return to Japan?” by local Christians who are leading the returnee. These local Christians ask us for the information and we provide it. Since there are too many “seekers” who fall under this, we think deeply “how we can connect them to a church.” I think it is a waste that the soul filled with abundant love and service of Christ is completely lost in Japan. I am led to think what is necessary, is it “low-key” ministry.. Rather than delivering a message for ministry as a form of a “ministry meeting,” and inviting people for a commitment, meetings that lead people to come to church and provide them opportunities to have contacts with Christians are needed, such as a bazaar concert gospel café. What is surprising for me when I met Japanese who are saved overseas is that significant number of them had never met a Christian in Japan. I think it is meaningful to expand the opportunity to meet with Christians through such “low-key” meeting.

classes mentioned earlier, the Bible and gospel is shared in some cases but not in others. With this gathering as a starting point, there are quite a lot of ladies who are led to baptism. Yet, if the person does not have much desire to seek for truth, and English proficiency is not so high, in many cases, they may end up just attending the activities.

Still, I am thankful if these people are given a desire to go to church after they return to Japan. We refer them to churches with the hope that they attend church as much/long as possible. When such a “seeker” says she used to attend church in England it is helpful to find out what kind of meetings she attended, what expectations she had, to what extent she heard and understood the gospel/Bible and what is she is now looking for from attending church in Japan. It will be easier for them to attend if there is a meeting that is similar to what was experienced in the UK.

These are the 4 points that help you to find out the experience at church outside Japan and present status of returnees. In the following section, I would like to share my personal comments on returnees and church in Japan from a viewpoint of a person who is involved in Japanese ministry outside Japan.

A Christian worker muttered: “are ‘returnees’ weirdos?”

As society in Britain is basically founded on individualism, respecting individual dignity is a basic premise - the idea that every person has equal value before God permeates society. Disabled people are fully integrated and through this kind of thing there are cases where non-Christian Japanese start to have an interest in Christianity.

Many British Christians who, overflowing with the love of Christ, desire to minister to Japanese. They accept them the way they are, try to understand, help, serve and along with the gospel message, communicate the love of Christ through the way they live. There are quite a few Japanese who are motivated to seek for the truth because of the feeling “I want to be like this person.”

A Japanese person who leaves his home country with the desire to gain something, even though he has to overcome differences of language and culture, may be considered strange by Japanese who have no experience overseas. (It may be different for someone who is sent overseas by his company.) Isn't it worse when the “weirdo” has made himself even more odd in a favourable environment before returning to Japan?

In the abnormal circumstances of reverse culture shock returnees quickly withdraw when they encounter attitudes like Miss C did who was told, “What you're talking about is all over there. This is Japan. Concentrate on what is in front of you. Forget about Britain. It is pointless talking about it.” Even if you want to say such things, please bite your tongue and just accept them saying, “Is that so? That's good. It was like that, was it?” In this way, they can feel they are accepted and what they experienced over there was still good and they are able to stay in the fellowship.

Well, we are in Japan aren't we!?

To this somebody might respond, “That being said, sticking to the past events forever and being unable to focus on what is ahead is not healthy, so would not it be better for the returnee to put the past behind her?” That may be a reasonable thing to say but in helping and guiding a person and, with the love of Christ, interacting with them it can become an obstacle instead. Isn't it the same with bringing up children? This is the way to make use of the returnee and her overseas experience.

When I keep on hearing “in England”, I feel that my church and how we are as Christians is being criticized.

This feeling among Japanese Christians without overseas experience is not unusual. It this makes you feel like this, we're very sorry about it. Whether like us, who knows both churches to a certain degree, or a returnee who does not know about churches in Japan, whoever talks like this never intends to be critical. When we say something, it's because we desire that the differences will be understood and through understanding them, it'll be easier to accept returnees. In the case of returnees, it may be because of their sense of nostalgia, an expression of reverse culture shock or irritation at themselves for not being able to fit into the Japanese church they're in. Even though they know it will never happen they may inadvertently express their true feelings, “I wish it were like church in Britain” but they are not criticizing or hoping things will change overnight.

home country treat her differently (refer to the sentences with dotted underline). They indicate to her with or without words that she cannot be accepted unless she becomes like them. Yet, what would have happened if they'd treated her with an attitude that said it was OK to miss the UK all the time and not be the same as them? Miss C wouldn't have felt like she was denied. Can't we Japanese Christians treat people in such a way?

Coming to accept differences is a normal part of culture shock... grumbling by returnees lasts 6 months on average.

Not all returnees keep on talking about life in England for a long time like Miss C. They have reasons for talking about nothing but their overseas experience. One of them is that their Christian experience is only from outside Japan. Another is that it is a form of reverse culture shock which every returnee goes through.

When people live in a different country with its different language and culture they go through the following 4 steps; (1) "excitement: feeling like a tourist," (2) anger: who are these people!? (3) "despondency: I cannot be like the people in this country no matter how hard I try" (4) "settling down: I can be myself."

When Japanese go overseas, these are the 4 steps they have to struggle to go through, and eventually they get used to the life of that place. Then when they return to Japan, they repeat the same process. In that process, there are some words and behaviour that is difficult for "normal" Japanese to understand, but little by little they find themselves getting used to life in Japan again. Yet it is impossible to go back to how they were before they left Japan; they settle down as "someone with overseas experience." The time span varies depending on the person but usually people settle down after about 6 months. This involves going through the following 4 processes; (1) "excitement: I'm back home in Japan! I can eat sushi and anything else I like whenever and as much as I want!" (2) "anger: why don't my friends understand what I'm talking about? (this is because there are some things that only people who have overseas experience can understand.)" (3) "despondency: after all, I've become a "weirdo" I can't fit back into Japanese society." and (4) "settling down: it is OK even some people think I'm strange. I've had a good experience overseas and I'll be myself."

I am not denying that there may be people who find it easier to understand, treat and accept returnees through this way of thinking. However as we, as a couple, are in a position to have direct contact with returnees, we see this from a slightly different position

Let's assume that people who go overseas of their own choice are "a bit strange." Yet amongst these people there are those who are close to being normal, ranging through those who hope to find inner healing by leaving Japan to even those who've dreamed of living overseas through getting a fake marriage - truly there's a great variety. Furthermore, are those who do not have any overseas experience not in the slightest bit "odd"? From our personal observation, there are some people with psychological problems, "odd" people that we cannot understand, no matter how hard we try. They have no experience overseas but there are some people who are labelled as "peculiar/problem people" wherever they are placed.

As we tackle the issue of how returnees can get attached to a church we find that Japanese churches generally appear to be very much the same. Couldn't this "sameness" even be a barrier to church growth? Isn't this the reason why lately there are ministries that are conspicuous in reaching out to those outside the churches? (for example the ministry of Arthur Holland, the work of the VIP club and the increase of churches that operate beyond the conventions of traditional churches.)

This is not just a simplistic desire to see churches become more like churches in the UK. British churches have their own challenges. A British Christian who is very familiar with church in Japan says, "The churches in the UK have things to learn from churches in Japan. They should have more activities together such as having lunch and fellowship together after the Sunday morning service. There are also British people who were saved when living in Japan. Each culture has the expression of Christianity that is befitting it as well as how church should be. However, as a general tendency, it seems like Japanese churches are too much against individuality. In concrete terms isn't it the case that there's too much pressure to make newcomers the same as ourselves? I think that learning how to accept people different from us and to help them flourish as a Christian is something that needs to be learned.

Understanding and accepting returnees seems to be a challenge for the churches of Japan and yet for that very reason we believe that it will be a blessing for them. Through the experience of welcoming “returnees” to church and the process of becoming friends with people who have different experiences from that of our own, church can lay the foundation to accept people who are different from us. Of course this doesn’t only apply to “returnees” but is also relevant is relating to “youth with brown hair who have pierced ears, tattoos and speak differently from us.”

Becoming a friendly church for outsiders. Becoming a church that people who do not normally go to church visit and feel like visiting again. When this happens it will likely be the way for people to break through the often heard “blocked up feeling” of society? Isn’t it true that the desire of the Lord Jesus is, through His body the church, to shine His light on Japanese society.

3. When a person feels like attending the same church again.

Returnees are continuing to gather at churches, growing as church members and being brought into the body of Christ as indispensable parts being a mutual blessing to each other. They are dedicating themselves to God’s work and becoming pastors, missionaries and workers for the Lord. God is causing this to happen. It is a great work of God. Returnees go back to Japan and visit churches. What are the keys for them to feel like going again or wanting to continue to attend a particular church? Let’s learn from some cases where people stopped going to church because of something.

Case 3: Miss. C (like Miss A in case 1 a single woman, saved and baptized in a church in the UK and returned to Japan)

It has been a few years since I returned. I have visited several churches, but currently I am staying away from church. I am an introverted person and not good at expressing what is in my heart. I had a very tough time getting used to the UK and it took me a long time. However, when I got used to it I had many people who had become lifelong friends and it was painful for me to leave. Even now I take every chance to exchange emails with my friends in the UK. When I came back to Japan I visited many churches and tried hard to get used to them. I am sure about my salvation and I also served at the churches I visited. Yet, **when I talk about my experience in the UK, which is very important for me, people at church do not show any interest at all. The impressions I receive from their responses are, “What you’re talking about is all over there. This is Japan. Concentrate on what is in front of you. Forget about Britain. It is pointless talking about it.” This makes me feel that I am not accepted and that I cannot be myself** and makes me stay away from fellowship. Right now I think that my current faith life is OK, and this is the only thing I can do.

Accepting differences

Miss C’s personality of having difficulty in saying what she thinks seems to be one of the reasons that she was not able to stay at church. English Christians patiently accepted quiet Miss C. They understood and loved her. However the Christians in her