

Kobe Union Church 1871 – 1989
On the 60th Anniversary of the Ikuta-cho Building

(Retyped by Kikuko Delp, July 13, 2020)

On January 1, 1868, fourteen years after the signing of commercial treaties between Perry and the Tokugawa Government which opened Japanese seaports for trade, a port named Hyogo was opened. Across the bay in the settlement of Kobe there were less than a thousand people living in the area stretching from roughly the Boeki Center Building and New Port Hotel in the east, past the American Pier towards Kobe Station in the west, and going north as far as the JR tracks.¹

Gradually, under the system of extra-territoriality where the host government designates a certain parcel of land to be used by people of other nations and gives up the right of jurisdiction over the area, a foreign concession was developed in the eastern third of the above described area. There were 126 lots in the concession, and it came to have its own fire brigade, police force, and Municipal Council.² In January 1869 the first foreign baby was born. Life was very restricted as foreigners were confined to the concession and could not travel outside it without imperial permission.

On April 17, 1870, Easter Sunday, the consecration of the Catholic Chapel took place. As noted in the Hiogo News: “despite the fact that there are over a hundred Protestants in the community, there is as yet no sign of a place of worship being erected by the.”³ In fact, up to that time, it is probable that there had not even been a Protestant worship service.

The Rev. Henry Blodgett, a missionary to China of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), was appalled by the immorality of the bustling foreign concession and succeeded in persuading the Rev. and Mrs. Crosby Greene, a fellow missionary with the American Board, to move to Kobe, from Yokohama,⁴ and begin work there among the foreigners who numbered about 400. The first Protestant service was held at the Masonic Hall on May 22, 1870 thanks to the Masonic members, S. Forbes, A.A.J. Gower, and Ed Fischer,⁵ who eventually became the first trustees of the church. Twenty-five residents attended this service.

Needless to say, the port of Kobe grew rapidly. In fact, it grew so fast in the first three years after being opened that there was talk of extending the boundaries of the foreign concession. Yet, even though there was a steady increase of population and business; the establishment of branches of major banks; the opening of a Telegraph Office; provision for a hospital; and a Roman Catholic Church; “shame that we should have to pen it, there are as yet no signs of a Protestant building being erected.”⁶

There were difficulties in holding an organizational meeting to establish a Protestant Church. On November 2, 1870 only eight people attended the called meeting of all Protestants of whatever denomination.⁷ At this meeting a sketched out plan for a building, the cost (about \$3000), a suitable location for the church, and the manner of circulating a subscription list and its wording were the main issues discussed.⁸

During the winter several more attempts to gather interested members of the community failed to bring a response. On January 14, 1871 another meeting was called with only four attending and was postponed. By this time, however, an amount of \$2500 had been subscribed and a resident promised to provide interior furnishings at his own expense.⁹

In early April, no one came except those who had called the meeting. However, it so happened that a launch and a furniture auction were both scheduled for the same day.¹⁰ Not being deterred, Rev. Greene reported subscriptions amounting to \$2500 and personally guaranteed another \$1000 to build a church which would seat 125 people, five times the number attending services at that time.

As the April 19 meeting continued, the quest for a place to build the church came to an end with the offer by Mr. Bradfield, an Englishman, owner of lot 48, (near the present Mitsubishi Bank near Daimaru), of half of the lot cost free with the understanding that if the site was at any time no longer used for church-purposes it would revert to the giver or his successors. Also at this meeting the first Trustees were elected.

Another source of tension for Pastor Green came from the American Board which seemed to look disapprovingly at his boldness in acting as guarantor because in a letter to the Board he stated that what he did was with his own business. In addition, the Home Office was unhappy that a missionary to the Japanese was devoting his time to working with foreigners. Rev. Greene told the American Board that if they could get permission for him to live in the "interior", he would be happy to do so but:

"while I am obliged to live in the same town as hundreds who speak the same language as myself, who have no one besides myself to act as their religious teacher, I must continue to perform the duties I assumed when I first came here. If I did not, I could not look them in the face for shame..."

In May 1871, Bishop Alford, an Anglican from Hong Kong, passing through Kobe on his way to Europe, expressed the view that "a larger congregation would attend the service held here if the Episcopal form of worship service were sometimes adopted."¹¹ Thus the Episcopal Service was used on the first and third Sundays of each month alternating with the Congregationalist. Letters to the American Board reveal some dissatisfaction on the part of the Congregationalists having to "sit through" these liturgical services; but all worshipped together the Anglicans built All Saints Church on Tor Road in 1897.

At a meeting of the Church Trustees in May 1871 go ahead was given to commence the building of the church on the lot given by Mr. Bradfield. The building was to be of brick with blue stone trimming.¹² The church building, rising 18 feet, was completed in July 1872 at a cost of \$4,121.

On November 23-24, 1872, a group met and formally organized the Union Church of Christ in Kobe. The first members were the Rev. Daniel Crosby Greene, Mary J. Greene, Orramel H. Gulick, Ann E. Gulick, Dr. John C. Berry,¹³ Mrs. Maria Gove Berry, the Rev. and Mrs. Jerome D. Davis, M.L. Gordon, Mrs. Agnes D. Gordon, and from England, Mr. and Mrs. P.S. Cabeldu. Mr. Cabeldu and Dr. Berry served as deacons from 1872-1893. Dr. Berry was the first church clerk from 1872-1877.

Because of its close association with all the missionaries working in Japan with the American Board, the church in Kobe was considered to be the home church of all who worked in such far away places as Okayama, Kyushu and Hokkaido. At the 1879 annual meeting of the American Board missionaries, the name was changed to Mission Church of Christ in Japan. Gradually each mission station set up its own worship services and the Kobe group eventually became a local organization which changed its name to Kobe Union Church in 1903. "Union" meant something varied and strong. It was the essence of consecration, of singing the songs of the Lord and doing his work in a foreign land, with joy and unfailing hope.

The Manual of the Mission Church of Christ in Japan (revised 1903) records 178 members during the 1872-1902 period; members coming by profession of faith and associate membership. In 1897 when the Anglicans built All Saints Church on Tor Road, most of the Anglican members left the Mission Church.

In 1927 the business quarter of the growing city had almost engulfed the Church. Church services were being seriously affected by the noise of Sunday shoppers and of taxis, growing more numerous and louder by the week, in addition, the building, which could seat only about 125, was too small. Also, the Mistubishi Bank, which owned the lot next door and had become the financial heir of Mr. Bradfield, the original donor of the church lot, wanted to expand. A legal arrangement was made whereby the Mistubishi Bank would supply ¥110,000 for a new church building if the present members would relocate and allow the land to revert to the Bank.

On November 28, 1927, the agreement was signed¹⁴ and the church acquired the premise at 34 Ikuta-cho 4-chome; the present site. The last service was held in the old church on December 11, 1927. On February 28, 1928, plans for the new building drawn by W.M. Vories Co., Hachiman, were approved by the pew renters. On July 7, 1928 the Takenaka Construction Company began the excavation work for the building. In an open air meeting on November 25, 1928 the cornerstone was laid and on June 9, 1929, the completed church was dedicated with appropriate services.

For ten years the new church sailed along, both figuratively and literally. For in 1938, when the great flood devastated the Sannomiya and Nunobiki areas of Kobe, the street in front of the church was several feet deep in sand and debris. The church itself, however, stood firm and strong, and served as a haven for the neighbors who were flooded out, a symbol of a building not constructed entirely by human hands.

Then came Monday, December 8, 1941 (Sunday, December 7 in America), "a day that will live in infamy", the fateful day of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Soon after this tragedy, Dr. Harry W. Meyer,¹⁵ who was serving as pastor along with his duties as a missionary of the Presbyterian church, was arrested and interned. Upon the arrest of their pastor, the English-speaking membership turned to Rev. Liemar Hennig, a German national living in Kyoto and serving as the German-speaking congregation's pastor, who had recently come from the Union Theological Seminary in New York, to help them in their English-speaking service in the afternoon after his German service in the morning.

Rev. Hennig preached every Sunday at Kobe Union Church – in the morning to an ever increasing German congregation due to the evacuees from Java; in the afternoons to a handful

of brave enduring, and faithful English-speaking folk. This staunch group included Carl F. Hansen, a Danish engineer; Professor Roy Smith (until his repatriation in 1942); Herbert Strauss, a German-Japanese; L. H. Bartholomew, an Indian Christian; Mr. Obertik; Mr. & Mrs. Masanosuke Taniguchi (his wife was Finnish), and Mioko Kadota. Their behavior in these times demonstrated far more than gifts and pledges; their heroic devotion to the Christian cause.

Near the end of 1942 the Church took further opportunity to show its Christian love and compassion. In June 1942, a number of enemy nationals from Guam were brought to Kobe. They received a small allowance from the Red Cross through the Swiss government. From their meager stipend they gave a gift of money and hand-painted cards and asked the church to use them for benevolence purposes.

In the expenditure of this money, Miss Mioko Kadota went to the Ward Office to ask for the names of Japanese families living in the neighborhood of the church who had lost a husband, father or son who was supporting the family. The Ward officials could not believe that these enemy nationals, especially the internees, would give such a gift for benevolences. Miss Kadota had to explain that it was the custom to help the needy and share joy at Christmas time. So, the officials took the trouble to select the names of the most needy families and each of these families received an equal share of this benevolence fund. When they learned that the gift was from the enemy nationals, especially from the internees, they accepted it with mixed feelings and great appreciation, some even with tears in their eyes and said that they would offer it at their family shrines, then they would use it with great care.

On December 21, 1942, Miss Kadota was returning home as usual from Osaka after giving piano lessons to the welfare workers at Yodogawa Zenrinkan in Osaka. As she got onto the Hankyu train, she bumped into Dr. Kagawa, and old friend, who was on his monthly visit to his church in Nishinomiya. Miss Kadota insists it was the Lord that led her into the carriage where Dr. Kagawa was standing, because the train was full. The minute he saw her he told her, "Kadota-san, you have no more church of your own." It was shocking news to Miss Kadota but equally surprising to Dr. Kagawa that the church members knew nothing at all about the matter. He said that Hirano Church¹⁶ had completed negotiations to take over KUC as foreign property confiscated by the Japanese government and they were sending a man to the Ministry of Finance on December 27 with the payment. Dr. Kagawa requested that his name not be mentioned concerning the matter and the promise was kept until after the war.

Miss Kadota says that the 15 minutes train ride from Nishinomiya to Kobe was the longest ride she had ever experienced. As soon as she returned home, she telephoned Mr. Hansen who immediately came to her house where she told him the news.

The next morning Mr. Hansen went to Mr. Taniguchi's office and asked him to consult with his nephew, who was Vice-Minister of Finance. Rev. Hennig made it clear to the Ministry that the German would leave if the English-speaking worshippers were driven out. Eventually, a compromise was worked out, largely through the goodness of government officials, whereby English, German, and Japanese speaking peoples could share the building. Although a sale transfer was actually completed and the name "Sannomiya Kyokai" placed over the Church gate, the worship services continued for all. There is a note recording the attendance at the

1944 Christmas service held in English that 13 different nationalities were represented – 17 Japanese, 6 Russians, 6 Swiss, 5 Germans, 2 Swedes, 2 Danes, 2 Americans, 2 Englishmen and one each of Indian, Dutch, Turk, Finn, and Hungarian. The note concluded, “Enemy sat with enemy to celebrate the most wonderful of all birthdays.”

In spite of vast tribulations, it seemed that the Church would safely outlive the War. But systematic bombings of Kobe by American B-29's began with a raid on the Hyogo area of west-central Kobe on March 5, 1945. In a second raid on June 5, the Kobe business district was wiped out, and the Church was hit by incendiary bombs. The caretaker was helpless because the water mains had been disrupted and there was no water for fighting the fire. When the fire was over, only the concrete shell of the sanctuary and fellowship hall and the upper floors of the manse remained. The end of the War was only 70 days away.

In good weather the congregation carried their chairs to the roofless sanctuary to worship. When the weather was bad, services were held in kindergarten room beneath the manse. During the Occupation period, regular services were held on Sundays at 3:00 p.m., with the help of Army chaplains. Gradually, as the missionaries returned they took over the leadership, and eventually the property was legally returned to the joint ownership of the German and English-speaking congregations, known as the Kobe Union Protestant Church.¹⁷

During the immediate post-war period nothing was done to refurbish the church building as the congregation decided that their first priority was to help Japanese in the neighborhood to rebuild their homes. Actual rebuilding of the Church was begun in 1951 with the restoration of the roof and refurnishing the interior of the sanctuary. By 1954 the Fellowship Hall and kitchen were restored and proper chancel equipment and pews installed. On January 13, 1963, the pipe organ was dedicated.

The pastoral duties of the congregation were shared by various missionaries until 1957 when the first full time postwar pastor was called. The calling of a full time pastor gave continuity to a congregation that continued to come and go.

And so it is today. It is true that members are always coming and going but we are also blessed with a number of longtime residents. The officers of the Church make every effort to involve new members as soon as possible. The average Sunday schedule is a busy one with Choir rehearsal, Sunday school classes for all ages, and a morning worship service. Various commissions and other activities meet after church. The Church's weekday schedule is an equally active one as well.

As from its beginning back in 1872, Kobe Union Church continues to be a self-supporting church. At present, the membership of Kobe Union Church is about 125.

The German congregation, composed of German-speaking people, is a vital part of Kobe Union Protestant Church, supplying two members of the seven-member Board of Trustees. This congregation meets the second Sunday of every month at 9:45 a.m. and participates in a joint Thanksgiving service with the English-speaking congregation every October.

Presently, Kobe Union Church is again looking forward. Ideas are always being advanced on ways of expanding the ministry to include all people. Outreach, in all forms, is a vital part of

Kobe Union Church. At this writing, the Church is again thinking of relocating the church so as to better serve those to whom its ministry is directed – the people of God as then live in Kobe, Japan. On this occasion, the 60th anniversary of the present building, the congregations, German-speaking and English-speaking, give thanks for the faithful people who came before and made Kobe Union Church a reality, and at the same time, continue to envision the future so that those who will follow can continue to find a place of worship here, in the House of God called Kobe Union Protestant Church.

FOOTNOTES

1. Seton, Cyndee and Alistair, Hills and Water – Kobe Sketchbook, Yumi Shobu, (1979), p.16.
2. according to Harold S. Williams (Australian Historian) – from Historical Reading 1.
3. Hiogo News, April 13, 1870.
4. Rev. & Mrs. D. C. Green arrived in Yokohama on November 30, 1869.
5. 1st, 2nd, and 4th Masters of the Lodge Hiogo and Osaka, according to W. Lackie of Scotland.
6. Hiogo New, October 1, 1870.
7. Two were American, two German, three British, one Dutch.
8. Hiogo News, November 5, 1870.
9. Hiogo News, January 18, 1871.
10. Hiogo News, April 19, 1871.
11. Hiogo News, October 14, 1871.
12. Hiogo News, June 21, 1871.
13. John Berry was head of a government hospital in Kobe from 1872-1877. After which, with imperial permission, he answered the call of the governor of Okayama to help with medical work there in 1879, accompanied by the Rev. & Mrs. Otis Cary and the Rev. & Mrs. James H. Pettee to teach English.
14. The agreement was signed with the assistance of A. J. Kentwell of Australia who was a member of the church committee and treasurer.
15. Dr. Meyers was a great influence in the conversion of Dr. Toyohiko Kagawa to the Christian faith. Dr. Kagawa plays a part n the history of KUC.
16. Both Dr. Kagawa and Rev. Toku, the minister of the Hirano Church, were Miss Kadota's Sunday School teachers.
17. Kobe Union Protestant Church is the legal name for business purposes. KUPC is comprised of the English-speaking and German-speaking congregations.

June 11th, 1989.