

Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church

(Nihon Fukuin Ruteru Kyokai)

HISTORY

The beginnings of the **Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church** go back to 1893. The first missionaries to Japan were two pastors sent by the United Synod of the South, a predecessor of the Lutheran Church in America, which became part of the ELCA. The first worship service in Japan was observed Easter Sunday 1893 in the city of Saga on the island of Kyushu under the leadership of newly called missionaries James A. B. Scherer and R. B. Peery. A Japanese co-worker, Ryohei Yamanuchi, gave invaluable assistance to the new American missionaries.

Throughout the history of the JELC, education has been emphasized along with evangelism. The Kyushu Gakuin High School was established in 1911 for the training of pastors and education of young men (now co-ed), followed by Kyushu Jogakuin in 1925 (for girls; now co-ed and renamed Luther Junior and Senior High School). These schools are flourishing, and Kyushu Lutheran College was accredited in 1997, with Dr. Yoshiro Ishida as its first president. Many local congregations have served their communities through Christian kindergartens.

Social welfare has long been an important part of Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church. Two institutions, Jiai-en (House of Mercy) in Kumamoto and The Tokyo Home for the Elderly in Tokyo, have been leading pioneers in the field of social work in Japan. The Kamagasaki Diaconia Center in the slums of Osaka includes child care, mutual learning, problem study, and community projects. Today, many Japanese social workers are trained at the Japan Lutheran College in Tokyo.

World War II brought great hardship and many changes for the JELC. All missionaries were forced to leave. The Japanese government ended denominations and created one United Church. Thus the JELC ceased to exist. However, as soon as possible after the war, the JELC reinstated itself as a Lutheran church with faith based on the Augsburg Confession and other Lutheran teachings.

After World War II, U.S. Lutherans were interested in helping and evangelizing the Japanese, whose country had been devastated by the war. Some former servicemen were interested in returning to Japan as missionaries. During the decade of the 1950s, there was a huge influx of American missionaries to Japan, including people from several ELCA predecessors. Many of these missionaries had served in China but were expelled because of political changes in China.

PRESENT SITUATION

The Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church has a relatively small membership of 22,000. The population of Japan is less than 1% Christian, and becoming a Christian is considered extremely counter-cultural in a country where following cultural norms is very important. Most congregations have less than fifty members. Pastors are well trained at the Lutheran Seminary in Tokyo, and most congregations have their own pastor. The JELC has sent successive missionaries to serve among Japanese immigrants in Brazil, serving with the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil, as well as to the United States among expatriate Japanese.

The JELC is fortunate to have a solid financial base, partly because of the value of real estate which was purchased earlier in the century for missionary residences and other mission purposes. The JELC is unique among the ELCA's overseas partners in that it contributes funds to the ELCA to help pay for