

History of the Church in Japan - Part 15: 1970-1975: Tokyo Stake organized; General Authority visits

By R. Lanier Britsch ()

The week from March 13 to 18, 1970, was exhilarating. The Mormon Pavilion was dedicated on the 13th; the Tokyo Stake was organized on the 15th; the Japan East Mission, with headquarters at Sapporo, Hokkaido, was created on the 16th; and the Japan West Mission, with headquarters at Fukuoka, Kyushu, was founded on the 18th. From that time on, most of the leaders in the missions and virtually all stake leaders were Japanese. During the 1970s, most of the mission presidents were nisei who originally joined in Hawaii.

In 1935, President Heber J. Grant had a vision of a later time when Japanese from Hawaii would take the gospel to their people in Japan. During the 1970s that vision was fulfilled through the nisei mission presidents.

More important than the contribution of the nisei from Hawaii and the U.S. mainland was the coming of age of the Japanese Saints themselves. The first stake presidency was entirely Japanese. In most stakes throughout the Pacific, the first stake president or at least one of his counselors had been expatriate Americans; not so in Japan. Tanaka Kenji, who had joined the Church in 1952, was selected by Elders Benson, Brown, and Hinckley, to be the first president. He chose Kikuchi Yoshihiko to be his first counselor, and Sagara Kenichi as second counselor. The bishops of the six wards were all native Japanese.

At the same time, Watanabe Kan was called to serve as the first president of the Japan West Mission in Fukuoka. He was the first native Japanese to serve as mission president. Since that time the list of local Japanese mission presidents has become extensive. By the early 1970s the Church in Japan had come abreast of the Church in most other developed parts of the world.

Elder Ezra Taft Benson, who in his capacity as supervisor of all Asian missions visited that part of the world five times between 1968 and early 1970, was deeply impressed by the Church's progress all over Asia. He was so impressed, in fact, that he wrote:

There has never been a time until now when the Church has had the strength and means to reach out effectively to the Asian nations. In the timetable of the Lord, the door is now open, and this is apparently the day for work in Asia. (Ezra Taft Benson, "The Future of the Church in Asia," Improvement Era 73 (March 1970):14; also Benson, "A World Message," Improvement Era 73 (June 1970): 96.)

In 1970 there were approximately 12,500 members of the Church in Japan. The creation of Tokyo Stake helped the development of the Church in Japan in a number of ways. One of the most important was the regular visits General Authorities made to attend quarterly and, after the change, semi-annual stake conferences. Whereas the number of General

Authorities who had visited Japan until 1965 could be numbered on the fingers of one hand, with the interest in Expo `70 and the new stake, General Authority visits became not only frequent but almost commonplace.

Shortly after the founding of the Tokyo Stake, Adney Y. Komatsu was called to serve as Regional Representative over Hawaii and Japan. He held that position until April 1975, when he was called as an Assistant to the Council of the Twelve. Soon after, he was assigned by the First Presidency to live in Japan and supervise the Church in all of Asia. This assignment was later changed to include only Korea and Japan, and Elder Jacob de Jager was assigned to supervise the Philippines-Southeast Asia area.

In addition to the assignment of resident General Authorities, the Saints in Japan were blessed with visits by members of the First Presidency. President N. Eldon Tanner, Counselor in the First Presidency, came in the early 1970s; then President Harold B. Lee visited there and marveled at the tremendous progress of the Church since his first visit in 1954. The most significant visit by a General Authority to that time came in August 1975, when President Spencer W. Kimball presided at the first Japan Area Conference.