

History of the Church in Japan - Part 19: 1990-1996: Temple Work; Kobe Earthquake; 100,000 Members

By R. Lanier Britsch (Author of *From the East: The History of the Latter-day Saints in Asia, 1856-1996*)

On September 1, 1992, the Asia North Area Presidency was created to administer affairs in Japan and Korea. Elder W. Eugene Hansen was the first Area President. His counselors were Elder Han In Sang, from Korea, and Elder Sam K. Shimabukuro, from Hawaii. Many Japanese members felt that the creation of the Asia North Area was a reaffirmation of the importance of their part of the world. A year later, Elder Merrill J. Bateman replaced Elder Hansen as Area President, but he was soon called as Presiding Bishop of the Church and replaced by Elder David E. Sorensen.

Since its dedication, the Tokyo Temple has symbolized the Japanese Saints' faith. The Japanese members are concerned for the salvation of their ancestors. During 1993, the total number of family names submitted by Japanese member passed 300,000. In that same year, the total number of endowments performed in the Tokyo Temple since it opened exceeded 500,000. In 1994, Elder Kikuchi Yoshihiko of the Seventy was called home to Japan to preside at the temple and in 1995 the Japanese Saints performed over 50,000 endowments-no small feat for 7,300 recommend holders who were spread all over the country.

Providing meetinghouses and meeting places in Japan and East Asia has been a difficult and expensive proposition. By the mid-1990s the Church had constructed 160 meetinghouses in Japan. Most of the wards and branches in Japan are in metropolitan areas. Meetinghouses are generally spaced forty minutes to one hour apart from each other. When members move to smaller cities or towns they may find it necessary to travel up to two hours in order to attend Church meetings.

Many meetinghouses are freestanding, much like LDS chapels in North America. But most recent buildings have been constructed following what might be called an Asian model. Land is so expensive that wisdom demands that buildings be built up more than out. The latest meetinghouses have parking on the ground floor and the chapel and classrooms, etc., on two floors above. The main hall, usually thought of as the chapel, is now used as a multi-purpose room. Folding chairs are used in place of permanent benches. The Church is well housed throughout Japan and the necessary features of LDS buildings are present.

On January 17, 1995 Kobe was struck by a massive earthquake. It was the second largest earthquake in Japan, in terms of damage, in the twentieth century. A staggering 5,000 people lost their lives, and 26,000 people were injured in the quake. More than 20,000 homes were destroyed and 56,000 buildings were damaged. Fortunately, even though the epicenter of the quake was only a short distance from the Kobe Ward chapel and the Kobe Mission home, these buildings were not damaged. They were available to serve as a center for preparing meals, distributing food and supplies, and organizing relief efforts.

One member, 76-year-old Nagai Kimiko and her non-member husband were killed. Two children of an investigator family also lost their lives. Considering the number of Latter-day Saints in Kobe, the Church was fortunate in not losing more lives. Among the 300,000 Kobe residents left homeless were 35 member families. The ward and stake moved quickly to provide shelter and to meet their other needs.

Stake President Donomoto Tsutumo and Kobe Ward Bishop Takagi Kenji took charge of Latter-day Saint help and rescue operations. Kobe Mission President Curtis P. Wilson was also very much involved. All three men were impressed with the untiring labors of the Japanese people, members and others, and their willingness to share and help each other.

By 1996 the LDS Church in Japan had grown to 106,000 Japanese Latter-day Saints who were living in 300 wards and branches that were part of 25 stakes and 20 districts.