

History of the Church in Japan: Part 8: 1948-1953: Elder Cowley visits; Korean War

By R. Lanier Britsch ()

In 1948 the Japanese mission opened again under the direction of President Edward L. Clissold. The day after President Clissold arrived in Japan he was taken to a Japanese Sunday School that was directed by his friend Nara Fujiya and conducted by Tsukayama Kiyoshi. Forty-three people were in attendance. Certainly the circumstances of the re-establishment were better than those that had prevailed during the early mission. Brother Nara's little group became the nucleus of the Ogikubo Branch, which was organized later that year. By the end of 1948, President Clissold had organized a branch and four Sunday Schools. And these organizations were separate from the servicemen's groups. At that time, President Clissold reported that nine hundred people were attending LDS services every week. Twenty-two convert's names were entered on the Church records in 1948. (MFSR, Japanese Mission, 1948, LDS Church Archives.)

When President Clissold submitted his year-end report to the Presiding Bishopric, he expressed confidence that the missionaries would bring many converts into the Church during the coming year. "The great needs of the mission at this time," wrote Clissold, "are literature in Japanese and more missionaries." The missionaries were working on the literature problem, but the shortage of missionaries Clissold perceived could be alleviated only at Church headquarters. Considering the world-wide missionary demands of the Church, it was difficult for the Church leaders to meet his requests. But it is regrettable that more missionaries could not have been sent.

Although President Clissold was not satisfied with the number of missionaries assigned to Japan, he used those whom he had to expand the proselyting area to Sapporo in the north and to Osaka-Kobe in west central Honshu. By the time he was released to return home on August 31, 1949, elders and sisters were teaching the restored gospel in at least ten major cities, including Tokyo, the largest city in the world.

On June 11, 1949, Elder Matthew Cowley of the Quorum of the Twelve and his wife arrived in Tokyo for a tour of the mission. He was at that time president of the Asian and Pacific missions of the Church. During his stay in Japan he visited most of the branches and traveled as far west as Hiroshima. While in Japan, Elder Cowley prophetically promised "many Church buildings and even [LDS] temples in this land." (Kan Watanabe, et al. "Japan: Land of the Rising Sun," Ensign, August 1975).

Vinal G. Mauss was called to be the new mission president. When President Mauss arrived in Japan on August 20, 1949, he began a mission that lasted for over four years. Mauss, a businessman and mortician from Oakland, California, had served as a missionary to Japan during the last year or two of the early mission. During the years of his presidency he moved the work along well, especially considering the international developments that occurred while he was in Japan.

Between 1949 and 1953, Japanese membership grew from 211 to over 800; the number of districts expanded from one to five; and the number of Japanese branches grew from twelve Sunday Schools and one or two branches to twenty-five branches. The number of missionaries also expanded to a high of eighty-four during this time.

President Mauss's greatest contributions, however, were not in numerical growth but in the areas of missionary training and expanded proselyting, Church organization, acquisition of property, and work with LDS servicemen's groups. If President Clissold laid the foundation for the Japanese Mission, President Mauss can be credited with the erection of the walls. By the end of 1949, the missionary force was up to forty-four. During 1950, President Mauss was busy integrating still another thirty-six elders and sisters. With the added numbers of workers, he asked all branch leaders to expand the Sunday Schools and to begin holding Sacrament meetings. It was at that time that many of the Sunday Schools in fact became branches. By the end of 1950, there were fifteen branches in the mission. Almost all of these units were presided over by missionaries.

Midway in that year, however, war broke out in Korea, and before the end of the year its effects were being felt by the Japanese Mission. The military draft greatly diminished the supply of new LDS missionaries. Another effect of the Korean war was the assignment by the U.S. military of thousands of servicemen not only to Korea but also to Japan (which was a major staging area), Guam, Okinawa, and the Philippines. Among these military people were hundreds of Latter-day Saints. By 1953, there were seven groups and two servicemen's districts in Japan.

The service personnel supported the development of the Church in many ways, not the least of which was by way of example. When it became evident to President Mauss that the supply of American missionaries was going to be diminished, he decided to call local Japanese members on full-time missions. By the end of 1952, eleven young Japanese men and women were serving two-year missions and by mid-1953 the number was up to twenty. Almost all of them were supported by money contributed by LDS servicemen. (Vinal G. Mauss Oral History)