

History of the Church in Japan - Part 9: 1953-1955: Hilton A. Robertson's Presidency

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President Vinal G. Mauss served long and well. His release to return home came in October 1953. His replacement was Hilton A. Robertson, who had recently been released as president of the Chinese Mission, which had been terminated a few months before in California. Robertson and his wife Hazel had also served previously in Japan, where he closed the early mission, and in Hawaii, where he organized and presided over the Japanese-Central Pacific Mission from 1937 to 1940.

When President David O. McKay set Hilton A. Robertson apart as mission president, he gave him unusually broad authority. He was to preside not only over the Japanese Mission but also the Chinese Mission. "Yours is now a distinct responsibility, a mighty one, in holding the Presidency of the Missions in the Orient, in Asia. . . ," said President McKay. He told him to "organize these missions" and to "expand in excellency, in permanency." He specifically told President Robertson to take care of the little group of Chinese Saints in Hong Kong (Hilton A. Robertson, *Daily Dairy, Japanese Mission 1954-1955*, 3).

When President Robertson arrived in Japan, he found the demands of the mission and the servicemen's organization to be very time-consuming. In fact, he hardly had time to think about China or other areas such as Korea, Okinawa, the Philippines, and Guam. But Church leaders in Salt Lake City, particularly President McKay, had a larger vision of the world and the missionary responsibility of the Church. In the summer of 1954, President McKay sent Elder Harold B. Lee of the Council of the Twelve Apostles to Japan and Asia to survey the progress of the mission and to study the possibilities for growth. Elder and Sister Lee arrived in Japan on August 20. During their stay they visited all five mission districts and the servicemen's districts. When Elder Lee reported his trip to Asia at General Conference a week after he returned to Salt Lake City, he told the Church, "The signs of divinity are in the Far East. The work of the Almighty is increasing with a tremendous surge." (30) During his travels in East Asia Elder Lee met with 1,563 LDS servicemen and service women.

Elder Lee was obviously impressed with the missionary possibilities he saw. Only a year later, undoubtedly as a result of Elder Lee's recommendations, President Joseph Fielding Smith, then President of the Council of the Twelve, visited Asia, made some significant changes in mission organization, and dedicated several new lands for the preaching of the restored gospel. President and Sister Smith arrived in Tokyo on July 25, 1955. Two days later President Smith met with the missionaries and service people at Karuizawa. He there proposed that the mission, which had sometimes been called the Far East Mission but was generally known as the Japanese Mission, should be divided into two missions. Japan, Korea, and Okinawa were renamed the Northern Far East Mission. Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Guam were named the Southern Far East Mission (Joseph Fielding Smith, "Report From the Far East Missions, " *_Improvement Era*, Dec 1955, 917).

President Robertson's missionaries, however, did not convert many Japanese. The principal reason was the tremendous turnover in missionaries. Most of the local Japanese missionaries completed their terms during 1954 and early 1955, and President Robertson did not see the need to replace them with more local missionaries. Had he done so, he could have largely eliminated the other part of the problem, that of having too many missionaries who did not speak Japanese well enough to be effective.

President Robertson's leadership was important in three other areas. He supported and helped Sato Tatsui with his retranslation of the Book of Mormon — a project which Sato began while President Clissold was still in Japan — and with his translations of the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price, which he worked on concurrently with the Book of Mormon.

Another contribution was in the acquisition of property. President Robertson purchased for the Church at least three homes that doubled as chapels and living quarters for missionaries. He noted that wherever the Church had buildings the work was "greatly facilitated" (MFSR, Japanese Mission, 1954, LDS Church Archives).

Finally, President Robertson did much to strengthen the auxiliaries: MIA, which had been held throughout the mission since the early months; Sunday Schools, which had been started early, even before sacrament meetings in most instances; and Relief Societies, which had been organized during Mauss's time. Primaries had their beginning under Robertson's direction in 1954.

President Robertson's health began to fail during 1955. He mentioned his health problems, particularly trouble with his vision, to President Smith. He undoubtedly also mentioned his long years of service in the mission field. In late October, only a day or two after Robertson had it confirmed that he had cataracts in both eyes, he and his wife received their letter of release.