

History of the Church in Japan - Part 4: 1909-1921 - Elder David O. McKay visits Japan

By R. Lanier Britsch ()

In 1909 Elbert D. Thomas became the president of the Japanese Mission. President Thomas believed that it was unnecessary for missionaries to remain for five or six years. In his opinion they could become proficient in speaking the language in a shorter time and learning to read it was not necessary. Because the First Presidency agreed with him, mission terms seldom lasted more than four years from then until its closure.

During the Thomas years, 1910 to 1912, the elders opened work among the Ainu, the indigenous people of Hokkaido, and started missionary work in Osaka, a large industrial and commercial city in the west. They also started using street meetings as a method of finding investigators and advertising their church services. In early 1911, the elders in Kofu initiated English language classes at Kofu Commercial School. These regular English classes were part of the school's curriculum. During 1911 and 1912, some of the elders played baseball with the Tokyo American Baseball team. This was the most important effort of the entire mission to establish warm relations with representatives from other churches.

From 1910 until 1921, the missionaries never ceased working on one kind of translation project or another. They published several books and a number of tracts. They also worked steadily at enlarging the number of meetings that were held in the branches. The Mutual Improvement Association was started in 1916, and the first Relief Society was organized in Tokyo on May 30, 1917.

During President Joseph H. Stimpson's era, from 1915 until 1921, the Church grew faster than at any earlier time. Between 1915 and 1920, the elders performed sixty baptisms, sixteen children were blessed, thirty-seven men were ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood, and the total membership grew to 124. President Stimpson was proud of the mission's accomplishments, but he was concerned about the small number of missionaries in the field — only eight.

President Stimpson struggled with this handicap and sought the help of Elder David O. McKay of the Council of the Twelve. In March 1920, Stimpson wrote a letter to Elder McKay to invite him to an international Sunday School convention to be held in Tokyo that fall. In that letter, he pleaded with Elder McKay to use whatever influence he could to have six more missionaries sent to Japan. Three new elders did arrive in May 1920, the first to come in two and a half years, but they merely replaced several others who were released. There were only two elders working in each conference, and Sendai had been closed for lack of missionaries. Stimpson wrote: "We have so few missionaries here in the mission at the present time that the devil has to look elsewhere for a workshop." (Joseph H. Stimpson to David O. McKay, March 18, 1920, Copybook H, 359, LDS Church Archives.)

From 1920 on, the Japan Mission was on trial. There is no question that by this time the leaders of the Church in Salt Lake City were harboring grave doubts concerning the value of continuing the mission. During Stimpson's era, the missionaries continually received rumors from home that Church authorities were thinking about closing the mission. Confirmation was never received by Stimpson from the Brethren, but when Elder David O. McKay visited Japan as part of his world mission tour, one of his purposes was to assess the situation and decide whether or not the mission should be continued.

Elder McKay arrived in Japan on December 20, 1920. While there he visited all of the conferences of the mission (except Sapporo, Hokkaido, where a blizzard prevented such a visit) and remained in Japan for a month. He spent considerable time asking questions and seeking to learn more about the Japanese people. At the end of his visit he concluded that the mission was worth continuing and that if this was so, enough missionaries must be assigned to make it a success. "It is like trying to run a sixty horsepower machine with a one horsepower motor and that out of repair," said Elder McKay. He decided that the mission would be much better if there were several married couples appointed and distributed to each of the conferences. These couples were to have six or eight missionaries working under them, and they were to act as guardians and counselors for their missionaries. This idea began to be put into effect during the coming months but never became fully operational. In June 1921, Hilton A. and Hazel Robertson arrived in Tokyo, and in November 1922, three more couples arrived in the mission. At the end of the year there were twenty missionaries in the field, three more than in any other year.

In addition to the plan for more missionaries, Elder McKay also made some suggestions concerning improving the work. He stressed the need to turn every conversation into a gospel discussion. Missionaries were always to carry tracts and other literature. They were to spend more time in teaching the gospel in public places such as markets. Street meetings were to be continued. Evidently, the visitor did not feel that the missionaries had been working hard enough. He told them to work at least as hard as if they were earning salaries.

The last official act of Elder McKay was to release the Stimpsons to return home. They left Japan on February 11, 1921. In March 1921, Lloyd O. Ivie, a former Japan missionary, and his new bride, Nora, arrived in Japan to assume leadership. Ivie continued in the spirit of the reforms or innovations started by Elder McKay. He tried to expand the work. He sent missionaries to four new areas and introduced new methods of language study. For a brief moment total numbers of missionaries, Book of Mormon sales, and baptisms increased, but by the end of 1922, matters had returned to the old pattern. In January 1922, Kofu, after having been worked for fourteen consecutive years, was closed. This left only three conferences in the mission. Unfortunately, after the arrival of the couples the leaders in Salt Lake City did not continue to send the numbers of missionaries that had been suggested by Elder McKay. The result was a dampening of enthusiasm among the missionaries.