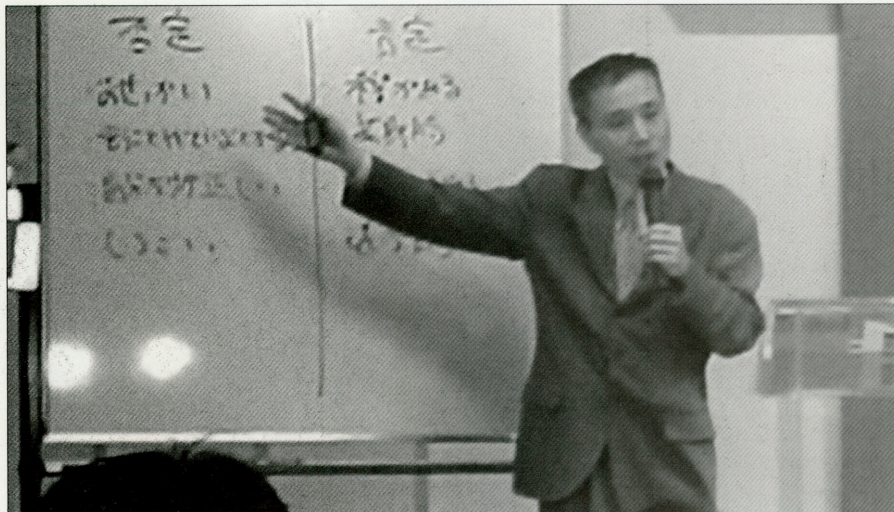




In Japan, Adventists Find Willow Creek Bridge to the Unchurched



An Interview with Yasuki Miyamoto

BY JULIUS NAM

Editor's Note: Yasuki Miyamoto is pastor of Kashiwa Seventh-day Adventist Church, located outside of Tokyo, Japan, and director of Willow Creek Network Japan, which is the Japanese agency of Willow Creek Association <www.willowcreek.com>. When it was launched in 2000, he was Sabbath School, personal ministries, and children's ministry director at Japan Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. He received his ministerial training—both a B.A. and an M.A. in religion—at Avondale College in Australia.

NAM: You studied at Avondale for your bachelor's and master's degrees in religion. Is it a normal or common thing for Adventist ministers in Japan to be educated abroad, or are almost all of them products of Saniku Gakuin

College, which I believe is the only Adventist college in Japan?

MIYAMOTO: Most of our ministers in Japan are trained in Saniku Gakuin College and some get further training at Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies in the Philippines. Few go to the United States.

NAM: Why did you choose Avondale? And why pastoral ministry as your career?

MIYAMOTO: I went to Avondale because I heard that it had a strong theological department. Plus, Avondale offered fees cheaper than colleges in the United States. I thoroughly enjoyed my stay Down Under.

I am a second-generation Adventist. I picked up my career because, in

humbleness, I was called to do this work. After high school, I dropped out of the Church because of weariness of church life. Back then, the Church was very legalistic. However, through a sequence of interesting events, I was led back to the Church and I sensed that God had a plan for me.

NAM: I've been told that only 1 percent of the population in Japan is Christian, and 1 percent of Christians Adventist. What do you see as the reasons for the difficulty in comparison to Korea, and even China, for example?

MIYAMOTO: It is said half-jokingly that Japan is the graveyard of missionaries. So much effort and time have been spent on evangelizing Japan, but there has not been much of a harvest. Japan is considered the most difficult country to be evangelized apart from Muslim countries. There have been many studies done on this matter. I'd like to mention a few of them by comparing the success of Christianity in Korea.

National characteristic is one reason. In Korea, people have always faced the threat of invasion from



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other powerful countries, such as China. They had to decide who was enemy or friend. It was a matter of black-and-white when they had to make a decision. In Japan, we have never been invaded by foreign powers. Rather than distinguishing themselves, everyone is expected to live harmoniously with others by diminishing individual identity. Individual people see things or identify themselves in terms of group consensus.

This has created an ambiguous attitude in our national character. However, the Bible is not ambiguous in a sense that it always asks us to make a clear decision on whom to follow, which does not fit easily into our way of feeling and thinking. To an average Japanese person, religious difference does not play a big role. He or she is happy to have a wedding at church, yet when a family member dies they have a funeral at a Buddhist temple. They are happy to go to the church on Christmas, but also happy to go to the Shinto Shrine on New Year's Day—something that always puzzles Westerners.

History is another reason. In Korea, Christianity played a resistance role to Japanese imperialism [in the first half of the twentieth century]. Through this, Christianity became well-integrated into the national identity of Korea. But when you study Japanese history, the only period during which we had many Christians was the Warring State Period (1493–1573). During this time, we had seven to eight hundred thousand Christians (back then, the entire population was one-tenth of the current population).

One reason for this success was the harshness of social conditions,

which made people more religious. Also, becoming a Christian brought the advantage of gaining profit from foreign trade, and there existed more religious freedom. However, after the Warring Period came the Edo Period, and Japan closed the door to Westerners and severe persecution of Christianity was carried out. During this time, the religious policy forced everyone to become a Buddhist and register their names at local Buddhist temples. This period lasted about three hundred years and Christianity was virtually wiped out. To this day, we have not been able to overcome the effect of this weighty history.

The last reason is climate. The abundance of rain makes our culture wet and rather gloomy. Even popular songs that sing about love and lovers have many gloomy words like "drizzle," "farewell," "tears," "waiting," "bearing," "dreary," and so forth. Our emotion is drawn to these subduing words. On the other hand, the Bible expresses bright and hopeful emotions. Though the Bible contains negative expressions, they all turn into positive ones at the end. The Japanese feel that the emotion of the Bible is too bright and too clear. Emotional expressions of Koreans are also different from the Japanese. Rather than subduing their emotions like the Japanese, Koreans are more expressive.

Christianity is said to be like a Western-style dress, which we have not been successful in turning into the Japanese Kimono.

NAM: *What is the size of the Adventist church membership in Japan and how many pastors are there?*

MIYAMOTO: Membership in Japan is 15,000 on the books, but church attendance is around 6,000. There are 84 pastors working among some 180 churches.

NAM: *What about Saniku Gakuin College? How many students attend the college, and how many of them are theology majors?*

MIYAMOTO: We have 230 students altogether; many of them are nursing majors and only 13 theology majors (a number just over the 12 disciples of Jesus!).

NAM: *In my correspondence with you, you've mentioned that Adventists in Japan tend to be less conservative than their counterparts in Korea and probably elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia. What did you mean by that? Could you give some examples with explanations as to why?*

MIYAMOTO: What I meant by "less conservative" is that if you want to reach out to 99 percent of the population who aren't Christians, you are bound to think differently than people in a country in which the presence of Christianity is dominant.

As far as the Seventh-day Adventist Church is concerned, a few years back, we changed our structure for more effective use of our resources for evangelism. We got rid of the conference bureaucracy, leaving only the conference president. Now, all the administrative and departmental work is done at the union. Even these union departmental directors are pastors at local churches. I think we made our structure as streamlined as possible. Right now, the General Conference is proposing different models of restructuring,

and our current structure is considered one of them.

Another example is our wedding guideline. We don't recommend that an Adventist marry a non-Adventist, but our guideline leaves room for an Adventist marrying a non-Adventist to have their wedding ceremony at an Adventist church. This guideline was drawn because we had more ladies than men in our church, and there were increasing cases of marriage between Adventists and non-Adventists. We used to require them to have their weddings at different venues, but it created a negative image of Christianity among non-Christian partners and families. This guideline helps a non-Christian partner have a better understanding of Christianity and a more cordial attitude toward the Church after the marriage. We paid attention to the religious tolerance of our culture, which I've mentioned already.

NAM: *In addition to being a local church pastor, you're a director of Willow Creek Network Japan, which provides Willow resources through the Adventist publishing house. That's fascinating because I've never heard of an Adventist pastor—much less a denominational entity—involved with Willow Creek to that extent. How did this relationship come about?*

MIYAMOTO: The SDA Church in Japan has been facing the challenge of aging within the church. The strategy we considered at the union was to implement Natural Church Development (NCD) <www.ncd-international.org>, which measures eight elements (leadership, worship, spiritual gifts, and so forth) of local church life. It was about eight years ago that we started implementing it,

but we faced lack of resources to help improve each element.

I had a chance to visit Willow before, so I checked to see if we could bring its resources to support the churches. Willow was already known then to be a most effective church to reach out to secularized, materialistic, unchurched persons in the United States, and we in Japan have a somewhat similar type of people that we are trying to reach. Fortunately, the Adventist Center for Creative Ministry <www.creativeministry.org> produced a resource on spiritual gifts—*Connection*—which is an Adventist version of *Network*, produced by Willow Creek. Thanks to the center, we did not have any trouble securing the copyright from Willow and Zondervan to translate the material into Japanese.

The translation of the *Network* kit took us about three years. Since then, we have been able to publish other resources like *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, *Courageous Leadership*, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, *Too Busy Not to Pray*, and so forth. We have marketed them to general Christian churches because, with only the SDA church market, we cannot cover the cost of publication. At the same time, we also wanted to help not only SDA churches, but also other Christian churches to grow as well.

NAM: *Why has this been important to you?*

MIYAMOTO: It is important not only for making a church growth tool available to the SDA Church as well as to other churches, but also to help break down the barriers that we used to build between us and other church-

es. To an average Japanese, seeing infighting within religious groups does not provide a positive image. Japanese consider it a sign of immaturity. When we face the fact that 99 percent of Japanese are non-Christians, it is of no use to continue infighting. Rather, we must have cooperation among Christian churches to spread the gospel.

Getting involved with Willow has been our way of saying that we'd like to reach out to other churches and we are here to cooperate with you so that the gospel could reach 99 percent of people in Japan. My work involves providing Willow resources, conducting seminars in other churches using those resources, organizing a tour to Willow and to their Leadership Summit conference, and so forth. Sometimes, I am even asked to speak at worships at Sunday churches. I am happy to see that God is doing wonderful things through SDA churches as well as other churches.

NAM: *What have been some of the positive outcomes of this relationship?*

MIYAMOTO: Evangelical newspapers and magazines used to refuse any advertisement that had to do with the SDA Church. Christian bookstores did not sell any books from our publishing house. It has all changed now. Advertisements of our hospital, books, health foods, and schools appear in these papers and magazines. You can find our books in any Christian bookstores. We even published a book that introduces the SDA Church with the recommendation of two promi-

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The Sabbath Judge

BY BONNIE DWYER

Careening through the streets of Nairobi in a state-issued Mercedes Benz, Kenyan High Court judge Mary Ang'awa deftly shows that the key to driving in this city with traffic-clogged circles is to keep moving. And that she does, hardly stopping for guards to salute and lower chains at crossroads.

On this Sabbath afternoon, she hurries to get to the Adventist church on the south side of town to pick up her niece and nephew, who have attended services all day. Stories spill out along the way about her experiences as a young lawyer and the history of the church to which we are headed.

She was only twenty-seven when members there asked her to chair the building committee. It was a small company at that time. Potlucks were often held at her (then) nearby home. Plus, she was the only one not discouraged when they lost their lease on rented space. Her talk about the opportunity that the company had to build their own place got her the building committee position. And with a church home, the congregation has grown.

It is Pathfinder Sabbath, so uniformed children and adults mill around in the parking lot when we arrive. We get out and take a brief peek inside the large sanctuary with beautiful cathedral windows. Back at the car, six more people have piled into the backseat. We head off to the home of her brother, where we drop off the children, their neighbors, and their nanny.

Making sure that these children have a way to and from church and a good Sabbath School—even though it sits across town from the place she regularly attends—is important to the judge. A



single woman who loves children, she plays auntie to many others beside her brothers' children.

Patron may be her title, but Sister Mary is what she is called at the University of Nairobi Church, where she regularly attends. This congregation of five hundred students recently went through the official process to be declared a church. On this Sabbath, its members nominate the nominating committee, which will spend Sunday coming up with a list of officers. More importantly to Mary, this is "Pearls' Sabbath," the time when the women lead out in all aspects of the service.

Sister Mary offers the pastoral prayer, leads the choir, bounces from back to front to introduce a visitor, but mostly sits smiling at the polished young women who preach, sing, and lead out. Everyone is invited to stay for potluck. Within minutes after the service, a table is set on the platform and food spread out for all to enjoy. A small group gathers by the microphones and begins to practice music for the afternoon session, which is scheduled to run until four. It is five when we leave, and the meeting still goes strong.

Mary says that Adventist students have gathered together at the University of Nairobi for Sabbath services ever since she studied there in the late 1970s. But only during the last year have they decided to become an official congregation. Many of the planning sessions for this congregation

were also held at her home. When we get there, she pulls out her photo albums; the majority of the images are of her church family.

As she shares the stories of her colorful life, Sabbath plays a recurring role. As a law student, her refusal to attend the bar preparatory classes on Sabbath impressed one of her professors—particularly when she was one of the few students to pass the exam. He was so impressed that he nominated her for a magistrate position. However, the Kenyan government works on Saturdays, and when she declined to work on that day, her pay was docked.

After a year and a half, she wanted to resign. But the elders encouraged her to stay. And every two years she received a promotion. By 1990, she was the chief magistrate of the First Anti-Corruption Court in Kenya. In 1996, she became the resident judge of the High Court of Kenya in Mombasa, a court known for its corruption. It was a mess, she says. The advocates fought her because she took steps to clean it up.

"There was evil all around," she says. "Going to church on Sabbath was such a refuge."

How so?

"Just doing the normal things, singing, praying."

Just spending a Sabbath day with Judge Mary has similar rejuvenating qualities. Her love for the Sabbath and her church family shine irresistibly. In *Fahrenheit 451*, people became books to preserve them. Mary becomes Sabbath. ■

