

Akashi for Mennonite Japanese Christian Fellowship Zoom church, June 2021

Mina-san, konnichi wa. Wiens, Greta to moshimasu.

This month, it is one year since I began attending the Zoom worship services of MJCF. At first, I joined only for the purpose of hearing Japanese spoken. Since then, I have begun to think of this church group as my friends. Now it is my turn to share a testimony. It should be easy. How did I become a Christian? What has God done for me? Why am I here?

Nevertheless, when Gerald-sensei asked me to give my testimony, all I could think was, "What will I say?"

In 1 Peter 3:15, it says, "... *have reverence for Christ in your hearts, and honour him as Lord. Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you ...*"

Well, there are many different kinds of people in this world. Some are always ready to speak, and some are not.

In Ephesians 4:11-12, the apostle Paul writes that Jesus Christ "*appointed some (people) to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, others to be pastors and teachers. He did this to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service.*"

Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 12:5-7, Paul, again, explains, "*There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served. There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to all for their particular service. The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all.*"

I think about these verses a lot. We live in a competitive world. It's tempting to compare ourselves to others in a negative way. At least, I find myself doing so. But I take encouragement from knowing that God *designed* us all to be different and that He has a purpose for each one of us.

Yes, according to Ephesians 2:10, "*God has made us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus he has created us for a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do.*"

Now I will tell you a little bit about my background, and why I am a Christian. My family comes from a part of northern Germany that now belongs to Poland. In that area, near the city of Gdansk, there used to be very many Mennonite villages.

Both of my grandmothers, and one grandfather, were Mennonite Christians. My other grandfather was also a believer, but in the Lutheran church. Consequently, my parents and my aunts and uncles were raised in Christian families, and they passed on this heritage to my generation.

I don't want to say that all children of Christian parents become believers, but let's say there is some influence. It is part of the family culture and tradition. Some young people rebel against their religious upbringing.

In my case, it provided a sense of security. I am grateful to God for placing me in a family and community where it was natural to read the Bible and pray, to go to church and be baptized.

Some people are able to say exactly when and how they became a Christian – and some churches even insist on being able to name a date and a place – but for me it was just a part of growing up.

Of course, I had to decide it for myself – that is how it is in the Mennonite church. That is why we have adult baptism. We can't just say we are Christians because of our parents. But if they teach us that there is a God who loves us, it enables to eventually develop our own relationship with Him.

When my siblings and I were small, my mother and grandmother read to us from a children's Bible story book. But I loved to look at my mother's Bible. It had a zipper – I found that fascinating – and colour illustrations. This was in the days before television.

We learned everything from books. We also learned to recite prayers before meals and at bedtime. I don't remember how old I was when I began to pray by myself, but I do remember one of my early prayers.

The Bible says, "*ask, and it shall be given unto you*", doesn't it?" (Matthew 7:7). So, I sat outside our house, and I prayed that chocolate bars would fall from the sky.

They did not. Somehow I must have understood that that was not an appropriate kind of prayer, and that maybe God didn't appreciate my efforts to test his generosity.

In 4th grade, I got a New Testament at school. Every child got one; they were distributed free of charge by an organization called the Gideons. Nowadays, they aren't allowed to do that anymore. It's not permitted to give out religious literature in public schools.

But in those days, we even recited the Lord's Prayer in our classroom every morning after singing "Oh Canada". Anyway, I loved that little red book and I read it cover to cover. I was 10 years old, and by that time, I was quite devout already. I had good Sunday School teachers, too, and I loved reading our Sunday School children's magazines and books from the church library.

The one thing I have to add is that my parents didn't force us to go to church or Sunday School every week if we didn't want to. So, although we got a religious education, we had a lot of freedom and didn't feel pressured to follow church rules like some other children we knew.

Besides teaching Bible stories, my Sunday School teachers would tell us about the work of missionaries in far-off countries. Without really understanding what it would mean, I dreamed of being a missionary someday.

I also admired my second-grade teacher at school. In my imagination, I was going to be just like her, writing words and numbers on the blackboard while all the children worked quietly at their desks.

These fantasies accompanied me throughout my school life, and I have to stress the words "dreams, imagination, and fantasy" because most of what I knew about the world came from books and not from real life experience.

I was baptized at the age of 16 along with about a dozen other young people in my church. At that time, baptism was a kind of graduation from Sunday School. We had free choice, but most people went along with it because that was the custom. By then, I sometimes felt and acted like a rebellious teenager. But my decision to be a Christian had been made long ago.

My favourite Bible verse is Hebrews 11:1 – *“To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see.”* It illustrates the strangeness and the mystery of the belief we have in God, in Christ, in salvation, in eternal life.

I’ve heard that, for some young people raised in a Christian home, university life offers temptations that draw them away from their faith. I didn’t find that to be true for myself. I don’t mean that I was never exposed to ideas that made me question the things I believed.

It’s just that I could always talk to God about every kind of issue or concern. All of us can. We wouldn’t normally talk to someone who isn’t there – but God is always there.

After university, I attended Teacher’s College for a year, but I didn’t enjoy it. At university, I had been a member of the student newspaper team, and all my friends were still there. But worse than that, the reality of standing in front of a classroom full of teenagers was nothing like what I had imagined.

However, when I look back on my life, this is one area where I truly experienced the grace of God, because in spite of all the difficulty, I passed the course and obtained my teaching certificate.

Meanwhile, I had also learned to do the bookkeeping for my father’s business. Bookkeeping is quiet, methodical work, and some people would say it’s boring, but I like it.

For the next four years, I worked part-time as a teacher and part-time as a bookkeeper. I saved all my teaching income separately for the fulfillment of another childhood dream. I wanted to go to Japan.

I know exactly how I got that idea. It has to do with the Olympics, but not the Tokyo Olympics of 2021. In 1972, I was just an 8th-grader. At that time, I didn’t know anything about Japan, and I wasn’t interested in sports.

But I was at the bank one day, and there on the wall was a poster that attracted my attention. I don’t remember the picture on it – maybe it was someone skiing down a snow-covered mountain. I just remember the word

“Sapporo” written in large letters across the top. I looked at that poster, and for some reason, I decided: **I want to go there.**

What an unrealistic idea it seemed to be at that time. Ten years later, it was not just a dream, it was a goal. I read all the books about Japan that I could find. I practised eating rice with chopsticks. I already had some Japanese penfriends. I made plans to visit them. And when my younger sister got a scholarship to the University of Toronto, I convinced her to study Japanese there so that she could come to Japan with me and handle our communications.

I think I should hurry up and get to the end of the story. Because I still wanted to be a missionary, but I didn't know how.

On that first trip to Japan, I was visiting a penfriend in Kobe. I knew that there were Mennonite missionaries there, too, so I contacted them. They introduced me to a young American woman who was teaching English there as a volunteer.

Once again, I got an idea: **I could do that, too.** Yet, four more years passed, until one Sunday I saw an exciting announcement in the church bulletin. A Mennonite mission agency was offering a tour to Japan for young adults who were interested in mission work. Of course, I applied!

On that tour, our group spent some time with Maria-*san* and her husband Peter-*sensei*. One day, they asked each of us directly if we wanted to come to Japan as mission workers. I think I was the only one to say “Yes” very clearly, and maybe I would not have been their first choice of candidate!

But, a few months later, after I had sent my application to the mission board, they very kindly invited me to join them in their new project in the city of Fukuoka. My job would be to teach English and invite people to church.

That is how three dreams came together: To be a teacher. To be a missionary (or at least a missionary helper). To go to Japan.

Honestly, I don't know if any of this was God's plan for me. With the Bible verses quoted earlier, I was trying to explain my insecurity about having or not having the right gifts to do what God wants me to do.

I still experience doubts regarding my Christian life, but I'm grateful to God for taking care of me and allowing me to experience the fulfillment of my dreams. It was an immense privilege to live in Japan, work with the Derksens, make friends, and travel throughout the whole country, even to Sapporo!

As I was writing this, I came to reflect on how much of my adult life was influenced by the desires and decisions of my childhood. I can say that I experienced many blessings in my life, but not everything was positive. Even my Christian family has problems like everyone else.

If you have unfulfilled dreams, if you have regrets about choices you have made, if you sometimes feel depressed about something, I don't want you to think that Greta's life is perfect by comparison.

For the purpose of this testimony, I had to focus on something, so I chose (to describe) my path to Japan. The path continued, and that's why I now worship with you on Sundays (or Mondays).

We have a great God, and He loves us. I learned that when I was young, and it remains the most important thing I know.