

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

ENDURING BY HIS GRACE:
AN UPDATED HISTORY OF THE LUTHERAN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN
JAPAN FROM 1957 THROUGH 2019

SUBMITTED TO PROF. BRADLEY WORDELL
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ABSTRACT

In 1982 the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod along with the Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church, the WELS' sister synod in Japan, celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of mission work in Japan. A history of the Wisconsin Synod's work in Japan up to 1982 was produced between 1982 and 1985. This paper is an update of that history. The first major section of the paper treats the years of 1957 to 1982 as a summary of secondary resources, mainly the previously mentioned anniversary history. The years 1983 to 2019 are treated using primary sources including interviews, surveys, and documents provided by the LECC and WELS missionaries. A brief analysis of challenges and opportunities for mission work in Japan as experienced by both expatriate missionaries and native Japanese Christians follows, which concludes that the LECC is equipped to endure the challenges present in Japan as a mission field today. The paper as a whole concludes with suggested topics for further research.

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INTRODUCTION—PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THIS PAPER

In 1982 the Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church (LECC) celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary under the theme “Praising His Grace.”¹ That same year the first part of what would be a three part history of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod’s (WELS) mission work in Japan was produced by a team of seniors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) under the authority of the Japan Mission Board utilizing the same theme.² The third part of “Praising His Grace” was completed in 1985. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People: A Century of WELS World Missions*, first published in 1992 with a revised second printing the following year, included a chapter on the history of the Japan mission with a few additional details on the seven years in between.³ The last dated historical event is the retirement of missionary Pastor Richard

1. Michael K. Biedenbender, Kevin R. Hastings, and Lloyd C. Schlomer, “Praising His Grace: The History of the Wisconsin Synod in Japan, 1957-1982, Book III (1972-1982),” 1985, WLS Essay File, <https://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/480/Japan3BiedenbenderHastingsSchlomer.pdf>, 13.

2. Bruce H. Becker, Mark R. Freier, and Mark P. Henke, “Praising His Grace: The History of the Wisconsin Synod in Japan, 1957-1982, Book I (1957-1957),” 1982, WLS Essay File, <https://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/302/Japan1BeckerFreierHenke.pdf>, Introduction (n.p.).

3. Theodore A. Sauer, Harold R. John, and Ernst H. Wendland, editors. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People: A Century of WELS World Missions* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), 147-167.

Poetter in 1991.⁴ Historical essays written since the publication of *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People* have focused on events prior to 1991, and a history of the subsequent 28 years of the LECC has not yet been produced.

The purpose of this paper is to provide just such a history. This paper is divided into two major sections. The first covers events from 1957 to 1982. This section is primarily a summary of the “Praising His Grace” WLS senior church history papers, with support from other secondary resources that provide additional details. The second section covers events from 1983 to 2019. It utilizes secondary sources to a smaller extent and makes greater use of primary sources, including documents from missionary files, surveys, and interviews. The paper follows a chronological-topical format; the second section in particular being more topical due to the nature of the research behind it.

As with any paper of this sort, the amount of history that can be recorded is limited by the size of the paper and the timeframe in which research can be conducted. The history recorded is also greatly influenced by the perspective of the sources at the writer’s disposal. The earlier history papers that form the basis of the first half of this paper have occasional inconsistencies in spelling, terminology, and chronology, which I have standardized and corrected as I consulted with former missionaries and their families. In the second half of the paper there is a greater focus on the Tokyo congregation than others of the LECC, since that is the congregation my contacts in Japan are connected to. This is in no way meant to diminish the work being done by the other congregations. Likewise, due to conducting an interview with former missionary Pastor Kermit Habben and his wife Margie, there are more specific references to outreach efforts by them and their family. These references certainly do not exclude outreach work by other

4. Ibid., 161.

missionaries' families or the Japanese LECC member families, but serve as examples typical of the kind of work done in the field. It is my hope that the events recorded here will help give readers a broad understanding of the LECC, acknowledging that there are many periods in this history which merit a deeper study on their own. I include suggestions about how some of these could be carried out in the conclusion.

An additional limitation on the chronological scope of this paper is that it is specifically about the LECC and the Wisconsin Synod mission that brought about its founding. Therefore the prior mission led by Pastor Frederick Tiefel will not be covered in detail here.⁵ The outcome of this first Wisconsin Synod mission was a completely fresh start for the synod's mission efforts in Japan, one that would lead to the founding of the WELS's sister synod in Japan, the Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church.

5. For an account this mission see Biedenbender et al., "Praising His Grace I", 20-35, as well as Ben Enstad, "God Opens a Door in Japan: 1951-1956," 2008, WLS Essay File, <https://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/1381/EnstadJapan.pdf>. In 1957 Tiefel resigned from the Wisconsin Synod as a matter of conscience regarding how Wisconsin was handling the issue of fellowship with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod at the time. The congregation he had started followed him and was soon supported by the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) after it was established during the same controversy. Tiefel and his congregation in Japan would later break with the CLC and become an independent church. For an account of Tiefel's mission after leaving the Wisconsin Synod, see David Lau, *Out of Necessity: A History of the Church of the Lutheran Confession* (CLC Board of Education and Publications, 2009), 119-145, 360-371.

1957–1982

1957–1960 – A New Foundation

In 1956, seminary candidate Richard Seeger was assigned as the Wisconsin Synod’s second missionary to Japan. By the time he and his wife arrived in Japan in April of 1957, he had become the first missionary of the Wisconsin Synod’s second mission in Japan.⁶ Seeger began two years of intensive language study while living in Itabashi, Tokyo Prefecture.⁷ At the same time, he already began to make connections through English language Bible classes in his home, the first of which was held on June 17, 1957. While the students were drawn to the class initially because of the benefit of learning English from a native English speaker, these classes were the birth of the LECC. The total reset of the Japan mission had not been part of the Wisconsin Synod’s plans a year prior, and from a human perspective would be considered a major setback. Nevertheless, the mission appeared to be bearing fruit.

The first Wisconsin Synod mission to Japan had been lost in the course of the Intersynodical Controversy between the Wisconsin Synod and the Lutheran Church–Missouri

6. Clark et al., “Praising His Grace II,” 2. Since in this subsection of the paper I am primarily summarizing the second and third parts of “Praising His Grace,” nearly every sentence could be considered worthy of a citation. In order to reduce redundancy in the footnotes I have opted to limit “Ibid.” citations to the first citation in a paragraph, direct quotes, changes in page number, and on occasions when additional commentary is added in the footnote. The reader can presume to find all other historical information in the same location as the most recent prior citation.

7. Ibid. This would be the pattern followed by most subsequent WELS missionaries in Japan.

Synod (LCMS).⁸ Yet this same controversy also contributed to the new mission gaining two of its longest serving workers. Pastor Richard Poetter had served as a missionary in Japan for the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod since 1950.⁹ In 1957, due to the doctrinal controversy in the Missouri Synod, Poetter resigned his call and returned to the Wisconsin Synod, which he had grown up in.¹⁰ He nevertheless expressed a strong desire to continue working in Japan. The Japan Mission Board of the Wisconsin Synod saw a great opportunity in Poetter and extended a call to him as the second missionary in Japan.¹¹ In April of 1958 he accepted the call, and in August of that year Poetter and his wife Ikuko (whom he had met and married during his time as an LCMS missionary in Niigata Prefecture) returned to Japan.¹²

But Poetter as a second missionary, and one with experience in the field already, was not the only personnel gain for the Wisconsin Synod mission that year. Poetter soon brought Ryuichi Igarashi onboard as a paid lay worker for the mission.¹³ Igarashi had worked closely with Poetter

8. The term “Intersynodical Controversy” is used to refer to the series of events and doctrinal disputes leading to a break in fellowship among the members of the Synodical Conference. Church fellowship was one of the more prominent points of dispute, especially as the controversy played out between the Wisconsin Synod and LCMS missionaries in Japan (see footnote 5). The controversy, which had gone through various stages since at least the 1930s, led to the Wisconsin Synod breaking fellowship with the LCMS in 1961. A concise history of this controversy can be found in Edward C. Friedrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 198–208. For a longer history focused on the controversy itself, see Mark E. Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003).

9. Darren Green, “God’s Grace in Action in Mito,” 1994 WLS Essay File, <https://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/1878/GreenMito.pdf>.

10. Clark et al., “Praising His Grace II,” 3.

11. Green, “Mito,” 6.

12. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

13. *Ibid.*, 7.

during his earlier mission work, and Poetter spoke highly of his willingness and aptitude of mission work.

Mr. Ryuichi Igarashi has worked with missionary Poetter for more than five years. He has proved himself an able worker in the church and proved himself to be a sincere Lutheran by conviction. He is trustworthy.... Mr. Igarashi is capable to interpret, teach Japanese, do secretary work for the missionary, teach bible class and do evangelistic work under supervision, conduct reading services and superintend Sunday School, that is to say he has experienced all phases of mission work. He is adept in Japanese, Russian, and French... He has agreed to work with missionary Poetter again.¹⁴

Igarashi's many varied skills and hardworking nature would prove indispensable to the mission work in Japan for many years.

September of 1958 saw the first meeting of the Mission Council, a regular meeting of the missionaries in Japan.¹⁵ With two missionaries in the field the next step was determining where to begin working. The Japan Mission Board deferred to Poetter's experience when it came to selecting where to start outreach efforts.¹⁶ In deciding where to begin searching, Poetter turned to the assistance of a radio ministry conducted by the LCMS, The Japan Lutheran Hour.¹⁷ Listeners were encouraged to write in to the program, and the LCMS missionaries kept a record of prospects throughout Japan. However, they lacked the manpower to follow up on every contact. Poetter acquired from the LCMS mission a list of contacts in Ibaraki, a prefecture northeast of Tokyo where the LCMS was not focusing their efforts.¹⁸ In October, Poetter and Igarashi surveyed Ibaraki Prefecture, focusing on the cities of Ishioka, Tsuchiura, and Mito.¹⁹ Mito, the

14. Ibid.

15. Clark et al., "Praising His Grace II," 4.

16. Ibid., 6.

17. Green, "Mito," 8.

18. Ibid., 8-9.

19. Clark et al., "Praising His Grace II," 4.

capital of the prefecture, was selected as the city to start outreach in, and the Poetter family moved there in November.

Back in Tokyo, Seeger had begun holding English-language worship services in his home in October; in November, Poetter began the mission's first Japanese-language worship services in Mito.²⁰ The work of the gospel was being carried out, but the controversy within the Synodical Conference continued to hang over the Japan mission. In May of 1959, the Wisconsin Synod missionaries informed the Japan Board that they could no longer practice fellowship with the LCMS missionaries in Japan; they did, however, continue to receive lists of prospects from the Lutheran Hour.²¹ 1959 marked the centennial of the Protestant church in Japan, and Poetter reflected on the blessing of bringing God's word in truth and purity to the people of Japan, while acknowledging the confusion for many Japanese on meeting "a missionary of Christianity who not only uproots heathen religions but explains about false doctrines in the Christian churches in Japan."²²

As the missionaries faced the dual fronts of Japan's false religions and the deteriorating relationship with the LCMS, the mission continued to grow. Seeger completed his two years of language training and began preaching in Japanese, working in the city of Tsuchiura, Ibaraki.²³ In Mito, Poetter recorded the mission's first infant baptism and the first adult baptism and confirmations. Contacts continued to be made through mail, including a Bible study correspondence course written by Igarashi. Recognizing the growth of the mission, the Japan

20. Ibid., 4.

21. Ibid., 5.

22. Ibid., 6.

23. Ibid., 6–7

Board sent a letter in May stating the goal of establishing an indigenous church in Japan and instructing Seeger to move to another field after a third missionary arrives.²⁴

At the Synod convention in August 1959, the WELS authorized the sending of a third missionary to Japan, and the Japan Board began calling for the third missionary.²⁵ The call was eventually extended to a Seminary graduate through the Assignment Committee. In 1960, WLS candidate Luther Weindorf accepted the call as the third missionary; he would arrive in Japan in August.²⁶

1961–1965 – Establishing and Expanding

The first half of the 1960s would see the Japan mission both expand and further establish itself, with the constructions of the first church properties and legal incorporation as a church body. In 1960, Seeger began working in the city of Utsunomiya, the capital of Tochigi Prefecture, which is on the northwest border of Ibaraki.²⁷ Contacts continued to be established in other cities in both Tochigi and Ibaraki, so that by the end of the year mission work was being carried out in eight cities: Tokyo, Daigo, Hitachi, Ishioka, Mito, Shimotsuma, Tsuchiura, and Oarai.²⁸

The chairmen of the Japan Board and the General Board for World Missions, Pastors Harry Shiley and Edgar Hoenecke respectively, made their first field visit to Japan in August of

24. Ibid., 7.

25. Ibid., 8.

26. Ibid., 8–9.

27. Ibid., 9. See also Sauer et al., *To Every Nation*, 159.

28. Clark et al., “Praising His Grace II,” 9. Work in Shimotsuma would later shift to the city of Shimodate to the north.

1960.²⁹ These visits served the important purposes of both encouraging the missionaries and their families and providing an opportunity to discuss important matters in person, a special blessing at a time when it took about a week for a letter to cross the Pacific Ocean. The following year, Seeger would meet with the Japan Board while back in the United States on furlough. The main topic of the meeting was the goal of incorporation of the mission.³⁰ Already at the first meeting of the Mission Council in 1958 the missionaries had urged the Japan Board to pursue incorporation.³¹ In order for a foreign religious group to incorporate in Japan, three missionaries were needed; with the arrival of Weindorf, that number had been met.³²

The need to incorporate was especially timely because incorporation would allow church properties to be registered under the mission as a corporate entity, instead of under the names of the missionaries. Such properties had expanded beyond the missionaries homes when a chapel was dedicated in Utsunomiya on May 5, 1961.³³ Seeger reported on the progress of the Japan mission, including the Utsunomiya chapel, to the WELS convention in 1961. The convention authorized the calling of a fourth missionary; Norbert Meier accepted the call and arrived in Japan in 1964.³⁴

The first formal steps towards incorporation of the mission began in November, 1961. The Mission Council was formally organized to include the missionaries as well as Japanese men

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 10.

31. Ibid., 4.

32. Ibid., 10.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., 16.

from the congregations.³⁵ In March of 1962, the Mission Council approved the articles of the Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church, which were then approved by the Japan Board.³⁶ The first Delegate Church Council of the LECC was held on April 29, 1962. A budget was adopted, church properties were listed under the LECC, and a board of trustees was elected. Poetter was elected Chairman, a role he would serve in until his retirement, in addition to serving as field administrator for the Japan Board.³⁷ The incorporation of the LECC was approved by the Ibaraki prefectural government on January 29, 1963.³⁸ That summer the LECC would gain its first national pastor, Tatsushiro Yamada, through colloquy.³⁹

Weindorf completed his language studies in 1962 and began to assume more duties, so that by the September Mission Council meeting the eight cities in which work was focused were divided between the missionaries as follows: Tokyo and Utsunomiya were served by Seeger; Mito, Ishioka, and Shimodate were served by Poetter; Hitachi, Tsuchiura, and Daigo were served by Weindorf.⁴⁰ Weindorf also opened a new field of outreach with a special ministry to the blind. With the help of Keiichi Takahashi in Mito, materials were produced in Japanese Braille and distributed. Takahashi would continue to carry out this ministry until his death in 1989.⁴¹

35. Ibid. 10

36. Ibid. 11

37. Sauer et al., *To Every Nation*, 156. In some documents the LECC chairman position is referred to by its Japanese name *Richijo*, and the LECC board by the term *Rijikai*. Poetter was appointed to the field administrator position in 1966. Clark et al., "Praising His Grace II," 20.

38. Clark et al., "Praising His Grace II," 11.

39. Ibid., 21.

40. Ibid.

41. Sauer et al., *To Every Nation*, 159.

The 1961 WELS convention also authorized \$50,000 to be given to the Japan mission for the construction of chapels and parsonages; Seeger would raise another \$20,000 through presentations made while on furlough, which was contributed to the Church Extension Fund of the LECC.⁴² In June of 1962, the WELS released \$20,000 to Poetter for land and buildings in Mito; the house and chapel of Megumi (Grace) Church were dedicated on December 30, 1962. Weindorf relocated to Tsuchiura, where construction soon began. Funds were also sent to Japan for land acquisition and construction in the Tokyo area. The selection of the city of Higashikurume, Tokyo, led to disagreements and confusion between the missionaries, the Japan Board, and the General Board for World Missions, which were finally resolved following a site visit in 1964.⁴³ The resolution resulted in the adoption of a plan that focused the efforts of the mission on two parallel highways coming out of Tokyo, one which went through Hitachi in Ibaraki and the other which went through Utsunomiya in Tochigi.⁴⁴ Construction on the Higashikurume site would be completed in 1965.⁴⁵

1966–1971 – Calling Workers from Far and Near

The building projects of the early 1960s and the incorporation of the LECC had firmly established the new foundation laid in 1957. The following years would be especially influenced by changes in personnel as mission work continued to expand. By the end of the first decade of the mission in 1966, LECC membership numbered 112 souls, eighty-six of whom were

42. Clark et al., “Praising His Grace II,” 12.

43. Ibid., 13–15.

44. Ibid., 15.

45. Ibid., 18

communicants, and there were nine preaching stations and one organized congregation, Megumi Church in Mito.⁴⁶ That year had also seen both Seeger and Weindorf take calls out of Japan. The pastoral staff was thus cut to three; Poetter, Meier, and Yamada. Change also occurred in the United States as Harry Shiley stepped down as Japan Board chairman; he was replaced by Karl Bast.⁴⁷

Seminary graduate Kermit Habben accepted the call to Japan in 1967, beginning his language studies in the fall of that year.⁴⁸ He began his ministry in Tsuchiura as the replacement for Weindorf.⁴⁹ The following year the Japan Board began calling another missionary, who was to specialize as the head of the new seminary to be established in Japan. Harold Johne accepted the call in 1969.⁵⁰

The LECC seminary had its beginning already at the start of the decade, when Shoichi Onomura, an assistant to Seeger in Tokyo, requested to be trained as a pastor in 1960; however, a year later he discontinued his studies for personal reasons.⁵¹ The seminary plans were more formally structured, with courses distributed between the three pastors and Igarashi, when Tadashi Yoshida entered seminary training in 1964; he put his studies on hiatus after one year to get married.⁵² Two more men, Fukuichi Oshino and Junzo Yamaguchi, would enter pre-seminary training at this time; both also later deferred their studies.

46. *Ibid.*, 19.

47. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

48. *Ibid.*, 20.

49. Sauer et al., *To Every Nation*, 161.

50. Clark et al., “Praising His Grace II,” 22.

51. *Ibid.*, 8, 21.

52. *Ibid.*, 21.

The first year of concentrated effort toward formally establishing the seminary was 1967. In March the board of directors finalized the seminary curriculum, based on the curriculum of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.⁵³ Yoshida began his second year of studies in September; the next year he was joined by Oshino, Yamaguchi, and Yasuo Suzuki.⁵⁴ Plans had been made to make a seminary classroom in the basement of Megumi Church, but in 1969 the Japan Board decided to locate the seminary in Tsuchiura instead.⁵⁵

As the missionaries searched for a suitable site for the seminary's permanent location, the seminary produced its first graduate. In December of 1969 Tadashi Yoshida completed his seminary training.⁵⁶ His graduation and ordination service was on January 15, 1970, to coincide with the LECC Delegate Church Council meeting, and he was called to serve in Hitachi. Fukuichi Oshino and Yasuo Suzuki graduated a year later; Oshino was called to the city of Ashikaga, and Suzuki to Utsunomiya.⁵⁷

The spring of 1971 had brought the graduation and ordination of two seminary students. The fall of that year would feature another important day for the LECC seminary. On September 15, 1971, the new facilities in Tsuchiura were dedicated.⁵⁸ Three new buildings were constructed. The largest building contained a large meeting room, two seminary classrooms, and

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., 21.

55. Ibid., 22.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid. The congregation in Ashikaga had previously been served by Yukichi Makise. Makise had passed a colloquy in October, 1969 and been assigned to Ashikaga, but later moved to Kashiwa. "During his stay at Ashikaga, Makise had swindled local merchants and forged Pastor Poetter's signature. Makise disappeared after his move to Kashiwa and was not found. The LECC was forced to absorb the losses incurred by Makise." Ibid., 23.

58. Ibid. 23

a chapel for the Tsuchiura congregation. The second building housed the LECC print shop. The third was a parsonage for the seminary head, which was built alongside the parsonage of the Tsuchiura pastor.

1972-1977 – Self-Identity and Fellowship

By 1972, seven pastors were active in Japan, four American missionaries, Habben, John, Meier, and Poetter, and three Japanese pastors, Yamada, Oshino, and Yoshida.⁵⁹ At this time there were two men enrolled in a two year pre-seminary instruction course. The work in the Japan mission field continued to grow, and so the WELS approved the request to call a fifth missionary to Japan. Meier, serving in Ueno, Tokyo, began exploratory work in Yokohama and Chiba in 1973. Oshino organized an evangelism drive in the city of Ashikaga, which had responded well to Sunday radio broadcasts produced by the LECC, and approval was given to locate land for a new mission there.⁶⁰ Along with evangelism tracts, these radio broadcasts were highly effective outreach tools. Other literature being produced at this time included translations of “This We Believe,” “Basic Doctrines of the Bible,” and “The Wonderful Works of God.” The continued expansion of the mission work highlighted the need for more help, which was to come from the fifth missionary.

The need became even greater when Yamada resigned his call in 1973 following hospitalization and extended sick leave due to a nervous disorder.⁶¹ One of the two students

59. Michael K. Biedenbender, Kevin R. Hastings, and Lloyd C. Schlomer, “Praising His Grace: The History of the Wisconsin Synod in Japan, 1957-1982, Book III (1972-1982),” (1985. WLS Essay File), <https://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/480/Japan3BiedenbenderHastingsSchlomer.pdf>, 1.

60. *Ibid.*, 2.

61. *Ibid.*

enrolled in pre-seminary training withdrew that same year. The call for a fifth missionary was accepted by Herbert Winterstein. While he began his language studies, another vacancy opened when Meier accepted a call back to the United States in the spring of 1974.⁶² Poetter and Habben filled the vacancies in Mito and Shimodate while a call was extended for another missionary. This call was accepted by Roger Falk. Winterstein and Falk, along with their families, arrived in Japan in August, 1974.

During this time, the LECC also began to take steps that would establish its own identity while at the same time strengthening its bonds to the WELS. At its meeting in January of 1973, the Delegate Church Council recommended that a committee be formed to draw up a constitution for the LECC.⁶³ This was to be based on careful study of other synodical constitutions for proper form, as well as a careful study of Scripture; each section would be studied and evaluated by the Japan congregations as it was completed, with doctrinal oversight from the Delegate Church Council.

Property expansion projects took place in 1974, both out of generosity and necessity. A retaining wall was built on the Tsuchiura property at a cost of \$60,000 when land erosion threatened the combined church-parsonage-seminary facilities.⁶⁴ The print shop at Tsuchiura was expanded as well. Thanks to gifts from the Lutheran Women's Missionary Society (LWMS), a new press was purchased and the old press was overhauled, allowing printing operations to expand. The new congregation in Ashikaga, Heian (Peace), dedicated a church and parsonage in

62. Ibid., 3.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

September, and plans were made to build a new chapel in Utsunomiya.⁶⁵ 1974 was also notable for the release of a first of its kind Lutheran Hymnal in Japan, produced by the Literature Society of the All-Lutheran Free Conference.

1975 was a year of celebration of the past and optimistic planning for the future. Falk and Winterstein would soon complete their language training, with plans to assign Falk to Utsunomiya and Winterstein to Tsuchiura.⁶⁶ Seminary student Munehide Nakamoto began his vicar year at the Shimodate church under Yoshida, and two new students enrolled in the pre-seminary program.⁶⁷ On November 3, following the Reformation service, a celebration dinner was held in Tsuchiura to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Poetter's ministry in Japan.⁶⁸ The WELS also was celebrating "Grace 125" that year. In his remarks to the Delegate Church Council, Poetter gave thanks for the blessings God had given the LECC through her mother church. At that same convention, the LECC took a major step in becoming a mature church body, as the delegates unanimously adopted the proposed constitution.

Falk and Winterstein entered the field in 1976 as planned and began working in Utsunomiya and Tsuchiura. Meanwhile, Johne received an assignment to Ishioka and Ami.⁶⁹ While the exploratory work in Yokohama came to a disappointing conclusion, suitable land was found for construction in Utsunomiya. The Literature Committee continued to publish new materials, including a Small Catechism and "Basic Doctrines of the Bible." In May the LECC

65. Ibid., 4.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid., 4–5.

68. Ibid., 5.

69. Ibid., 6.

established the Committee on Doctrinal Matters for the purposes of monitoring Lutheran developments around the world, judging the doctrinal content of publications printed by church bodies outside the fellowship, and supplying information on denominational differences.⁷⁰ In April the Japan Executive Committee suggested that, since the LECC now had a constitution, the time was right to consider a statement of fellowship with the WELS. The Executive Committee was also reorganized. Clarence Krause became Chairman; Luther Weindorf, former missionary to Japan, became Vice-President; and Karl Bast became Secretary.⁷¹

1977–1982 – Milestones

As the LECC and WELS continued to move towards a formal declaration of fellowship, the number of workers being sent into the Japan field continued to grow. In March of 1977 Munehide Nakamoto finished his seminary training and was assigned to Shimodate.⁷² His entry into the ministry was especially welcome after the dismissal of Winterstein that year, which the Executive Committee compared to the separation of Paul and Barnabas over a difference of opinion. David Haberkorn accepted a call to Japan and began his language studies in 1978.⁷³ The mission was also blessed with another new missionary who had prior experience in Japan. Elwood Fromm, a LCMS pastor, had initiated a colloquy into the WELS the prior December.⁷⁴ Following a year at WLS in Mequon, he accepted a call into WELS as a missionary

70. Ibid., 7.

71. Ibid. Karl Bast is erroneously referred to as “Kenneth Bast” in Biedenbender et al., “Praising His Grace III,” 7. Kermit Habben, message to Brad Wordell forwarded to author, May 20, 2020.

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid., 8.

74. Ibid., 6.

in 1978, bringing with him twenty years of experience in Japan, and was assigned to Hitachi.⁷⁵ In August, John Boehringer accepted a call as the seventh missionary in Japan, and began his language training in Japan in October.⁷⁶ Haberkorn and Boehringer completed their language training in 1980; Haberkorn was installed at Nozomi (Hope) Church in Tsuchiura, and Boehringer at Praise Church in Zushi.⁷⁷ The next year the total number of called workers would grow to eleven with the graduation of seminary student Wakichi Akagami; he was assigned to the area of Toride, Abiko, Kashiwa, and Matsudo.⁷⁸

Exploratory work continued in these years, with outreach beginning in the areas of Kanuma, Katsudo Koga, and Iwase, and work continuing in Yokohama and Tokyo.⁷⁹ In 1978 Yoshida moved to Yachiyo in Chiba prefecture to serve a congregation in the area that had applied for admission into the LECC, with plans to build a chapel and parsonage within the next two years. 1979 the WELS Board for World Missions suggested alternate facilities be located, putting those plans on hold, but in 1980 the Board authorized full funds for the Chiba project.⁸⁰ The facilities in Chiba were dedicated in September, 1981.⁸¹

75. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

76. *Ibid.*, 9.

77. *Ibid.*, 11. Haberkorn and Boehringer are listed here as being assigned to “the Zushi and Tsuchiura-Ishioka congregations respectively,” but the cities are listed in the wrong order respective to the missionaries. The names of the congregations they were assigned to are correctly listed.

78. *Ibid.*, 12.

79. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

80. *Ibid.*, 10–11.

81. *Ibid.*, 12.

Media output also continued. The Mass Media Fund of the WELS provided funds for the rebroadcasting of the Sunday radio worship services in the evenings.⁸² The LWMS provided a gift to build the libraries of the national pastors. The print shop in Tsuchiura continued to produce new materials each year. In 1978, Poetter adapted the WELS “Handbook for Circuit Pastors” for use in Japan, Falk completed a new translation of the liturgy, and Igarashi completed the translation of “The Shepherd Under Christ.”⁸³ Subsequent years saw the printing of Bible commentaries, Bible Information Courses, and doctrinal materials.⁸⁴

These publications played a key role as the LECC continued to work toward a declaration of fellowship with the WELS. The LECC adopted “This We Believe” as their official doctrinal statement in 1979.⁸⁵ In 1980, translations were planned of “Our Blessed Fellowship” and “Doctrinal Statement of the WELS, 1970.”⁸⁶ In March of 1981, the LECC pastors met to discuss the WELS doctrinal statements; four months later “A Declaration of Church Fellowship with the WELS by the LECC” was signed by congregational representatives and pastors and sent to the WELS convention.⁸⁷ The WELS responded with a resolution declaring fellowship with the LECC.⁸⁸ The daughter church had become a sister synod.

The Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1982 under the theme “Praising His Grace.” On September 12th a special service was held at

82. *Ibid.*, 8.

83. *Ibid.*, 9.

84. *Ibid.*, 10, 12–13.

85. *Ibid.*, 10.

86. *Ibid.*, 12.

87. *Ibid.*, 13.

88. Sauer et al., *To Every Nation*, 165.

Tsuchiura; WELS President Mischke delivered a message in English, and Oshino followed with a message in Japanese.⁸⁹ Gifts were exchanged between sister synods, and special recognition was given to Poetter and Igarashi for their many years of service to the Japan mission.⁹⁰ Celebrations also took place in the United States, with September 12th set aside by WELS for prayer and thanksgiving. A film was produced to give WELS members in America an inside look at the work of their Japanese brothers and sisters of the LECC, and a special offering in both synods raised money for the LECC's Church Extension Fund. Twenty-five years of mission work was reason to praise God's grace, but there was still much work in Japan for the church to carry out.

89. Biedenbender et al., "Praising His Grace III," 13.

90. Ibid., 14.

1983–2019

1983–1991 – Changing of the Guard

To carry out that work would require more workers. That need would continue to be filled from within the LECC as Takeshi Nidaira began his seminary training in April of 1986.⁹¹ Pastor Jim Behringer served briefly in 1984–1985.⁹² But the latter half of the 80s would again be a period of high turnover in missionaries. Soon after Nidaira’s studies began, a six-year program at this time, Johne, who had been called to Japan in 1969 to direct the establishment of the seminary there, accepted a call back to the United States to be a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. He returned to America in June. Falk replaced him as administrator of the seminary program.⁹³ Glen Hieb accepted the call as a missionary to Japan and arrived in September of 1986.⁹⁴ After his language training was completed, he was assigned to Chiba. Around that time another loss in manpower came with the passing of Elwood Fromm in the summer of 1988.⁹⁵ Akagami was called to take over the work in Hitachi. John Hering was the next missionary to accept a call to Japan. He was assigned as a Seminary graduate and came to Japan in August of 1989.⁹⁶

91. Survey of LECC Members by the author, December 2019. See Appendix 3. In this subsection, due to the large amount of information drawn from the survey, I have followed the same guidelines regarding “Ibid.” citations as outlined in footnote 6 above.

92. Habben, May 2020.

93. Sauer et al., *To Every Nation*, 159.

94. Survey.

95. Sauer et al., *To Every Nation*, 160.

96. Survey.

Even as the missionary personnel and Japanese pastors were changing and being called to different fields of ministry, the work of the church continued. A new church building was constructed in Shimodate.⁹⁷ In 1985 Aganai (Redemption) Church, the congregation in Higashikurume, Tokyo, celebrated its twentieth anniversary. The work in Tokyo also demonstrated that proclaiming the gospel was not just the responsibility of the missionaries and pastors. Their families contributed in their own ways. Sometimes for the missionary families, that meant using the cultural gap to an advantage. Margie Habben, wife of missionary Kermit Habben, began teaching a cooking class, extending invitations to women in their neighborhood.⁹⁸ At these classes Margie Habben would teach different Western recipes, connecting with people in Higashikurume who were interested in learning more about American culture. Much like the English language classes taught by Seeger at the start of his ministry, the cooking classes provided an opportunity to make connections, build friendships, and ultimately proclaim the gospel. Those who came to the class were invited to worship at Aganai Church. Pastor Habben also soon began teaching Bible class in connection with the cooking classes.

1982 had marked a significant anniversary for the LECC. The rest of the decade saw the work of the church continue in the midst of changes in the called workers serving the LECC. The transition into the 1990s would come with the loss of two significant church workers, in many ways marking the end of an era for the Japanese church body. Ryuichi Igarashi, who had served the LECC for years in a variety of roles—translator, seminary instructor, writer, and more—passed away in July of 1990.⁹⁹ The following year, Pastor Richard Poetter retired from ministry

97. Ibid.

98. Kermit & Margie Habben in discussion with the author, January 2020.

99. Sauer et al., *To Every Nation*, 164.

and returned to the United States in June of 1991.¹⁰⁰ He had spent his entire forty-one years of ministry in Japan, thirty-three of those years as a missionary for the Wisconsin Synod and as a leader in the LECC. Following Poetter's retirement, Habben became the WELS field administrator and chairman of the LECC.¹⁰¹ Hering completed his language training and was assigned to replace Poetter in Mito.

1992–2000 – Global Connections

In March of 1992 Nidaira completed his seminary training, having served as a vicar under Habben.¹⁰² He was called to Zushi in April. Outreach had been started in this city in Kanagawa Prefecture in 1977 after members of Aganai Church who had moved to Zushi from Tokyo requested that Habben conduct Bible classes there.¹⁰³ It would be another five years until another student entered the seminary program. In April of 1997 Mitsuo Haga began his pre-seminary training.¹⁰⁴

Changes again came in the missionary staff as well. In 1992 Haberkorn accepted a call to a congregation in Wisconsin and left Japan in August of that year.¹⁰⁵ Hieb took over the work in Tsuchiura from Haberkorn. James Sherod accepted the call to fill the missionary vacancy and arrived in Japan in December. After completing language study, he was assigned to Shimodate in

100. Survey.

101. Sauer et al., *To Every Nation*, 161.

102. Survey.

103. Sauer et al., *To Every Nation*, 161.

104. Survey.

105. Ibid.

July of 1995. In 1998 Hering accepted a call to a congregation in Texas and returned to America in November.¹⁰⁶ Sherod replaced him in Mito.¹⁰⁷ In March of 1999 Brad Wordell accepted the call as missionary and arrived in June.

In 1981 the LECC and the WELS had formally declared fellowship with each other, a significant step in the growth of the LECC into a mature, independent church body. This declaration also showed the connection of faith between Christians in completely different parts of the world. That global connection was proclaimed even more strongly in 1993. In April of 1993 the first meeting of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) was held in Oberwesel, Germany.¹⁰⁸ The CELC was formed to be spiritual successor to the Synodical Conference, an international organization for the edification of confessional Lutheran church bodies throughout the world.¹⁰⁹ The LECC sent three delegates to the foundational meeting in 1993: Pastors Kermit Habben, Fukuichi Oshino, and Takeshi Nidaira.¹¹⁰ There the LECC served as a founding member of the CELC. The LECC would continue to have opportunities to express fellowship and demonstrate maturity as a church body through the CELC in the coming years. For example, at the 1996 CELC convention, held in Puerto Rico, Nidaira presented an essay entitled “Justification Is For All.”

106. “WELS Source called worker database,” information provided via personal communication with Marissa Krogmann (WELS Joint Missions Office), February 2020.

107. Survey.

108. Ibid.

109. Gaylin R. Schmeling, “Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference—A World-Wide Confession,” <https://celc.info/confessional-evangelical-lutheran-conference-a-world-wide-confession/>. See also the CELC Mission Statement: <https://celc.info/information/mission-statement/>.

110. Survey.

As the global connections of the LECC as a church body were reinforced through the CELC, those connections were also made on a more personal level as around this time Margie Habben organized a tour to the United States.¹¹¹ A group of LECC members was taken to Wisconsin to visit Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and local WELS churches. Many of the Japanese were amazed especially at the hospitality shown by the WELS members who served as hosts. The Christian love shown to strangers, who despite distance of space and culture were brothers and sisters in Christ, was an encouragement and example the LECC members took back with them to Japan.¹¹² At the meeting of the DCC in February, 2000, the LECC welcomed WELS President Karl Gurgel as preacher for the opening service.¹¹³

As the mission in Japan passed its fortieth year, and with the new millennium approaching, the LECC was continuing to grow in its ability to stand on its own. Since the beginning of the mission the intent had been to foster an indigenous church, and this intention was always in the minds of the missionaries.¹¹⁴ In 1998 a report was produced on the status of the LECC, which included statistical reports, summaries of the current fields of labor, and long-range plans.¹¹⁵ It also included an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the LECC. Among the strengths cited were the strong doctrinal stance of the LECC, the ability of the church to exercise discipline, and the predominance of Japanese members in the positions of leadership, between the *Rijikai*, various synod committees, and congregational leaders. There was steady

111. Ibid.

112. Habben, January 2020.

113. Survey.

114. Habben, January 2020.

115. "Mini-Focus on Japan 1998," from personal files of Brad Wordell.

growth in both membership and offerings. These would indicate that the LECC was in a good position in moving toward independence. However, two interconnected weaknesses were holding the synod back; slow growth and financial dependence. Growth had always been gradual in the Japan field. One reason for slow growth that came to be recognized in the 1998 report was the choice early on to focus on more rural and suburban areas outside Tokyo, where people were much more firm in holding onto older traditions and religious practices. The lack of funds, and consequently the dependence on the WELS for financial support, was an obstacle to transitioning to outreach in potentially more receptive urban areas. This in turn was seen to potentially hinder the progression towards financial independence. Despite these challenges, the writers of the 1998 report were hopeful as the year 2000 approached. Their long-range plans proposed sending additional missionaries to strengthen the work currently being done and to prepare for outreach to spread out from the base of central Japan.

The plans would ultimately not be carried out as proposed in 1998. In July of 2000, Roger Falk retired from ministry and returned to America.¹¹⁶ Joshua Stahmann accepted the call as missionary to Japan and arrived in September. He would be the last new missionary called by WELS to serve in the LECC.

2001–2015 – Withdrawal of Missionaries

In September of 2002 Stahmann was assigned to Sakura in Chiba Prefecture, a city to the east of Yachiyo, where outreach work had been made earlier.¹¹⁷ A church and parsonage had been dedicated in Sakura that May. Mitsuo Haga completed his seminary training and was called to

116. Survey.

117. Ibid.

Heian Church in Ashikaga in April of 2003. Sherod, under whom Haga had served as a vicar, returned to America in March of the same year. Other changes in ministry took place as Hieb became chairman of the LECC in 2001.¹¹⁸ He held the position of chairman until accepting a call to a congregation in Ohio and leaving Japan in June of 2006.¹¹⁹ Stahmann replaced him at the congregation in Tsuchiura. Wordell was elected as the new chairman.¹²⁰ In 2008 Habben retired from ministry and returned to America in August.¹²¹ He had spent his entire ministry of 41 years in Japan, serving congregations in Tsuchiura, Tokyo, and Utsunomiya.¹²² The following year, Stahmann would accept a call back to America, and the decade would close out with only one American missionary remaining in Japan.¹²³

The question of withdrawing missionary support weighed heavily on the LECC in the early 2000s. In 1998 the proposal was made to increase the number of missionaries, but within a few years evaluation was being made as to whether independence was feasible for the LECC. A document produced circa 2002 suggested that the LECC was still in a “partnership state” rather than the “advisorship stage” of a foreign mission.¹²⁴ Notably, this was not considered an issue of spiritual maturity or desire for independence; this follows what had been stated in the 1998

118. Habben, January 2020.

119. Survey. The departures of both Sherod and Hieb from Japan were part of the WELS World Mission Board decision to cut the number of missionaries in the 2000s. Factors leading to this decision are detailed below.

120. Habben, January 2020.

121. Survey.

122. Habben, January 2020.

123. “WELS Source called worker database.”

124. “The Japan Field more closely resembles the ‘partnership stage’ rather than the ‘advisorship stage,’” from the personal files of Brad Wordell.

report. The primary issue continued to be finances and worker shortage. Without support from the WELS, many longtime programs of the LECC, such as the print shop and radio program, would most likely be cut. The LECC had also not yet reached full salary support for the Japanese pastors. There was also the need for more workers; at the time there were four pastors, two of whom were nearing retirement age, and one seminary student. The LECC consisted of nine congregations with a total membership of 429. There were concerns that reduction in called workers would lead to loss of morale and temptations to doctrinal compromise, as was common in other denominations in Japan.

The discussion of withdrawing missionaries came in part due to financial struggles the WELS was facing itself; for example, in 2005 the synod convention adopted a budget anticipating the recall of ten world missionaries by 2007.¹²⁵ The withdrawal of missionaries was also due in part to a shift in policy by the World Mission Board.¹²⁶ Greater emphasis was now being placed on the missionary's primary purpose being to train national pastors. As noted above, building an indigenous church had been established as a goal of the mission work from the beginning by Seeger and Poetter. Nevertheless, the reality was that the missionaries had also themselves been serving in the role of parish pastor for the congregations of the LECC, working alongside the Japanese pastors. Shifting to a more narrow focus of nurturing national leaders, Stahmann pointed out, would feel like uprooting decades of tradition and be difficult for the members, who would now have to see the missionaries as fulfilling a different role than their

125. "Minutes of the Japan-Europe-Asia Administrative Committee: August 9, 2005," provided via personal communication with Marissa Krogmann (WELS Joint Missions Office), February 2020.

126. Daniel Lange, "Trials of the Flock: A Personal Look at the Challenges of the Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church in Japan," from the personal files of Brad Wordell. This document was, as Lange describes it in the opening paragraph, a "compilation of interviews" with LECC members, pastors, and missionaries. It is not dated, but some answers indicate the interviews likely took place around 2004.

congregations' pastors. Wordell summed up the shift that had occurred during his first years in Japan:

When I came on the field five years ago there were five missionaries and four national pastors. The general feeling in LECC was that we are a growing church and that we are stable and on the go. Since then, we've lost two missionaries and a third one is set to leave. Now the feeling of the LECC is we don't have what we need to do this and that the ship is sinking. Of course we put our hope and trust in God's word, but there is still that challenge.¹²⁷

While generally a decrease in morale was felt in the synod, the members of the LECC endured the uncertainty ahead, striving ahead with the gospel by the grace of God.

Besides the gradual reduction of missionaries, the LECC also stopped receiving direct budget subsidies from WELS at this time.¹²⁸ The loss of manpower and finances naturally led to some cuts. The radio program, which had long been an easy way to broadly reach out with the gospel, was faced with rising costs for radio. It was ended in March of 2010. The print shop, another longtime LECC standby, was also closed when it became more cost effective to contract printing with established publishers. The churches in Shimodate, Hitachi, and Zushi closed.¹²⁹

But plans were being made to continue the spread of the gospel, even as the work would shift to fewer cities. An outreach committee was formed at Aganai Church in Tokyo.¹³⁰ One of the first outreach events was Aganai Cafe, a cafe started at Aganai Church. A unique opportunity

127. Ibid.

128. Survey. A Japan Fund still exists in the WELS budget that is used to assist with continuing education for LECC pastors, transportation to CELC conventions, and other such support besides direct funding to the LECC budget or called worker salaries. Brad Wordell in conversation with the author, January 2020.

129. Ibid. Only the congregation in Shimodate is mentioned in the survey responses. A church list from 2003 also lists the congregations in Hitachi and Zushi, where prior outreach was noted above, as well as preaching stations in Ryugasaki and Daigo. "Information packet with map on first page," from personal files of Brad Wordell. While no longer having enough members to support a congregation with a church building, Zushi is currently served as a preaching station. Wordell, January 2020.

130. Survey.

to witness came in 2011 following the Great Tohoku Earthquake. On March 11 a record breaking earthquake and tsunami struck eastern Japan, the strongest ever recorded in Japan.¹³¹ With support from WELS Christian Aid & Relief and other members of the CELC around the world, relief funds of around \$300,000 were used to buy much needed supplies for the communities devastated by the earthquake and tsunami.¹³² Wordell, Haga, and Nidaira brought supplies to relief centers in the cities of Kesenuma and Minamisanriku. The LECC also set up a center in Kesenuma, where members of Aganai Church distributed supplies and provided hospitality by sharing tea, coffee, cookies, and hymns. Visits were also made to bring supplies to temporary housing areas.

Even though direct financial support had ended between the LECC and the WELS, the bonds of fellowship most certainly remained. At the 2002 CELC convention in Sweden, Nidaira delivered an essay, "The Person of Christ."¹³³ He was also appointed as a member of the Theological Commission of the CELC, a position he held for twelve years. In 2005 the LECC hosted the Fifth Triennial Convention of the CELC in Tokyo. Haga delivered an essay at the convention entitled "Eagerly Await the Savior Even Though You Must Face Divine Judgment." In 2007, Nidaira preached at the opening service of the WELS Synod Convention in New Ulm. The following year Nidaira delivered the essay "Christology: The Focus of Our Message" at the CELC convention in Ukraine.

131. "2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami," Wikimedia Foundation, LLC, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Tohoku_earthquake_and_tsunami.

132. Survey.

133. Ibid.

The work of the church also continued with the addition of another Japanese pastor to the LECC. In April of 2013 Daisuke Nakamoto was called to Tokyo.¹³⁴ He had completed his seminary training in America. A church building committee was started at Aganai Church, recognizing that the church properties were showing their age. In October of 2015, Aganai Church celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. That summer the importance of another pastor having entered ministry in Japan was underscored when Wordell accepted a call to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The final WELS missionary had been called out of Japan. The LECC now stood on their own.

2015–2019 – Independent, But Not Alone

Self-sufficiency, however, ought to never be total independence in the church. As the LECC strived to declare the gospel in Japan, they would still receive support in different forms from the WELS. One example of such is in the area of publications. While the print shop operated by the LECC had eventually closed as predicted, that did not stop the flow of printed Lutheran materials in Japan. This came in a large part with the assistance of WELS Multi-Language Publications (MLP).¹³⁵ While in Japan, Wordell had also served as MLP Asia Coordinator of the WELS. Kaori Egawa, a member of Aganai Church, became a certified translator for MLP Japan. MLP produced Bible study and Sunday School materials, among others. MLP also helped support the launch of a bilingual website for Aganai Church, which includes information on all LECC congregations.

134. Ibid.

135. Ibid.

At Megumi Church in Mito, English language classes were started as an outreach method, much as they had been used in the earliest days of the mission.¹³⁶ Dave Reinemann and Sam Brandt were sent as English teachers funded by WELS Kingdom Workers. The classes gathered as many as eighty students. The bonds between believers in the area were also strengthened with the Asia Oceania regional meetings of the CELC. The first regional meeting was held in October of 2015 in Seoul, South Korea. Nidaira delivered an essay at the meeting entitled, "Baptism: Its Meaning and Blessing." The second regional meeting was held in Hong Kong in November of 2018. Wordell had served on the planning committee for the first meeting; Nakamoto was appointed a member of the planning committee for the second meeting.

A number of programs were started focusing on youth outreach and nurture. In Tokyo, the Joy Club, which consists of a Bible story, song, craft, games, and snack time, was started.¹³⁷ It is held on Saturday afternoons once a month. Tomato Club, a cooking club for middle school and high school children, was started at the home of Kouji and Kaori Egawa. In Mito the Pure Club for children with mental disabilities was started at Megumi Church.

The closing year of this current history reflects a pattern seen throughout the LECC's past: the gospel mission continues even as those serving the mission change. A new parsonage was dedicated in Higashikurume in May of 2019 as a result of the work of the Aganai Church building committee.¹³⁸ Nakamoto and his family moved into the new parsonage as he continues to serve Aganai Church, but the fields of labor for the pastors of the LECC are shifting once again. The end of 2019 marks the end of another long-serving worker's ministry. This time it was

136. Ibid.

137. Ibid.

138. Ibid.

not the ministry of an American missionary, but the ministry of a native Japanese pastor. Tadashi Yoshida, the first graduate of the LECC seminary, retired at the end of 2019. He had served faithfully for fifty years.

REFLECTIONS ON THE JAPAN FIELD: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As with any place where the gospel is preached, the nation of Japan comes with its own challenges and opportunities. Some are unique, some are universal. There are also some that are particular to foreign missionaries working in Japan, whereas there are different challenges for the Japanese pastors and lay people of the LECC. This section will briefly highlight some of them, both those that were present for the mission in the past and those that continue to be challenges for the field today.

Challenges

The challenge that is most easily recognized for those working in a foreign mission field is the language barrier. That was no different in Japan. Japanese is often considered a particularly difficult and complex language for native English speakers to learn. Some of the difficulties of the Japanese language include many levels of politeness that serve different functions in the language, as well as a tendency to be less direct and more implicit in speech.¹³⁹ This requires much reading between the lines, which can be difficult for non-native speakers such as the missionaries. Even those who have spent a considerable amount of time living and working in Japan never quite feel they've mastered the language. Habben is one such experienced speaker, and even though the language itself can be challenging, he considers the language training to have been one of the mission's greatest strengths.¹⁴⁰

139. Lange, "Trials of the Flock."

140. Habben, January 2020.

Language is closely connected to culture. This leads to an additional challenge of the language that remains even for the native speakers of the LECC. Many of the most basic terms of the Bible, such as “God” and “sin,” do not as easily carry the intended meaning as they do in a western language like English, which has been influenced by Christianity for a far greater extent of its history.¹⁴¹ Japanese culture, and therefore language, has been influenced instead by the religions of Shintoism and Buddhism. Besides having to confront the teachings of these false religions, the cultural imprint and effect on language they have had is another hurdle to be overcome.¹⁴²

An event in more recent Japanese history has also presented a challenge to the spread of the gospel. On March 20, 1995, a deadly attack using sarin gas was carried out by members of a doomsday cult on subway stations in Tokyo.¹⁴³ This led to increased negativity toward religious practice in general.¹⁴⁴ Christians faced persecution for the passion they showed in their beliefs, and were quickly held at a distance by many.¹⁴⁵ Anyone who claimed to have “the truth” was viewed with distrust, and the churches and members of the LECC were certainly not immune from this suspicion.¹⁴⁶

141. Lange, “Trials of the Flock.”

142. See Appendix 1 for a brief overview of religious culture in Japan.

143. “Tokyo subway sarin attack,” Wikimedia Foundation, LLC.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokyo_subway_sarin_attack.

144. Survey.

145. Kaori Egawa (member of Aganai Evangelical Lutheran Church) and Daisuke Nakamoto (pastor of Aganai Evangelical Lutheran Church) in conversation with the author, December 2019.

146. One example is the attendance of Sunday School at Aganai in Tokyo. Prior to the attack many parents in the neighborhood of the church would send their kids to the Sunday School since it was viewed as a good opportunity for learning about Western culture. Following the attack such attendance by neighborhood children no longer occurred. Wordell, January 2020.

The challenge of Japanese views toward religion, and especially Christianity, remains a roadblock to be overcome by the members of the LECC, just as it was for the American missionaries. Another challenge that remains constant is funding. Even more than culture, language, or anything else, money is often the biggest obstacle to work in Japan.¹⁴⁷ Land costs and the cost of living are particularly high in Japan. For a smaller church body, operating costs and supporting the called workers is often a struggle. Careful stewardship of resources is a must.

One challenge unique to the LECC in its current state is one of identity. While always intending to form an indigenous church, the missionaries who served in Japan naturally drew from their own experiences and presuppositions from their lives and training in America. This influenced certain expectations for church structure and methods, even as they dealt with the contextualization needed in a foreign mission field. For the members of the LECC today, the question becomes what to keep and what to change. While holding on to the truth of God's Word, they must work to find their identity as a Japanese church serving Japanese people. This is by no means a quick or easy task, and one that can be all the more difficult if it requires changing traditions established decades ago.

Finally, a familiar challenge the LECC faces is the called worker shortage. With Yoshida's retirement in 2019, the LECC now has only three full-time pastors. Finding qualified and willing candidates for ministry is often challenging. This challenge is heightened by the social environment of a highly secular nation like Japan. A foreigner being a pastor is one thing, but many Japanese view Japanese pastors as failures who could not make it in a "real job" and so turned to religion as an easy out.¹⁴⁸ This puts a great deal of social pressure on the LECC pastors

147. Habben, January 2020.

148. Wordell, January 2020.

and any who might be considering ministry. For all of these challenges, prayers to God and trust in his promises are essential.

Opportunities

Despite the challenges, Japan is a rich and waiting harvest field. Less than 1% of the population of Japan claims Christianity as their religion. There is much work to be done.

While being an outsider to the culture certainly presented challenges to the WELS missionaries in Japan, it also granted them unique opportunities. As mentioned above, the Japanese language often is much more implicit and high context than English. Japanese people, however, are much more forgiving of blunt speech when it comes from a foreigner. This allowed the missionaries to circumvent that challenge to some extent.¹⁴⁹ Their position as obvious outsiders also helped draw attention to them and open up opportunities to talk about the gospel.¹⁵⁰ Christianity is still largely viewed in Japan as being exclusively a western religion.¹⁵¹ This means for many people it is more natural to hear about Christianity from a westerner.¹⁵² Japanese people also have a strong appetite for learning.¹⁵³ The opportunity they saw for learning about western culture from a westerner opened opportunities to tell them about the Savior of the entire world.

149. Ibid.

150. For example, as former missionary Habben told in our discussion, many Japanese people were not afraid to point to him and his family as they walked by and excitedly say “*Gaijin!* Foreigner!” His children’s bright blonde hair was also a common conversation starter. Habben, January 2020.

151. Egawa & Nakamoto, December 2019.

152. Lange, “Trials of the Flock.”

153. Habben, January 2020.

Such opportunities remain for the members of the LECC. They are surrounded by unbelieving neighbors. Many of them have an interest in Christianity from a cultural education perspective. All of them have a need for Christianity and the good news of Christ. As native Japanese, they understand the language and culture of those they are witnessing to better than any foreign missionary ever could. The LECC has a strong tradition of lay involvement, showing that all kinds of members, not just the called workers, are able and willing to work for the spread of the gospel. Whatever challenges or opportunities come from the outside, a church body of dedicated members grounded in God's word is well equipped to do amazing things by God's grace.

CONCLUSION—DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

It was my desire in writing this paper to provide an updated history of the LECC, albeit a brief and broad overview history. This is a history that could fill an entire book and deserves a book's worth of research. A major part of my decision to write this history was to provide a basic starting resource for later writers, and it is my hope that this paper will lead to further study related to the Japan mission field. To that end, I conclude with several potential directions for further study.

A focused study on the transitional years when direct support from WELS was ended. Besides the history itself, more analysis of the transitional period could be done, whether the decade centered on 2015 or even from 2000 on. This would especially focus on analysis from a missiological perspective. What were all the factors that led to the end of missionary support? How was the LECC prepared for the transition, and how prepared were they? How effectively was the transition carried out? What was the perception of the transition, both in Japan and America? How has the LECC handled the challenge of establishing their own identity as a Japanese Lutheran church body while remaining steadfast in the truths of Scripture? Some of these questions have been addressed briefly in this paper, but there is much more that could be studied. The LECC is an excellent subject for a case study on missiology in WELS, since they were the first of our mission fields to make the transition to full independence.¹⁵⁴

154. This was actually the initial topic I had in mind when beginning the research for this thesis. The shift in scope took place when it became apparent that a basic history up to the point of transition would have to be included in the research for a detailed study of the transition itself. Since that history did not exist yet, this paper's topic became that history.

A study on the role and impact of missionaries' families for foreign mission work. What roles have they served? Where have they felt most effective? What are the unique stresses and challenges they face? This topic would present opportunity for study of other world mission fields in addition to Japan.

A study of the school at Nozomi. An aspect of this part of the history I chose not to cover in this paper is the issue of education for the children of missionaries. The education question was one that the missionaries and synod officials wrestled with for many years, and could form the basis for a study on its own, along with a history of the Nozomi school and its teachers. Another education related topic is the English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers who served in other areas of Japan and the role and impact of ESL as an outreach method in a foreign mission field.

A more in depth profile of one of the missionaries. The ministries of the longest serving missionaries, Richard Poetter and Kermit Habben, have been covered in broad strokes in this history and others. A focused history of one or the other, or any of the other missionaries, could be a useful study.

Similarly, a study of the ministries of the Japanese pastors of the LECC. Of particular note would be Tadashi Yoshida. His ministry covers fifty years of LECC history. No doubt his story would offer unique insight into the Japan mission field.

Besides inspiring future study, my simplest hope for this paper is that it would help raise awareness of the LECC. This little confessional Lutheran church body in Japan holds a unique place in the history of the WELS. They remain brothers and sisters in Christ. My hope is that readers of this paper have gained a better understanding of the mission work carried out in Japan in the past and the work that continues today. May those readers also offer prayers on behalf of

those workers, the members of the LECC. A world away, we are all one in the body of Christ. Whether we are able to support through finances and missionaries or not, prayer is the greatest support we can give. Remember the members of the LECC. Praise God for the grace he has shown them in his history. Pray that he would continue to pour out his grace so that they may endure and continue to proclaim the Risen Son in the Land of the Rising Sun.

APPENDIX 1. PRIMER ON JAPANESE RELIGIOUS CULTURE

Prior histories of the LECC often began with descriptions of the major religions of Japan. With the wealth of encyclopedia resources easily found online, I have chosen not to include a lengthy treatment of major Japanese religions in the body of this paper. This appendix serves as a brief introduction to some of those major religions, as well as Japanese social views of religion in general.

Shinto

If religion in Japan is pictured as a tree, Shinto would be the roots.¹⁵⁵ Shinto is the earliest Japanese religion. It is an animist religion, based around the worship of *kami*, which is usually translated into English as “spirits” or “gods.” *Kami* can be identified as being anything from objects in nature, mythological beings, human ancestors, or even abstract concepts.¹⁵⁶ Because of its early development in Japan, Shinto has continued to impact Japanese culture today, even as more overt religious associations with Shinto may decrease.¹⁵⁷ Shinto concepts related to purity;

155. Roger J. Davies, *Japanese Culture: The Religious and Philosophical Foundations* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2016), 39.

156. *Ibid.*, 40.

157. *Ibid.*, 48.

ceremonies to mark births, weddings, and other new beginnings in life; and respect for nature are all evident in Japanese culture.¹⁵⁸

Buddhism

Buddhism was first introduced to Japan through the influence of China in the 6th century A.D., and in the 7th century was adopted along with Chinese government structures by the Japanese imperial court.¹⁵⁹ Early Buddhism in Japan served as a vehicle for Chinese culture as well as Buddhist religious concepts.¹⁶⁰ Japanese Buddhism deemphasized the ascetic vales common in earlier continental Buddhism and instead adopted a more practical form of Buddhism, which strove to find ultimate truth within the work of secular life.¹⁶¹ In contrast with Shinto, Buddhist rituals became largely associated with death in Japan.¹⁶² Buddhism would also introduced Taoist concepts through Zen Buddhism, which impacted Japanese culture through its emphasis on simplicity, harmony, and precision.¹⁶³ The flow of Chinese culture into Japan through Buddhism also introduced concepts from Confucianism. Many of the philosophical emphases of Confucianism were already present in some way in Japanese culture, and so the Confucian forms

158. Ibid., 48–52.

159. Ibid., 65–66.

160. Ibid., 67.

161. Ibid., 70–71.

162. Ibid., 50.

163. Ibid., 97.

were easily accepted.¹⁶⁴ The Japanese emphasis on education, diligence, and historical precedent over intellectual debate was greatly influenced by Confucianism.¹⁶⁵

Syncretism & Secularism

From the major religions of Shinto and Buddhism, with all the other philosophies and worldviews often bundled together under one or the other, the big picture of Japanese religious thought could be described as generally hazy. “The Japanese have long-held customs of plural belonging and commonly follow more than one belief system,” and so “contemporary Japanese religious and philosophical thought can be characterized as multilayered, eclectic, and syncretic.”¹⁶⁶ Yet despite the deep influence of these religions on Japanese culture, the average Japanese person will have a very secular view of the world.¹⁶⁷ Put another way, what someone from a Western, and even more so a Christian, perspective would see as religious, most Japanese see simply as a non-religious cultural act. This makes Japanese religious culture a double-edged sword of syncretism and secularism, each of which is challenging enough toward gospel outreach on its own. Becoming a Christian means exclusion from Shinto and Buddhist customs. This puts strain on family members who are seen as abandoning their own culture.¹⁶⁸ Visits to temples and shrines are done when one is looking to get something; Christians going to church

164. Ibid., 105.

165. Ibid., 106.

166. Ibid., 33.

167. Ibid., 122.

168. Daniel Lange, “Trials of the Flock: A Personal Look at the Challenges of the Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church in Japan,” from the personal files of Brad Wordell.

every week are therefore perceived as being especially needy, challenged, or weak.¹⁶⁹ In a sense, this perception is not too far off the mark. All people are sinners in need of the Savior, and Christians go to worship to be fed by God's Word. Mainstream Japanese culture views such a broad statement of sin and a narrow statement of salvation as improper.¹⁷⁰ But that does not change the truth of it. Japan as a nation is not unlike the city of Athens the apostle Paul witnessed: full of religiosity and devoid of true spiritual knowledge. It is the great blessing and command given to Christians to shine the light of the knowledge of salvation into the darkness of unbelief, whatever form it takes.

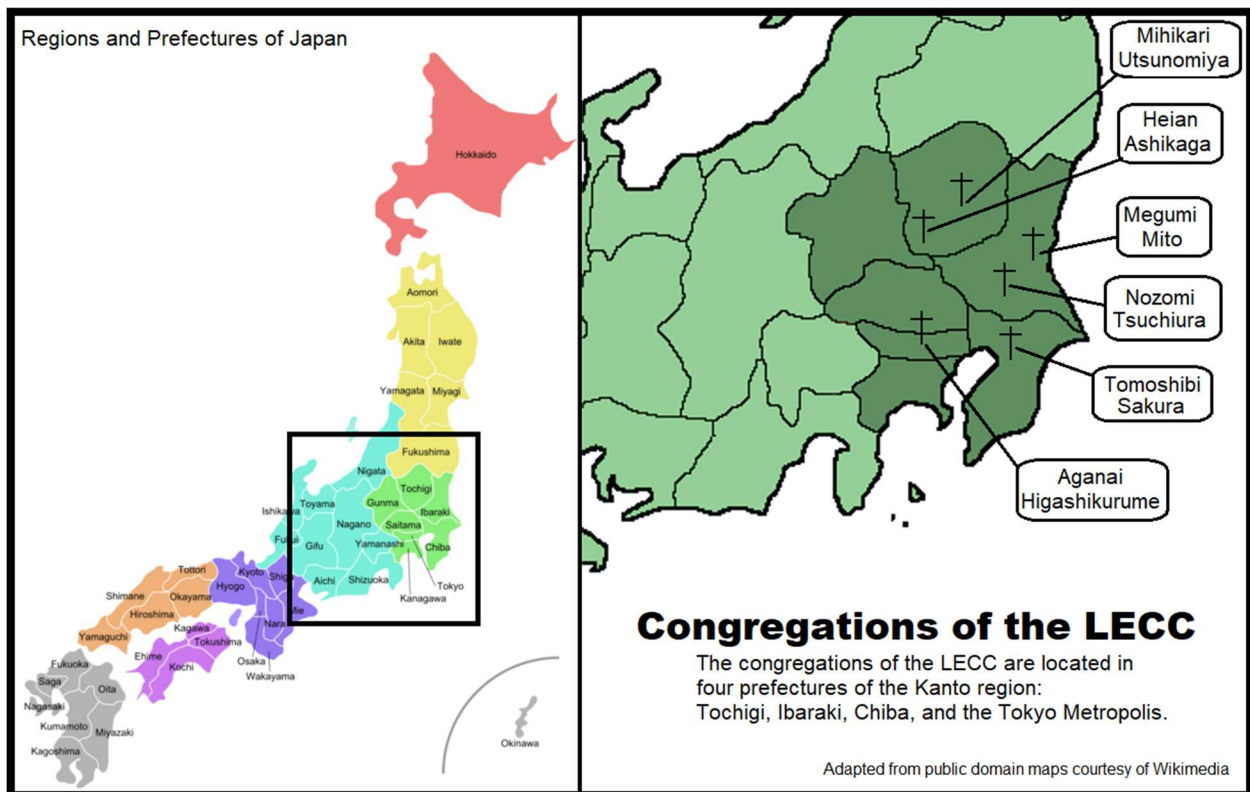
169. Ibid.

170. Ibid.

APPENDIX 2. CONGREGATIONS OF THE LUTHERAN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH

The congregations of the LECC as of 2019, as listed on <https://tokyoaganai.com>

Congregation	Pastor	City	Prefecture
Aganai (Redemption)	Rev. Daisuke Nakamoto	Higashikurume	Tokyo
Heian (Peace)	Rev. Takeshi Nidaira	Ashikaga	Tochigi
Megumi (Grace)	Rev. Mitsuo Haga	Mito	Ibaraki
Mihikari (Holy Light)	Rev. Takeshi Nidaira	Utsunomiya	Tochigi
Nozomi (Hope)	Rev. Tadashi Yoshida	Tsuchiura	Ibaraki
Tomoshihi (Lamp)	Rev. Tadashi Yoshida	Sakura	Chiba



APPENDIX 3. RESPONSES TO SURVEY OF MEMBERS OF THE LECC

The following survey was sent to members of the LECC in November 2019 and the answers returned in December. The original survey was translated into Japanese by Kaori Egawa, who then also collected the responses and translated them into English. Formatting has been adjusted.

LECC History Survey General Responses

Demographic Information

Name (Age), Congregation name, Year/month/day of Baptism

- Hiroko Shimada (73), Aganai Church, 1967/3/26
- Keizo Kouchi (75), Aganai Church, 1967/3/26
- Yoriko Sato (61), Aganai Church, 1977/Easter
- Hitomi Kato (69), Aganai Church, 1976/3/28
- Kyoko Takahashi (60), Aganai Church, 1976/3
- Katumi Fujita (59), Mihikari Church, 1979/9
- Kouichiro Murahara (56), Mihikari Church, 1986
- Daisuke Nakamoto (46), Aganai Church, 1973/4/22
- Kaori Egawa (41), Aganai Church, 1990/12/23

Important incidents in the LECC

1980-1989

- Pastor Kermit Habben began teaching Bible class to the ladies in Mrs. Margie Habben's cooking class held in the parsonage.
- Tokyo Aganai church celebrated its 20th anniversary.
- Pastor Glen Hieb was called to Japan.
- A new church was built in Shimodate, Ibaraki prefecture.

1990-1999

- Pastor Takeshi Nidaira began ministry.
- Margie Habben organized her first "Margie's Tour" to the US.
- Pastor Brad Wordell and family arrived in Japan.

2000-2009

- CELC Conference was held in Narita, Chiba prefecture.
- LECC educational trip to Germany was organized to learn about Martin Luther.
- Pastor Mitsuo Haga graduated seminary and began ministry.
- Many WELS missionaries and their family were called back to the US (including Pastor Glen Hieb, Pastor Jim Sherod, Pastor Kermit Habben, Pastor Joshua Stahmann)
- The church in Shimodate, Ibaraki closed

2010-2019

- LECC became financially independent from WELS.
- Outreach Committee started in Aganai Church.
- Church cafe (Aganai Café) started in Tokyo Aganai church as one of the first outreach events.
- A great earthquake and tsunami struck eastern Japan on March 11, 2011.
- Financial help for the tsunami struck areas arrived from WELS – LECC opened a help center in Kessenuma.
- Pastor Wordell accepted a call to be a MLP (Multi-Language Publications) Asia Coordinator of WELS.
- Pastor Daisuke Nakamoto began ministry in Tokyo Aganai Church.
- Church Building Committee started in Aganai Church.
- Launch of first bilingual website for Tokyo Aganai Church with MLP's support.
- Pastor Wordell (the last WELS missionary in Japan) was called back to the US.
- Pure Club for children with mental disabilities started in Megumi church in Mito, Ibaraki prefecture.
- Kingdom Workers sent Dave Reinemann and Sam Brandt as English teachers to LECC.
- English classes in Megumi Church gathers up to 80 new young English students.
- Joy Club for elementary school children (bible story, song, craft, games, and snack time on Saturday afternoons once a month) started in Tokyo Aganai Church.
- Tomato Club (cooking club for Junior High and High school Children) started at Kouji and Kaori Egawa's home.
- Professor Brad Wordell and Kaori Egawa complete MLP translation course taught by Professor Ernst Wendland in Hong Kong.
- Kaori becomes the ALS (Asia Lutheran Seminary) certified translator for MLP Japan.
- New website for Tokyo Aganai church which includes all LECC church contacts was launched through MLP. (tokyoagani.com)
- MLP produced useful publications for congregational Bible study and Children's Bible study.
- A new parsonage was built for Tokyo Aganai Church.
- Pastor Nakamoto and family moved into the new parsonage.
- Pastor Tadashi Yoshida retired from ministry.

The impact of changes in technology

- Many people are using PCs, cell phones, and tablets to read articles
- Less are reading actual books.
- It is sad that people are not reading “books” nowadays. They tend to just skim through internet news or entertaining blogs.
- We feel that we value the information more when we read actual books.
- When we produce digital books sometimes it feels like the content does not carry the same significance as the actual book.

Lay people being active in LECC

- Lay people have been giving offerings, helping to put information on radio broadcast and on SNS¹⁷¹, and teaching Sunday School. Aganai Café, Parenting Café, Joy Club, Tomato Club and other outreach parties. They have volunteered in Kessenuma, handing out tracts, and helping MLP translation activities (editing, distributing etc.).

Cultural changes in Japan

- In 1990’s a Japanese cult group committed a mass murder in public transportation station (Tokyo attack). The incident aroused strong negative feeling towards all religious practices. Many Christians were victims of prejudice for being passionate about his/her belief. People tend to keep distant from you once they find out you are a Christian.
- As housewives started to work outside of their homes, many families started to put leisure first on Sunday mornings resulting in low attendance in Sunday School.
- Fathers are too busy with work and find it hard to spend quality time with their family.
- Children have many classes to attend (e.g. piano lessons, karate class, tutoring school etc.) and stop coming to church because they are too busy.
- Many Junior High and High schools are forcing children to participate in sports club practices after school and on weekends, which makes it harder for them to attend church on Sundays. They are also encouraged to study on weekends to prepare for the severe school entrance exams.
- TV, video games, internet have robbed people’s interest in the Bible and attending worship. People are focusing on earthly pleasures rather than eternal blessings.

¹⁷¹ SNS = social networking service, i.e. social media.

Response from Pastor Nidaira

Pastor Takeshi Nidaira provided the following answers to the survey directly. Formatting adjusted.

Demographic Information

Name: Takeshi Nidaira

I am a pastor. Since September 2008 I have been serving two congregations in Tochigi Prefecture: Heian (Peace) in Ashikaga and Mihikari (Holy light) in Utsunomiya.

When did you become a member of the LECC?

I was baptized in 1984. I entered the LECC Seminary in April 1986, graduated from the Seminary in March 1992, and accepted the call to serve a congregation in Zushi, Kanagawa Prefecture.

What do you consider the most significant events for the LECC in the following decades? 1980-1989

- Takeshi Nidaira began pre-seminary training on April 22, 1986.
- Pastor Harold Johne was called to the WELS Seminary. He returned to America on June 16, 1986.
- Pastor Glen Hieb was called to Japan. He came to Japan on September 19, 1986. After two year Japanese training, he was assigned to Chiba.
- Pastor John Herring was called to Japan. He came to Japan on August 18, 1989.

1990-99

- Takeshi Nidaira began his vicar year on April 8, 1990 under Pastor Habben.
- Pastor Richard Poetter retired from the ministry and returned to America on June 17, 1991.
- After two year Japanese training, Pastor Hering was assigned to Mito and replaced after Pastor Poetter on October 6, 1991.
- Takeshi Nidaira completed seminary training in March, 1992. He was called to Zushi in April, 1992.
- Pastor David Haberkorn was called to a congregation in Wisconsin. He returned to America on August 11, 1992. Then, Pastor Hieb was assigned to Tsuchiura and replaced after Pastor Haberkorn.
- Pastor James Sherod was called to Japan. He came to Japan on December 10, 1992.
- From April 27 to April 29, 1993 the initial meeting of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) was held in Oberwesel, Germany. The LECC sent the following delegates to the Conference: Pastor Kermit Habben, Pastor Fukuichi Oshino, and Pastor Takeshi Nidaira. The LECC became a member of the CELC.

- After two year Japanese training, Pastor Sherod was assigned to Shimodate on July 5, 1995.
- At the Second Triennial Convention held from April 23 to April 25, 1996 in Puerto Rico, Pastor Nidaira delivered his essay, “Justification is for All.”
- Mitsuo Haga began pre-seminary training on April 6, 1997.
- Pastor Hering was called to a congregation in Texas. He returned to America on November 4, 1999. Then, Pastor Sherod replaced Pastor Hering.
- Pastor Brad Wordell was called to Japan. He came to Japan on June 7, 1999.

2000-2009

- WELS President Karl Gurgel preached at the opening service of the 81th LECC Delegate Church Council held in Tsuchiura on February 11, 2000.
- Pastor Roger Falk retired from the ministry for health reasons and returned to America on July 24, 2000.
- Pastor Joshua Stahmann was called to Japan. He came to Japan on September 15, 2000.
- At the Fourth Triennial Convention of the CELC held from April 23 to April 25, 2002 in Sweden, Pastor Nidaira delivered his essay, “The person of Christ.” At this convention Pastor Nidaira was appointed as a member of the Theological Commission of the CELC. He had been on the Commission for twelve years.
- Church and parsonage was dedicated in Sakura on May 3, 2002.
- After two year Japanese training, Pastor Stahmann was assigned to Sakura on September 10, 2002.
- Mitsuo Haga began his vicar year on April 22, 2001 under Pastor Sherod.
- Mitsuo Haga completed seminary training in March and he was called to Ashikaga in April, 2003.
- Pastor Sherod retired from the ministry and returned to America in March, 2003.
- The LECC hosted the Fifth Triennial Convention of the CELC. This convention was held from May 31 to June 2, 2005 at a hotel near Narita International Airport. At this Convention Pastor Mitsuo Haga delivered his essay, “Eagerly Await the Savior even though You must Face Divine Judgment.”
- Pastor Hieb was called to a congregation in Ohio. He returned to America on June 5, 2006. Then, Pastor Stahmann was assigned to Tsuchiura to replace Pastor Hieb.
- Pastor Nidaira preached at the opening service of the WELS Synod Convention held in New Ulm on July 30, 2007.
- At the Sixth Triennial Convention of the CELC held from June 3 to June 5, 2008 in Ukraine, Pastor Nidaira delivered his essay, “Christology: The Focus of our Outreach Message.”
- Pastor Kermit Habben retired from the ministry and returned to America on August 25, 2008.

2010-2019

- For cutting the budget the LECC terminated the fifteen minutes radio ministry program, “Walking with Jesus” at the end of March, 2010. For more than thirty years, many pastors and lay leaders had served as “radio preachers.”
- Daisuke Nakamoto was called to Higashikurume on April 1, 2013. He had finished seminary training while he was living in Minnesota.
- The first regional meeting of the Asia Oceania Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference was held on October 28 and 29, 2015 in Seoul, Korea. Pastor Nidaira delivered his essay, “Baptism: Its Meaning and Blessing.” The second regional meeting was held on November 6 and 7, 2018 in Hong Kong. Previous to the first regional meeting, the members of the Planning Committee were appointed and Pastor Nakamoto has been on the Committee.
- Pastor Wordell, the last missionary from the WELS, was called to the WELS Seminary. He returned to America on June 16, 2015.
- Aganai Lutheran Evangelical Christian Church in Higashikurume celebrated its 50th Anniversary in God’s Grace on October 12, 2015.
- New parsonage was dedicated in Higashikurume in May 3, 2019.
- Pastor Tadashi Yoshida will retire from the ministry at the end of December, 2019. He has served the Lord and the LECC faithfully for 50 years.

How have lay people been involved in the work of the LECC?

- Lay leaders have served as the LECC convention delegates or the alternate delegates for their congregations.
- The convention delegates and the alternate delegates have served as the LECC Secretary; as the Print-shop manager; as members of the Evangelism Committee, the Education Committee, and Literature Committee, etc.
- As I mentioned above, until the end of March, 2010 many lay leaders had served as “radio preachers.”
- Along the Pacific coast of the Kanto and Tohoku regions, the eastern and northern part of the main Island of Japan, was affected by the big earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011. The LECC decided to do relief operation in and around the city of Kesenuma in Miyagi Prefecture because a baptized member of Aganai lived in Kesenuma. The city is about three hundred miles north of Tokyo. The WELS and other sister churches from around the world sent a lot of donations, more than 20,000,000 yen, about 300,000 dollars. Although many things were sold out here in and around Tokyo area, many members of the LECC helped to buy food, bottled waters, beverages, clothes, underclothes, sneakers, sanitary napkins, diapers for babies and aged people, kitchen utensils, televisions, boards and planks, sheds, etc. And then, Pastors Wordell, Haga, and Nidaira drove a two-ton truck and carried these relief goods to the relief operation centers of Kesenuma and Minamisanriku. Some of these goods were carried also to the LECC relief operation center, a rented room in Kesenuma.

There, ladies from Aganai entertained victims with tea, coffee, handmade cookies, and Hymns. They also visited one of the temporary housing areas many times and delivered relief goods even in the snow.

- Some ladies are serving as organists.
- Some ladies are serving as translators and interpreters.

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