

## Chapter 6

### From the Rising of the Sun

by Doug Woon

After our first Sunday morning service at Hiroshima Minami Alliance Church, we pulled our chairs in a circle for a *kangeikai* (welcome party) in our honour. As very recent Japanese language school graduates, we were starting a two-year stint serving in the church under Pastor Miyoshi's direction. With *sembei* rice crackers and cups of green tea on the small plates on our laps, we introduced ourselves to the tiny congregation, typical of the size of most churches in Japan.

I mentioned that fourteen years earlier when I was in my first year at Canadian Bible College, I and the others in the Far East Prayer Band prayed for this church being planted by a missionary couple. I was interrupted by Mr. Fujii, a white-haired *hibakusha* atomic bomb survivor. "What did you pray for?" he asked. I told him we prayed for the English and Bible program the church was starting, asking God for people to come to Christ through it.

"Because you prayed, I believed. Thank you very much!" he said, bowing. On his first day in English class, he told Dick Kropp, the missionary working there, "I'm here for the English. I'll put up with the Bible." Yet, his spiritual interest was awakened; he came to the point of believing and was baptized. He prayed for over ten years for his wife to come to Christ; she was the organist in the service that morning.

It is a unique perspective to have, being on-site to see and hear the results of one's prayers, and you can be sure I've told this story in many churches during home assignments. It also is indicative of the work in Japan. A spiritual ambivalence, a slow awakening of spiritual need, and a long process, whether it be for Mr. Fujii or his wife, to finally come to the point of commitment.

### The Early Years

When people in Japan ask where in Canada we're from, I often say, "Halfway between Toronto and Niagara Falls" because all Japanese people know those two locations. For Carol, it was Oakville, on the north shore of Lake Ontario, closer to

Toronto. In my case, it was Stoney Creek, on the south shore leading to Niagara Falls. We grew up in believing households and were involved in our respective churches. Attending a Lay Institute for Evangelism with my parents was the point at which I shifted from a child's understanding to an adult faith. I was the church's worst nightmare: a compliant child. We compliant children look so promising, as we memorize our verses and do all we're supposed to, but since at our core, we are people-pleasers and people-fearers, when we get away from a Christian environment, many of us go with the flow, with or without some initial moral misgivings. We're like a sailboat without the keel or centreboard in the water.

When the sail is hoisted, we drift whichever way the wind blows.

I was fifteen, and in this training, we were to go out into the community to share our faith using a well-known tract. This was terrifying to a people-fearer like me. However, the emphasis on sharing our faith in the power of the Holy Spirit, leaving the results to God, and explaining the Spirit-filled life came at the right time for me.

I remember the underlying anxiety in everyday life fading away as I began living in dependence upon God daily. Since I enjoyed writing, I thought of a career in journalism, but when considering college, it just didn't seem to be *enough*. I went to Canadian Bible College for a year and enjoyed the courses, so I returned for a second year. At this point, I felt a challenge to vocational service. At the time, it felt like "ministry" was just a series of meetings. I've since seen it's changed lives, changed families, and someday we'd love to see a changed Japan.

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Hearing that ninety percent of Christian vocational workers are working with ten percent of the world's population, in the West, I felt, based on the need, I should head towards the neediest place, which would be overseas.

Carol took a different trajectory as she entered high school. She connected with the cool kids and got invited to their parties. This was not good for her spiritual life, and she continued in the same direction through nursing training and into her career working at The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. In contrast, applying to work in the emergency ward was quite good for her spiritual life. Seeing children suffering and dying and parents grieving forced her to think more seriously about life. She prayed for the first time in about ten years, "*God, if You're there, show Yourself to me.*" A person who sincerely prays for God to show Himself will see things happen.

Through her brother's urging, she reluctantly filled in at the last moment as a camp nurse at a Hockey Ministries International camp, where Christian NHL players teach hockey skills and share their faith. Carol spent time with these players and their families at the camp and saw they had the peace and joy she'd sought. Then, reasoning that when you give your life to Christ, you give your *whole* life to Him, she applied for a nursing position at a World Vision hospital in Cambodia. While she did not end up going there, she and I did have lunch a few weeks later, which led to overseas service, among other things.

We'd first met in Windsor, where I served in Heritage Park Alliance Church, where Carol's sister and family attended. On her vacation back home, I met her for lunch and was impressed with her intentionality to grow in her faith and to serve. She cut back to part-time hours during our engagement year to study at Tyndale College and then served with me in Windsor for my last year there.

I was accepted to study at Wheaton Graduate School, and while we thought Carol would be nursing, it seemed impossible for her to get nursing certification in Illinois. So, the afternoon before classes started, we applied for her to study at Moody Bible Institute. They accepted her on the spot, and she started the next day, tuition-free. I still shake my head when I think of that. Her RN and two years of theological training met The Christian and Missionary Alliance's (C&MA) requirements for overseas service.

## **Called to Japan**

We both felt a call to Asia, having sixty percent of the world's population with five percent of the world's believers. Arnold Cook, vice president of Missions, told us there were openings in Taiwan and Japan and said we should pray about it. Based on the need and the gap of years since new workers had been sent, we felt led to Japan. Thirty-five years later, we see it's now not "Japan or Taiwan" but "Japan plus Taiwan" since, as area directors, we had a support role with the Global Ministries (GM) team in Taiwan.

## **Learning the Language and Culture**

After presenting our future ministry in Japan at our home church, a man told me, "I pity you." A shocking statement, but knowing he had immigrated to Canada from the Netherlands after the war and had to learn the language and adapt to a new country while raising a family, perhaps it meant, "I can identify with you" or, "I sympathize with your future struggle." It shows how a non-native speaker of a

language sometimes lacks the vocabulary to express himself fully. I've been living that reality for 35 years.

One compliment here that is anything but is, "Your Japanese is so good!" I've heard this after merely giving a greeting, which means that person's baseline for a foreigner's understanding of the language is close to zero, and I've already exceeded it. It's never said when a gaijin (foreigner) speaks perfect Japanese. In fact, some Japanese people find it unsettling when a gaijin speaks well. Or so I've been told, at least. Regarding language, Paul's statement, "I die daily," applies. I must die to pride in using my anything-but-natural Japanese.

On our first Sunday at the Kotesashi church, which we attended during language school, there was a potluck lunch, and I was wary of the offerings. I saw a tossed salad, which seemed safe, but when I sat down with the plate on my lap, eyes were staring back at me! Tiny dried fish had been sprinkled in the salad. Even the salad wasn't safe!

Is there a more exciting and interesting city on earth than Tokyo? The language school was draining in all ways, and the commute was tiring, but the weekends exploring the area were invigorating. In business, MBWA means, *Management by Wandering Around*, but we experienced MBHO, *Mentoring by Hanging Out* on selected Sunday afternoons with Dick and Janice Kropp, experienced international workers. We trust our hanging out with teammates was as productive for them as those times were for us.

In planning an outreach event, Janice said, "We've done our best planning; now we'll leave it to God." I reflected on how at home, there had been such an emphasis on the latest study book, program, or emphasis from some thriving church, which resulted in ministry becoming technocratic. Janice's perspective was biblical and refreshing in a land with very few "successful" church models or programs to follow.



After School Club for  
neighbourhood children

## Hiroshima

After graduation, we moved to Hiroshima for the last two years of our term. Once a month, I took the train ride to the Mihara church, where I did children's and adult English classes and preached in the morning service. I can remember the exhaustion I felt on the train trip back to Hiroshima every

time. While I've already mentioned a welcome party, I can remember two farewell parties quite clearly. At the first, Pastor Miyoshi asked me to pray the closing prayer, and my mind went blank. No Japanese would come out of my mouth. I mumbled something or other and said "amen," feeling dreadful. Six weeks later, there was another farewell (for a young man who is now pastoring a Japanese C&MA church in Princeton, NJ), and during the farewell, I got a strong impression (from God?) I would be asked to pray the closing prayer. I mentally got my act together, and to my surprise, Pastor Miyoshi asked me, and I prayed so well that people commented afterward.

For years afterward, anytime I remembered this, I'd get a lump in my throat. Pastor Miyoshi throwing me a lifeline after I'd earlier failed him so miserably has meant he has a very special place in my heart. I've often thought I would like to do that for others.

Meanwhile, Carol was asked by a woman to speak to her friends about "the differences between living in Canada and living in Japan." She was more than a little surprised to find out the meeting was held in a Buddhist temple, and the friends were all wives of Buddhist priests. She had a chance to share her testimony there. You go with the opportunities as they arise. The challenge is sorting out the real opportunities from distractions.



Women's ministries build relational bonds with interested women

## Meeting Resistance

Japan is known for being "resistant" to the Gospel, and people ask why. The first reason is that the Japanese are so much like us. They live in a modern, extremely fast-paced society and are affluent. Affluence naturally builds walls around people. We become suspicious of initial contact with others because we wonder about their motives. We affluent people are also overscheduled, but nothing like the Japanese, who have ridiculously long working hours and commutes. So, it's tough even to make initial contact with people. In an apartment complex of over 570 units, with three rental meeting rooms, our congregation is almost always the only group reserving the rooms each month. Isolation is another result of an affluent society.

After this first barrier, there's the issue of traditional religions. When the total

of Buddhists and Shinto followers exceeds the population of Japan, you can see people have no trouble following both. Most weddings in Japan are “Christian” in the sense that they have all the trappings. It’s just style. So, Jesus’ statement, “I am THE way, THE truth and THE life,” doesn’t translate well in a mix-and-match religious milieu here.

The subway gas attacks by an apocalyptic cult in the 1990s and, more recently, the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe by someone embittered by the Unification Church have reinforced the “religion is scary” mentality. “Mind control” is something people fear in engaging with a faith group. Regarding traditional religions, people will say, “It’s just culture. We Japanese are not religious.” Yet, seventy-five percent of the population annually visit a Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple in the first three days of the New Year, seeking blessings for the year.

However, a recent Gallop poll found that five percent of Japanese identified as “Christian” in a land where it’s actually 0.5 percent. Whether it was a Christian kindergarten, school, college, or Sunday school they contacted in the past, Japanese people think this puts the “Christian” stamp on them because neither Shinto nor Buddhism requires weekly attendance. This at least shows that people are not averse to the Christian faith, which gives some encouragement.

I had an epiphany while speaking in Alberta during our first home assignment. I was “on tour” following the system the C&MA had used since the beginning, and this tour was out of province. As I was encouraging people to pray for Japan and us, I realized the futility of this action. I asked people for a long-term commitment when I was unlikely ever to see them again. This was the system I grew up with, attending an Alliance church, but as an international worker, my evaluation was, “This is for the birds!” I was thus very enthusiastic when we shifted to a model where we connect with a group of congregations for an entire career. That has greatly benefited our ministry, and we trust we’ve also encouraged our partner churches.

We worked for four years in a church in the suburbs. In our first month, we met only twice because the one person who was attending couldn’t come the other two Sundays. The church was meeting in a rented room on a major thoroughfare, on the second floor of a commercial building. The rent was a significant expense for such a small congregation, and thinking of paying a pastor in the future was a real challenge. By the end of our four years there, a small congregation had assembled, and the full room at our farewell party contrasted with the empty space which had greeted us upon our arrival.

My struggle with language, culture, and ministry was acute there. I remember running one of my morning routes, thinking, “At least running is going well, and

my devotional life is going well.” When it felt like everything was beyond my control or understanding, it was good to have an interior life equipped to take it.

We had a two-year home assignment doing the district missions consultant work (now missions mobilizer) in the Eastern and Central Canadian districts, from Thunder Bay to the Maritimes, excluding Quebec. It was a great experience, although it was tough for our middle daughter to leave Canada again after those two years.

In Japan, when personnel are on home assignment, there is a need for someone to come in for the year and give leadership. We did this ministry twice in two churches over the next ten years. We also provided leadership to the Japan field in two three-year blocks. Add in two home assignments, and there was a decade of our lives.

Because of a delay in personnel returning to the field, over several months, we had responsibility for two churches, the mission office, and helping with onboarding two new couples in their first terms in Japan. The time was a blur in our memories.

If you ask, “how many C&MA workers are there in Japan,” the answer is complicated. In addition to people from the USA and Canada, there are Alliance workers sent by the National Churches of Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and the Philippines working in Japan with their respective diaspora (scattered people) ministries. Also, Chinese Alliance churches in Canada are assisting with two Chinese churches in Fukuoka in western Japan.



Special events for children provide contact with whole families



The cultural differences were evident to us as we took on field leadership and were invited to their services and events. Latino churches have many people of Japanese heritage who come from South America. They have Japanese faces but Latino hearts, greeting each other with a kiss on the cheek. You couldn't be further from Japan culturally.

Two men carrying a roast pig along the beach to a feast after a Filipino church's baptismal service caused some Japanese jaws to drop—another huge cultural difference within our C&MA family in Japan.

The Japan Alliance Church denomination has congregations from Kyushu to Tokyo. I remember meeting Pastor Suteichi Oue, who had been imprisoned in the notorious Sugamo Prison during the war for preaching the Second Coming of Christ (since “every knee will bow” would include the emperor, which was deemed problematic). When he gave the benediction at the end of a service, it felt like Moses was speaking.

The churches planted in the Tokyo area by mission personnel have joined the Alliance Church Network, a body for supporting churches and pastors.

It was late in my career when a retired American colleague returned to Japan for a visit, and I learned to follow his experience regarding preaching in Japanese. I had been using a manuscript written in Japanese for preaching up to this point, but following his experience, I started preaching from point-form notes in English as I had done in Canada. Suddenly, I was communicating! I was looking at people and gauging their responses, but also, because I wasn't following the manuscript, I was making Japanese mistakes as I spoke. I would realize the mistake I had just made in the previous sentence, but I couldn't go back and correct it. Communicating is more important than perfect Japanese. Once again, I had to die to myself and keep on moving.

John Ortberg has said, “Leadership is the art of disappointing people at a rate they can stand.” You might wonder how a grown compliant child, a former people-pleaser and people-fearer, could take a leadership position. I would reply, those who supported me helped me in the short term, and those who opposed me helped me in the longer term. They helped in stiffening my spine without hardening my heart.

Knowing interpersonal conflict is a significant cause of missionary attrition, some have explained the phenomenon as being a result of missionaries having strong personalities. In response, I would ask if, in Acts 15, the apostle Paul and James of the Jerusalem church appear like timid souls. Yet, they navigated possibly the most contentious dispute in church history and came to an agreement for the sake of Christ.



## **Handling Conflict**

In the past, Japan had a reputation for discord. I briefly suggest some ways to deal with conflict based on my experience.

### **Everyone Owns It**

At our first field conference in Japan, there was a recommendation for action that even we, as newcomers, saw as a significant problem. Yet, no one addressed it. Carol and I, as “junior missionaries,” certainly didn’t want to. Yet, when I was in the same position, I was often taken off guard by comments coming out of left field and would only later think of an appropriate response.

I’m encouraged to hear now about teams who covenant together to hold one another accountable in all situations, as a practical act of love. The socially dominant ones in Japan could have been steered into more positive interactions had there been solidarity among everyone.

### **Self-Awareness is Critical**

The action proposed at one field conference was to stop a certain practice. Yet, without any sense of contradiction, the person proposing it later employed the same approach when he found it necessary. With a lack of self-awareness, one has the illusion of superiority and infallibility, which is the assumption behind critical speech.

As a former compliant child, I was outraged by people overstepping their bounds because I would never do such a thing. In time, I realized it’s merely a character flaw different from the ones I display. Just as the dominant people were used to challenge me to grow, it’s sobering to realize how by my cluelessness or carelessness, I’ve been a source of frustration and, therefore, a challenge to greater Christlikeness to others. God, in His perfect plan, uses people in many ways. We all want to be used by God, but not in this way.

### **Build Team Health**

A worker can excel at overseas ministry and yet, in relationships with mission colleagues, be a real pill. Rather than being written off, they must be consistently guided and challenged toward proper behaviour. Again, everyone owns it.

Working together in a team setting is becoming more of an emphasis in preparing new international workers, and it’s an essential skill everyone needs to acquire. The “lone ranger” missionary days are long over.

## **De-Escalation is the Goal**

There's a temptation to respond in the same tone to those who come on strong, but de-escalation is the goal. Answering recrimination without a defensive manner is refusing to play their game.

## **Be Biblical**

The pragmatic, no-fault, false-equivalency "resolution" to conflict can leave relationships broken, and scarring prevents genuine resolution. Holding people accountable to biblical standards without fear or favour is essential.

## **Be like Christ in Your Words and Deeds**

To be true to Christ, yourself, and your colleagues, pray for them and their ministry rather than undercutting and delegitimizing them.

## **Ultimately, It's From God**

Martha did not become angry with Mary but rather with Jesus. Tension on the horizontal level affects a person's relationship with God because He obviously knew about it and allowed it to happen.

When I learned to say, "Ultimately, this injustice is God's gift to me," I immediately saw its purpose. It challenged me to see the proactive God-centred stance the new position required.

## **Leadership Should Be an Ego-Free Zone**

I would suggest an essential quality in leadership is, believe it or not, meekness—biblical meekness. Three different times God said He would strike Israel dead and start again with Moses. Three times Moses, in meekness, bowed before God and then resolutely appealed to the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, whose name was too holy to be uttered, to remember His covenant and have mercy. That's meekness. It's a source of great boldness, persistence, and power.

Similarly, Simon was self-assured and self-assertive in rebuking Jesus and later drawing a sword at Jesus' arrest, but after his failures and after Pentecost, in meekness, he was quick to sense the Spirit's nudge and speak boldly. That's meekness. Self-assured, self-assertive leaders are like King Rehoboam, who caused the unified kingdom to come apart at the seams. Leadership should be an ego-free zone.

## Our Reproducible Church Structure

In recent years we've been in central Tokyo, working in a simple, reproducible church structure to encourage multiplying networks of multiplying congregations of multiplying believers. We rent facilities by the hour and keep the study and application of the Word interactive for the sake of making better disciples faster. In traditional churches, I am *Woon Sensei*, but here I am *Doug san*. In the traditional church, one has to be ordained to give the benediction. Here we involve believers as soon as possible in ministry.

Contrasting with Japan's gleaming cities and technology is the loneliness and dysfunctionality of relationships, workplaces, and families—so many isolated people surrounded by millions. We try to provide community through various means. People need to belong before they believe. In Japan, where most people take a long time before taking a step of faith, we disciple people before they take the step of faith. Were Jesus' disciples fully committed from day one?

Despite that general reticence to believe, in the Spring of 2018, four people were baptized together, and suddenly, a casual meeting to explore what the Bible has to say became "Shiohama Gathering," and we sought to transition to a full-fledged church. We've aimed to involve young believers in ministry, and they've grown rapidly through it. We've had interpersonal conflicts where in so many churches, one party would leave, but here repeatedly, both parties have come to a resolution and have grown stronger from it.

And yet, a false teacher pulled away a couple of people, the COVID pandemic hurt our momentum, and those at the fringes dropped out. Also, this being Japan, people have limited time and energy due to the hectic pace of life. Men, in particular, have long working hours and commutes, so our men's Bible study turned to Zoom for the foreseeable future. We'd love to turn over more ministry to believers, but they feel stretched. It's exciting to work with young families (even if it means we're the parent and grandparent figures) in a land where the population and the church are rapidly graying.

It's also exciting to work as area directors with our workers at the Chinese churches in Fukuoka, roughly 1,000 kilometres to the west, and with the Canadian team in Taiwan, a three-hour flight away. Our focus is communication, encouragement, member care, and administrative details. At an arm's length, we have a share in transforming lives among the rural Taiwanese and urban Vietnamese in that land.

When I first met Tetsuya, it felt like having a conversation with him was like lighting wet firewood. I'd get a one-word response to my questions. We started studying the Bible together, probably with some arm twisting from his wife. Later,



Carol and Doug Woon

he came to a café nearer to me, and as we studied, I noticed he was interacting with the content of the passage.

We noticed a change as he interacted with the men of the Shiohama Gathering and then started to attend the men's Bible study. He was beginning to deal with the implications of following Jesus. His father in Nara, about 500 kilometres away, had seen a difference in him and after hearing from him and his believing wife, he started attending church. Tetsuya was baptized this Spring, and his father was baptized at a church in Nara sometime later. Jesus talked about the shepherd rejoicing over finding

one sheep, which certainly fits the ministry model in Japan. We can be concerned about the future of the Shiohama Gathering and all the unknowns, or we can celebrate what God has done.

We can't really say the servants at the wedding in Cana helped Jesus perform a miracle; they merely filled the water pots so Jesus could turn the water into wine. Such is the model of ministry here. Jesus involves us and our small actions in the miracle He's performing.

Another picture would be the woman who poured perfume on Jesus' feet. In the Gospel of John, it says the room was filled with the smell. Ultimately, that fragrance symbolized her love and gratitude toward Jesus. With all the negatives of ministry in Japan, it's the fragrance people need to sense when they're around us.