

5 Aug 2018, North Family in Japan

Introduction

Introduce the North family.

Simon: Finance Director.

Alison: Personal evangelism and discipleship with women.

Sam & Isaac: At CAJ, the Christian Academy in Japan, an International School in Tokyo.

We want to thank the Mairangi Bay Community Church for your prayers and support.

We started with OMF in 2007. We have lived in near the OMF office Ichikawa (in Chiba Prefecture); then Sakura (further into Chiba Prefecture – about half way to Narita Airport); then Nerima (in Tokyo); then Higashi Kurume (in Tokyo).

Reading

Hebrews 12: 1-3

Running the race

The Course

We are all running a race.

For Christians, there are similarities between the races we run, but there are also differences based on:

- Our personalities, skills, gifts, and talents;
- Our personal histories;
- Our callings;
- The course we are running on; and
- Where we are on the course.

The hindrances and sins that entangle

Paul notes, undoubtedly from great experience, that there are many things that can interfere with our running the race. The course is seldom straight, nor smooth. These hindrances include:

- Discouragements – that make us stop running, or slow down, and often question whether we are on the right track, and whether we should be running at all. Christ, in scoring the shame of the cross, pushed through massive discouragement.
- Distractions – that side-track us
- Sins – that derail us
- Overdoing it – trying to run too fast and burning out; trying to take God's part, rather than the one He has ordained for us

The answer

- Fix our eyes on Jesus
- That is, don't fix our eyes on anything else
- Jesus as our example: relied on God, accepted the Lord's timing, incarnational ministry, didn't do everything, was never in a hurry, did what he saw his father doing.
- We must run with perseverance. This requires endurance, patience, and wisdom.

We thought this morning that we would share with you some stories about the races the North Family are running in Japan, the obstacles we've faced, and our experiences on the way.

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The Track

But before we talk about the race, you need to understand the track and racing conditions.

Japan

Population 127 million, almost exclusively Japanese.

Third largest economy in the world. Low unemployment. Living standards are generally high. Education is very important and literacy rates are very high.

High levels of social cohesion and public safety. It is the experience of most visitors to Japan that the country is clean, safe, and the people are polite and generous. And, of course, the trains run on time.

But more than 20,000 Japanese take their own lives each year. Over a million Japanese live their lives as shut-ins, staying in their rooms and refusing to interact with society.

Christianity in Japan

The first Roman Catholic missionary came to Japan in 1549. Protestant mission started in Japan in the 1860s. I read recently that there are over 120 different denominations in Japan. There are also many seminaries and several translations of the Bible into Japanese.

The Japanese constitution guarantees religious freedom and we work in Japan on religious activities visas. OMF enjoys tax-free status as a religious corporation.

But despite all this, fewer than half of one percent of Japanese are Christians. They are the second largest unreached people group in the world.

Many towns and cities in Japan don't have a single church.

Moreover the church is ageing.

And in decline.

OMF in Japan

OMF Japan started in Japan in 1951.

We work in east Japan

We have around 120 missionaries, with 80 kids.

This makes us the largest protestant mission agency in Japan.

Traditionally, we have been a church planting mission, but over the past 15 years at least, the Lord has sent people to join us who have had a much wider focus.

In addition to church planting, we have people engaged in student outreach, sports ministry, dance ministry, church revitalisation, training, women's ministry, reaching out to the elderly, etc, etc.

Also, although the Japanese are so unreached, we also recognise that discipleship of Japanese Christians is almost as urgent a need, so this also part of our work.

To give you a sample of what this looks like, here is a list of the things we are doing in and around Tokyo.

But even with all this activity, the wider context is still that the church in Japan is in decline, and although we all have stories of things that God is doing in the lives of individual Japanese people, we are all waiting for the day when the Lord decides to pour out His Holy Spirit over Japan and we see the Japanese coming to Him in great numbers.

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This is the race that OMF Japan is running. We are pressing on in reaching out to the Japanese, despite some formidable cultural and spiritual barriers to the Gospel, seeing only a few come to faith, and that usually over 8 or 9 years per person. The temptations are tremendous to either give up, or to submit to the Japanese culture that says if you are not busy, then you are not important, and burn yourself out trying to speed up the work that seems so slow.

As we saw in Hebrews, the solution to this is to keep your eyes on Jesus. We need to recognise his Lordship, even over somewhere as spiritually difficult as Japan. We need to trust that He has a plan and that His timing is sovereign. We need to believe that He loves the Japanese people more than we do and that He will pour out His Spirit at the perfect time.

This does not mean we are idle in waiting for this, but that we need to keep Jesus in front of us in all that we do.

Simon's Race

The race I am running is a bit of a reflection of OMF's.

My official title is Sector Leader for Finance and Administration. I serve on the Field Leadership Team with the Field Director and other Sector Leaders. My role is to provide leadership and policy direction to the Japan Field finances, as well as asset management, Guest Homes, Holiday Homes, disaster management, legal matters, and a host of random things that a mission agency in Japan might face.

I started this role in 2015, but, as those of you who saw us in 2016 will remember, I had to step down from this at the end of that year. This was because, at that time, the Lord had not sent someone to be the Finance Manager, so in addition to everything else, I had to manage the day-to-day accounting and payments for the Field. I had thought that this was what the Lord wanted from me – after all, there was a need, and I had the skills, but it was too much and I burned out.

What had happened is that I had taken my eyes off Jesus. Instead of keeping Him in view, I had looked at the needs around me, the plight of the Japanese people, and the requests of the missionaries I served, and not looked at Jesus. Sure, all those things are worthy of my time and attention, but not if Christ is not the centre of my life.

Now, three difficult years later, I have a Finance Manager and am slowly putting together the Finance Sector and helping the Field Leadership Team to grapple with the complex questions of how to reach the Japanese with the Gospel. But in all of this, I am determined to keep Jesus out in front, to run at the pace He sets for me, and to let Him set the course for His work in Japan, which I am privileged to be included in.

Alison

Thank you for praying for our family following the loss of my father 2 weeks ago. This time has caused me to reflect a lot on the race he ran, the people who shaped him and the many people he influenced over his 73 years, not least his family. At the funeral I met many people that my paths have crossed over the 46 years of my life and I was reminded of the complex tapestries our lives are. The little forks in the road, the people we listen to, the choices we make.

Missionary Life

- We've needed much endurance over our 11 years of missionary life in Japan- many times it has seemed too hard, or pointless, or when we doubted our call.
- This past year has been a year of convergence when many things have clicked into place and God has brought many of my past experiences and connections together.

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- Big transition 4 years ago, moving from Chiba to Tokyo. Sam started at CAJ the American school, and Isaac started a new Japanese school, and Simon commuted long hours to the OMF office. We started at a new church. I kept asking God, what now for me, what have you got for me to do? But it seemed that He kept saying just wait, just watch and pray.
- John 15:15 'I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.' This verse was a great encouragement to me that the race wasn't just about following God and serving him by doing the good works he had for me but was equally about friendship with God and our sense of joy and significance in our journey coming from our relationship with him.

A New Season

- Moved to a new house with space for ministry.
- Formed a new team with Japanese colleague to reach out to women.
- Following up Japanese returnees from New Zealand.
- Supporting and promoting a theatrical performance of the life of author Ayako Miura
- Involvement in our church, Nerima Grace Chapel

Sam

Running the race in Japan has been tough. Since I grew up in a Christian family, I grew up believing in Jesus. Although in Japan there are not many Christians, I never really felt my faith challenged by people around me. However, living in Japan was a struggle first with learning Japanese in kindergarten and then having a horrible teacher my first year of primary school. Also throughout primary school I was sometimes bullied and wondered why a good God would ever put me in such horrible circumstances. Also when I went to CAJ, what I thought would be a good wholesome schooling experience, those expectations were proven horribly wrong for the first few years. Although throughout this there were good times I often just wanted to come home to New Zealand. However, when I entered high school, things improved. The education style suited me and I started to get along with many people I could never have imagined becoming friends with. Although still not perfect, Japan has sort of become my home and I am grateful to God for giving me all of the experiences I have had and through this my faith has become my own.

Isaac

I've been always different during my life. And I think through that, God has helped me run the race He has planned for me. If I did not go to Japanese Kindergarten and Japanese Elementary school, my parents' ministry may have been less successful than it has been. If I did not grow up in a whole different country with people who think, act, and look different, I may have not been able to learn a new language: Japanese; and start learning another language: Spanish; and also make great friends that God has provided along the way. If I did not go to the international school in Japan, I would not have been able to be part of starting a prayer group, and meeting people who have helped my spiritual relationship with God. It has been an amazing race, and I hope to be able to keep running it, and be a part of God's plan. Thanks for listening to what I had to say.

Conclusion

Conclusion: Paul said it like this in Acts 20:24: 'However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.'

May each of us aspire to this level of commitment to the race God has given us.