

Living Documents

Interview with Carlton Walker,
IMB missionary for 45 years.

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Learning from Living Documents

It is a Sunday morning in September at Living Hope Baptist Church in Sappo, Japan, but not a normal Sunday morning. Today the walls are lined with rows and rows of shelves with pictures of people who have passed away. Today the members of Living Hope honor those who went before them, celebrating their lives and their faith. They have a roll call—160 names called out reverently to honor those who went before—their walk of faith and their contributions to the church. “We emphasized the faithfulness of the Lord to us through our families and acknowledged that we are building on the shoulders of giants,” said Carlton Walker, IMB missionary to Japan and founding member of Living Hope.¹

Other Christian churches in Japan do not do this ceremony. Living Hope developed this church tradition to make their church more indigenous and contextualized to the Japanese culture. In Japanese culture, honoring the

¹ Interview with Carlton Walker, Teams video call, October 22, 2024.

aged and the dead is very important. In fact, they have two special days every autumn for these remembrances. *Keirō no Hi*² is the “Respect for the Aged Day” and the day around which Living Hope plans its special ceremony. In August of each year the Japanese celebrate *Obon*,³ a festival centering on honoring the ancestors—visiting their graves and giving food offerings at house altars and temples. These two Buddhist-inspired events express a deep need for the Japanese to acknowledge their roots and seek the blessing of their family.

Walker and the leadership of Living Hope recognized this legitimate need and have worked to offer a way for congregants to express their love and appreciation for the god-given family they were born into without lapsing into pagan ancestor-worship. “We have taken some of the things Japanese long for and found a way to express it in a Christian context,” Walker said.

Living Hope is a good example of an indigenous church plant, the goal of all IMB missionaries globally. Indigenous churches, though helped in the initial stages by the missionary, learn to stand on their own in carrying out the key components of the missionary task, namely, entry, evangelism, discipleship, healthy church formation, and leadership development, so that the missionary can exit to partnership.

“Indigenization should go hand in hand with biblically appropriate contextualization, such that the evangelistic message, teaching, style, and worship of the church should be as much at home in the receptor culture as possible without compromising biblical standards,” said IMB Vice-President Zane Pratt. “This does not mean that the goal is to avoid all offense, but rather that any offense taken is the offense of the gospel rather than offense from biblically unnecessary foreignness.”⁴

² “Keiro No Hi – Celebrating and Recognizing Our Elders,” Keiro, accessed February 4, 2025, <https://www.keiro.org/features/keiro-no-hi-holiday>.

³ “Obon,” Japan-Guide.com, accessed February 4, 2025, <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2286.html>.

⁴ Zane Pratt, email to author, August 9, 2024.

Whereas Living Hope doesn't worship ancestors-and they are clear about this-it has found a way to acknowledge the need to honor those that went before.

A lifetime of experience

Carlton and Cornelia Walker began their missionary career with IMB 45 years ago. Forty-two of those have been spent in Japan. When they arrived in 1982, more than 100 years had passed since Baptists first planted churches in this island nation.

Shinto (a type of animism) and Buddhism are the traditional Japanese religions, having existed there since the 6th century C.E. However, Christianity had been welcomed during the Meiji Restoration beginning in 1868, when the Imperials ushered in an era of openness to anything Western. During this time, Christians saw that women were not educated and set about to bring change, especially influencing the next generation of imperial women. Because of Christians modeling family relationships and educating women, Christianity was seen as favorable and was readily accepted. "The church didn't come in to dominate or push down, it worked itself into the warp and woof of society by serving," Carlton said.

Carlton and Cornelia did their part to continue serving well by asking many questions and learning from their Japanese brothers and sisters. "When my generation landed, there was a degree of indigenous thought, but we were just so happy that there were churches already here to learn from that we took a position being students," Carlton said. "How do we pray, do a home visit, what is appropriate to say in different situations?... The churches looked a lot like our American churches outwardly because of the Baptist ancestors who had come before us, but there was a lot of really good stuff that they had developed too."

Japanese are an adopting culture, having a genius for taking things from others and making it their own. "They are not the best at making things

indigenous because they appreciate the foreign. The foreign face is compelling to them, but in the background they are working on making the faith indigenous,” Walker said. Outwardly and even functionally, many of the churches image a Western church, but the themes are different.

Carlton remembered when he first arrived and realized the church was preaching through Jeremiah. He wondered why they were spending so much time on this book and not focusing more on the gospel and the hope of Christ. When he asked, his Japanese brother said, “We understand suffering. We get it.” That conversation was eye-opening to Carlton as he began to appreciate how Japan’s history had shaped them differently, and yet the Christian faith was big enough for both cultures.

The god shelf and other cultural idols

Sometimes, in planting a healthy church, lines must be drawn narrowly. Walker told a story of another missionary who came before him named Annie Hoover. She was confronted with a common issue in Japan—the god shelf. This shelf is a household altar where daily food offerings are given to the gods and worship takes place. This shelf is such a part of culture that nearly every Japanese-style house has a place built in for this shelf as part of the basic architecture. This shelf is often passed down through generations through the elder son, and it is an offense to others if one does not honor the tradition.

For many believers, the choice is clear, and they do not have these altars in their homes. Instead, they display something prominently in the home to declare their Christian faith. However, the choice is never easy. Not having the shelf can be an offense to family and neighbors, and it rejects a deeply held cultural value of harmony and respect. For those who are new to the faith, the choice to part with this tradition is difficult.

When now-emeritus missionary Annie Hoover had the privilege of seeing a friend surrender her life to Christ many years ago, she walked with her

through those early days of discipleship. The new believer recognized quickly that she needed to get rid of her god-shelf, but she didn't know what to do with it. She couldn't put it in the garbage, as that would offend the neighborhood. She couldn't take it back to the temple because it was costly. When Annie asked what she wanted to do with it, she said she wished she could burn it. Annie decided that was a brilliant idea. She brought the altar to her private, walled residence and organized a service with other church members and pastors where they burned the altar as an offering to the Lord.

Whereas the god shelf is literally a place for idols, other cultural idols are more hidden and woven into the fabric of the people. When missionaries are new to a culture, they have to learn to recognize these cultural idols and discern how to draw the line between indigeneity and confronting the idols. Two Japanese idols that stand out to Carlton are conformity and busyness. Though these may not sound like idols, they often compromise a strong walk with God.

The Japanese have a saying that the nail that sticks up gets knocked down. They do not want to stick up or stand out for any reason. In contrast, for many Americans, standing out is a positive thing and personal belief often trumps politeness. "Japanese aren't purposefully deceitful, but getting along and harmony is so very important to them," Carlton said.

The Japanese also have a term that means "death by overwork." Their strong work ethic, while admirable, means that they are incredibly busy and inaccessible. "They are busy to the degree that key relations and families suffer," Carlton said. Teaching them to take time for fellowship and spiritual growth is a challenge.

The ability to recognize and engage these hidden idols in culture is a learned practice. The Walkers' 42 years in Japan have mined a wealth of wisdom. One nugget is that Americans have their hidden idols as well, and missionaries should be aware of these. "We all have a Bible within a Bible—the part that appeals to us, but the whole counsel of God works really well when we apply it to the holistic issues that other cultures are facing," Carlton said.

These hard situations are ones that missionaries face regularly as they share Christ in foreign cultures. The Walkers have years of experience navigating these waters.

Leaving a legacy

As the Walkers reflect on 45 years of ministry, they marvel at how faithful God has been and how much he still has to do. They have no plans to retire and are being used right now in mentoring and leading newer missionaries to their region of Japan. They celebrate the strong indigenous church they planted and the years of discipleship and catalytic ministry they have enjoyed. Some things they did didn't last as long as they would have liked, but others flourished.

In talking to Carlton, the thing that shines through is his deep respect for the Japanese and his patience and kindness in learning their culture and their ways. His words of advice center on listening to the people's stories, learning what speaks to them and what issues they are facing. Carlton learned over the years to truly appreciate that church members are the living documents he could learn from. He recognized their experience and wisdom and the aspects of their culture that reflect biblical truth. He also recognized the need to fill some holes that their indigenous ways don't fill. In bringing the gospel to bear in that context, he learned to adapt some of his ideas that were more cultural than biblical while helping them be aware of their own cultural blind spots. Working side-by-side caused a synergy to occur. "Their experience can speak to us, and our desire to see church planted can help them," he said.

When asked what Carlton would tell new missionaries coming to Japan, his answer was poignant: "With the wisdom of Solomon, the evangelical fire of Paul, the patience of Job, the longevity of Methuselah, and the love of Jesus Christ, you stand a good chance of having an impact."