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Incarnational Engagement: North American Missionaries in Japan
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I still remember the first time I went to see Betty Sue. It was the spring of 2004, and her office was on the second floor of Payton Hall at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Dr. Elizabeth Susan (“Betty Sue”) Brewster was the first professor at Fuller to whom I paid an office visit. After plucking up my courage and knocking, I opened the door. Betty Sue came up to me with a welcoming smile and offered me a seat. Her warm welcome instantly made me feel at ease.

Since that first visit, I visited Betty Sue’s office many times to discuss not only my studies, but my spiritual life and personal life struggles as well. She prayed together with me and always made me welcome whenever I visited her. I have been impacted greatly by her ministry, and I would like to share how her ministry affected me.

Two of Betty Sue’s contributions to missiology I want to highlight in the following narrative of my life and work are first, the importance of having a meaningful relationship with God and His people by coming alongside them in their struggles, and second, her method of language-culture¹ learning, both of which she taught and modeled in her own life and ministry.

I was born in Fukuoka, Japan in 1974 as the first child of Keiko and Nobukatsu Manabe. Like many other Japanese, my parents held onto Shintoism and Buddhism not as religions, but as traditions. My parents were good people; they were responsible, committed, and solid, and I believe they did all they could to be good parents. However the important missing piece that my parents did not provide me with was the knowledge of the relationship one can have with God through Jesus Christ.

As I grew up, I remember wondering, *Isn’t there more to life than this? If not, what is the meaning of this life?* Although my parents did not teach me about God, I believed there was “somebody” bigger than me whom I could pray to, so since I was a little child, I used to pray to that “somebody.” My father told me later that when I was three, I would sit at funerals praying

¹ I intentionally hyphenate language and culture because I believe they cannot be separated; language learning facilitates culture learning, and vice versa.

together with the chanting Buddhist monks. I think I was trying to make sense of my life and trying to connect with the supernatural.

When I was seven, my family moved to Livingston, Scotland, where my father had been sent to work at a branch of Nippon Electric Company (NEC). I spent my elementary and junior high school years there. The transition to the life in Scotland was hard at the beginning because I did not know the language. Some Scottish boys in school bullied me for being Japanese, as my brother and I were the only Asians in the local school we attended. However, I remember that when I could not communicate adequately in Scottish English², I used drawings and paintings as communication media, and I was able to make friends in that way. Later, as I learned Scottish English, I was able to make more friends. From Scotland, my family traveled extensively overseas. During these trips, I developed an appreciation for meeting people from diverse backgrounds and for learning different languages and cultures.

When I was around ten, my father took us to the birth place of missionary David Livingstone in Blantyre, Scotland. Adjacent to Livingstone's birth home was a museum that showed how he grew up and received a call from God to go to Africa. At that time, I was genuinely touched by Livingstone's courage in leaving the comfort of his home and going to share the love of God with people in faraway countries. Even though I knew nothing about the God that Livingstone served, I went back home and wrote in my diary, "I want to become like David Livingstone in sharing the love of God with people in Africa." Around the same time I was also inspired by reading the stories of Mother Theresa, and I wished that I could become like her in serving people in need. In retrospect, I think God was preparing me by letting me see, through the lives of Livingstone and Mother Theresa, how He works in different people and nations.

When I was thirteen years old, we moved back to Yokohama, Japan. Getting back into the life of a Japanese high school was hard because the academic pressures were great and study was very competitive. The Japanese schooling system was in many ways very different from the British schooling system. I needed to go to private tutoring institutes after my regular classes to catch up with my peers.

² Scottish English refers to the language most Scottish people speak today. I remember my school friends used to be proud of being Scots and speaking Scottish English. My Scottish friends were offended when Scotland was grouped together with England. Scottish English has some distinctive vocabulary and was influenced by the Scots language, which is of Germanic origin and is different from English (Stuart-Smith, 2008:48).

My high school years were challenging emotionally as well. In Japan, there is a saying, “a peg that stands out gets hammered down,” which means that a person who is different from the group gets disciplined to make him or her become more like the others. Although those who are weird or different get bullied even in Western societies, I think that in Japan, the peer pressure is even stronger and conformity to the group is even more expected. I probably seemed weird in the eyes of other students and teachers. So for months, I was bullied. I was not able to make friends, and I was fearful of going to school.

During those isolating high school years, I devoted a lot of time to my studies and reading. I searched through different religious and philosophical books to find answers to the meaning of life. Although what I read was interesting, it made me more pessimistic and confused. I started to have frequent suicidal thoughts because of loneliness, depression and a lack of direction in my life.

Meantime, I slowly made friends, as my peers at school asked me to help them with their English. Then, in college I taught English to high school students. Often, I saw how ineffective English teaching methods in Japanese schools were, and I enjoyed coming up with creative ways to teach. Some of the students came to me afterwards saying that they had begun to like learning English after I taught them. Through these experiences, I realized that my experience in Scotland was unique, and I wanted to work on my language skills and utilize them to help others. My interest in languages and culture also led me to study the Korean language for two summers at the Language Research Center at Seoul National University.

After I graduated from college, I received an offer to work at IBM. Since I did not have a clear idea of what I should do after college, I decided to work at IBM to gain working experience and to save up money while I found out what I really wanted to do. Then, right after my initial six month training, I was sent to Nagano to help operate the computer systems at the Nagano Winter Olympics. In Nagano, life seemed to be going well on the outside, but I was hurting and lonely inside. Life seemed meaningless and I was depressed. One time, I decided to commit suicide. I took up a kitchen knife, but I thank God I did not have courage to kill myself.

After finishing the project at the Nagano Winter Olympics, I was sent to work at an IBM branch in Tokyo, where I felt very stressed. One day, one of my college friends took me to a

Latin dance club in Roppongi³, and from then on, I became addicted to dancing at these clubs after work. I did not drink, smoke, or take drugs, but I used dancing to forget my concerns.

It wasn't long before I found out that I was pregnant as a result of the casual attitude I had toward having sex with my boyfriend. After all, most of my friends were in sexual relationships too. I was at a loss, and I consulted my parents. Since they considered out-of-wedlock pregnancy a great disgrace, my mother advised me to have an abortion. I complied. However after the abortion, my guilt and shame grew, and I became deeply depressed. I spent weeks and months going home alone after work and crying. The suicidal thoughts became stronger again.

During this time, I became friends with Anita, a Canadian Christian girl who was working in Tokyo. Anita was different from all the other friends I had met in Roppongi: she had listening ears and seemed genuinely interested in spending time with me. I felt safe sharing with her what I was going through, including my abortion. Until that point, I had not told anyone about it apart from my parents because my mother advised me to keep it a secret because of the shame involved.

One time, Anita and I were discussing religion. Until then, I believed that a supernatural being or god existed, and I could communicate with that god through Buddhist chants, New Age mediators, or other means. When I shared that opinion, Anita did not argue but just said plainly, "Jesus says He is 'the way, the truth, and the life.'" I was a little taken aback, because I thought Jesus was arrogant to say that He was the only way. However, Anita was not arrogant; on the contrary, she was loving and caring, so I began to want to know about this Jesus she believed in. Furthermore, I thought I ought to at least find out more about Jesus before concluding that He was wrong. As I started reading the Bible and going to church, slowly, I learned more about Jesus. At Tokyo Union Church, I attended a ten-week Alpha Course. Through that course I learned the basics of what Jesus taught, why He died for us, and how we can have a relationship with God through Him. In February 2000, I accepted Jesus in my heart, and, at the end of the year, I was baptized.

I thank God who sent Anita to befriend me at a Latin dance club. Through Anita's friendship, He showed me His love and brought me out from the miry pit of sin, sadness and depression into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

³ An entertainment district in Tokyo.

Jesus started to change my life bit by bit. I had been tormented with guilt and shame from my abortion, but God slowly restored me, and I came to understand that He forgave me for my foolish mistakes. This experience and the relationship I now had with Christ were incomparable with anything else I had ever experienced.

At that time, I was dating, but I told my boyfriend that I could not have sexual relations with him anymore. He became angry, and soon our relationship soured, and he left. I lost some friends from the dance club because I had changed my priorities, but others stayed with me, and they wanted to know more about my faith. I also gained many valuable friends in Christ as I got involved in a local church.

One other important change was that my relationship with my parents. While growing up, I had tried to meet my parents' expectations, but I could not. Thus, I held grudges against them for expecting too much of me. Furthermore, after the abortion, I barely even talked to my parents. However, God told me to ask their forgiveness for not being thankful for the good things they had done for me. He also reminded me that I needed to forgive my parents and to initiate conversations with them. In the beginning I was reluctant, but when I realized that my parents had tried to raise me as best they could, I saw that I should be grateful to my parents. My mother was surprised at the way my attitude toward them changed. She told me later that after becoming Christian, I had changed very much for the better.

One day during my devotional time, God spoke to me from a verse in the Bible, "Better is one day in your courts than thousands elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked" (Psalm 84:10-11). This verse became my prayer that God would use me to serve in His court for His kingdom. God then brought people into my life who directed me to Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. In 2004, after six years of working for IBM, God called me to Fuller to become equipped for ministry.

I enjoyed my classes at Fuller, but Betty Sue's Language/Culture Learning and Mission class especially hit home for me. Betty Sue taught the class participants the importance of incarnational engagement⁴ that results in developing relationships in the community. Half of the day was spent in a classroom studying language-culture learning principles, and the rest was

⁴ Incarnational engagement refers to the attitude of following Jesus' footsteps in coming alongside the people being ministered to by learning to speak their language and understand their culture. It also involves walking with the people in their struggles and responding by serving them. Jesus himself was born in a specific time and place and into a particular culture. He grew up learning the language and culture and served the people there.

spent using what we learned in the community where the language is spoken: the class participants built valuable relationships in the community while learning its language-culture. This experience gave me an opportunity to reconsider some of my assumptions about language-culture learning for missionaries in Japan. Though missions and language schools had worked hard to teach the Japanese language-culture to the missionaries, I began to suspect that some improvements could be made in certain language-culture learning models that had resulted in isolating missionaries from the Japanese community.

Those thoughts got stronger when I visited Japan in 2008. I visited a local Japanese church where Pastor Yamada, my *Sempai*⁵ from college, was pastoring a church. *Sempai* told me he was so glad that American missionaries come to Japan and said that his church members were looking forward to working together with them. However, *Sempai* also mentioned a disappointment he had experienced recently.

We heard that an American couple was planning to come to serve at our church in Japan, but it took two years for them to raise support through their mission agency. Then, two years later, when they had finished raising support and could come to Japan, we thought, “At last they will come to our church.” However, the missionaries went to a full-time language school for another two years in a rural part of Japan. After this, we thought “Finally they are coming to our church,” but we were disappointed to find out that the missionaries had decided not to come. It seemed that at that point, the missionaries felt that they were not called to come to Japan.

This story illustrates a pattern in the experience of some missionaries to Japan who sensed a call from God to come, then attended language school only to leave Japan before they had fully adjusted or built significant relationships with Japanese people. I did not think that God would waste that couple’s efforts in language-culture learning and their heart for Japan, but it seemed to me that leaving after two years of full-time study was a waste of time, energy and financial resources for themselves and for those who supported them. After hearing *Sempai*’s story, I started questioning if there were common patterns of language-culture learning for missionaries to Japan. Additionally, I wanted to understand what struggles missionaries in Japan

⁵ *Sempai* literally means “a person who was before.” The term is used for Japanese seniority-based status relationships. A junior student will often refer to senior students by the title “*Sempai*.” This relationship holds even after one graduates from school.

face. Thus, I decided to do further research on North-American missionaries' language-culture learning and their relational patterns on a doctoral level with Betty Sue.

As I reviewed literature on this topic, I discovered that missionaries to Japan have found language-culture learning one of the major stumbling blocks in their ministry. According to Susan Takamoto's research, ninety percent of North American missionaries who were interviewed reported that it was extremely difficult for them to learn and understand the Japanese culture (Takamoto 2003:286). Additionally, her research revealed that missionaries in Japan had a long transitional adjustment period that averaged 7.8 years.⁶ During these years missionaries dealt with periods of extended isolation because of the difficulties of overcoming language barriers, social problems, and other issues related to the vast differences between the Japanese and North American cultures. Unfortunately, the average length of missionary service in Japan was seven to eight years, so the implication was that many missionaries were leaving the field before they had fully adjusted and built significant relationships (Takamoto 2003:309).

Through the fieldwork I conducted in 2009⁷, I discovered that being an insider or outsider impacts the way missionaries learn Japanese language-culture. One of the major frustrations for missionaries was their status as *gaijin*⁸. Since the missionaries were considered outsiders, they had difficulty having meaningful relationships with Japanese people. Other frustrations included the difficulty of learning the Japanese language-culture and a lack of training and support. My conclusion from the fieldwork was that missionaries must employ a variety of methodologies in order to address different challenges.

In my dissertation I applied my fieldwork findings to the creation of a coaching model so that language-culture coaches effectively assist missionaries in developing meaningful relationships with Japanese people while learning the Japanese language-culture.

Current and Future Plans

Three years into my research, I heard the news of an earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear power plant crisis in Japan. My heart ached and I struggled to focus on my research because I

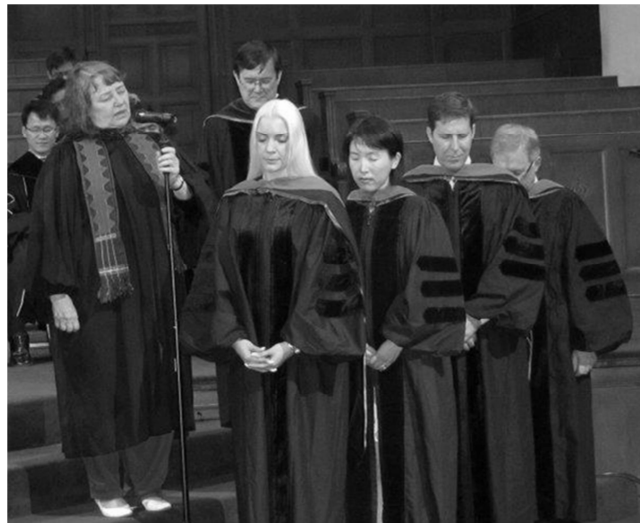
⁶The length of adjustment for missionaries in other parts of the world was between 1.5 and four years

⁷I conducted an online survey with sixty-three missionaries from sixteen different mission agencies. I also interviewed eleven missionaries in the United States and eight missionaries in Japan at LCMJ and conducted focus groups with Asian Access missionaries.

⁸ Foreigner. Literally translated, an out-of-the group person.

was thinking of the suffering people who needed comfort. I even questioned if my research was a waste of time and should I just drop everything and go to Japan to help.

However, I then began to think that perhaps God had led me to do this research so that future missionaries could be better trained to effectively share the love of Jesus with my people. Thus I decided to continue writing my dissertation. By God's grace, early in 2012, I was able to complete the four-year DMiss in Intercultural Studies program with Betty Sue as mentor. It was an honor for me to be part of her last cohort before her retirement from Fuller.



Betty Sue praying over her cohort members at the doctoral hooding ceremony June 7, 2012. I am the third student from the right.

While working on my doctoral research, I met my future husband, Christian J. Kim in Betty Sue's class. After we married and our son Noah was born, we moved to New Jersey, where we now live. My husband and I do not believe we will be in New Jersey for very long and that God has other plans for us. However, I also believe God sent us here to train and equip us for the future, and so I am focusing on living my life with Christ by serving as a wife and a mother, and by connecting with my Korean family and friends in New Jersey. Since my husband serves as a mission pastor at Pilgrim Church, a Korean-American immigrant church, I am learning Korean using the principles I learned through my doctoral studies. I enjoy attending the Korean children's church service with my nineteen-month old son where we sing Korean praise songs, and memorize Scripture verses in Korean.

My prayer is that in the future, I can work together with my Korean and American friends to bring others to have a relationship with Christ. I also would like to continue to assist missionaries in language-culture learning, and I hope that my research can be utilized for God's kingdom.

Appreciation for Betty Sue

Meeting with Betty Sue and taking her class showed me that Jesus was born in a specific time and place, and into a particular culture. He grew up learning the language-culture and served the people there. We are also called to follow his example to come alongside the people in their struggles and serve them. I agree with Tom and Betty Sue's description:

A missionary is the one who goes into the world to give people an opportunity to belong to God's family. He goes because he, himself, is a believer in this most meaningful of relationships. His life should proclaim: "I belong to Jesus who has given me a new kind of life." By my becoming a believer here with you, God is inviting you through me to belong to him (Brewster and Brewster 1987:6)

Betty Sue walked what she taught in her personal life. Although I did not know Betty Sue when she was serving with her husband, I was touched when I read Tom's brother, Dan Brewster, writing about Betty Sue's sacrificial service in assisting Tom (Brewster 1997:54-55). The task of assisting her husband who was in a wheelchair must have not been easy. She became the "arms and legs" for her husband by taking care of his daily needs and assisting him in travelling over eighty countries, packing their bags and carrying their luggage, and later their son. Her serving heart has been an inspiration and a role model for my own life and ministry.

Betty Sue also demonstrated her teaching by coming alongside her students in their struggles. "Spending time with students, listening, praying, learning about their spiritual pilgrimage, and getting to know them as individuals" were central to Tom and Betty Sue's ministry (Brewster 1997:271). She was not just my academic mentor but became my mentor in personal life. For example, when I first arrived in Pasadena and I got homesick for Japan, she helped me go through homesickness by listening to me and praying for me. Furthermore, I remember when I was getting anxious about being single all my life she listened to me, and I was comforted and encouraged as she shared with me her experiences when she was single, and how

she met Tom. Never did I imagine then that later I would meet my future husband, Christian, in her class!

Finally, I would not have been able to envision doctoral studies without Betty Sue. Her class first inspired me to begin my doctoral research. I am thankful for the many hours she spent with me discussing my dissertation. She generously shared her resources and wisdom on language-culture learning. While some people struggle in their research because they do not get enough feedback from their professors, I never had that problem. Betty Sue was always there for me to discuss my research, to point me to the right resources and contacts, and to encourage me to continue.

In a recent conversation with Betty Sue, she mentioned that she is re-”tire”ing her wheels for future ministry. I pray for abundant blessings on Betty Sue as she re-”tire”s for many more years of fruitful ministry.

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