

How International Is the Church in Japan?

JIRO NUMANO

ROBERT MULLEN WRITES in *The Mormons* that "temples are, in a way, measurements of the acceleration"¹ of the rapid expansion of the LDS Church. The Church will have a temple in Tokyo in 1980. Does the construction of the Tokyo Temple really signify the establishment of the Church in Japan?

I would like to examine the current condition of the Church in Japan to see how "international" it really is. An important indicator is the perception of Japanese members: Do they feel that they are part of an American church? Or do they feel that they have been able to "digest" the gospel? I have been contemplating this subject for years. Before I wrote this article, I sent a questionnaire to all the stake presidents in Japan and to some prominent non-members for their response to how international the Mormon Church actually is.

The Church is international, but only in an elementary sense in the eyes of Japanese both in and out of the Church. The Church is still regarded as an American church here. Mormonism does not yet have roots fastened deep in the social soil of Japan and has not become an international church in the full sense.

We have often read such headlines and titles of articles as "expanding church" and "international church" in the past several years. The translator

JIRO NUMANO is Assistant Professor of English at Tokuyama University in Yamaguchi prefecture, Japan.

of Mullen's *The Mormons* put the titles of part 3 and chapter 32 into "Mormonism Which Spreads into All the World" and "Transforming into a World-wide Church" from their original "The Twentieth Century" and "Salt Lake City in the Jet Age" respectively. In fact Robert Mullen sympathetically examines the existence of the Church in the world's great metropolises² and says "few realize the extent of their [the Mormons'] worldwide thrust."³

Yes, in the sense of thrusting outward, the Mormon Church is now international. Mormons are found far and wide, not confined to Utah or the United States. Professor Masashi Takahashi,⁴ a prominent Old Testament scholar, responded "yes" to my question on whether the Mormon Church was an international church. He answered positively on the grounds of the Church's international proselytizing work and its many recognized achievements. A councilman of Nishinomiya City also answered "yes," giving his view that when a church has doctrines which persuade people throughout the world to believe they would be saved thereby, then that church is a universal organization. Both reasons for calling our Church an international one are pertinent and are essential elements of any international religion.

However, both opinions could be only an effort to view the Church from an American (and not a Japanese) perspective or just a lenient appraisal. I suspect that the idea that the Mormon Church is an international church is founded mainly on the fact that membership is found widely in various nations outside the United States. It is something like a Japanese considering judo an international sport because it is now popular outside Japan.

Another reason advanced as to why the Church should be considered an international church has to do with staffing. Local members fill the leadership positions such as stake presidency, ward bishopric, branch presidency; daily Church meetings are conducted by local Japanese members, leaving American missionaries solely to proselyting. During the administration of Mission President Paul C. Andrus, branch presidencies and district leadership positions in the Tokyo and Osaka areas were filled by Japanese members. This epoch-making change took place in December 1957.⁵ Since then, almost all of the units of the Church have been operated by local Japanese members, except for a few small rural branches where missionaries still fill those positions.

Nevertheless, the predominant view of the current stake presidents of Japan is that the Church is an American church, not an international church.⁶ What are the reasons for this response?

My analysis of why the LDS Church is regarded as an American church is based on answers from stake presidents and other persons and on my own personal observation. The following points can be made:

1. *The number of members in Japan is too small.* Although the number is not the most important factor nor a qualification required for an international religion, yet the number of Mormons in Japan, 36,084 as of 1 March 1979,⁷ is far too small compared to the population of other local religions and also to the vast population of the whole nation, more than one hundred million.

2. *Most of the missionaries in Japan are American youths.* Among the 1,359

missionaries working in Japan as of April 1979, only 214 are local Japanese members.⁸ This number is still far too small to change the impression that the Mormon Church is an American church.

3. *There are many transliterated loan words in Church terminology.* It may be sometimes inevitable to see a few transliterated terms in an organization whose headquarters is located in America, but the number is quite sufficient to deem us an American church. To name a few, "S.A.P." for Single Adult Program, "referral," "re-referral," "Special Interest," and "session (of endowment)" are recent examples of transliterated words which could well be translated into appropriate Japanese equivalents.⁹ This, of course, is dependent on the attitude and policy of the Japanese members.

4. *Apparent traits of the American way of thinking and way of living* are seen throughout the manuals and textbooks, the programs of meetings and events and the manner of operating of the Church units.¹⁰ More flexible application of manuals and instructions and more careful, generous adaptation to the Japanese culture might avoid giving unnecessary offense to local members and investigators.

5. *The tendency is toward pro-Americanism on the part of Japanese Church leaders.* A column in a newspaper dealt with the problem of "the tragedy of an English-speaking nation." It called such misestimation of situations by the United States (e.g., the Iranian crisis) in spite of her spendthrift intelligence activities "the tragedy of an English-speaking nation." The column continues

There are quite a few people who speak English in any country. Therefore the American government and the CIA are apt to rely on and contact only so-called "English speakers." However, those who are able to handle English have usually acquired a Western mode of thought and do not always represent the main stream of their native country.¹¹

We hope this is not the case with the Kingdom of God. The tendency is not very serious, but a Japanese mission president expressed his concern on this point. I have often wondered how sincerely, earnestly and frankly stake presidents, regional representatives and mission presidents have been reporting on the current conditions, problems and the plea of spiritual hunger and struggles on the part of the members of the Japanese unit, however serious and unpleasant they may be. Or are they resorting only to the achievements and the better phases of their activities? Are their attitudes comparable to those members of Parliament who earnestly represent their local citizens' welfare? Considering the organization of the Church, it is quite natural that the main flow of information and instruction is from the center to the circumference. But should not a sound organization grasp the current condition and the plea of members on the bottom layer?

6. *Japan has not yet produced enough excellent leadership, nor has she come to the stage of sending her leadership to the highest decision-making council of the Church.*¹² This may sound too arrogant and premature, but having multinational members in the highest decision-making positions is essential if an organization is

to be called an international one. In the Roman Catholic Church, the College of Cardinals who have the right to elect a new Pope, are composed of various nationalities. Recently the archbishop of Nagasaki was nominated as a new cardinal, the third cardinal from Japan.

7. *The character of the Japanese members is passive in communication with the hierarchy of the Church.* There are very few Japanese members, if any, who, after a stake conference, will come up to the pulpit and converse with the main speaker and express their responses, especially when the speaker is a visiting authority from America. In the United States, interested individuals will often come to the front to visit with the speaker. It is not that the Japanese members don't respond to the moving sermons and strong callings for repentance, faith and actions; it simply has not been our practice. It definitely requires courage for the average Japanese member to converse with a visiting authority of the Church, person to person. There is an insurmountable language barrier which keeps lay members from conversing with Church authorities. People revere, understand and respect the leaders who come from the headquarters of the Church. But might there not be a seed of widening distance in this almost silent reverence without actual communication?

We notice from the articles and sermons of the authorities that they have direct contact with the members of the Church either through interviews or correspondence, though we are encouraged to follow the principle that members should go to their bishops and stake presidents rather than to general authorities for counsel. More direct contact between Japanese members and the visiting authorities might facilitate a greater spirit of unity and thereby result in the Church's becoming more genuinely international.

The Church in Japan has to rise above the present situation of being such a small minority as to command little notice by the general public and must start reflecting Mormonism's dynamic power in Japanese society. I list some specific ways in which the Church in Japan might grow to be regarded as an organization deeply rooted here and hence an international church.

1. *Increase the membership and the number of missionaries sent from local units.* A substantial membership is essential for mass recognition. Elder Bruce R. McConkie, in a stake conference on 5 August 1978 in Osaka, told the members that the most needed thing in that stake was to have more members. He also said that the American missionaries currently laboring in Japan were substitutes, that it was expected that the Church in Japan would provide missionaries for Japan as well as for other Asian countries in the future. There must be more Japanese missionaries, for those we see in town, on the train and on their bicycles are almost invariably Americans.

2. *The members of the Church must play more active roles in society, holding important posts in the community.* Some members hold important posts in society already, but they are the exception in Japan. Members are aware of this problem and are currently striving to obtain greater social prominence. Many of us feel ourselves pioneers of the Church in Japan in this respect. Many of the stake presidents and members who responded to my questionnaire listed this and the previous matter as the most important problems facing us.

3. *Live and apply the gospel independently and bear fruits.* Japanese members are required to grasp the spirit and the core of the restored gospel and digest it and then to have the ability to live it according to their Japanese circumstances in terms of their culture, history and environment. They must make practical application of gospel principles to their physical and psychological conditions. We need to be able to live the gospel without being led by the hand or having to mimic our American models. There is some concern about the tendencies of Japanese members to put more emphasis on outward form rather than inward transformation. This tendency induces empty feelings and sometimes fears rather than peace and joy among the members.

If we could solve this problem, we would be able to work out the questions of the many transliterated Church terms, the American mode of thought, and the direct importation of the way of life from the United States, all of which is American provincialism. Then we would have the ability to write our own manuals, textbooks and articles for Church magazines in Japanese. Some have even expressed their desire to see more personal publication on Church-related subjects by the Japanese members themselves.

4. *Further develop those traditional Japanese traits which coincide with the principles of the gospel.* We recognize some noble cultural traits within us which we have inherited from our ancestors and which coincide with the principles of the gospel. To name a few, we can list such virtues as modesty, respect for the aged, reverence, hospitality to travelers and preference to the spiritual over the material. If we had those and other traits before we accepted the gospel, we should be able to develop them after joining the Church. We, the Japanese members, are constitutionally different and unique as the Saints of all nations are. If all Saints develop these traditional favorable traits of our respective nations, as we repent and accept the whole system of the gospel, we would be maintaining our identities; Mormonism will also be better regarded as a deeply-rooted religion.

5. *Increase the international sense of Japanese members.* This idea may sound contradictory to the above, but it could be done without sacrificing the traditional Japanese traits, for members are now "fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God." (Ephesians 2:19) While maintaining cultural identity and developing the traditional noble values, we should be better citizens of God's kingdom by being more internationally minded, widening our sights and deepening our insight.

To reach this goal, Japanese members must face and accept the challenge of President Lee when he encouraged European Saints to learn English in Munich in 1973. He said, "How helpful it would be if every one now speaking your own native tongue would learn to speak English. Then you would be able to talk with us more clearly and we could understand you better than we have done."¹³

As fellow-citizens with the Saints, members of the Church in Japan have to rid themselves of a traditional Japanese aloofness and racial prejudice, both of which have been nurtured unconsciously by the insularism and homogeneity of our people. As we become more international by overcoming

the above two problems and also by learning English, we will be better equipped to know and understand the gospel and also to communicate with the Church leadership.

Just as we hope that the Church will become an international church in Japan in the near future so do we hope the Japanese members will become more internationally minded.

The foregoing presentation is not meant to be a collection of complaints. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has truths which could be shared by every nation and hence is an international church. However, until Japanese members attain both physical and spiritual independence, the Church in Japan will be regarded as an American church and not an organization deeply rooted in Japan.

We need more members, we need to demonstrate more achievements in the civic, business, educational and political worlds as well as in the religious world. At the same time, we need to develop an international consciousness, be more independent and play more active roles in furthering the cause of the Kingdom of God in serving in the local units or in providing feedback to the headquarters rather than always being a quiet and passive recipient.

Stakes are the strength of Zion. They are the footstools upon which Zion can stand rather than units which consume the strength of the Church. It will not be until the eight stakes of Japan stand firm that Mormonism in Japan will be regarded as firmly rooted and thus international.

NOTES

¹Robert Mullen, *The Mormons* (London: W. H. Allen, 1967), p. 199.

²*Ibid.*, p. 5.

³*Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴Emeritus professor of Doshisha University.

⁵News column of the *Seito-no-Michi*, the Japanese Church magazine, Vol. 2 (January 1958): 18-19.

⁶Seven out of eight stake presidents responded to the questionnaire and five answered to that effect.

⁷The data was given by the Information Center of the Asian Office of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Tokyo. There are currently eight stakes and the same number of missions in Japan and the membership is rated as sixth among Protestant denominations according to the 1979 edition of *The Japan Christian Year Book* whereas it was eighteenth in 1963 according to the 1972 edition of the same book.

Statistics of the Christian denominations in Japan (1978) based on *The Japan Christian Year Book* (Tokyo: Christian Newspaper Ltd., 1979)

United Church of Christ in Japan	188,409
The Spirit of Jesus	95,195
Japan Episcopal	55,122
Primitive Gospel	50,000
Jehovah's Witnesses	45,000
LDS	35,000
Baptist	32,286
Lutheran	26,164
All Other	167,328

Roman Catholic	381,504
Japan Charistos Orthodox Church	24,573
Protestant Churches	694,504
Catholic Churches	406,077
Total	1,100,581

⁸The figures were obtained from the secretary to Elder Yoshihiko, a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy at the Asian Office of the Church in Tokyo.

⁹Reference to the same subject by President Seiji Katanuma of Japan Sapporo Stake is quoted in Lavina Fielding, "The Expanding Church," *Ensign* Vol. 6 (December 1976): 12.

¹⁰Public Relations of Japan Central Region, "Report of a Survey of the Life of Members," December 1978. This survey, conducted in two stakes and a mission in the Osaka area of Japan in November 1977 with 626 responses, reveals that 23% of the members are aware of the difference of the society of the Church and the Japanese society and 17% of the members admit that they feel pressure of Americanism in the Church programs.

¹¹*Asahi Newspaper* (evening edition), 25 January 1979.

¹²No Japanese members can have forgotten the prophecy by President Hugh B. Brown as he addressed a congregation in Osaka on 20 April 1967 to the effect that there would someday be a Japanese member in the Council of the Twelve. "President Hugh B. Brown—from a Special Conference at Abeno Branch on April 20," *Seito-no-Michi*, Vol. 11 (May 1967): 6.

¹³Doyle L. Green, "Munich Conference Report," *Ensign* Vol. 3 (November 1973): 82.

