

Vancouver Story
Rev. Kiyoshi Hata

Winter in northwestern Canada is difficult. In 1962, I visited North America for the first time in my life. The official purpose of this trip was to perform the 5th memorial service for Rev. Yoshiaki Fukuda, the former head minister of San Francisco church, and, as head officiant, to visit all the churches in North America and their propagation efforts.

The third Konko Sama had encouraged me to take on these tasks. Of course, I had to cover all the travel expenses myself. It was a time before people could travel freely overseas and thus, it was quite a challenge to just get a passport. I had to go to both American and Canadian consulates and have one-on-one interviews with consuls before obtaining my visa. The consul at the American consulate asked me various questions about my trip and I had to provide answers to each of his questions in English. For example, he asked me the purpose of my trip, the number of days I stayed in the States, the names of my hosts, the names of the places I was going to visit during the trip, my status, and my occupation at that time. Although I was nervous and sweating profusely, I managed to provide responses to all of his questions in English. Finally, at the end of the interview, the consul said to me in Japanese, "Have a safe trip." As soon as I heard these words, all of the tension inside me suddenly disappeared.

The interview at the Canadian consulate was fairly easy as I had already received a visa from the American consulate. However, when I told the Canadian consul that the purpose of my trip was not sightseeing, but rather to observe the activities of a religious organization, his expression changed. He looked at me with sharp eyes and said that I was not allowed to engage in propagation activities during my trip. He then told me that it would, however, be acceptable to observe activities at the churches. Upon hearing this, I quickly replied that I was indeed visiting North America only to examine the Konko churches themselves and nothing more.

Back then, a passport was not a small booklet with a red cover, but a heavy-looking notebook with a hard cover made of black leather. It was valid for only one trip. Written in my passport for this trip, the purpose of my visit was described as the observation of religious propagation.

It was also challenging to obtain foreign currency in early the 1960s. The exchange rate at that time was 360 yen to the dollar. Since very little foreign currency was available in Japan, a clerk there refused to exchange money for me when I went to the Bank of Japan. I was told that they would exchange money if I was an actor or a singer who could potentially earn money overseas and bring back American currency. Unfortunately, they did not consider a minister to be a member of such a category. The underground market for currency exchange was very popular at that time, with the usual rate hovering around 400 yen per dollar. I managed to ask someone at Sumitomo Bank to prepare a document indicating the amount of money sent from the Konko churches in North America to the Konkokyo headquarters in Japan. I then went back to the Bank of Japan and argued that if a minister traveled abroad, Japan would receive more religious donations from other countries. They finally relented and I received 200 U.S. dollars.

At the time I visited North America, the Japanese economy had not yet fully recovered from the destruction it had incurred during the war. Once I arrived in the U.S.,

I quickly realized that I could not afford to use airplanes as a means of transportation to visit the other churches. The State of California alone was the same size as the entire country of Japan. I had to organize other ways to travel within the country. Luckily, Mr. Shigeru Yamada who was the Church Elder at San Francisco church drove me around to visit San Francisco, Los Angeles, Hollywood (Gardena), Fresno, San Jose, and the Sacramento Churches. Mr. Yamada had bought a brand-new Cadillac for my visit and drove me all over California together with his late wife in it.

As Mr. Yamada could not take me to Portland Church in Oregon, Seattle Church in Washington, and the Vancouver church in Canada, I had to find alternative ways to visit these churches. When I was discussing this problem with believers at the San Francisco church, Rev. Yasuyuki Yasuhara, the former Chief Administrative Minister for KCNA, told me that he also wanted to visit Portland Church for its grand ceremony. He said that he was planning to perform a ceremony to build a memorial monument for the Late Mrs. Hirayama whose husband had introduced Konko religion to Rev. Yasuhara. Mr. Wataru Nakahara, Rev. Yasuhara's son-in law, volunteered to drive us to Portland together with his wife, Mitsuko. Upon hearing of our plans, Rev. Mako Fukuda kindly prepared hot water bottles and provided many blankets for our trip. She told me that she was worried that we would catch colds during the night drive from northern California to Oregon through the Shasta Pass.

It was shortly after 8:00pm when we left the Nakahara's in Oakland. I still remember vividly their four small children waving at me and saying, "Ji chan, bye-bye. Ji chan, bye-bye." In those days, there was no Interstate highway like the I5 that spanned the continent from Alaska to South America. Instead, we had to use Highway 99 to drive up north. Although it was a major highway, we had to be extremely careful driving through the cities at night, especially because nocturnal animals such as deer would occasionally wander across the highway. While Rev. Yasuhara was able to enjoy a sound sleep next to me, I was too excited to fall asleep. I thought the road near Mt. Shasta was especially interesting despite the darkness outside.

Wataru Nakahara, who was same age as I at that time, had a lot of stamina., He told me to get some sleep anticipating that I would be very tired when we arrived in Portland. As we continued on our journey, a large deer suddenly appeared in the headlights at the curve. I was simply too excited to fall asleep. During the night drive, Mitsuko kindly poured hot coffee for me from the thermos she had brought with her. Her hospitality was especially comforting during that dangerous night drive.

Thinking back, I am once again amazed with how big America is. I think we cannot grasp the actual size of the country and its natural and cultural diversity if we fly from one place to another.

When we finally entered the State of Oregon, the sky in the East seemed a little brighter. It was then that I fell into a deep sleep. "I can see Portland." I woke up to Wataru's voice. When I looked out of the window, I saw some houses. The sun was already up. Wataru said to me, "Sensei, you were sleeping very well." His voice was so cheerful that it was hard to imagine that he had driven 1300 km from San Francisco all through the night. We were soon in downtown Portland. It was almost nine o'clock. Mitsuko offered me rice balls wrapped with seaweed saying, "Sensei, you must be hungry." The hot tea she served me was especially delicious.

We had finally arrived in Portland, Oregon. I realized though that Vancouver was still far away. I then thought about the circumstances of the churches in Northwestern America. I began to sing a song in my heart. It was a song about a traveler who went back north. (It had been a dormitory song at my Ryojun high school). We stayed at Portland church that evening. I had to get ready for the grand ceremony and the ceremony for Mrs. Hirayama scheduled for the next day.

We arrived at the church near the Willamette River (the old Portland church) around noon. I was deeply moved by the fact that I had driven 1300 km north of San Francisco and had finally reached Portland. When we arrived at the church, Rev. Hirayama appeared at the Church Altar and welcomed us. He politely washed his hands and gave a prayer at the altar. While Rev. Hirayama, advanced in his years, stayed rather quiet, Mr. Akagi, Mr. and Mrs. Akiyama, and Mr. Kuroe openly expressed their excitement and happiness at having their beloved friends visit them. Sadly, I cannot see Rev. Hirayama, Mr. Akagi, or Mr. Akiyama any more. They have all now passed away and my visit to Portland church has become a memory.

It rained in Portland the next day. We planned to have the grand ceremony in the morning, but as Rev. Fumio Matsui was supposed to bring Kagami mochi from Seattle, we decided to wait until he arrived. We ended up having the ceremony in the afternoon. Back then when I visited America, Rev. Matsui was facing challenges to restructure the Seattle church. Despite difficulties at his own church, he was also looking after the Portland, Vancouver, and even the Toronto church that was located in Eastern Canada.

The day after we had the grand ceremony, I drove further north with Rev. Matsui. Rev. Matsui explained me about his propagation efforts in Vancouver. I was shocked, but also deeply impressed with his accounts. Rev. Matsui was not the type of person who called attention to his own hardships. Listening to his story, I contemplated on the difficulties he was facing in commuting between Seattle and Vancouver once a month for the purposes of propagation.

I stayed in a room on the second floor at the Seattle church, and, as a result, Rev. Matsui's two boys had to sleep in the basement in their sleeping bags. Looking at the boys sleeping on the floor, I imagined the time when Rev. Matsui first became a minister at the Seattle church. He had to have his third son, Alan, who was only a toddler at that time, sleep on a board placed directly on the floor. Every evening, until the wee hours, Rev. Matsui and I discussed his propagation efforts in North America. Our discussions made me realize the challenges he was facing in his efforts to propagate in Vancouver, something that was beyond description.

It was snowing on the day we left for Vancouver. We made the decision to take a bus instead of driving because we thought the road might be too slippery. It was early in the evening by the time we arrived at the bus station in Vancouver. I felt very cold sitting inside the terminal building.

Rev. Matsui told me to wait there until a church member came to pick us up. This person was supposed to attend the service that evening. Rev. Matsui also told me that I should be in charge of conducting the service as I had come to Vancouver all the way from Japan. I was surprised by his suggestion and began to wonder what to do as I hadn't even prepared a pastoral prayer. Rev. Matsui said to me that it would be fine if I just wrote something in my notebook and offered it to Kami. I quickly began to write my prayer while shivering in the cold inside the bus terminal. Soon after, someone rushed

into the building and shouted, "Sensei!" with a very cheerful voice. He seemed joyful and very happy as if he had found something very precious.

Although believers' people in Vancouver did not have a minister or a church building, on that day they were able to have their own religious gathering with us, visiting ministers from Seattle and Japan. That one church member's ecstatic attitude reflected the gratification that members of the Vancouver church held in their hearts.

Rev. Matsui told me that it was Mr. Yamada from the Vancouver church. Mr. Yamada welcomed me by saying that he had never been as happy as he was that day. He also said that he was so delighted to have me come all the way from Japan. When I received his warm greeting, my heart filled with indescribable emotion. I became very touched with the fact that I was finally about to meet with members of the Vancouver church who had been preserving their faith with strong determination.

On the way to the Japanese school where we held the service, Mr. Yamada kept talking about things that had happened to him during the past month. I was somewhat mesmerized with him while listening to his stories. Mr. Yamada drove us through the downtown area and then parked his car in front of a big building. It was the Japanese language school. As it was Sunday, there were no lights around the building. I could vaguely see its shape in the darkness. We went inside and walked along a corridor. Our footsteps echoed in the quiet hallway. Soon I spotted a classroom with some lights on inside. When I opened the door, several people in the room turned their around all at once. Everyone looked very happy and cheerful despite the darkness of the school building. They had set up the altar in the classroom and put Tenchi Kakitsuke in the middle of the altar. The church members had kept various parts of the altar in their homes and Tenchi Kakitsuke was kept at Mr. Fujiwara's home. When I introduced myself as Rev. Hata from Tokyo, everyone quickly gathered around me. They grabbed my hands and said, "Welcome to Vancouver." They even had tears in their eyes. They seemed truly happy to see me.

I sensed the joyful feeling that filled the classroom. It was a feeling shared by the people who gathered in the classroom that night. They were happy because they were able to hold a religious gathering using the classroom as a church. They had set up the altar and had even prepared offerings to Kami. It was literally "their service."

There was no minister or church building in Vancouver. Throughout its history, believers in Vancouver had been unable to recruit ministers from Japan due, in large part, to immigration policies set forth by the Canadian government. Such racist policies before World War II had created a strong anti-Japanese sentiment in Canada. Despite living amidst such difficult circumstances, the members of the Vancouver church had preserved their faith, keeping an imaginary church in their hearts. Although other Konko churches in North America have undoubtedly faced some challenges, I don't think they were as difficult as those that the believers in Vancouver endured. During my visit to Vancouver, I felt as if the warmth and strength of the believers' hands reflected the pride they held toward the Konko faith, a faith that they had worked so hard to maintain.

Soon thereafter, an older lady (whose name I have unfortunately forgotten) came into the room. She was carrying a lot of vegetables on her back and breathing heavily. She said, "We had so much snow in our area today and I dug my way through the snow until I got to the bus stop." I thought her words reflected her passion and sincerity towards the church and the gathering.

While performing the ceremony, I sensed the honour and pride believers in Vancouver church held in the faith they had worked to preserve for such a long time. After the ceremony, we shared offerings such as sushi and sweets and had an informal discussion on our faith. Although there weren't a lot of people at the service, everyone was very happy. One by one, they talked about how their lives had been since the last time they had gotten together. Every story reassured members of the group that they had all received numerous divine blessings from Kami. The gathering was very heart-warming.

The faith people in Vancouver held profoundly moved me. I had traveled 2000 km north from San Francisco and had crossed the border into Canada. Then, literally at the edge of this northern country, I met people who shared the same faith as me. Together they had sustained their religion, enduring the hardships of living in a foreign land. I believe my encounter with the believers in Vancouver was one of the greatest experiences of my life.