

Why are we losing 80% of Japanese returnees?



by Liz Godwin

Around the world, workers in ministries to international students work tirelessly to reach students who have gone overseas to study. Many international students come to faith while outside of their country. Twenty-four percent of the Japanese returnees that I met in Japan came to faith outside of Japan.¹ The Japanese Christian fellowship Network (JCFN) estimates that of those who become Christians outside of Japan and are not followed up, about 80% fall away from the faith within three years of returning to Japan.² Why do we lose so many, of those who profess faith overseas, when they return to Japan? What is the point of helping them come to faith if we lose them after they return? How can we stop this loss?

What issues do Japanese returnees face?

- They don't know where to find a church
- Their families don't want them to be Christian
- They have busy personal and working lives
- They have no Christian friends for fellowship

- They don't know how to share their faith
- The atmosphere at church is very different from what they experienced overseas
- They don't have a Bible study or fellowship group with whom to meet.

What we knew and what we learned

Paul and I went to Japan for two years to learn about the cultural barriers preventing returnees from entering the church in Japan.

We knew that international churches can be a better fit for Japanese returnees. Returnees are now third-culture kids. They want to keep their English fluency, and an international church is often more similar to what they experienced overseas.

Many of us have heard that the threshold to entering the church in Japan is six feet high. In other words, in the Japanese mind, you can't just walk into a church. That is because it is considered foreign, and you can't enter an



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already formed group without an introduction. We knew introductions were important in business, but we didn't realize introductions were also important for entering the church.

Another church barrier is the need for an invitation to attend. But we found that Japanese people often do not invite their friends or family to church. When I asked why, they stated that is a social barrier they are not supposed to cross. However, non-Japanese people in Japan easily invite their Japanese friends to church, and the Japanese will usually attend with them. This again makes the international church the more welcoming church.

International Students, Inc., the organization I work with, has a returnee follow-up model that assumes its US staff have time and money to follow up, and visit their returnees every four years or so.³ However, most staff are busy with the next group of new students arriving, and they simply don't have time to follow up all their returnees.

Strategy modification

Consider other possibilities for follow-up:

- Take future returnees to a Japanese church in your country before they return to Japan. Their re-entry process will be helped if they learn how to worship in Japanese and get to experience a Japanese church before going back to Japan.
- Introduce them to a regional JCFN fellowship⁴ where they can meet other Japanese Christians.
- Introduce them to another returnee in Japan who is growing and attending church.
- Introduce them to an expat contact in an international church in Japan. Have your contact invite the returnee to an international church in their area.

Returnee-friendly churches

I have been investigating churches in Japan since 2000. I wanted to help the church in Japan by sending returnees to them. It quickly

became evident that it was returnees that we needed to help. They needed to find a church that would welcome them, include them, and give them freedom to serve the body of Christ. The type of churches that returnees are looking for often had the following characteristics:

- International
- Bilingual
- Inclusive of newcomers
- Have lively worship
- Intentionally welcome newcomers at the door
- Invite newcomers to socialize with the group
- Encourage members to use their spiritual gifts to serve the church body

I have created a list of returnee friendly churches. These are a wide range of evangelical churches that major in the majors and minor in the minors. Most are international churches, but the list includes a few Japanese churches that returnees have recommended to me.⁵

Our findings on the first steps to faith:

Japanese will attend a church with you because of the relationship. Talk Time is an English conversation program at our church in the US where international students can practice English and learn more about US culture. It gives us a relationship to work from and provides opportunities to find seekers and invite them into Bible study.

Many Japanese people are lonely and looking for acceptance in a group. And often, Japanese seekers will come to faith through the experience of community, not because of logic of the gospel or apologetics.

Japanese society in general is not good at accepting people into already formed groups. This includes the church.

A mix of foreigners will tend to break up the traditional Japanese hierarchies that creep into church from society; this is a good thing.

Foreigners easily invite their Japanese friends to church. It's second nature to them.

By 2020 the number of Japanese studying abroad will double to 120,000. Reaching Japanese outside of Japan is a wonderful opportunity that many are engaged in. It is a great ongoing tragedy that many who find faith outside of Japan don't get involved in the church in Japan when they return and subsequently fall away. Hopefully, we who work with Japanese students outside of Japan and you who work in Japan can find better ways to cooperate together to get a better outcome in the future.

Disclaimer: In an attempt to establish best practices, I have put down guidelines with rationales for connecting returnees to the church in Japan. These are generalities and not absolutes as everyone one is different, and everyone's circumstances are different.

Notes:

1. The author gathered information on 150 returnees that she knew, were referred to her, or met in various places while living in Japan.
2. Returnee Seminar, Presenter: Hiroko Higashi (JCFN), Toyoake, Japan, Fall 2009.
3. "International Students, Inc., exists to share Christ's love with international college students. Since 1953, ISI has been training Americans to meet international students' needs. These Americans befriend international students and help them adjust to American culture." <http://www.isionline.org>
4. Use this link: [JCFN](#) or Google the Japanese Christian Fellowship Network.
5. The list of churches is available in ACMI's ISM [Resource Center](#) on the "Japan, Asia-Pacific" page. Click [List](#) to go directly to the Japan-Pacific page, then scroll to the title "Returnee-friendly churches in Japan." (ACMI = Association of Christians Ministering among Internationals.)

About the Author

Liz Godwin and her husband Paul have worked with international students in the Seattle, WA area for over 30 years. In 2013 they undertook a two-year project in Japan (seconded to TEAM), researching returnees, churches, and student ministries in Japan.

Paul Godwin, the author's husband, also profiled 240 campuses in the Kansai area. He documented the number of international students in different universities and Christian faculty they met in churches. He also documented Christian ministries on the campuses and the schools that had exchange programs with universities in the US.