

THE STUCK SYNDROME

ARTICLE 1: VISCIOUS CYCLE OF STUCKNESS

Since the day I wore diapers I have been church-ed. Being the son of a missionary and church planter I did not have much choice in this matter. I was hauled around from church to church, and to be quite honest, I would rather have been watching TV. Fortunately, however, by the grace of God, I eventually came to love the church. It is in this context of almost forty years, in dozens of churches, in numerous countries, I have gotten acquainted with a variety of kinds of churches. Some churches were vibrant, others were stuck. There are quite a variety of churches in Japan as well. As we look at the last few decades of the church here one thing is clear. The Church in Japan is stuck. We are all familiar with the statistics. We all wonder why year after year the church still has not broken the 1% Christianity barrier in Japan. We wonder why it takes as many as 200 plus churches to plant a single church per year. We wonder why the average church attendance is only 25 people, and our growth rate is almost at a standstill. This has been the case for quite some time.

So the question boils down to why? Why is the church stuck? Personally, I don't believe there is a simple answer. It is as simple to answer the common question; Why has the church in Korea grown so much. Of course, we have also seen many an American or Korean arrive in Japan with an air of superiority, coming to show everyone what needs to be done. Eventually they leave with their tail between their legs. All of us who have spent many years ministering in Japan have likely hit the wall many times. Japan is undoubtedly a tough place. Sometimes we ourselves make it even tougher.

There are exceptions, however. I had the privilege of growing up seeing one of these exceptions first hand. My parents planted churches in Japan, and never encountered the puddle of stuckness. It so happens that they were in Japan at two different periods. First, after the war, they were in Yamagata for less than ten years, but planted more than ten churches. The second period was the 70's in Tokyo. My father planned to plant five churches in five years. Most ministers gawked and advised him that this was not postwar Japan anymore. They said that things had changed, and advised he shoot for one. The result? Numerous strokes terminated his ministry prematurely, but in almost five years there were three solid churches planted, and the groundwork laid for two more. Later, the other two churches materialized from help that he had recruited. (For those who are skeptical I will mention: my parents received no ministry funds for their work in Tokyo, a handful of believers in the church plant funded everything). It is not uncommon to meet those who took thirty years to plant one church. Others could not even plant one..

Again we want to ask the question why? Why was this work so different? I believe I know the main reasons, but I will not share those yet, in fear of their abuse. We forget that every church is like a fingerprint, unique in its personality. And we tend to want quick answers to use rather than doing the hard but crucial work for our unique situation. Often we look at our churches as machines which can be pulled apart and fixed, perhaps scrapping old parts for new parts. But the reality is, the church is an organism and the life it possesses is much larger and more intricate than the individual pieces. I believe answers will arise within you personally as we look over many aspects of the stuckness syndrome.

What specifically is stuckness? Kenneth Halstead in his book *From Stuck to Unstuck* defines stuckness as a condition where the “love and life giving energy of God is blocked.” Instead of God expanding in and through us, we find ourselves stuck in vicious cycles, and maybe just paying for buildings. Although it should be quite obvious when we are stuck, often we do not recognize it. Here are some Halstead’s indicators of a stuck church.

There is:

A conflict and scapegoating cycle.

Absence of older youth.

Inability to integrate new members.

Declining attendance and giving.

General boredom in worship and fellowship.

Lack of clear sense of vision and identity.

Preoccupation with buildings and money issues.

Clinging to tradition at expense of present and future.

Personally, I have observed these factors in churches over and over again. For example, consider the scapegoating cycle. A church might hire then fire a pastor. A church might indirectly chase out members who are viewed as the source of the problem. In scapegoating pastors blame members for the problem, or members blame pastors for the problem. It is very common in Japan to see churches scapegoat the culture. We blame the world for not flooding into the church. It has been said: light is supposed to illumine darkness, if things are dark, should not the blame be placed on the light. I have joked before; “If only Japan would change, I would be a great missionary.” Scapegoating is a little ridiculous, and it gets us nowhere.

Many churches are like an obon dance. The vicious cycles go on and on, round and round, people change places, but nothing really changes. I am sure the enemy loves this scenario in the local church as much as he does the dance at the local temple. But is stuckness because of evil? Not particularly, often stuckness is the result of people trying to do the right thing. Wonderful motives often are at the root of stuckness. For example, something that was very meaningful and fruitful in the past is overlearned, that is, people cannot let go of it, and they keep doing it over and over, hoping it will do what it used to do. I have been invited a number of times to speak at special evangelistic meetings where no seekers were present. In general these meetings are poorly attended in the local church. Yet this remains the main outreach strategy of many churches around the nation. At one time it worked well, we overlearned it, and now we cannot let go of it.

So what will happen if the viscous cycles do not end and we do not get free from stuckness? What hope will our nation have? Where will they find the love and life giving energy of God? That is a fearful proposition. It could be that with the church stuck for so long, Japan is poised for a major revival of traditional Buddhism or Shintoism. Not the new religions, which have been so popular, but the strongholds of religious history. Both Buddhism and Shintoism have immense power over the culture, lives, and minds of people, even with those just nominally connected. But also the finances and facilities of both of these institutions are tremendously vast. We may think things are difficult for Christianity in Japan, when actually we could be living in our great window of opportunity right now.

In spite of all this, I am tremendously optimistic. There is nowhere else in the world I would rather minister. The Church of Japan is in a position to undergo a radical conversion in which we bust loose of all the old trends of stuckness and God's power is released as never before. Imagine the local church as a place where people cannot find a place to sit, and have to stand. Local worship will be the great highlight of our week. Something we could not consider missing, not because of obligation, but because of joy. I believe that day in Japan is coming. And all the world will see it and marvel.