

## THE STUCK SYNDROME

### ARTICLE 9: BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

I am naturally a pessimist. My first trip to Hawaii was when I was 10 years old. We stayed on the northern shore of Oahu, surrounded by sheer vibrant green cliffs and the kind of tropical beauty that people, dream of visiting, their whole lives. But on that first morning, I wrote in my diary, “I woke up and counted my mosquito bites.” (A couple years later I threw that diary in the trash. My mother fished it out, and to my horror told a Sunday school class about my mosquito bite counting in paradise.)

We see this kind of negative tendency in Scripture as well. Despite the mind boggling miracles and good things Jesus was doing, in Mark 7 the Pharisees were fussing over the disciples eating without washing their hands! So the question is, Where are we focusing? When we face the stuck syndrome in a family or a church are we seeing only the problem or are we seeing the strength?

One statement, frequently heard in church, that makes me cringe is, “*konnani chiisai mure desuga...*” (though we are just a tiny gathering). Why do I disdain this statement? Because the focus is on how small we are, on a weakness, not necessarily to our benefit but possibly to our detriment. I recall that another church, after completing a new building, kept reiterating the phrase, “*watashitachi ni mottainai hodo no tatemono*” (It’s almost a waste for a group such as us to be in this wonderful building.) This seemed to convey that a building was more valuable than the people within it. These are but a few of the many statements that emphasize a weak identity of the Japanese Church. Overall we might say that the Japanese Church has an inferiority complex, it is obsessed with its weakness and smallness. Unwittingly the church is locked into patterns that are enforced by these dominant beliefs. The stories emphasize smallness, weakness, and barrenness.

The trend in family therapy today is overtly optimistic. Much of therapy in the past has focused on problems, instead of potentials. The therapist role was to identify a families’ problem and then determine the right way to fix it, like a doctor diagnosing an illness and prescribing the right medicine. The primary attention was given to the problem itself. This emphasis in therapy has radically changed. The belief today is that by labeling a family, we make improvement harder. By seeking to uncover pathology we entrench it. But the focus of today’s therapy has shifted from pathology to competence. The underlying optimism of this shift is that families are resourceful and have a

capacity to grow, learn, and change. Every family possesses latent or unrecognized abilities, which are the key to their existence and future. Thus, therapy sessions today focus on building competence rather than correcting deficits. More than anything, a wise therapist will help a family recognize their strengths. This takes skill because, in the words of family counseling trainer, Dr. William Madsen, “Competence is quiet. The trick is to listen very carefully for it.”

Of course there is nothing wrong with knowing our weakness as long as this is not our dominant focus. According to Natural Church Development of Christian Schwarz our weakness has a critical limiting factor. In the diagram, the shortest stave determines how much water the barrel can hold. Obviously we need to work to improve our weakness, but it is important to note, the best way to do this is to utilize our strengths.

So the next question is, What is the strength of the Japanese Church? Three words that come to my mind are holiness, faithfulness, and endurance. I see holiness in the Church keeping itself from the world, Christians in Japan look very different from the rest of society, aiming to live a life of purity and reverence for God. Holiness is not one of the strengths of the African Church, which is struggling with immorality. I see faithfulness in that believers are loyal to their church despite discouragements and also oppositions from unbelieving husbands or families. Such faithfulness does not characterize the US Church, where the average tenure of even pastors is less than three years.

Perhaps most of all I see endurance as the shining strength of the Church in Japan. I am struck with humility when I observe the history of Japan. Countless thousands were persecuted, enduring injustices and heinous torture. In 1637 alone over 37,000 believers were slaughtered. In Nagasaki, on Feb.15, 1597, twenty-six Christians were crucified. For over 250 years there was continual holocaust for Christians in Japan. I have been amazed to find that the blood of Christians was shed all over Japan, on this river bank or that mountain side, or in some remote field. Yet there is no commemoration, no monument, seemingly they are forgotten, uncelebrated even by the nearest church. The blood of those who refused to tread upon a symbol of Christ sings out to us, it is a song of enduring love for Christ.

Some time ago I asked myself, Who do I know who has severely suffered for their faith? To my shame I could not think of one American that I knew personally. But there is someone whose story deserves telling. Today the Rev. Haruo Yamamoto struggles even to stand or walk because of Parkinsons. But for many years he touched the heart of Maui, pastoring numerous *issei* fellowships around the isle. Yamamoto was one of the most energetic and heart-warming pastors I ever met. He would dress as a clown, play

hymns on a saw, and draw people to Christ all at the same time. He was also the perfect man to pastor the aging *issei*, a people who had struggled to survive working in the cane fields. In Rev. Yamamoto's study I remember hanging against the stark white wall not a beautiful Hawaiian wreath but a sobering crown of thorns. An appropriate symbol of the past.

During the war Yamamoto was a kamikaze. He was also a Christian. Needless to say being a Christian in the Imperial Army was a fearful thing; persecution was guaranteed. The military gloated in putting him in situations where he had to compromise his faith. Throughout this challenge Yamamoto stood strong. But finally one day, Yamamoto's boots disappeared. He was subsequently called in by his commanding officer and accused of negligence for losing the Emperors property; since all military supplies belonged to the Emperor. Yamamoto was then told he must recover the boots. This order was a well-planned and impossible task as there were no boots to be had, and it was likely that his commanding officer himself had arranged to have the boots stolen. There were only two choices for Yamamoto, steal someone else's boots or face the wrath of the Imperial Army. Though Yamamoto struggled, he knew as a Christian he could not steal, he must stand strong. Then the day came. One morning he was called forward at an assembly, the other soldiers were informed that Yamamoto was guilty of stealing the Emperors property and would be made a public example. He was then forced to stand on the stage at attention while being beaten with rods. Blow after blow hit him. He lost control of his bladder. The blows continued. Then lost control of his bowel. But the blows kept coming. The next thing he knew he was waking up in a hospital. He had been in a coma for weeks, and it was months before he could walk again. His body has likely never been the same.

This and other stories are the glory of the Japanese Church. This is the Churches true identity of great strength, which cries out to be told. These are the narratives that have power to break the hold of an inferiority mentality and the stuckness it enforces.

Yes, the Church in Japan is stuck, but the Church is also strong—so strong that the world should be looking to Japan for a lesson in faithful endurance. A lesson that the Church in Japan paid tuition for with its own blood.