

A Pastor's Passion

Building A Church Where All People Pray Together

Shinjuku Community Church, UCCJ (United Church of Christ in Japan) is a unique community that does not have their own building. They rent a conference room of a hotel in Shinjuku district and hold a morning service every Sunday. Rev. Yoshiki Nakamura is an openly gay pastor who also works a second job in order to maintain the church. Rev. Nakamura founded Shinjuku Community Church (SCC) with a strong belief that there should be no barrier in a church of Christ. His passion of founding this community is to create a church where LGBT people and all those who understand a diversity of gender and sexuality could pray together.

What Is the Role of the Christian Church?

I was baptized on Christmas of 1983 at Kanazawa Church, UCCJ, when I was a freshman in high school. However, I converted to Catholicism after I went to a university and spent about ten years as a Catholic.

The Catholic Church is very clear that they oppose homosexuality, abortion, and divorce. In contrast, Protestantism seems to have a more individualistic and tolerant attitude toward these issues. However, when I actually belonged to both churches as a member, I felt that Catholic Church had a freer atmosphere

than Protestant church.

However, I stayed away from church for a while in my late 20s. To put it simply, it was because I found that church did not welcome all people while they claimed, "Everyone is welcomed by Christ." Usually, highly-educated people go to the church where most members are highly-educated, and rich people go to the church where most members are rich. It did not seem right to me. This is not what Christ originally told us to do nor what the early Christian Church tried to do, I thought.

After I graduated university, I went back to my hometown Kanazawa and



Rev. Yoshiki Nakamura

became a high school teacher. I taught Japanese language and literature there. My hope was to be a teacher that helps students to develop the emotional and spiritual components of their lives, but I needed to focus on education aimed only at passing examination. So I quit the job and went to Tokyo. I studied theology at Sophia University and graduated with a teaching certificate in biblical and religious studies.

While I studied at Sophia University, I also worked at an agricultural newspaper company and a Christian publisher. It took time to graduate because I was a part time student. It was 1993 when I went to Tokyo, and it was 1999 when I finally graduated university with the teaching certificate.

I remember my trip to New York in 1995 vividly. When I was walking by a church, my tour guide told me, "This church is famous for conducting funerals of those who died of AIDS." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I wondered, "So, it means, other churches refuse to conduct funerals of AIDS victims?"

After I went back to Japan, I checked some documents and found that there was serious prejudice against people who lived with HIV/AIDS not only in American society in general, but in Christian churches in 1980s. Some Christians even claimed that "HIV/AIDS was divine scourge." Such prejudice resulted in lack of proper care of patients. It also prevents development of scientific research of AIDS and prevention of HIV infection.

AIDS is not a disease peculiar to homosexual people. The HIV virus could infect anyone. However, it is also true that HIV was spread among gay people when HIV/AIDS was acknowledged by

the general public. Today, Tokyo is in the same situation. There are many gay people who are suffering with or living with HIV/AIDS.

My trip to New York inspired me to create a church where all people including those who live with HIV/AIDS pray together in Japan. However, I was only a layperson at that time.

Around that time, I got a life-threatening disease. I prayed, "If God saves my life, I will give my life to God." Fortunately, I completely recovered. Therefore, I finally decided to start a process of becoming a pastor. I entered Japan Biblical Theological Seminary in Mejiro, Tokyo in 2000. Now I strongly believe that everything was in God's guiding hand.

Living with LGBT people in Shinjuku

I graduated the seminary in 2004, and I was ordained as a pastor in 2006. It was 2004 that I founded Shinjuku Community Church. Half a year later, SCC was admitted as a member church of UCCJ.

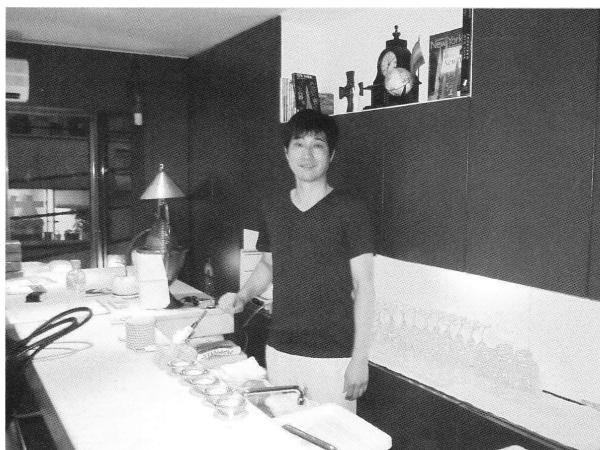
I am gay. Recently, the term LGBT, which is an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, has become widely known in Japanese society. However, I had experienced many times that LGBT people were marginalized and even oppressed in church. That's why I felt it necessary to build a church where all people are welcomed regardless of their sexuality and gender identities. I tried to create a non-discriminating and borderless church that LGBT people would not hesitate to visit.

When I was in seminary, I received

ministerial training at a big church in Tokyo. If I did not come out, I might have become a pastor of such a big, rich church. Some of my friends actually told me that I am a promising seminarian. But my true goal was not to be a pastor of such a big church, but to create a new church that LGBT people could gather. I kept my dream to myself and secretly started preparing to found a new church. Otherwise, someone would oppose my plan.

After I founded SCC, I applied to UCCJ for membership. God led this difficult process so that I could gather a specific set of documents together and pass a site visit investigation. Usually, it is difficult to establish a new UCCJ church if a UCCJ church is already in the same area, but despite the fact that it was central Tokyo, there was no UCCJ church in Shinjuku district. It was one of the reasons I decided to start a church in Shinjuku.

There are so many bars for LGBT people in Shinjuku. In the late 1980s, there were about 500 bars and clubs in Shinjuku Ni-chome (Area 2 in Shinjuku district). Today, the number of those bars drops as much as 50 percent, but still, Shinjuku Ni-chome is one of the biggest LGBT towns in the world. Recently the number of lesbian bars keeps rising.



At His Bar Near SCC (July, 2010)

This is why I chose Shinjuku to found a new church. I wanted to create a church where LGBT people and allies could pray together.

SCC does not have its own building. We use a conference room of an economy hotel in Shinjuku because we simply do not have funds to build a church. SCC has very few members, and does not receive any support from other organizations. This way of founding a church is so-called "self-supporting pioneer evangelism." I do double duty: I work at church on weekends, and work a second job during the weekdays. Besides my job as a pastor, I have worked for several companies. Once I ran a bar near the church. I used my savings to cover the expense of starting the church.

At first, SCC rented a small studio apartment. The 20 square-meter room cost 80,000 yen (about \$800) a month to rent. Three years later, we moved to a wider room near Shinjuku Gyo-en with an increase in the membership. At that time, we paid 160,000 yen (about \$1600) per month to rent. However, no one used the room during the weekdays because both worship and bible studies were on Sundays. So actually, we used the room only four days a month!

Therefore, we gave up the apartment. I reregistered my home address as the address of the church, and we started using a conference room of a hotel every Sunday. There are many economy hotels in Shinjuku, and most of them have conference rooms.

It would be great if we can have our own church some day, but it must be a long way off. Some members might want SCC to move to a different location because no one lives in Shinjuku district. All current members come to the church

from other areas. However, if we move from Shinjuku, SCC would become a "normal church." At the same time, however, we need to increase the number of members in order to maintain the church. Now SCC has only about ten members after ten years since I founded the church. In order to support a pastor, church needs at least thirty to forty members. Therefore, building our own church is literally just a dream now.

We will soon be faced with a difficult choice: Should we continue to be "a church in Shinjuku" even though we have very few members, or should we move to a different location in order to grow?

We have not had a funeral at our church yet because many of our members are young, but we will conduct a funeral someday. It is also my wish to build a ossuary that LGBT people could choose to be gathered in with other people, because many LGBT people do not have many relatives. [Translator's Note: Since a typical Japanese grave is a family grave, anyone who does not have relatives or who is separated from his/her family needs to find his/her own grave].

workers and students join the meeting.

Rev. Nakashita continues to support single persons (those without family). His passion to support single and poor people is very impressive.

Buddhism's concept of "muen" literally means "no connection to anyone" and it indicates those who died leaving no one to attend to his/her grave. Christianity does not have the concept of "muen" because those who are buried in a churchyard cemetery would be taken care of by other church members forever. At some churches, people even call deceased members "our members in heaven." Even after death, they are still members of the church.

The Apostle's Creed clearly says that Christian church believes in the "communion of saints." It declares that we, Christians, have strong relationships with those who went back to heaven earlier. Even if they did not have any relatives, current church members would surely remember them, attend the grave, and have memorial services for them. That's why I can talk about peace at any funerals.

Our church is very small. But when we pray for presence of Jesus, God

Interfaith Dialogues

I am a member of "Tera Net Sanga" run by Rev. Taiki Nakashita, a Buddhist priest of Shinshu Otani-ha. One of the members of my church introduced me to Rev. Nakashita, and we quickly became good friends. I soon started participating in a monthly gathering of Buddhist priests, "Tera Net Sanga." All priests gathered there have a strong passion. It is also interesting that not only priests, but also company



Teaching LGBTQ Issues at a Seminary in Tokyo

breathes into our church, and we can become a community that realizes Christ's will in today's society. Therefore, it is very important for us to keep reflecting on ourselves and see if Jesus is among us.

It is true that the Christian church has been the place in which people value a faith of individuals, people pray individually, and communicate only with some favorite friends. However, the most important duty of Christians is to be sent forth into this world and tell people about God's love for us.

When we look around at our society, we soon notice that there are divorced parents, single mothers, fathers who are too busy to spend time with their families, children who need love, teenagers who are forced to fight to get into the best universities, children who cannot go to school for many reasons, children who are labeled as "losers," victims of domestic violence, lonely seniors, people who suffer many kinds of illness including those who live with HIV/AIDS. There are also disabled people, foreign migrant workers, unemployed people, people who are discriminated against because of their nationalities and places of birth, people who depend on alcohol and drugs, and people of various sexuality and gender identities.

There are also many people who are



*Marching in the Tokyo Pride Parade
With SCC Members*

wounded or even killed by wars and conflicts and people who are suffering because of disasters in this world. We are called to reach out to those people and make God's love a reality for them. When we try to do so, we are supported by our absolute trust in God. And we can truly feel that we are not alone.

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Translated by Marie Kudo