

# The unintended church

## The movement for church unity and the establishment of the Kinki Evangelical Lutheran Church in Japan

Matsuda Seiichi<sup>1</sup>  
Inasakashita Church  
United Church of Christ in Japan

Knut Alfsvåg  
VID Specialized University

### 1. Introduction

When Norwegian Lutheran missionaries first came to Japan early in the 1950's, they had no plans of establishing a separate Lutheran Church. There was already a well-established Lutheran Church in Japan, and the intention was to become a part of this Church. This paper traces the history of the movement for Lutheran unity in Japan which ultimately led to the establishment of the Kinki Evangelical Lutheran Church as an independent church. What were the goals of the movement for church unity, and why did it not succeed?

This story has been told once before.<sup>2</sup> However, the relevant sources both in Japan and Norway have now been collected, presented, and discussed again in a master thesis recently submitted to the Asian Graduate School of Theology at Kobe Lutheran Theological Seminary in Japan.<sup>3</sup> This is a fascinating story which concerns both the development of Japanese Lutheranism and the history of Norwegian foreign mission. As the study of the thesis and its sources requires competence in Japanese, we have

- 1 In transcribing Japanese names, we follow the Japanese tradition of giving the surname first.
- 2 See Tor Berger Jørgensen, «Japan», in Torstein Jørgensen (ed.), *I tro og tjeneste: Det norske misjonsselskap 1842-1992* II, 229-292, her s. 248-255.
- 3 松田聖一、近畿福音ルーテル教会とは誰か〜ルーテル諸派合同運動の中で (Matsuda Seiichi, “Kinki Fukuin Ruteru Kyokai to wa dare ka – Ruteru Shohagodoundo no naka de” [Who is the Kinki Evangelical Lutheran Church – in the midst of the Lutheran union movement]), AGST/J 2023, 239 pp, quoted as Matsuda, “Ruteru Shohagodoundo”. The thesis has an appendix with a collection of sources both in Japanese, English and Norwegian. The authors of this article are the writer and supervisor of this thesis.

decided to make its main findings more easily accessible through this article.

## 1. The failed movement for Lutheran church unity in Japan

The Kinki Evangelical Lutheran Church was established and held its founding general assembly on November 3, 1961 (Showa 36).<sup>4</sup> It then consisted of eight congregations and mission centres belonging to the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS) (Rokko, Takarazuka, Higashi-Sumiyoshi (later Hirano Nishi), Minami Osaka, Izumisano, Wakayama, Nara and Sakurai) and 6 congregations and mission centres belonging to the Japan Mission of the Lutheran Free Church of Norway (LFCN) (Matsusaka, Tsu, Daio (Nakiri and Wagu), Yokkaichi, and Okutsu).<sup>5</sup> The Norwegian missionaries had first come to Japan around 1950 when they had to leave China after the Chinese Communist Revolution.<sup>6</sup>

The Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church (JELC) had then been in existence for several decades.<sup>7</sup> In 1941, this Church was forced to join the United Church of Christ in Japan (教団 [Kyodan]) which the Japanese authorities had established to be able to control the Protestant Churches in Japan during the war.<sup>8</sup> When the Lutheran

4 交わり(Majiwari [Fellowship], journal of the Kinki Evangelical Lutheran Church 17 December Showa 36, 1-4. 近畿福音ルーテル教会創立総会内案内 憲法規則草案起草委員会 (Kinki Fukuin Ruteru Kyokai Soritsu Sokai Annai Kenpo Kisoku Soan Kian Iinkai [Kinki Evangelical Lutheran Church Founding General Meeting Notice Constitutional Regulations Drafting Committee], October 11, Showa 36; 近畿福音ルーテル教会創立総会議事録 近畿福音ルーテル教会議長(Kinki Fukuin Ruteru Kyokai Soritsu Sokai Giji Roku Kinki Fukuin Ruteru Kyokai Gicho[Minutes of the General Conference of the Founding of Evangelical Lutheran Church Chairman of Evangelical Lutheran Church] Leif Salomonsen, December 31, Showa 36.

5 These congregations are all located in the Kinki area of Japan; hence the name.

6 Jørgensen, "Japan", 231-236.

7 福山猛「日本福音ルーテル教会史」ルーテル社(Fukuyama Takeshi, *Nihon Fukuin Ruteru Kyokaishi* [History of the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church], Lutheran Publishing Company, 1954.

8 See Knut Alfvåg, "Kirken og den shintoistiske stat. En framstilling og vurdering av et hovedproblem i japansk kirkehistorie," *Norsk tidsskrift for misjon* 1984, 25-45.

Church left the United Church after the war,<sup>9</sup> its leaders wanted to replace the forced Protestant union with a greater emphasis on Lutheran church unity. They therefore wanted to welcome the Norwegian missionaries and the congregations established through their work into a bigger Lutheran Church. This corresponds to the vision for church unity which is found in Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession, which insists that “to the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments,” explicitly rejecting that “that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike.” Article 7 does not speak of a union of Lutheran organizations, but understand unity as founded on the preaching of the pure gospel and the sacraments administered according to the gospel.

However, as the process for Lutheran church unity in Japan developed, one may question whether it developed according to the understanding of church unity which is defined in the Augsburg Confession. By and large, questions related to theological matters were overlooked. Discussions and negotiations concentrated on financial and organizational matters, and the progress of the movement for union was evaluated according to these criteria. It thus seems that one found that the most desirable way to evangelize Japan was to form a strong Lutheran Church, and the goal for the expansion of "Lutheranism" was that the Lutheran confession of faith was preserved as the formal foundation of the Church while not paying much attention to what this confession actually taught.

The wish for cooperation led to a number of joint efforts in the 1950's. Agreements between JELC and the United Lutheran Church of North America (UCLA) were revised to allow for Lutheran denominations to unite. Nishioka Kazuo and Takei Shogo, who were ordained in JELC, and Saiki Tanechika and Matsumoto Koji, who were educated at its seminary, were, with the blessing of JELC, employed by NMS and LFCN. Iwai Daizo, Fukui Toru and Tabata Takeshi, who were pastoral candidates from NMS congregations, were educated at the JELC seminary in Tokyo and returned to serve in the NMS congregations. Both NMS and LFCN had an urgent need for Japanese church workers, and human resource cooperation, which

9 ルーテル会誌(Ruteru Kaishi [Lutheran Journal] July 20, 1946. 日本福音ルーテル教会再建総会記録 日本福音ルーテル教会(Nihon Fukuin Ruteru Kyokai Saiken Sokai Kiroku Nihon Fukuin Ruteru Kyokai [Records of the General Conference for the Reconstruction of the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church], January 23-24, 1947. United Lutheran Church in America, Board of Foreign Mission Minutes, May12-14,1947, 124-127. 日本福音ルーテル教会臨時総会記録 日本福音ルーテル教会(Nihon Fukuin Ruteru Kyokai Rinji Sokai Kiroku Nihon Fukuin Ruteru Kyokai [Records of the Extraordinary General Meeting of the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church], November 13, 1947.

also included theological education, was seen as a stepping stone toward the future establishment of one Lutheran church.

But how were the relations with the overseas mission organisations to be maintained within the united Church? This was discussed in a report from the All-Lutheran Joint Liaison Committee (全ルーテル合同交渉委員会 [Zen Ruteru Godo Sessho Inkaï]) from August 30, 1956, which is contained in the minutes from JELC's 34<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in May 1957. This document says:

Concerning the preservation of the authority of the local church committees, some concessions at the beginning of the union cannot be avoided. But since a full preservation of the autonomy and authority of the local church committees with special relationships with different missions may hinder full union, this cannot be a long-term goal, even if some compromises due to special agreements may be acceptable in the beginning.<sup>10</sup>

The local church committees (地方部会[chiobukai]) are the representatives of the NMS and LFCN congregations. According to this document, these representatives' particular relationship with their Norwegian mission partners cannot be upheld in the united Church. The ultimate goal is a fully united, organizationally homogeneous Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the relation between parts of the Church and their foreign mission partners "may hinder full union." This shows the strong commitment of the JELC towards organizational unity. The organizational unity of the future Church is seen as more important than the autonomy of the overseas missions and their particular relationship with parts of the united Church.

However, other documents express a different attitude to this question. The report of the All-Lutheran Council from 1954, and the report of the All-Lutheran Joint Liaison Committee in 1955 do not signal a need for the abolishment of the relation-

10 日本福音ルーテル教会第34回総会記録 (Nihon Fukuin Ruteru Kyokai dai 34 kai Sokai Kiroku [JELC 34. General Assembly Minutes]) 1957.5.7-9, 58.

ship to the mission partners.<sup>11</sup> If there was a change in attitude, this does not seem to have been reported to NMS and LFCN. There is thus a discrepancy between the original position of the All-Lutheran Joint Liaison Committee, which was based on the Lutheran Confessions of Faith and advocated the expansion of Lutheranism through the evangelistic cooperation of Lutheran denominations, and JELC's goal of full organizational union. In spite of this contradiction, contact with each mission considered as steps toward the union of all Lutherans had already begun, and special agreements between the Lutheran churches and their respective missionary organizations were in place without the need for their dissolution after the union ever to be discussed.

There is a certain paradoxicality at play here. The goal of building a single Lutheran church may have occluded the theological issues constituting the Lutheran understanding of church unity. Organizational unity was considered more important than theological unity, and structures were created which came to promote this understanding of unity rather than the one we have in the Lutheran confessions.

The question of the education of the future pastors also complicated matters. JELC had its own theological seminary in Tokyo, and during the early years of cooperation the Norwegian missionaries sent their promising young men to be educated there. However, in 1957, Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM), which was never really a part of the JELC-centred movement for Lutheran church unity,<sup>12</sup> had established Kobe Lutheran Theological Seminary (KLTS), and candidates from the NMS/LFCN-congregations were being educated there. These congregations therefore wanted KLTS to be recognized as a theological seminary within the future united church in parallel with the JELC seminary in Tokyo. However, JELC insisted that only the seminary in

11 As a proposal regarding the organization in Japan the Evangelical Lutheran Liaison Committee (日本福音ルーテル接渉委員会 [Nihon Fukuin Ruteru Sessho Iinkai]) reported: "The constitution and supplementary provisions of the future Lutheran Church in the Japan should be appropriately established by the representatives of each local church (one lay person and one minister from each local committee), and a special agreement between the new Lutheran Church in Japan and the Lutheran Churches and the domestic and foreign missionary organizations cooperating for the evangelization of Japan should be expressed by the representative responsible for it. Therefore, we propose that the following points be considered in consultation and drafting in the future . . . (日本福音ルーテル教会第 32 回総会記録 [Nihon Fukuin Ruteru Kyokai dai 32 kai Sokai Hokoku], Proceedings of the 32nd General Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Japan May 3-5, 1955, 184-191)." What is then proposed is that the new Lutheran Church being promoted by the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church will respect the special agreements made with the separate Lutheran churches and their respective missionary associations, which will be united in the new Lutheran Church.

12 On NLM's attitude towards the union issue, see Matsuda, "Ruteru Shohagodoundo," 57-59.

Tokyo, Japan Lutheran Theological Seminary, was to be the place for the education of pastors in the united church. As a result, the Japanese representatives for the NMS/LFCN-congregations became quite sceptical towards the union project, while most of the missionaries continued to recommend unification.<sup>13</sup>

The outcome of these complications was that when the united Lutheran Church eventually was established, it was scaled down from what was originally intended. Only the Tokai Evangelical Lutheran Church, which was the result of the work of American missionaries and organized as a church body in 1960, joined the JELC as its Tokai Diocese (日本福音ルーテル教会東海教区 [Nihon Fukuin Ruteru Kyokai Tokai Kyoku]). When the Kinki Evangelical Lutheran Church (KELC) was established in November 1961, it was with the intention of becoming the Kinki Diocese of JELC. However, scepticism toward unification was now growing, and both the ordinary and an extraordinary General Assembly of the newly established KELC postponed the decision concerning unification. Eventually, the KELC General Assembly which took place on March 21, 1963, decided to not to participate in the scheduled Joint General Assembly of the united JELC. The single most important factor in that decision seems to have been the seminary issue.<sup>14</sup> This became a permanent solution in the sense that JELC and KELC are separate church bodies still today, and the KELC pastors are educated in Kobe. However, the two church bodies have maintained a positive and cooperative attitude towards each other both generally and in matters related to theological education.

Why did the KELC congregations decide not to join? There is no doubt that the movement for church union, which was developed based on the assessment that the most desirable way to evangelize effectively in Japan was to form a powerful Lutheran Church, wanted to uphold the Lutheran Confession of Faith and form a church based on it. However, in its emphasis on practical cooperation and joint work, it came to promote an understanding of church unity at variance with Article 7 in the Augsburg Confession. The central questions in the discussion with the NMS and LFCN affiliated congregations were not issues related to the theological understanding and implication of church unity, but how the affiliated churches could become achieve human and financial independence from NMS and LFCN. Seen in this perspective, the NMS and LFCN affiliated congregations did not meet the requirements to become a diocese of JELC.

13 The exception among the missionaries was Bjørn Alve from NMS. On his role in the final stages of the unification process, see Jørgensen, “Japan”, 253, Matsuda, “Ruteru Shohagodoundo,” 95-97.

14 近畿福音ルーテル教会 常議員会「教会合同準備に関する経過報告書」(Kinki Fukuin Ruteru Kyokai Jogiinkai, “Kyokai Godo Junbi ni kan suru Keika Hokokusho” [KELC Board, “Progress Report concerning the preparation for church unity]), 1963; Jørgensen, “Japan”, 253-254.

Why did the events develop in this direction, what are the consequences, and what can be learned from this process concerning the Lutheran understanding of church unity?

### **3. The background, impact, and implications of the church unity movement**

The Lutheran movement in Japan lasted for about a decade from the beginning of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1960s. However, it should be interpreted within a larger context. When JELC took the leading role in this movement, it was arguably influenced by its experience of being forced into the Kyodan in 1941 and of trying to regain its Lutheran identity when leaving the Kyodan after the war. Seen from this perspective, JELC wanted to regain what was lost by leaving Kyodan by working for organizational unity among the missionary groups that came to Japan after the war and the congregations they established. Central among these were NMS and LFCN with their congregations, and the goal of the work for church union was thus to organize these congregations as a diocese in JELC.

To achieve this goal, the NMS and LFCN missionaries met and held discussions, and in due time these discussions came to include the Japanese pastors and representatives of the congregations. However, when the Japanese were included, it was already concluded that the congregations would join JELC, and with this as the goal, KELC was founded in 1961. That KELC should be a part of the expanded JELC was considered decided, and the discussions were based on this decision. Theological issues were not a part of this discussion, which centred on issues related to independence from the missions. However, when the Japanese was involved, it became clear that there was no consensus.<sup>15</sup> Both the independence issue and the seminary issue became unsurmountable hurdles. The reason is that the Japanese found that the significance attached to these issues were incompatible with the understanding of church unity in the Lutheran confessions, notably Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession. One had not paid attention to questions related to this article during the unification process, but they suddenly appeared in the final stage of the discussion with JELC as a criterion for evaluating the planned church union.<sup>16</sup> The outcome was that KELC became an independent church body, not a diocese in JELC.

This emphasis on the theological foundation of church unity is of lasting significance. The union of the church is not established by a uniform church organization, but by the gospel being preached purely and the sacraments being administered according to the gospel. It is not an organizational union, but a unity of faith given through the means of grace. It is made manifest in worship founded on the gospel and

15 The significance of the involvement of the Japanese is emphasized also by Jørgensen, "Japan", 254.

16 See Matsuda, "Ruteru Shohagodoundo," 117-121.

the sacraments. If this union does not exist, there is no union irrespective of what is done on the organizational level. The church is only united when it conforms to the criteria in Article 7, and these criteria are sufficient.