

Bruce L. Bauer

Japanese Baptismal Vows

In the 1970s and 1980s most Japanese Adventist churches followed the practice of having baptismal candidates stand in the front of the church while the pastor read the thirteen statements of faith. For many, this was the first time they had met most of the church members and it was obvious that they felt very uncomfortable. It was almost like they were being interrogated. In response to each statement they would say “yes” with their eyes lowered and with their body language letting everyone know that they were not enjoying this initiation ceremony.

Japan is a group-conscious society where belonging to the group is of vital importance. To be different, to stand out in a crowd, to not fit in is one of the worst experiences a Japanese person can go through. As I saw the discomfort, the feeling of being an outsider, of being questioned in front of strangers about personal beliefs, I knew there had to be a better way to welcome new members into the church.

In response I re-wrote the baptismal vows in the first person singular when only one person was being baptized and in the first person plural when more than one was being baptized. Those being baptized would read the first statement, “we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal Savior.” I also gave copies to all the members in the pews, and they would respond, “I believe that too.” The antiphonal response completely changed the atmosphere and indicated to the baptismal candidates that they were part of a group. They were being affirmed and assured that everyone else in the audience believed just like they did. There was a sense of groupness that did away with the awkwardness that characterized the usual way of going through this aspect of the baptismal ceremony.

In Osaka, there were also those who gave square pieces of paper in various colors that were usually used for *origami* (Japanese paper folding) to all the members when people were being baptized. Everyone was encouraged to write a Bible promise, give a word of encouragement, or

share a favorite passage for those being baptized. A couple of people took pictures of the baptism, the pot luck that followed, and with all the papers a group of people put together a scrapbook that highlighted each person's baptism.

Missiological Implications

The Seventh-day Adventist Church grew and developed in the North American context, doing things in a North American way. Unfortunately North American practices have been exported to the rest of the world and presented as the "correct" way of doing church. However, when church practices are copied by countries with totally different cultures and ways of doing things, unintended results often occur. In this case the joyfulness of being baptized and joining a group of God's people was completely overshadowed by a North American way of doing things.

Initiation ceremonies are important in most cultures; however, they need to be carried out in culturally sensitive ways. The changes suggested above did not change in any way the purpose or content of the baptismal day. The only thing that was changed was a strong emphasis on groupness. The missiological implication from this case study is that one size does not fit all situations. There is more than one way to do most church ceremonies, so church leaders need to be encouraged to rethink what they do and do everything in culturally sensitive ways.



Bruce and Linda Bauer spent 15 years working in Japan where Bruce was the director of the SDA English Schools. Later he became president of the Guam Micronesia Mission before becoming a professor of World Mission at the seminary at Andrews University.