

Chapter 18

The Saints of the Japanese or Central Pacific Mission

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A Brief History of the Mission

On June 30, 1935, the O'ahu Stake was established by President Heber J. Grant and became the first stake outside the continental United States.¹ At the time the stake was being formed, Edward L. Clissold, district councilman who at the time was working closely with the Japanese Sunday School, asked President Grant to confirm nine Japanese as members of the Church. President Grant complied, admitting that he had not confirmed so many Japanese during his entire mission in Japan. Eleven years previous, in 1924, President Grant had decided to close the Japanese Mission after twenty-three years of missionary labor had resulted only in 174 baptisms.² However, President Grant's visit to Hawai'i in 1935 led him to conclude that work had to be seriously undertaken among the Japanese in Hawai'i.³ Already there were various ethnic Sabbath schools in Honolulu, but the Japanese organization, which held

all of its meetings in the Japanese language, seemed to impress him most. This impression led to the reestablishment of the Japanese Mission, this time not in Japan, but in Hawai'i.

The Japanese Mission, renamed the Central Pacific Mission during World War II, began to function in Hawai'i on February 4, 1937, with Hilton and Hazel Robertson at the helm.⁴ President Grant admonished the Robertsons to train the Japanese in Hawai'i to prepare for missions in Japan. He said, "A strong colony of Japanese Saints in Hawai'i could operate from there [Hawai'i] into their homeland in a way that might bring many Japanese to a knowledge not only of Christianity, but of the restored Gospel."⁵ In October 1937 there were seventeen members of the Japanese Mission in Hawai'i: nine men and eight women. But this number began to grow, and by 1950 there were over seven hundred Japanese Latter-day Saints in Hawai'i.⁶

In 1950 the Japanese/Central Pacific Mission merged with the Hawaiian Mission to form

the Hawai'i Mission.⁷ The merger occurred primarily because there was no need for a Japanese/Central Pacific Mission since essentially all the members spoke English due largely to the Americanization of the second generation, and in some cases third generation, of Chinese and Japanese in Hawai'i.⁸ Moreover, there was confusion and duplication with two missions serving the same geographic area.

The time line displayed here shows the growth pattern of the Japanese/Central Pacific Mission from its inception in 1937 until it merged with the Hawaiian Mission to form the Hawai'i Mission in 1950.⁹

Table 1. Time line

Year	Members
1937	17
1938	30
1939	60
1940	101
1941	150
1942	302
1943	375
1944	437
1945	484
1946	522
1947	532
1948	604
1949	671

The membership growth among the Japanese in Hawai'i was slow and laborious, particularly when one considers that the Japanese people during the above-mentioned period (from 1937 to 1949) made up more than one-third of the entire population of Hawai'i. For example, in 1940 there were a total of 423,330 people living in Hawai'i, of which 157,905 were Japanese and Japanese Americans;¹⁰ however, during that year there were only 101 Japanese or Japanese American members of the Church in the Japanese Mission.¹¹ Indeed, based on the large percentage of Japanese people in the overall population, one might even say that in terms of baptisms, the Japanese/Central Pacific Mission was not very successful during its existence. Yet despite the relatively small numbers, historian J. Christopher Conkling explained that the young Japanese American Saints were the most faithful members in the world, a statement evidenced by the record that more than 97 percent of the Japanese American members paid their tithing in 1945.¹² And the "faithful members" of the Central Pacific Mission to be dis-

cussed in this chapter are those who became the "strong colony of Japanese Saints in Hawai'i."¹³

Conversion Stories from Members of the Central Pacific Mission

Susumu Arima joined the Church on March 9, 1942: "I joined the LDS Church first, because of the Church's sports program, and second, because of the friendliness of the members and the interesting youth program of the Church. While in the Central Pacific Mission, I was the branch clerk and secretary. I was really welcomed by the members."¹⁴

Katherine C. Ishimoto was baptized in 1943: "I joined the LDS Church because I enjoyed the fellowshipping of the members of the Church and I felt that this is the church I wanted to belong to. I did not have any special talents—but helped the missionaries taking the kids to church. I taught a Sunday School class composed of young children and attended church regularly with my sister Joyce Teruya. I enjoyed going to O'ahu Prison with my husband's brother Chester to hold meetings with members of the Church who were in prison."¹⁵

Hideo Kanetsuna had attended both the Buddhist Church and the Methodist Church before becoming a Latter-day Saint in 1945. He explained: "I joined the LDS Church because I investigated and believe the Church is true. While in the Central Pacific Mission, I was a Sunday School teacher, branch clerk, and missionary to Japan from 1949 to 1952."¹⁶ Sharon Ikegami Kanetsuna became a member as an eleven-year-old in 1936. She was a Methodist before and cited her reason for joining The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: "My dad wanted us to study and join." She served as a pianist for the Central Pacific Mission.¹⁷

Wayson T. Okamoto came in contact with the Church in 1943 through the Boy Scout program. He said, "The scoutmaster was an outstanding youth leader and a missionary for the LDS Church. While a member of the Central

Pacific Mission, I was a member of the Sunday School presidency.” Ethel K. Okamoto was a Buddhist like her parents. She joined the Church in 1945 because of the encouragement of missionaries and served as a Sunday School teacher during the years of the Central Pacific Mission.¹⁸

Mike K. Tsukayama was baptized in 1942. He said, “I joined the LDS Church after hearing the plan of salvation and what it offers—I was deeply affected. While in the Central Pacific Mission, I was the Sunday School superintendent, teacher, MIA teacher, and missionary from 1944 through 1945 here in the islands.”¹⁹

Muriel Mizokami explained her decision to be baptized: “I had good missionaries. I would ask them all kinds of questions. And do you know what? The missionaries were able to answer all my questions. And if they didn’t have the answer they would get the answer and tell me the following week.” Muriel also remembered that “we had lots of good fun. We were all young—so many of us were in high school or college. [The] Central Pacific Mission was a really good time of my life.”²⁰

Russell Horiuchi explained that in the Central Pacific Mission and especially in the wartime atmosphere of World War II, “overall, it may be said that the Japanese Saints fared rather well with lots of spirit and enthusiasm. While the group was small, it was active and happy. Since most of the members at that time were young, in high school, just out of high school, working or going to the university, they had a reasonably normal life, albeit under wartime conditions.”²¹

Adney Komatsu, emeritus member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, knew that he wanted to join the Church after entering a meeting and feeling that “the peace that came over me that morning was something that I had never felt in my heart.”²² And Chieko Okazaki, former first counselor in the Relief Society general presidency, explained, “I learned why I was here, what am I doing here, and where I’m going.”²³

At baptism, many of the young Japanese investigators brought with them Buddhist teachings and values such as “respect, honor, love, caring, nurturing.”²⁴ These values, similar to



Fig. 1. O’ahu District officers serving in the Central Pacific Mission, 1944
Courtesy of BYU–Hawai‘i Archives

teachings of the Church, made it somewhat comfortable for the new Japanese members to make the transition into the Church and lay the foundation for the more unfamiliar gospel concepts. On the other hand, some ethical concepts such as filial piety and obedience to authority figures probably kept many Japanese teenagers and young adults from seeking parental permission to be baptized.

While many parents did not allow their children to be baptized, others were baptized even without outright parental approval. Chieko Okazaki claimed to have disobeyed her father only once—when she was fifteen and became a member of the Church without his approval.²⁵ Adney Komatsu made a deal with his mother that he would quit the Church if any of his mother's friends said he was turning into a bum.²⁶ Almost all the young Japanese investigators needed parental permission for baptism due to their young age, and those without parents, such as Sam Shimabukuro and Walter Teruya, needed

permission from an older brother.²⁷ However, all of the above members, as Cheiko Okazaki said, “represent an extraordinary group of people who I am convinced were called, chosen and led into the Church by the great actions of the Spirit in a turning point in the history of the Church.”²⁸

Japanese Saints Fulfill Prophecies

The Japanese/Central Pacific Mission was a unique mission that had much potential and power for doing good. Several prophecies were both made and fulfilled throughout the years, attesting to the significant role the young Japanese American members would one day play in both Hawai'i and in the land of their ancestral heritage.

In speaking of the few Japanese members and investigators he had observed, President J. Reuben Clark said at the 1935 conference when the O'ahu Stake was formed, “The Islands here of Hawai'i are the spearhead thrust out to the



Fig. 2. Central Pacific Mission sisters canning vegetables during World War II
BYU–Hawai'i Archives and Special Collections

Pacific, and from the point of that spearhead . . . there will radiate lines of spiritual communication of the heavenly work we are doing and purpose of which will be to spread the gospel in these foreign countries which lie to the East and South so they come to a knowledge of the truth.”²⁹

At the same conference President Heber J. Grant prophesied, “And from this place, we will be able to send well prepared leaders to take charge of the mission in Japan, and their own people will listen to their teachings.”³⁰ Also, full-time missionaries serving in the Central Pacific Mission in Hawai‘i were encouraged to teach the young Japanese American investigators—many between four and fifteen years of age—because they seemed to be more interested in the gospel than the adults. As a result, when the war was over, the youth were then young adults and were ready to serve full-time missions. Many were called to labor in Japan. President Heber J. Grant’s prophecy was fulfilled.

President Clissold, then president of the Japanese Mission, prophesied in the February 1944 issue of the Central Pacific Mission newsletter, “They are in the vanguard of a great missionary corps of young Japanese men and women who will carry truth and freedom to the Japanese people in Hawai‘i and abroad.”³¹ This prophecy began to be fulfilled when Tomosue Abo and Ralph Noboru Shino were called to be the first missionaries from the Central Pacific Mission in Hawai‘i to serve in Japan. Also, those Japanese American Saints who joined the Hawaiian-dominated branches and wards of the Hawai‘i Mission and stayed active eventually became the solid core of Japanese-American Saints. These men and women were later called to serve in Japan as missionaries. Dozens served in proselytizing and temple missions; for example, Sharon Ikegami Kanetsuna served a total of four missions. Those who served as mission presidents include Adney Y. Komatsu, Sam Shimabukuro, Russell N. Horiuchi, Tomosue Abo, Arthur Nishimoto, Roy Tsuya, Edward Okazaki, Richard Kwak, Kenji Akagi, Kotaro Koizumi, Satoru Sato,

Ralph Shino, Walter Teruya, and William Nako. Adney Komatsu, Sam Shimabukuro, Russell Horiuchi, Tomosue Abo, and Walter Teruya have all been temple presidents. Ralph Shino, Roy Tsuya, and Kenji Akagi also each served as the director of the Missionary Training Center in Tokyo. Adney Komatsu and Sam Shimabukuro were eventually called to be General Authorities. Others were called to the general boards of the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary. Chieko Okazaki served on all three, and Judy Komatsu served on the Primary General Board. Countless others were called to serve as bishops, high counselors, stake presidents, and in other leadership positions in their home areas. The early callings of the members of the Central Pacific Mission seem to have prepared the teenagers and young adults for early leadership positions near to and far from home. “We are survivors . . . pioneers in our own right in these isles of the sea holding aloft our colors alongside our brothers and sisters.”³² Today the sons and daughters of the members of the Central Pacific and Hawai‘i Missions continue to fulfill these prophecies.

Conclusion

The Japanese/Central Pacific Mission was a unique experience for hundreds of Japanese Americans living in Hawai‘i. It was a time when the teenage and young adult Japanese Saints learned about the gospel, formed strong social and spiritual relationships with each other, and upheld leadership positions in the Church. It was also a time when the young people were growing up and defining their identities as Americans and as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Their early Buddhist values played a significant role in all that they did. While many of their values, such as fairness, sharing, and honesty, transferred easily to Christianity, other principles such as obedience to family also kept many from joining the Church. Indeed, it took ability and effort to apply gospel principles such as the Atonement to meaningful cultural

values. This effort empowered the Japanese Saints in Hawai'i to merge both the gospel culture and the Japanese culture into faith, baptism, and endurance.

Cheiko N. Okazaki summarized the experience of these Central Pacific Mission Saints at the Pioneers in the Pacific Conference:

We were part of a remarkable group of converts in the former Japanese Mission, that sank deep strong roots in Hawai'i during World War II and before that. . . . In general we all joined the Church in our late teens or early twenties. . . . When I asked about the conversion process that each of [the Central Pacific Mission Saints] went through, nearly all of them said that they gained gospel knowledge from the missionaries and the love and acceptance from the Saints. For several of them the welcome and comfort they felt from the local members were very sustaining. . . . For over fifty years this group of survivors has been giving to people their service, paying their tithing, attending meetings, serving in the temple, teaching classes, providing leadership, setting a good example for their friends and neighbors. I think they were sent into the world at the time and in this place to provide a foundation of the work that we have seen about in the world since then. . . . The light that the spirit set aglow in their hearts fifty years ago still burns brightly.³³

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Notes

1. R. Lanier Britsch, *Moramona: The Mormons in Hawaii* (Lā'ie, HI: Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1989), 155.

2. For an excellent study of the reasons why the Japanese Mission was closed, see R. Lanier Britsch, "The Closing of the Early Japan Mission," *BYU Studies* 15 no. 2 (Winter 1975): 171–90.

3. Britsch, *Moramona*, 156.

4. Britsch, *Moramona*, 157.

5. Britsch, *Moramona*, 156.

6. R. Lanier Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Pacific* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 170.

7. Britsch, *Moramona*, 164–65. See also Susumu Arima, interview by author, September 19, 1997; in author's possession.

8. Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea*, 159.

9. Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea*, 170.

10. Franklin Odo and Kazuko Sinoto, *A Pictorial History of the Japanese in Hawai'i, 1885–1924* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1985), 19.

11. Britsch, *Moramona*, 158.

12. J. Christopher Conkling, "Members without a Church: Japanese Mormons in Japan from 1924 to 1948," *BYU Studies* 15 (Winter 1975): 210–11.

13. Britsch, *Moramona*, 156.

14. Susumu Arima, interview by author, September 19, 1997, in author's possession.

15. Katherine C. Ishimoto, interview by author, September 19, 1997, in author's possession.

16. Hideo Kanetsuna, interview by author, September 19, 1997, in author's possession.

17. Sharon Kanetsuna, interview by author, September 19, 1997, in author's possession.

18. Wayson Okamoto, interview by author, September 19, 1997, in author's possession; also, Ethel Okamoto, interview by author, September 19, 1997, in author's possession.

19. Mike Tsukayama, interview by author, September 19, 1997, in author's possession.

20. Muriel Mizokami, interview by author, September 20, 2000, in author's possession.

21. Russell Horiuchi to Sharlene Furuto, March 1, 1990, letter, in author's possession, 1.

22. Adney K. Komatsu and others, "A Special Panel Discussion: Contributions of Hawaiian Saints of Japanese Ancestry," at the Pioneers in the Pacific Conference on Lā'ie, Hawai'i, October 10, 1997, transcript in the archives and Pacific Island Collection, Joseph F. Smith Library, Brigham Young University–Hawai'i, 10.

23. Chieko N. Okazaki, "Contributions of Hawaiian Saints of Japanese Ancestry," 12.

24. Okazaki, "Contributions of Hawaiian Saints of Japanese Ancestry," 12.

25. Okazaki, "Contributions of Hawaiian Saints of Japanese Ancestry," 14.

26. Komatsu, "Contributions of Hawaiian Saints of Japanese Ancestry," 10.

27. Sam K. Shimabukuro, "Contributions of Hawaiian Saints of Japanese Ancestry," 10. Wayne Teruya, "Contributions of Hawaiian Saints of Japanese Ancestry," 6.

28. Okazaki, "Contributions of Hawaiian Saints of Japanese Ancestry," 4.

29. Castle H. Murphy, comp., *The First Stake in Hawai'i (and) the Chinese and Japanese Missions* (Orem, UT: privately printed, 1977), 197. Available in the Archives and Pacific Islands Special Collection, Joseph F. Smith Library, Brigham Young University–Hawai'i, Lā'ie, Hawai'i.

30. Castle H. Murphy, *A Brief Resume of the Beginning of the Work of Preaching the Gospel to the Chinese and the Japanese in Hawai'i in 1932 and 1944*, typescript (1974), 72, in the Archives and Pacific Islands Special Collection, Joseph F. Smith Library, BYU–Hawai'i.

31. "Central Pacific Mission newsletter," February 1944, photocopy in author's possession.

32. Grace Suzuki, "Japanese Mission in Hawai'i," photocopy in author's possession, 4.

33. Okazaki, "Contributions of Hawaiian Saints of Japanese Ancestry," 5.

