

If You Love One Another

Nozomi Church 30th Anniversary Commemorative Service

Hiroshi Suzuki

May 26, 2026

1 Encounter

My heartfelt congratulations on the 30th anniversary of the founding of the church.

I do not accurately remember exactly when I first met Pastor Sung-Hae Ha and his family, but I believe it was around the beginning of 1993. Since I could not speak Korean and Pastor Ha and his family could barely speak Japanese at the time, I believe we only exchanged a few words in English.

While there were a certain number of Korean missionaries in Japan, Pastor Ha stated that he intended to preach the Gospel to Japanese people, rather than starting a Korean ethnic church. Although there were likely others who held similar prayer requests, frankly speaking, it was almost unheard of at the time to imagine a church rooted in the soil of Japan under a Korean pastor¹. Furthermore, as their two children were close in age to our five children, our fellowship began naturally while praying together².

During that time, a minor financial issue arose³. Around this period, the Korean currency, the won, was pegged to the US dollar⁴. However, due to the rapid appreciation of the yen, the exchange rate shifted drastically from the 160-yen range per dollar in 1990 to 79 yen in 1995. This meant that the value of the dollar, and consequently the won linked to it, was effectively halved. The year 1993 was right in the middle of this volatile fluctuation. Even though sufficient financial support was supposedly being sent through the churches in Korea, its value had dropped significantly.

Upon hearing that they were suffering because of this situation⁵, I discussed it with my wife, Setsuko, and we handed over a certain amount of money to them as a mission offering, asking them to make use of it. I have forgotten the exact amount, but it appears I handed it over wrapped in newspaper. For a long time afterward, Pastor Ha would mention at various gatherings that he had received "a large sum of money wrapped in a bundle of newspaper." However, for him, the greatest surprise seemed to be that he was conversely supported by people in Japan—the very land he had come to serve through his mission. He apparently communicated this fact to the churches in Korea in various ways.

Our family moved to Tokyo shortly afterward. Pastor Ha had already graduated from a theological seminary in Korea, but he went on to study at the Kobe Reformed Theological Seminary, and his Japanese proficiency improved at a remarkable pace. At the same time, however,

¹The situation has changed slightly now.

²In fact, I was teaching at Osaka Kyoiku University at the time, but it had already been decided that I would move to the International Christian University (ICU) in Mitaka that summer.

³The Korean economic crisis (IMF crisis) seems to refer to events that occurred much later than this.

⁴Japan's currency was also fixed at 360 yen to 1 dollar until 1971.

⁵Probably from Pastor Junji Yamazaki of the Koshien Church of the Reformed Church in Japan, to which they belonged

he seemed to experience an increasing number of debates and clashes over the low standard of Japanese seminaries and differences in perspective with Japanese Christians and pastors. I remember speaking with him over the phone for hours on end many times. While acknowledging the challenges faced by the Christian church in Japan, I wished to offer explanations in the hope that it would assist his understanding.

Not long after that, on January 17, 1995, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake struck. I had already relocated to Tokyo, but extensive damage occurred from Kobe all the way to Nishinomiya, where Pastor Ha and his family were living. Water supply to Pastor Ha's home was cut off for quite some time. Pastor Ha immediately cooperated with various Christians to initiate relief efforts for the victims. I believe he did a wonderful job there alongside many fellow laborers.

To fast-forward a bit, after he moved to Sayama, the "Association to Support Missionary Ha" was established. I believe that the support from those who labored together during the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake accounted for a vital part of this association.

Since there are many here who know much better than I do about the events after his arrival in Sayama, I will not speak on them. However, since the time they began renting a meeting place to hold services—though it was in a different location than the current one—Pastor Ha's wife, Mrs. Sung-Hee Hong, would clean the area around the meeting place every single morning. I believe that such small, faithful actions served as a precious stepping stone for the church to start as a community trusted and loved by the surrounding residents.

2 Asia to Me

Here, please allow me to speak a little bit about myself.

In the autumn of 1969, when I was in my first year of high school⁶, a student movement conflict broke out. A faction of students, along with students from other schools, barricaded and blockaded the area around the principal's office. From that day on, daily debates on political issues and other matters continued. The riot police were brought in, and there were no classes for several months.

Through the student movement, we engaged in numerous debates, were confronted with various questions, and pondered deeply over a multitude of issues. Furthermore, amidst the growing divisions among the students, I began to attend church fervently. There were many university students there; listening to their stories and acting together with them made me feel a bit mature, and it was a time when my world suddenly expanded.

The pastor of that church⁷ had gone to Southeast Asia as a missionary during the war. Immediately after the war, as a "work of atonement"⁸, he established a dormitory for Southeast Asian students. He invited war orphans from Asia, children born between Japanese soldiers and local women, to Japan for study and vocational training⁹.

I want the young people of Japan not to exhaust their energy in confusion, but rather to see Southeast Asia with their own eyes and have opportunities to interact directly with the people of Asia for the sake of the next era.

As the pastor would say this whenever the opportunity arose, the members of the youth group decided to travel to Southeast Asia. A shipping company close to the pastor¹⁰ was planning a

⁶October 13, 1969 (Monday)

⁷Pastor Ryoichi Kato of the Tokyo Ikebukuro Church, the United Church of Christ in Japan. The pastor's wife, Asako, was a relative of my father, and my parents attended that church.

⁸Reference: "Now is the Time for Atonement"

⁹He was also tackling difficult issues such as searching for biological fathers and helping many stateless children acquire nationality.

¹⁰Koyama Shipping: It grew from the 1960s focusing mainly on Southeast Asian routes, but went bankrupt on August 21, 1975.

tour where young people could travel around Asia aboard the vacant cabins of cargo ships at a rate equivalent to a youth hostel. A total of seven people—six university students and myself, a high schooler—decided to participate.

For nearly a year after the trip was planned, I saved money by working various part-time jobs, such as washing dishes, helping out at an inn, assembling parts at a small business, and selling typewriters¹¹.

2.1 A 53-Day Cargo Ship Journey to Southeast Asia

In the summer of 1970, during my second year of high school, I embarked on the cargo ship journey.

It was a 53-day voyage where we departed from Japan loaded with used bulldozers and machine tools, unloaded them at free trade ports in Singapore and Penang in Malaysia, stopped at Balikpapan and Samarinda on the island of Borneo¹² in Indonesia to load Meranti timber, and finally unloaded it in Busan, South Korea¹³.

Both during the preparation period and throughout the journey, we held study groups about the Bible, English, and Asia. We learned about the history of how Japan entered Asia under the pretext of liberating Asian peoples from Western colonies, utilized their labor and resources as if they were Japanese colonies, plundered for the sake of the war, and how the Japanese military ruled the local people by force, including through massacres. I felt the heavy weight of war responsibility as a Japanese person, and frankly became anxious about how I should face the people of Asia¹⁴.

At our destinations, we visited churches and met various people. Everyone was living an extremely impoverished life. I encountered children trying to earn money in various ways¹⁵, as

¹¹The amount paid to the shipping company was 72,000 yen. This was an era when the starting salary for a university graduate was around 35,000 yen. The hourly wage for a high school part-time job was about 100 to 180 yen. The church provided me with part-time work, such as typing the weekly bulletin and using a Japanese typewriter, and also supported me by holding a bazaar. My parents were worried, but in the end, they cheered me on. My father was a national public servant (Ministry of Labour) at the time. Due to a mild physical disability, he was not conscripted into the military but went to Indonesia as a civilian military employee (a non-military person attached to the military, working as a civil official, employee, or laborer) to conduct a labor survey. He had also met the pastor in Indonesia, but due to his wartime experiences, he always maintained that he could never bring himself to go to Southeast Asia.

¹²In Indonesia, it is currently called Kalimantan Island.

¹³Leaving the Honmoku Pier in Yokohama, the ship docked next at Kobe Sannomiya Port (where I visited the Osaka Expo '00), and then at Hiroshima Ujina Port (from where I visited the Peace Memorial Park) for short stays before heading to Singapore. In Singapore, there was a branch of the International Navigators, a Christian organization with which a member was associated. In Penang, an international student who had lived in the Southeast Asian student dormitory had returned home and took care of us. However, we had absolutely no acquaintances in Balikpapan (which had an oil refinery) or Samarinda (which is now the capital of Kalimantan Province but was then a small port town up the river), so we searched for churches. It was around the time we departed Samarinda that Busan was decided as the destination to unload the timber.

¹⁴Since I had listened to the pastor's accounts, I possessed more knowledge than the average Japanese person. However, information regarding Japan's war crimes in Asia was still limited at the time, and I believe much of it consisted of vague information suggesting that Japan had done something terrible.

¹⁵In Samarinda, a boy who came aboard the ship with his father, a labor foreman, asked for my sandals. When I asked him if he had other shoes, he replied that he was barefoot. After hesitating for quite a while, I tried to give him the sandals, but he noticed that the soles were peeling slightly and said he didn't want them because they couldn't be sold. Our conversation, of course, was almost entirely through gestures.

well as young women who could not survive unless they provided sexual services¹⁶¹⁷.

Furthermore, South Korea was not originally included as a port of call, but midway through the journey, we received word from the company that the destination for unloading the timber had been changed to Busan. In South Korea at the time, martial law was in place, a curfew was enforced after 8:00 PM, and cholera was also prevalent. There were many people who could speak Japanese, providing various opportunities to converse. However, many of the older generation disliked Japanese people, harboring resentment or looking upon Japan's economic development with envy¹⁸.

Frankly, I was bewildered as to how I should interact with them. However, seeing the children of Southeast Asia living desperately, and reflecting upon the people of South Korea, I came to believe that for me—living in the present and into the future—it was more important to live responsibly as someone sharing the same era, rather than traveling around apologizing to people for what past Japanese had done. It might not be the best expression, but I suppose it means I was led to the decision: "Even if we live in different worlds, I will remember these people and live my life in a way that I will not be ashamed of before them."

3 What I Treasure

Among the words I treasure is the passage from the Gospel according to John, Chapter 13, Verses 34 and 35.

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Loving one another is by no means easy. When we speak of loving "one another," it requires the presence of the other party; it is not something that can be accomplished by one's own efforts alone. Earlier, I used the phrase "sharing the same era," which is also a commonly used expression, but this too is something that cannot be done by oneself.

This is likely true for the relationship between myself and Pastor Ha, my family and Pastor Ha, Mrs. Hong, and their children, and furthermore, between all of you, Japanese people, and Korean people. Loving one another is not a simple task. Yet, Jesus said here, "as I have loved you." The disciples who followed Jesus and lived alongside him surely understood what kind of love that was. Shortly before speaking these words, Jesus had also washed the disciples' feet.

Furthermore, Jesus states here, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." While it is not a goal that can be easily realized, it is my sincere hope that I can strive toward this together with all of you.

I pray and support Nozomi Church as it continues to aim to be such a community of love.

¹⁶Docking at a pier incurred berthing fees, so the ship only docked during the loading and unloading of cargo; basically, it anchored inside the bay. We used barges to go ashore. At night, people would come by barge to sell various goods, or call girls and procurers would come to arrange sexual services under the guise of massages. Some were quite young. My roommate, who spoke almost no English, barely managed to turn them away by telling them to go to the leader's room. I was just a high school student who didn't even understand what these people did until it was explained to me afterward.

¹⁷I believe the lack of language skills, which limited direct communication, was also in the background of this thinking. Since there were also students from the Southeast Asian student dormitory attached to the church, I think I could have engaged in much more direct exchange if I had made an effort, but I was unable to do so at the time. I suppose you could say I was immature. Re-reading "Now is the Time for Atonement," I recognize a large percentage of the international students' names, but we did not have deep interactions.

¹⁸While there was a similar atmosphere to some extent in Southeast Asia, it seemed that almost everyone in South Korea disliked Japan at that time.