

“The Future of Jodo Shinshu in America”

Part I: The Present Situation

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Over the past years, I can remember many discussions with various ministers, board members and others concerning the challenges facing our temple and other temples in regards particularly to declining membership. There have also been references to this subject in various newspapers and by various Buddhist writers/lecturers. This month, I'd like to start a series of articles that try to put together some of the many ideas and opinions I've come across. This is by no means meant as an exhaustive reference; it's merely an attempt to present some of the information that is already out there in the hopes of stimulating thought amongst our Sangha about this critical topic. I invite any and all who have additional information or opinions to “put it in writing” by submitting it to the Gateway staff directly, or dropping it in the “suggestion box” that we are adding to our services very shortly.

How many of you saw the article that ran in the Religion section of the Saturday, Jan. 27, 1996 LA Times? The headline read “Buddhist Group Beset by Membership Drop, Tension Between Sexes.” The subhead was, “Conflict: Younger pastors blame declining numbers on doctrinal rigidity. Women see mostly male hierarchy as insensitive.” In my opinion, though the article was technically about the BCA (Buddhist Churches of America) or Nishi branch of our Jodo Shinshu sect, it could just as easily have been about our Higashi Honganji North American District.

The crux of the article was that the BCA's membership has dropped from 50,000 families in 1960 to only 17,755 families in 1995, leaving the BCA only about 1/3 the size of what it once was. This drop has led to a shortage of funds and to the outright closure of some temples. The article states, “Younger ministers blame the membership problems on the reluctance of the church's aging leaders to update doctrines and policies to make them relevant to third and fourth-generation Japanese-Americans. Women complain that the male-dominated hierarchy is insensitive to their desire to become equal partners in church affairs.” The article points out that opinions on these issues seem to be divided along generational and gender lines.

Another problem mentioned in the article is that there is a discrepancy between the Jodo Shinshu of Shinran and Jodo Shinshu as actually practiced here in America. The article states,

“To many Japanese-Americans, Jodo Shinshu has become stale, better known for its ritual commemoration of dead ancestors than for its doctrine of salvation by grace.”

The article points out that some ministers, such as Mill Valley minister Rev. William Masuda, think that the key to saving the BCA is to become open to non-Japanese members. The article states that “as many as 70% of Japanese-Americans are marrying outside the community today.” However, though it would seem that this would “open the door” for many non-Japanese to become church members, in reality, few join because “the message of the church doesn’t draw them in.”

Interestingly, I also recently came across a copy of an article in the Sacramento Bee on Rev. Bob Oshita of the Buddhist Church of Sacramento. Rev. Bob, as you may know, recently spoke at our Spring Ohigan. The article on him essentially parallels the Times article, citing many of the same BCA problems.

The Bee article states that the founding issei generation is “dying off,” yet young Japanese-Americans “are not flocking to Buddhist churches, and the BCA is in conflict about how to turn things around.” In the article, the Rev. Ken Tanaka of Alameda county says “We’re at a crossroads; the BCA is perceived as a Japanese ethnic fortress and now things are changing.” Rev. Tanaka states that Sansei, for example, are increasingly assimilated into American life, intermarrying, feeling out of place in churches where ministers speak only limited English and do little to reach out to other ethnic groups. The article also states, as does the Times’ article, that the political infighting is largely along generational and sometimes gender lines.

What are some of the possible solutions cited in the Bee article? Ralph Sugimoto, the BCA lay president, says “We need to go with the times. We need to appeal to interracial couples.” Rev. Tanaka feels that the training of new ministers should be done entirely in America; ministerial candidates should not be required to study in Japan. In the article, Rev. Oshita himself says that younger Japanese-Americans usually don’t speak Japanese and are increasingly moving away from Japanese traditions. Half of the marriages at the BCS involve interracial or interfaith couples; 10% of their membership are of non Japanese ancestry.

Still, even with all the problems, Rev. Oshita states that he is optimistic that the essence of Buddhism can be made accessible to Americans, and to a generation of Japanese-Americans that knows only English.

Thus, both articles basically say the same thing: Membership has drastically shrunk, and that the shrinking membership is due to several key factors:

- 1) The out-of-date doctrines and policies of aging leaders.
- 2) A male-dominated hierarchy insensitive to the desire of women to be equal partners.
- 3) Differing opinions about what and how to change that are divided along generational and gender lines.
- 4) That Jodo Shinshu has become stale; often little more than rituals of ancestor worship.
- 5) That the BCA churches are perceived as Japanese ethnic fortresses, but that those ethno-cultural elements are losing their value with younger J-A's who are moving away from such traditions.

The solutions mentioned in the articles are:

- 1) "Go with the times": Open the doors to non-Japanese; reach out to other ethnic groups.
- 2) What is needed are American ministers trained in America who can relate Buddhism to Americans.
- 3) The control of American temples should be by American Buddhists. This should include younger members, women, and members who are not of Japanese ancestry.