

The Closing of the Early Japan Mission

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The first Japan Mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was closed 7 August 1924, after twenty-three years of effort and sacrifice on the part of missionaries and Church members. Because the Church is growing rapidly in Japan today, students of Asian mission history often wonder why the Church is successful now, since the early mission failed. The object of this article is to explain that failure and the consequent closing of the early mission.

THE CLOSING

On 13 June 1924, President Hilton A. Robertson of the Japan Mission, received a telegram from Church headquarters in Salt Lake City; it contained 12,000 yen but no message of explanation.¹ Nevertheless, Robertson and his missionaries had a good idea why the money had been sent. For several years rumors had circulated among them concerning the possible closing of the mission. Even during a missionary conference the month before President Robertson had "touched upon the possibilities of the Japan Mission closing and said that under present conditions, with the current thought as it is, it is impossible for the missionaries to spend their best efforts in the work." He also told the missionaries "that he hoped to learn in the very near future the fate of the mission. . . ."²

He was free to make such a statement because he had been corresponding with the First Presidency regarding this matter. On 31 January, he sent them a very carefully written appraisal

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¹Japan Mission Journals, 1901-1924, 13 June 1924, Church Archives, Hereafter cited as JMJ.

²Ibid., 14 May 1924.

of the condition of the mission, after he had consulted with all of his missionaries to find how they evaluated conditions in their areas. His five page report was considered carefully by President Grant and his counselors.

In answering this letter the First Presidency gave several indications that they were seriously considering closing the mission. The words "if the work continues" were used in one instance, and elsewhere they said they had "doubted as to the wisdom of continuing the mission." The most direct reference to closing the mission was written as follows:

When we stop to think that over twenty years of hard labor have been performed in Japan, it certainly looks as though the Lord would justify us if we saw fit to close that mission, when we read the words: "I feel perfectly safe in saying that we haven't over five or six real Saints in the mission who are willing and ready to help carry on the work."³ The Lord has said in Section 18 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

"And if it so be that you should labor all your days in crying repentance unto this people, and bring, save it be one soul unto me, how great shall be your joy with him in the kingdom of my Father!"

We do not wish to lose one soul in Japan, but if the same amount of labor in some other country was performed the chances are we would have many many times as many converts.⁴

Robertson's letter had indicated that all of the missionaries felt "the same amount of labor with some other people would bring better results."

All this was considered by the First Presidency when they wrote to President Robertson on 20 February. The only thing that appears to have kept them from a final decision to close the mission at that time was "whether we have done our duty in warning the Japanese nation."⁵

Following the May 1924 conference, the missionaries in Osaka, Sapporo and Sendai, as well as those in Tokyo, found attendance at scheduled meetings dropping weekly. Furthermore, some of the elders were insulted by irate Japanese who were aroused by the recent passage of the Japanese exclusion

³In the same letter the First Presidency mentioned that Lloyd O. Ivie, the previous mission president, estimated that there were "only five or six real converts to the Gospel in that mission."

⁴Heber J. Grant, Letterbook, 22 February 1924, p. 154, Church Archives.

⁵Ibid., p. 156.

laws in the United States. Notes telling them to go home had been left on their doors. To their surprise, on Sunday, 15 June, a Tokyo newspaper "contained a short telegram message stating that the Mormon missionaries would be immediately withdrawn from Japan."⁶

Why an earlier telegram from President Heber J. Grant had been delayed is not known,⁷ but on Thursday, 26 June 1924, the following arrived at the mission office. It was dated 9 June:

Have decided to withdraw all missionaries from Japan temporarily. Cabling you twelve thousand yen for that purpose. If more needed cable us.

Arrange return immediately.
Grant.⁸

The man who had opened the mission in 1901 had made the decision to "temporarily" close it.

Few missions of the Church have been closed, especially after being in operation for so many years. There are some slight similarities between the closing of Japan and the earlier closure of the Society Islands, Tonga, and other missions, but Japan is a separate problem. Most of the circumstances that caused temporary defeat there were peculiar to that mission.

PROBLEMS THAT CAUSED THE CLOSING

The official announcement of the First Presidency stated that the mission was being closed because of "existing conditions in Japan and because of the almost negligible results of missionary effort in that country. . . ."⁹ The issues that must be explained are what the "conditions" in Japan were and why the results were "almost negligible." The problems and con-

⁶JMJ, 15 June 1924. The LDS missionaries in Japan were not aware that a formal public announcement concerning the closing of the mission had been made in the *Deseret Evening News* (hereafter cited as *DN*) on 12 June 1924. It is not surprising that international news wire services had picked up this information by 15 June.

⁷The First Presidency was a little upset that this telegram did not arrive sooner than the notice about the money. They conjectured that the Church's cable address, "Quickmere," was not registered in Tokyo, which would have accounted for the failure of the mission to receive the telegram immediately. Grant, Letterbook, letter to Hilton A. Robertson, 12 July 1924, p. 969.

⁸Manuscript History and Historical Reports of the Japan Mission, 1901-1924, Church Archives; see also Heber J. Grant, Letterbook, 19 June 1924, p. 752.

⁹DN, 12 June 1924. The official text of the announcement also stated that the closing was temporary.

tributing difficulties the Church faced in Japan fit broadly into three categories: First, a number of problems were constant during the entire length of the mission. Difficulties with language, missionary approach, culture, scarcity of missionary numbers, long tenure, and failure to attract many converts all fit into this category.

Secondly, there were a number of hindrances that arose during the last several years of the mission. Among these were: international problems, such as the Japanese exclusion laws which were passed in the United States, the near-closing of the Tonga Mission at approximately the same time, the failure to acquire any real property, and the great Tokyo earthquake of 1923.

Thirdly, to these definable historic facts can be added the dimension of inspiration which guided the First Presidency, and the general aspect of psychological distress or defeatism which plagued missionaries in Japan, and Church leaders in Salt Lake City.

The Japanese language was recognized by every Mormon missionary as the main difficulty in the quest for baptisms. President Heber J. Grant complained that he constantly fell asleep while studying the language. He also reportedly quipped "that he learned the Japanese language but the people couldn't understand their own language when he spoke it."¹⁰ Years after the mission was closed, Hilton A. Robertson said he felt that many Mormons had condemned the Japanese for not accepting the gospel more readily, but he felt this was wrong. He placed the blame on the poor language abilities of the missionaries. They simply did not communicate well.¹¹

It is not correct to conclude that none of the missionaries mastered the language. A number of elders accomplished remarkable tasks, such as translating the Book of Mormon, Anderson's *Brief History of the Church*, Talmage's *Articles of Faith*, and other materials. But the fact remains that mastery of the language took years, not months, and this ability frequently came concurrently with waning enthusiasm for the work and a missionary's personal desire to return home.

Spoken language mastery was important but it was recognized from the beginning that potential converts needed printed

¹⁰Hilton A. Robertson in *Conference Report of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, April 1947, p. 53. Hereafter cited as CR.

¹¹Ibid.

information to study. The earliest missionaries expected that translated materials would bring in converts more rapidly. Unfortunately, after years of diligent effort and a number of good publications, there was no evidence that tracts and books helped the conversion rate at all.

An important aspect of the language and translation problem was transculturization, or the adaptation of terms from one culture to another. Special terminology has developed since the founding of the Church that sets Latter-day Saints apart from other religious organizations. Words as basic as "God" and "Savior" carry different meanings for Mormons than for other groups. The early missionaries to Japan soon learned that finding the proper vocabulary to convey their special message was difficult. The case of Elder John W. Stoker's translation of the *Brief History of the Church* illustrates this problem well. In writing the First Presidency of the Church after the book had been published, Alma O. Taylor said:

Being a book in which nearly all of our Mormon terms are used, it seemed that we would never get through all the problems that came up, for no words in common use ever approached an equivalent for the English meaning as we interpret it; hence, study, inquiry, and experiment had to follow . . . but these words are not necessarily beyond the grasp of the reading circle . . . for new words are only a combination of old words.¹²

Selecting good material for translation and publication was another problem. Several poor choices were made, along with some wise ones. Possibly the worst choice of a tract to translate was "Why I Left the Church of England. . . ."

It must be added, however, that in general, efforts were made to fit tracts to the needs of the people. An intelligent early effort to accommodate preaching to local needs was a pamphlet titled "The True and Living God." In its entirety this tract contained a very simple, step-by-step analysis of the Mormon concept of God.¹³

The problem was compounded by the fact that the Japanese did not share the same Christian patterns of logic, belief in

¹²Letter from Alma O. Taylor to the First Presidency, 3 September 1907, Japanese Mission Letterbook, Copybook C, p. 153, Church Archives. Hereafter cited as Copybook, plus appropriate letter.

¹³Alma O. Taylor, Journal B, 15 June 1903. Taylor kept a careful diary of his daily activities for a number of years. His diaries are held by Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

scriptures, or ideas about God. This is to be expected in a non-Christian part of the world. Missionaries with keen insight, such as Alma O. Taylor, Elbert D. Thomas, H. Grant Ivins, and Joseph H. Stimpson, recognized this problem and worked to overcome it. Taylor wrote concerning this difficulty after his arrival home:

I remember being asked to address an audience in Salt Lake City, before I went to Japan, on the subject, "Why I am a Latter-day Saint." After stating that my birth and bringing up in the Church were the first and foundation reasons for being a Latter-day Saint, I proceeded to quote scriptures to show that "Mormonism" was true. I am not ashamed of that speech, but I often smile when I think of the effect, or rather the lack of effect, such a speech would have on an audience in Japan, where we have to give reason for our faith independent of The Bible and the scriptures.¹⁴

Taylor continued this line of reasoning further by suggesting that many Church members placed too much reliance upon the testimonies of the ancient apostles and disciples of Christ. He said,

In Japan, the elders have to preach God and Jesus Christ, not in the name of Paul, John, Peter, Nephi, Samuel, Joseph Smith, or any other prophet, but in their own names and through the testimony of their own works. . . .¹⁵

Taylor felt that missionaries succeeded best "by earnestly and prayerfully seeking the evidences which God has amply provided in His own creations and dealings, and by using these evidences under the direction of the Holy Spirit."¹⁶

English language classes were used to attract prospective investigators during almost the entire mission. Some members were acquired through this means, but the missionaries frequently felt that this approach was a waste of time. Their students were often interested only in the English language and not in religion.

President Grant became disgusted with the attitude of many Japanese who attended LDS meetings. Speaking for President Grant, one of his counselors wrote to President Robertson saying,

¹⁴Alma O. Taylor, "Japan, the Ideal Mission Field," *Improvement Era* (June 1910), p. 780.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 781.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 780.

President Grant's experience in Japan teaches him that the average Japanese who comes to our meetings comes to see what he can get out of it. There is one little illustration of a man who learned French, German and English by belonging to three different churches and he was only too anxious to become a member of our church, providing we would employ him as interpreter and translator.¹⁷

Another example of a similar nature was also mentioned in the same letter to President Robertson. The First Presidency wrote:

President Grant remembers a group of young men, ten, he thinks it was in number, who came and believed everything we taught until the elders quit talking to them in English and made all their remarks in the Japanese language, and one by one these converts that believed everything disappeared when there was no chance to secure information regarding English. It was really amusing to Brother Grant to have these young men spend the evening talking in English as best they could and the elders answering in Japanese as best they could, and neither one of them speaking in their native tongue.¹⁸

The following portion of a letter from Louring A. Whittaker to President Stimpson dated 1 September 1919, verifies that the same problem existed late in the mission. From Osaka, Whittaker wrote:

I don't like this idea of staying inside of the church to wait for people to come to you, for from my experience you get people that just waste time that is spent on them because they come to study English and *not to hear the gospel*. I've felt sometimes that being dropped from a three-story building would not hurt me any more than when I've been trying to preach the gospel and some one has stopped to ask if that word on the third line down the page was an adverb—*ad infinitum*. . . .¹⁹

Even though the language classes had drawbacks, they were continued to the end of the mission. In fact the language classes were the main approach during the period from 1921 to 1924, particularly for the married couples who were serving in the mission at that time.²⁰ Some of the missionaries even took

¹⁷Grant, Letterbook, 22 February 1924, p. 155.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Letter from Louring A. Whittaker to Joseph H. Stimpson, 1 September 1919, Stimpson Papers.

²⁰Interview, Hilton A. Robertson by R. Lanier Britsch, 1 August 1967, Provo, Utah.

salaried positions as English teachers. In 1923 and 1924, for instance, Elder Elwood L. Christensen was employed at a commercial school near Osaka. He, of course, spent most of his time actively proselyting the gospel.²¹

Street meetings were also a regular means of preaching the gospel. Large crowds were usually easy to attract. People were courteous and willingly accepted tracts, announcements about meetings, and other literature, but getting the ideas of Mormonism across to a constantly fluctuating audience was a difficult task. Tracts were distributed by thousands but they did not attract many serious inquiries.

Special lessons were devised for the Japanese. Newsletters and periodicals were circulated among the members. Hymn books were published in Japanese. The Mutual Improvement Association was used to attract and hold young people. It accomplished some good, but the barriers of language and culture seemed to be insurmountable to each of the approaches used.

Another important question to consider is that of the difference in religious intensity. The main body of the Japanese have historically been low-keyed religiously. Although exceptions exist, generally Japanese religions are classified as "perfunctory, weak, and indifferent."²² In contrast it is evident that most Mormon groups should be classified as "lively, intense, and strong." This difference in religious intensity is a probable explanation for some of the lack of LDS success with the Japanese people.

Another Japanese trait is that of familism, or family centeredness. This cultural trait was very strong during the early mission period. The family group has traditionally been the individual's means of establishing his identity. Efforts, whether economic, social, or religious, have usually been made in behalf of the whole family organization. Fathers have ruled the Japanese home with an iron hand. Sons have respected the desires of their fathers, as have the wives and daughters. Marriages have been intended to be as compatible as possible, but they have been arranged for the benefit of the family, as well as the parties involved. Occupations have frequently been

²¹Japan Mission President's Report, 31 December 1923, in "Mission Annual Reports," p. 461, Church Archives.

²²Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 125.

family occupations. These traditions, and others like them, tended to discourage affiliation by individual Japanese with an alien institution such as the LDS Church. It was very difficult for the missionaries to take the place of the family, or become the primary socio-religious group in the place of the family. It was through constant association with the missionaries that converts, at least those who remained active in the Church, became acculturated to and comfortable with the new social group to which they belonged.

The problem the missionaries faced was how to influence people sufficiently that they would be willing to leave the secure environment of their natal family (which could be enlarged to include the entire Japanese national family) and take a chance with the Mormon family. Several of the most faithful converts were women who worked as cooks in the mission headquarters and thus became part of the Mormon family, so to speak, and were able to establish a new identity.

When the conservative nature of the Japanese family and society during the mission years is considered, it is perhaps more remarkable that 174 converts were baptized than that the number was so small.

Another problem was that of a small missionary force. At no time were there more than twenty missionaries and on several occasions there were as few as eight. It is implicit that the leaders of the Church felt ambivalent toward Japan. It was almost as though they had a policy of succeeding first and sending missionaries later. Requests for more missionaries were frequent from the various mission presidents, but they were seldom granted.

The lack of missionaries was recognized as a very real detriment to the work. Joseph H. Stimpson and his wife, Mary, who were in charge of the mission from 1915 until early 1921, struggled with this handicap and sought the help of Elder David O. McKay, then of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, to overcome it. In March 1920, President Stimpson wrote a letter of invitation to Elder McKay, inviting him to an international Sunday School convention to be held in Tokyo that fall, and including some statistics concerning the progress of the mission. To that date sixty baptisms had been performed during his tenure as president, sixteen children had been blessed, thirty-seven men had been ordained to the Aaronic

Priesthood, and the total membership was one hundred twenty-four. At that time there were only eight missionaries in the field. He pleaded with Elder McKay to use whatever influence he could to have six more missionaries sent to Japan. Three new elders did arrive in May 1920, the first to come in two and a half years, but they merely replaced several others who were released. There were only two elders working in each conference, and Sendai had been closed for lack of missionaries. Stimpson wrote: "We have so few missionaries here in the mission at the present time that the devil has to look elsewhere for a workshop."²³

Similar feelings had been indicated long before by Alma O. Taylor and were echoed after by Hilton A. Robertson. Taylor once reported, almost hopefully, that finally "the devil is waking up a little over here. The elders . . . report falsehoods and anti-Mormon literature afloat."²⁴

Many years later Robertson suggested that the devil had the Japanese people so securely that he did not have to worry about the Mormon elders.²⁵ He was probably quoting President Grant, who, in 1924, said "the devil is not at all worried over our success in Japan."²⁶ It is apparent that the missionary force was so small that they made virtually no impression upon the Japanese nation. The sad concomitant was that the missionaries felt that they were not a part of a going concern, and this was reflected in their attitude toward the work.

Another problem that was related to that of a small missionary force was the problem of long tenure by missionaries. From the days of Heber J. Grant to the end of the mission, years spent in the Japan mission field were longer than for other missions of the Church.

A survey of the "Manuscript History" reveals the following statistics concerning the length of time missionaries spent in Japan. The average mission length was three years and three months. President Alma O. Taylor stayed longest of all—eight years and five months. See Table I.

Parents, sweethearts, and ward members sometimes wrote to

²³Letter from Joseph H. Stimpson to David O. McKay, 18 March 1920, Copybook H, p. 359; also McKay to Stimpson, 10 June 1920, Stimpson Papers.

²⁴Letter from Alma O. Taylor to the First Presidency, 20 March 1907, Copybook C.

²⁵Interview, Hilton A. Robertson by J. Christopher Conkling, 13 November 1973, Provo, Utah.

²⁶Grant, Letterbook, 22 February 1924, p. 155.

Table I

<i>Length of Mission</i>	<i>Number of Missionaries</i>
1. More than 8 yrs.	1
2. 7 to 8 yrs.	1
3. 6 to 7 yrs.	1
4. 5 to 6 yrs.	5
5. 4 to 5 yrs.	19
6. 3 to 4 yrs.	24
7. 2 to 3 yrs.	19
8. 1 to 2 yrs.	13
9. less than 1 yr.	5

Note: Under categories six, seven, and eight, four, seven and six missionaries, respectively, left without completing missions because of the closing. Two missionaries served two missions. Their total years tenures were 11 yrs. 6 months and 7 yrs. 1 month, respectively.

the Presiding Brethren asking why some elder had been left in the mission for so long. The missionaries themselves were usually less concerned because they knew it was necessary to remain long enough to conquer the language and do some good. But the pressure from home did have an effect on the work in Japan. Alma O. Taylor once wrote an article in the *Improvement Era* in which he tried to explain why such lengthy stays were necessary.²⁷ Still the parents and friends at home had a hard time understanding the problem.

As a result of the difficulties mentioned above, the rate of conversions to the Church was very slow. The missionaries never had a chance to become elated with their success. It was always slow. This fact reflected upon both missionaries and converts alike. The missionaries did not learn to expect rapid success, and members and prospective members did not feel that they were a part of a successful operation. The old saying that nothing succeeds like success was without question true in the case of the Japan mission. The psychology was not one of winning.

From 1920 on, the Japan mission was on trial. There is no question that from this time on the leaders of the Church in Salt Lake City were harboring grave doubts concerning the value of continuing the mission. During Stimpson's era, reports

²⁷Alma O. Taylor, "About Japan and the Japanese Mission," *Improvement Era* (November 1906), p. 6.

were received regularly by his missionaries to the effect that Church authorities were thinking about closing the mission. Confirmation of this fact was never received by Stimpson from the Brethren, but when David O. McKay went to Japan as part of a world mission tour, his role while there was definitely to assess the situation and decide whether or not the mission should be continued.

Elder McKay arrived in Japan on 20 December 1920. While he was there he visited all of the conferences of the mission (except Sapporo, Hokkaido, where a blizzard prevented such a visit) and remained in Japan for a month. He spent considerable time asking questions and seeking to learn more about the Japanese people. At the end of his visit he concluded that the mission was worth continuing and that if this were so, enough missionaries must be assigned to do it right. "It is like trying to run a sixty horsepower machine with a one horsepower motor and that out of repair," said McKay.²⁸ He decided that the mission would do much better if there were several married couples appointed and distributed to each of the conferences.²⁹ These couples were to have six or eight missionaries working under them, and they were to act as guardians and counselors for their missionaries. This idea began to be put into effect during the coming months, but never became fully operational. In June 1921, Hilton A. Robertson and his wife, Hazel, arrived in Tokyo, and in November 1922, three more couples arrived in the mission. At the end of the year there were twenty missionaries in the field, three more than in any other year.

In addition to the plan for more missionaries, Elder McKay also made some suggestions concerning improving the work immediately. He stressed the need to turn every conversation into a gospel discussion. Missionaries were to always carry tracts and other literature. They were to spend more time in public places, such as markets, teaching the gospel. Street meetings were to be continued. Elder McKay wrote the following to the elders:

As far as the Truth is concerned, the Japanese people are in darkness, though we believe that hundreds of thousands of them are groping blindly for the light. The light is now in

²⁸"Missionary Annual Reports," 31 December 1921, p. 191.

²⁹Letter from Joseph H. Stimpson to Alma O. Taylor, 19 January 1921, Copybook I, p. 10.

their midst, but "the darkness comprehendeth it not." And we wonder whether we are not, perhaps unintentionally and unconsciously, hiding our light under a bushel, or at least to hold it aloft, so that all who see us must have their attention directed toward it.³⁰

Apparently the visitor did not feel that the missionaries had been working hard enough. They were told to work at least as hard as if they were working for a salary.

Elder McKay's last official act was to release the Stimpsons to return home. They left Japan on 11 February 1921. In March 1921, Lloyd O. Ivie, a former Japan missionary, and his new bride, Nora, arrived in Japan to assume the reins of leadership. Ivie continued in the spirit of the reforms or innovations started by Elder McKay. He tried to expand the work. Missionaries were sent to four new areas and new methods of language study were introduced. For a brief moment total numbers of missionaries, Book of Mormon sales, and baptisms increased, but by the end of 1922, matters had returned to the old pattern. In January 1922, Kofu, after having been worked for fourteen consecutive years, was closed. This left only three conferences in the mission. Unfortunately, after the arrival of couples, the leaders in Salt Lake City did not continue to send the numbers of missionaries that had been suggested by Elder McKay. The result was less enthusiasm among the missionaries.

During the last couple of years missionary activity varied little throughout the mission and weekday schedules were quite similar in all areas. The missionaries spent most mornings studying, teaching English at local schools and taking care of various tasks, such as letter writing, picture taking, shopping, visiting the doctor, and other similar activities. Active proselyting did not usually begin until afternoon. Evenings were filled with English classes, Mutual Improvement Association, teaching lessons, and visiting friends and investigators. Three meetings were usually held on Sunday. Sunday School was the largest, being attended by large numbers of children. The missionaries hoped these children would be a successful avenue of approach to their parents. Sacrament meetings were usually attended by only a few members and investigators. An evening preaching meeting frequently drew fairly good numbers.

³⁰Letter from David O. McKay and Hugh J. Cannon to the Elders of the Japan Mission, Tokyo, Japan, 23 January 1921, Stimpson Papers.

Attendance patterns in the individual branches of the mission were not encouraging. Just before Kofu was closed there were only two or three Saints and a couple of investigators attending sacrament meeting—the elders claimed these figures were encouraging.³¹ This was in spite of the fact that there were thirty baptized members still living in Kofu³² and ten years earlier between five and eight members attended regularly.³³ The situation in Osaka was slightly more encouraging. On seven Sundays picked at random during 1923 and 1924, the following numbers attended: an average of about twelve at sacrament meeting (including missionaries); about thirty-seven at Sunday School; and around twenty-five usually attended the evening preaching meeting.³⁴

In 1924 the elders in Sapporo reported a regular attendance of between twenty-five and fifty people at Sunday School, and of about eight to ten people at sacrament meeting.³⁵ Sendai was a much newer area and little success had been realized there. Even though Tokyo had twenty more potential members than any other area the attendance figures were more erratic than in other branches. Average attendance there was only eight at sacrament meeting. Tithe paying was reportedly very poor throughout the mission.

In summary, the statistics for the mission were far from impressive. This is evident in Table II giving statistics for the years 1918 through 1924.³⁶

One further issue should be raised here. Were the Mormons unusual in their lack of success or was their record somewhat like that of other missionary groups? It is my belief that the Latter-day Saints were no less successful than other missionaries, though it is difficult to accumulate the statistics to prove this statement. However, it appears that the ratio of effectiveness was about proportional to the number of man-years put in by any missionary group. Such thinking is justified

³¹Japan Mission District Records, Kofu Conference, April 1921 through January 1922, Church Archives.

³²Record of Members, Form E., Microfilm, Japan Mission, Reel 1, Church Archives.

³³Lloyd O. Ivie, Missionary Journal, 5 November 1911, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library.

³⁴Japan Mission District Records, Osaka Conference, 1923, 1924, Church Archives.

³⁵JMJ, 14 August 1924.

³⁶"Missionary Annual Reports," 1920-1924; and Manuscript History, 1918-1921, 31 December statement. Figures compiled by J. Christopher Conkling.

Table II

	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924
Number of Members	105	127	127	135	154	158	164
Number of Missionaries	11	10	9	13	17	19	14
Baptisms	10	13	10	10	18	6	8
Ordinations	11	4	6	11	7	1	2
Excommunications		1		1	1		

by the fact that the other Christian missionaries stayed in Japan much longer and still had few converts, especially during the early years.³⁷

Political conditions were much different then, but during the first thirteen years of the Protestant missions, only ten converts were baptized. By 1882, there were 145 Protestant missionaries and 4,987 members. Many of the missionaries had been there for ten years or more. By figuring in terms of man-years put in, the LDS missionaries actually gained converts a little faster than did the Protestants.

As was mentioned above, Lloyd O. Ivie became president of the mission in March 1921. He worked hard and tried to follow the counsel of Elder McKay. Two factors, however, worked against his success as president. The first was his own personality. He was a very bright and capable man, but he has also been described as being rather undiplomatic. This did not help relationships with either his missionaries or the members. Another problem was the health of his wife and new child. Sister Ivie gave birth during the early months of 1923, and neither the mother nor the child felt very well after. This was the apparent cause of his release as mission president in October 1923. However, because the child was not well the Ivies did not sail from Japan until 22 January 1924.

Elder Hilton A. Robertson was appointed president of the mission when the Ivies returned home. The period of his leadership was short-lived for two principle reasons. The most serious factor was the problem that arose in Japan as a result of the Oriental or Japanese exclusion laws. A second contributing factor was the great Tokyo earthquake of 1 September 1923.

We will turn to the international political situation next,

³⁷See Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), 6:385ff.

but first some comments about the earthquake. The destruction that came in the wake of this terrible disaster was very great. About 91,000 people died in fires, under falling debris, and as a result of riots and disorders. Several missionaries, including the Robertsons, were in Tokyo at the time of the disaster and were very fortunate to escape bodily harm or death. Through the entire disaster, Robertson reported, not one member of the Church was injured, nor were any of the missionaries. The mission home lost some tile from the roof and plaster from the walls, but aside from that the place fared very well.³⁸

The results of the earthquake caused missionary work in Tokyo to stop for a long time. However, the missionaries filled their days by helping some of the members repair their homes and others to relocate. Because the missionaries outside Tokyo were not able to get in touch with headquarters, they lost time by coming to Tokyo to assess the situation.

At home, gloomy reports were circulated, and in one instance an incorrect report of the death of President Robertson was published in one of the Utah papers.³⁹ Not until 11 September did the friends and relatives of the missionaries know that they were safe.⁴⁰

The earthquake had a lasting effect on the mission in one way. It started the leaders at home thinking more seriously about the work in Japan, and reassessing the position of the Church there. The parents of the missionaries also felt the distance from their sons and daughters to be greater than ever before. Family members of missionaries were concerned by scriptural passages telling of earthquakes as warnings to wicked peoples. Upon his return home Robertson concurred in this reasoning. He said: "We are told in the Doctrine and Covenants that after the testimony of the servants of God, earthquakes, pestilence, and disease, etc., will follow and I bear testimony to you folks, . . . that those things have taken place in that land. . . ."⁴¹ The "handwriting was on the wall," so to speak. The question was simply what to do. It was not answered immediately.

With the exception of the problem of unavailability of missionaries during World War I, international matters had no

³⁸Robertson in *CR*, October 1924, pp. 123-24.

³⁹Article found in scrapbook of Hilton A. Robertson.

⁴⁰*DN*, 11 September 1923.

⁴¹Robertson in *CR*, October 1924, pp. 123-24.

major effect upon the mission until 1924. The Japanese exclusion law in America caused the most serious problems. In October 1920 Alma O. Taylor wrote the following to President Stimpson:

You are perhaps anxious about the present agitation and ill feelings over the pending legislation in California against the Japanese. I can see no way out of the situation as the people of California have more support from the rest of the U. S. than ever before. Something should be done now to prevent the constant recurrence of the question. Before the settlement the feeling in Japan among the populous [sic] will perhaps run high against the Americans.⁴²

Taylor was prophetic in his assessment of the coming situation.

The problem did not come to a head until 1924, when laws preventing Japanese from immigrating to the United States were passed. The question of racial discrimination against Chinese and Japanese living on the West Coast of the United States was a contributing cause of the closing of the Japan Mission. A long series of state and national issues concerning the immigration of "orientals" into the United States and subsequent issues relating to their possession of land began in 1882, and was culminated by the enactment by Congress of a new immigration law, the second Johnson Act, containing a section forbidding admittance to the United States of "aliens ineligible for citizenship."⁴³ Because the Asians of China and Japan were the only aliens not eligible for citizenship, the law was a direct insult to the Japanese nation and was accepted by the Japanese as such.

The law went into effect on 1 July 1924. That day was observed throughout Japan as a "day of humiliation," and Tokyo was blazing with posters which read "Hate Everything American." The largest of sixteen meetings of protest lasted continuously from one in the afternoon until ten in the evening, with an audience ranging from 5,000 to 12,000.⁴⁴

The situation became very tense for the missionaries after this law was passed. Americans were temporarily not welcome

⁴²Letter from Alma O. Taylor to Joseph H. Stimpson, 17 October 1920, Stimpson Papers.

⁴³See Edwin O. Reischauer, *The United States and Japan* (New York: Viking, 1963), pp. 16-17, for a clear evaluation of these events.

⁴⁴Sidney L. Gulick, "American-Japanese Relations: The Logic of the Exclusionists," *The Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Sciences*, November 1924, p. 181.

in Japan. On one occasion, shortly after the 1924 exclusion law went into effect, President Robertson found two posters tacked to his door saying, "Bei-jin Haiseki" or "American go home."

Even before 1 July, other missionary groups were feeling the negative effects of the law. A *Salt Lake Telegram* article printed 18 June 1924 noted that the Reverend Dr. Paul B. Waterhouse had asserted that "the passage of the exclusion act has made Christian missionary work in Japan almost impossible." However, further attention must be paid to the dates involved in these actions and reactions. By the time the unfriendly law went into effect the fateful telegram from the First Presidency had already been delivered. It was sent 9 June 1924 and arrived 26 June 1924. The final decision, however, probably had not been made much before then.

The earthquake and the deterioration of Japanese-American relations hastened the closure of the mission, but Robertson and others believed that the real reason for the closing was the indifference of the Japanese and the failure of the missionary work.

Robertson's conclusion was correct. In a letter dated 10 June 1924 the First Presidency stated that they were not "particularly alarmed over the situation in Japan." They believed that the current problems would soon subside. The reason for closing the mission was because "from the standpoint of converts" success had been "so limited that, at least for the present, under existing circumstances, it will be better to withdraw...."⁴⁵

Several other items may have contributed to the willingness of the First Presidency to close the Japan-based operation. One was that the Church had not acquired any real property. This made it possible to leave easily. Another development that may have had some bearing, was the consideration being given to closing the Tonga Mission at the same time. (The mission president in Tonga made a valiant plea for the continuance of his mission. There were over a thousand Saints in Tonga. Nevertheless the mission came very close to being shut down during the summer of 1924.) Such thinking seems to reflect a willingness to assess missions and determine their worth. Japan was found wanting.

⁴⁵Grant, Letterbook, 10 June 1924.

Closely related to the above reasoning was the problem of psychological failure. This was a cumulative matter. Since the mission was first opened President Grant had questioned its validity. Upon his return from his mission to Japan he had requested to go somewhere where he could perform a real mission; he was sent to England two months later. A feeling of questioning the possible success of the mission had been in the mind of President Lorenzo Snow when he sent Grant to Japan. On 26 June 1901 President Snow told Elder Grant:

Noah preached 120 years, he was a grand man, he did his duty but failed . . . and as to these brethren who will shortly leave for Japan the Lord has not revealed to me that they will succeed, but He has shown me that it is their duty to go.⁴⁶

This attitude may have helped President Grant make this particular decision.

There is still one further ingredient that many Latter-day Saints would suggest as an essential reason for President Grant's decision. This is inspiration or direction from the Lord. When the missionaries arrived in Salt Lake City on 22 August 1924, President Grant greeted them with, "Thank God you are home because I know what is in store for the people of that land and we are glad you are safely home."⁴⁷ President Robertson made a statement many years later that was similar in spirit to that of President Grant's greeting. He said:

I think that the mission was closed for a purpose in 1924 when we returned home. I feel that the Lord knew what was going to transpire and he called the missionaries home and ordered the mission closed temporarily. Later on we find that the other denominations throughout the world who were proselyting in Japan were forced to close their missions and return to America at great loss and sacrifice.⁴⁸

When the telegram arrived on 26 June, instructing them to return, the missionaries promptly set about making the necessary arrangements for closing the mission. Arrangements were immediately made for Elder and Mrs. W. Lamont Glover to sail home, as Sister Glover's health was not good at the time. They sailed on 8 July aboard the *S. S. Shinyo Maru*. On 16 July

⁴⁶Gordon A. Madsen, comp., *A Japanese Journal* (n.p., 1970), p. 12. Quotations from the journals of Heber J. Grant.

⁴⁷Manuscript History, 22 August 1924.

⁴⁸Robertson in *CR*, April 1947, p. 53.

1924, Elder Elwood Christensen baptized Yosaku Morita in Tokyo, the last baptism in Japan for over fourteen years. During the first three weeks of July elders and sisters arrived at Tokyo from their various locations. Most of the last month or so was spent visiting members, selling and giving way mission-owned goods, shipping books, and other similar activities.

Then on 24 July, Elders William E. Davies and Milton B. Taylor, along with Elder and Mrs. F. Wallace Browning (who had visited China since the notice of closing came), boarded the *S. S. President Cleveland* and sailed for the United States.

All meetings were cancelled after 29 June, except sacrament meeting, which was held until the last Sunday before departure. Only two to four Japanese Saints attended during that time. Three thousand seven hundred tracts were passed out during these final days. Finally on 2 August, President and Sister Robertson went to Osaka to encourage the Saints there to "live up to their duties." They boarded the *S. S. President Pierce* in Kobe, and all the remaining missionaries, Elder and Mrs. Elwood L. Christensen, and Elders Rulon Esplin, Vinal G. Mauss, Lewis H. Moore, and Ernest B. Woodward, boarded the same ship in Yokohama. They sailed from Japan on 7 August 1924. Thus the early mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to Japan was closed.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

Considering the number of problems the mission had faced through the years, the disruptions of the final two years, and the psychological distress suffered by the missionaries, it is easy to understand the decision of the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve to close the mission. It was true that the results had been "almost negligible." Nevertheless, the mission did produce some lasting contributions—translation work in particular—and a few converts were brought into the Church who remained faithful through the years until the work was recommenced following World War II.

⁴⁹Manuscript History, 7 August 1924. One of the final entries in this history states simply that in the first twenty-three years, eighty-eight missionaries had served in Japan. One died in the mission field and seven were sent home sick. Nine elders had been sent home in varying degrees of dishonor. One hundred seventy-four Japanese had been baptized—one hundred twelve men and sixty-two women. Ten members had been excommunicated, nine died, and eight had moved. Seven elders, twenty-two priests, fifteen teachers, and thirty deacons had been ordained.