

# JAPAN

Japan is an ancient civilization with its own distinctive legends and myths. Despite the significant cultural influence it received from China and Korea over the centuries, the 250 years of self-imposed national isolation from the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century has contributed to the development of a rich and highly refined culture that has won many admirers around the world today. Japan is a leading global economic power, largely due to its advanced technology and manufacturing capacity.

## Population

- Population: 127.8 million.
- Density: 336 per square km.
- 99% ethnic Japanese.

Minorities include Ainu, Korean, Chinese, Filipino and Latin American of Japanese descent.

Nearly 80 percent of people live in cities. About 20 million people live in the Greater Tokyo area.

## Religions

- Buddhism 85%
- Shinto 70%
- New Religion 20%
- Christianity 1%

The unusual statistics on Japanese religion can be explained by the fact that most Japanese practice more than one religion. Ironically, most Japanese are not interested in religion as a formal set of beliefs. Rather, religion is practiced for the functions it fulfills in their daily lives. For example, every New Year's Day, about 80 percent of the population visits a Shinto shrine to pray for blessings. About seven out of 10 weddings are conducted Christian-style in special wedding chapels, and nine out of 10 funerals are carried out according to Buddhist rites.

## Language

Japanese is spoken throughout the country. Most of the regional dialects are mutually comprehensible, except for the dialects spoken in northeastern Japan, Okinawa and other rural areas.

## Geography

Japan is an archipelago comprising more than 6,800 islands. The four largest islands are Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and

Kyushu, which together account for 97% of Japan's land area.

The Japanese archipelago sits on a seismically volatile area where several continental and oceanic plates meet. Many parts of the country have experienced devastating earthquakes and tsunamis in the past. Most recently, the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake that occurred on March 11, 2011, triggered a massive tsunami that caused widespread destruction in which more than 15,800 people were killed and 3,000 more reported missing.

## Climate

Japan's climate varies widely because the country covers 15 degrees of latitude. There are short summers and long, severe winters in Hokkaido and northern Honshu. In Tokyo and further south, summers are hot and humid, and winters are mild with little snow.

## Modern History

From the late 1800s, Japan pursued a policy of territorial expansion, initially into China, Taiwan, Russia and Korea. Japan joined World War I on the side of the Allies, and the post-war Treaty of Versailles granted Japan some territory in the Pacific.

In 1937 Japan went to war with China, and in 1940 occupied Indochina. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. and its allies declared war on Japan in 1941. By 1944 Japan had occupied several other countries in Southeast Asia, and in 1945 U.S. forces began bombing Japanese cities, including the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending World War II in the Allies' favor.

The Allied Powers, led by the U.S., occupied Japan from 1945-1952. Although the goals of the occupation were to demilitarize Japan and enforce democracy, it also brought about an unintended consequence

of westernizing the country in practically every area of Japanese society.

The rapid economic growth that Japan experienced in the post-war years was astonishing. Toward the latter half of the 1980s, however, the economy overheated with greatly inflated real estate and stock prices. The so-called economic bubble burst in the early 1990s, leading to a recession from which the country is still struggling to recover. In spite of this, Japan remains a vital economic player on the global stage, and continues to be among the world's leading producers in some industries, such as electronics and automobiles.

## Christianity

Christianity first came to Japan in 1549 through the efforts of the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier. The initial spread of Christianity was phenomenal with the conversion of a number of samurai warlords and their subjects. However, when Tokugawa Ieyasu, a staunch Buddhist, came into power as the shogun (supreme military ruler) of the country in 1600, he began to issue several edicts against the church. In the years that followed, persecution became commonplace, leading to the martyrdom of many Christians. The revolt of Christian peasants in Shimabara Peninsula in 1637 convinced the Tokugawa rulers that the Europeans were using Christianity as a front to invade Japan. The rebellion was cruelly suppressed, and all foreigners were



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expelled. In 1639, Japan closed her doors to the world.

Japan re-opened her doors to the world in 1854 with the signing of the Convention of Kanagawa. The ban on Christianity was lifted 20 years later, and the response to the gospel was favorable. However, the rise of militarism and nationalism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century led to a renewed suspicion of the Christian faith. During the years of World War II, the church came under government control.

The postwar years have seen a marked increase in missionary activity, especially from the evangelical churches in the U.S. More recently, missionaries from South Korea are also making their presence felt.

OMF International—then called the China Inland Mission—first came to Japan in 1951. In line with its pioneering ethos, OMF International sent its first workers to unreached towns in Hokkaido and Aomori Prefecture. There was good response among the young people, but rapid urbanization led to withering churches as new converts left for the cities. Today, OMF



International works in these cities, with its headquarters being located just outside Tokyo.

Japan appears largely unresponsive to the gospel.

Materialism, cultural pressures to conform and long work hours are often cited as reasons for the slow growth of the church. There are about 8,000 Protestant churches around the country today, the average worship attendance of which is 30. In many cases, the small number of members makes it difficult for the church to support a full-time pastor. In the last 10 years, however, a number of larger churches of more than 100 people have been established in the larger urban centres.

The economic slowdown and recurrent spate of political scandals have created a sense of disillusionment in many people. There has been a renewal of interest in spiritual matters, as can be seen in the growth of the new religions.

There are no legal restrictions to witnessing or preaching the gospel. However, there is

still a great need for workers. Many rural towns, villages, and small cities are still without a single church.

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### **Strategic Focus**

- Planting churches.
  - Pioneering ministries to reach neglected frontiers.
  - Partnering and networking with like-minded churches and organizations.
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### **Opportunities**

- Church planting.
- Evangelism.
- Student work.
- Youth outreach.
- Theological education.
- English teaching.
- Teaching missionaries' children.
- Short-term opportunities.
- Administrative support: financial accounting, medical, information technology.

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## **HOW TO PRAY**

- Pray that the Lord will send more workers to reap the spiritual harvest in Japan. Pray especially for more people who can commit themselves to long-term missionary service.
- Pray for new missionaries currently in language and cultural study.
- Pray for love, patience, wisdom and creativity in sharing the gospel message using Japanese cultural forms, so that it is understandable to the Japanese people without compromising its biblical integrity.
- Pray for the thousands of young people who go to Japan every year as short-term workers, that they may exercise a spirit of humility and openness in serving the church in Japan.
- Pray for churches in Japan, that they may strengthen discipleship training and equip Christians to live as wise and courageous witnesses

in an intensely non-Christian environment.

- Pray for more Christians to take up the call of pastoral ministry, especially in the rural areas.
- Pray for quality leadership training, not only for people in full-time ministry but also for lay Christian leaders. Pray for the many small Bible colleges and seminaries across the country.
- Pray for churches to be more effective in reaching men for Christ.
- Pray for more creative youth programs to draw young people to church.
- Pray that the Japanese church may be equipped to accommodate the many Japanese young people who become Christians overseas.
- Pray for the government of Japan to not revert to a right-wing militaristic stance as it seeks to increase its role on the global stage.

Pray especially for Japan's relations with her neighbors, especially China, South Korea and North Korea.

- Pray that the gospel will continue to be preached freely. Pray against the effects of secularization and materialism, and that many people may become more open to the gospel.
  - » Pray against the influence of the thousands of new religions and cults.
  - » Pray for the government to implement wise measures to meet the challenges of a rapidly aging society.
  - » Pray for the surviving family members of the nearly 20,000 people who died or are missing as a result of the 3/11 disaster, that they may experience real comfort and salvation in Christ.