



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Masaru Arita: A Japanese Good Shepherd

Masaru Arita was known as a good shepherd. He dedicated his life to caring for his flock of Christ followers and developing the Japanese Mennonite Brethren Conference (JMBC) during the years after World War II. He was one of nine children born to Syoumatsu and Matsue Arita, born in Hyogo Ward, Kobe City, Japan, on January 8, 1930. In July 1951, he was baptized with two others as the first converts of North American Mennonite Brethren missionaries, becoming the first members of the JMBC.

On March 25, 1958, Masaru Arita married Teiko Wakizaka. Masaru and Teiko had one son, Nozomu, and two daughters, Mieko and Naoko. Throughout the rest of his life, he devoted himself to the development of the JMBC: as the chair and central person in leadership; as the senior pastor of the Ishibashi Church, the oldest and largest of the 29 congregations in the JMBC; and as the academic dean of the Mennonite Brethren Osaka Biblical Seminary (later the Evangelical Biblical Seminary).

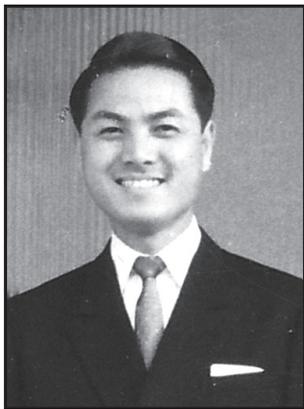
Masaru was a God-seeker even when he was a high school student. He was a poor, shy, and quiet boy, but always ready to

explore the great spiritual questions. He wondered why human beings had to work so hard and how human beings should live their lives. He read the religious works of Leo Tolstoy and others, trying to be good by his own efforts, only to find that this was in vain.

At this early point in Masaru's search, Christian teaching did not make sense to him. He could not understand how he could be saved by the death of Jesus Christ. But when he encountered Mennonite Brethren missionary Ruth Wiens from Mountain Lake, Minnesota, he finally had an experience of conversion. Reading a book entitled *Looking for God*, he understood the wonderful love of God for the first time. He accepted Jesus Christ as his savior and finally found peace, recognizing that his sin was wiped away by Jesus.

After graduating from high school, young Masaru studied English in the night school at Osaka City University. Eventually, he became an English teacher at St. Andrews University in Osaka. During this time, he prayed about dedicating his life to church ministry.

In 1961, Masaru felt called to Christian ministry.



Masaru Arita (1930–1991)

He left his teaching position and entered the small Osaka Biblical Seminary. Even before his graduation, he became the pastor of the Ishibashi Church. He was a man of prayer, always seeking Christ's love so that he might care for each member of the church, even though this came at great sacrifice.

Masaru Arita not only had leadership responsibilities at the church and the seminary, but his English language ability meant that he was put in charge of building relationships with the North American Mennonite Brethren Board of Missions and Services (then known as BOMAS). He exchanged many letters with BOMAS administrators, one of whom was Jacob H. Epp. Amazingly, while Masaru was still a seminary student, he wrote a letter as the representative of the JMBC, requesting financial support for the Japanese churches.

In addition to writing about economic matters concerning the JMBC, Masaru also asked for pastoral and educational support from BOMAS to nurture young Japanese seminary students and pastors. For example, he wrote a letter to BOMAS saying: "We need spiritual and intellectual help. We wish to have spiritual, learned, and experienced people of God in our seminary." In 1972, Masaru visited Fresno during a trip to attend the Mennonite Brethren General Conference Convention and he was able to enjoy memorable fellowship with delegates from various churches in North America.

However, his active ministry suddenly came to an end due to illness. In 1986, Masaru collapsed because of a cerebral hemorrhage. He became disabled on the left side of his body and his speech was affected. Reflecting on his condition, he said: "Although it was natural for me to die, God permitted me to survive."

Masaru worked hard on rehabilitation and was able to recover his verbal ability, enough that he could preach again in his church. Although he was disabled, it is reported that the last five years of his life inspired the members of the Ishibashi Church even more than the years when he was healthy! He was still the shepherd in his church, even though his physical abilities were limited.

On July 20, 1991, Masaru Arita died. Two days later, on July 22, his funeral was held in the Ishibashi Church, where many people came to mourn his death.

About one year before his death, Masaru asked Shinji Takeda to sing a song based on Psalm 23, "Surely Goodness and Mercy." The lyrics included: "A Pilgrim was I and wandering. In the cold night of sin I did roam. When Jesus, the kind Shepherd, found me, and now I am on my way home."

Masaru's life and testimony continue to inspire. He was a person who experienced a true conversion and served faithfully as a good shepherd, helping many find peace in the care of Jesus, the great shepherd.



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of Mennonite Faith: No. 56, Fall 2014.

Written by: Yoshio Fujii, Japanese Mennonite Brethren pastor in Osaka, Japan. During the summer of 2014, Yoshio did the research for this Profile while working as an archival intern at each of the four Mennonite Brethren archives in North America. Masaru's letters are preserved in the archives at the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Fresno and Winnipeg.

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