

Free Methodist Historical Society

Newsletter

WINTER 2023 — Volume 22, No. 1

We are thankful to Evelyn Yee for her willingness to share the story of Japanese and Nisei Free Methodists' experiences of internment during World War II. Evelyn is the head of Community Relations at Azusa Pacific University library and her work over the years collecting the material and stories of the ministers and lay people of the Pacific Coast Japanese Conference (PCJC) is a gift to the broader Free Methodist Church. We are honored to share some of the highlights in this issue.

Published by the
**Marston Memorial
Historical Center**

ISSN 1546-4199

Cathy Robling, Director
Julianne Class, Archivist
Kyle Moran, Digital Librarian

World Ministries Center
PO Box 51710
Indianapolis, IN 46251

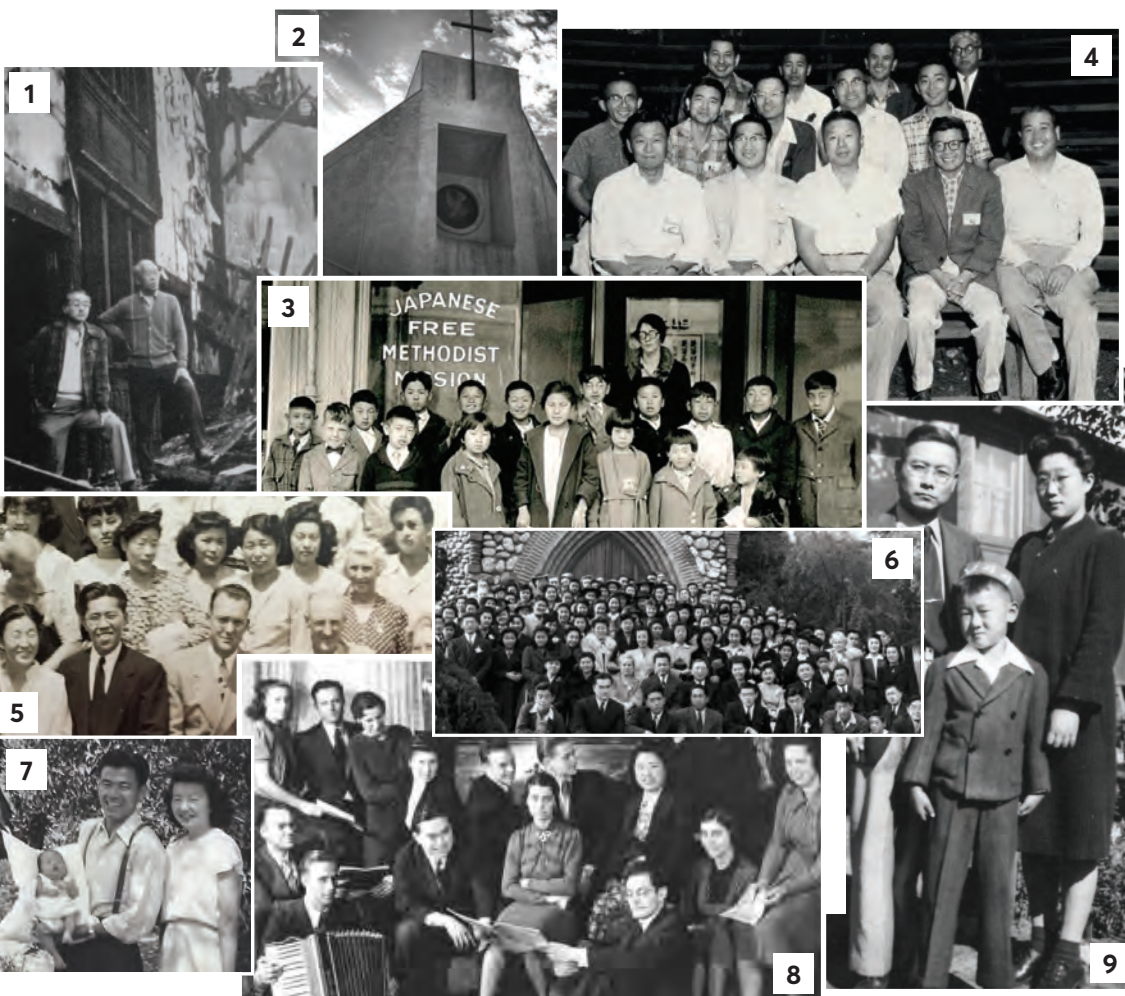
(800) 342-5531

Email
history@fmcusa.org

Website
<https://fmcusa.org/historical>

Newsletter
Mindi Grieser Cromwell
(Editor)
Cathy Robling
David Bundy
Howard Snyder
Julianne Class

Layout & Design
Andrea Anibal



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- 1** Rev. Frank Omi and Rev. David Shigekawa in the rubble of the arsoned LA Free Methodist Church. **2** The LA Free Methodist Church is rebuilt in San Gabriel and renamed the Mission Valley FMC. **3** Early mission of the Pacific Coast Japanese Free Methodist Conference. **4** Early Japanese Evangelical Mission Society ministers at Mt. Hermon Conference in the 1950s. **5** Dr. Haggard, president of APU's early institution Pacific Bible College and prominent Nisei church leaders including a young Rev. Frank Omi at the 16th annual PCJFM Conference in 1947.
- 6** PCJC gathering at Bethany Church, Sierra Madre, January 1942. **7** Rev. George Takaya with his wife and son who was born while they were residing on campus at APU where George managed the Azusa College plant nursery after leaving the camp. **8** A young Dr. Haggard (left, holding book) and Nisei Rev. Victor Fujiu (center, holding music), class song leader and FM pastor who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., are pictured with fellow Pacific Bible College classmates including Teruko Hashimoto before Executive Order 9066 which sent them to the camps.
- 9** Junro Kashitani and family on his son's seventh birthday in a concentration camp in front of a tar-papered barrack.

The Mission of the Free Methodist Historical Society is to preserve Free Methodist heritage and transmit it faithfully to each generation in order to assist the Free Methodist Church in fulfilling its mission.

THROUGH THE REFINER'S FIRE:

THE FREE METHODIST CHURCH BEHIND BARBED WIRE

By Evelyn Shimazu Yee

It has been 80 years since the photo on the right was taken, most likely on Feb. 1, 1942. Little did these young adults know that only 18 days after this happy Midwinter Convention, their lives would change forever!

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt would sign Executive Order 9066, sending these innocent, American-born ministerial students — and their elderly Issei parents and young babies — into camps surrounded by barbed wire and sentry towers for three years based only on their Japanese ancestry.

Hate toward Asians is not new. Anyone with a Japanese name was shunned. People with doctoral degrees were dismissed from their jobs. The only jobs some could find were janitor or gardener. Highway billboards said things like, "The only good Jap is a dead Jap." Nikkei American-born citizens serving in the U.S. Army were refused haircuts at the barber.

These young people were put through the refiner's fire. They had to muster all of their courage to survive this test of faith. Suddenly they had become ministers to thousands of evacuees streaming onto buses and trains to destinations unknown. They were refined quickly, and through this fire emerged lifelong ministers in the Free Methodist Church. They transformed into strong men and women of conviction; they knew God was there for them even if others were not.

Each of these Nisei American-born citizens would be separated and interned in one of 10 major concentration camps in America's desolate wastelands during one of the darkest eras of our nation's civil rights history. News stories used euphemistic terms, labeling them "non-aliens," because calling them what they really were, "American-born citizens," would not ease the guilt of those incarcerating them without due process. Likewise, concentration camps were called "relocation centers" to disguise their treatment of the Nikkei as justified.

Each of these young people were tried by the Refiner's fire. Their training took place much earlier than expected as they ministered to people in deep

distress. Their bank accounts were frozen. They were forced to leave their homes within 48 hours to two weeks with only what they could carry. Some had to leave loved ones in hospitals with no family to see that they were cared for. They grieved for lost livelihoods, careers, educations, automobiles, farms that took decades to build, businesses and all their worldly possessions. People were open to hearing the gospel and many came forward to accept Christ into their lives.

Their first lodging was temporary. They were imprisoned in horse stalls that still had the stench of manure at the Santa Anita Race-tracks, where they waited for months to be shipped out to 140-degree deserts or minus 30-degree mountainous areas with only their California clothing. Living quarters were barracks that averaged 20x20 feet, had no bathrooms or running water and only one light bulb for a family of four or more. The only toilets were communal and showers had no doors for the duration of three years. Women stood three to four at a time holding up blankets to surround their daughters for privacy as they showered.

Each young ministerial student took on pastoral duties while in the camps, sharing their faith and leading congregations in prayer meetings, Bible study and worship. FM Superintendent Clyde Burnett had assisted in nurturing this group of young people in the Free Methodist ways years prior to the Executive Order 9066. Would the training they received at Azusa Pacific University's early institutions — the Quaker-run Training School for Christian



Shozo, Shima and Nelly A. Sasuga, Evelyn Shimazu Yee's grandparents and mother in Poston, Arizona concentration camp during World War II.



Rev. Dr. John Miyabe (row 2, #12) later became the longest serving superintendent of the Pacific Coast Japanese Conference. He recently passed away in 2020 at the age of 98. His sister Mary Miyabe (row 2, #8) and classmate Flo Aiko Komatsuka (Sakato) (row 3, #4) are still with us and close to 100 years of age.

Workers, the Free Methodist Los Angeles Pacific College and Pacific Bible College — be enough to sustain them? Did the support of the conference under Clyde Burnett make a difference?

Between 1/4 and 1/3 of the students at these Christian places of higher education were Nisei Christians as a result of the first-generation work of non-Japanese American missionaries who planted seeds of faith among their parents' generation in Japan. Reverend Burnett and then President Haggard of Pacific Bible College/Azusa College stood by this group of missionary-minded young people before, during (they drove to the camps) and after their tumultuous exile to these desolate camps in the wilderness.

Following the exit from the camps three years later, President Haggard allowed Nisei to hold the Annual Pacific Coast Japanese Free Methodist Conference at the Azusa campus and even allowed housing for some who still needed a place to live. They wanted to sign up for missionary work; however, every missionary society they approached denied them due to their ethnicity and because the people they wanted to minister to were Japanese.

A dear friend who was a non-Nikkei minister suggested they start their own missionary society. They decided that was a good plan from the Lord

and established JEMS, the Japanese Evangelical Missionary Society.

They wanted to minister to Nikkei Americans who were returning from the camps and struggling without homes, jobs or money for college. They also wanted to minister to the country of their ancestors — a country to which some of them had never travelled. They wanted to fulfill the great commission in Japan where the military had run the country into war at the cost of innocent civilian lives.

Seeing the devastation of the atomic bomb, they felt that they were uniquely matched to minister to people of Japanese ancestry in Brazil and in Japan where less than 1 percent of people were Christian.

Today God has blessed JEMS. It is the largest U.S.-based missionary organization run by Americans of Asian ancestry. It is the umbrella organization for more than 100 mission-focused churches. God has also blessed the Pacific Coast Japanese Free Methodist Conference, which has churches throughout the West still thriving and filled with young people after more than 100 years.



Evelyn Shimazu Yee (pictured here with Ruth Privett, Dr. Haggard's daughter) serves as head of community relations at Azusa Pacific University library.

Free Methodist Church – USA
Free Methodist Historical Society
PO BOX 51710
Indianapolis, IN 46251
(800) 342-5531

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SECOND WINNER OF BISHOP L. R. MARSTON BOOK PRIZE ANNOUNCED

Lived Missiology: The Legacy of Ernest and Phebe Ward, by Shivraj Mahendra of India, has been awarded the Bishop L. R. Marston Book Prize for 2022. This unusual book fills in chapters of Free Methodist history and that of missions in India that are largely unknown in North America.

Ernest Ward (1853-1937) and Phebe Cox Ward (1850-1910), both from Illinois, were Free Methodists. They were shaped by the holiness revivalism of the latter part of the nineteenth century and in 1880 felt God calling them to foreign missions.

The Wards are not better known partly because they first went to India independently, there as yet being no functioning FM mission board. For about five years they affiliated with the Pentecost Bands, an innovative church-planting movement within the FMC that later became independent. Once the denominational mission board was formed, the Wards became FM missionaries.

Dr. Mahendra documents the breadth and depth of their ministry and their sensitivity to and immersion in Indian culture. For the Wards, he writes, “evangelism and social action went hand in hand.” Their ministry was “apostolic” in the sense that they worked in a particular area only long enough to see converts won and the church established, then moved on to another area. They were not notably effective however, the author says, in raising up indigenous leaders in the churches they planted.

Dr. Mahendra writes that the Wards “did not endorse Western dress code or lifestyle among their colleagues

and converts,” but encouraged adopting the dress and food of the people among whom they worked. They were often pioneers, ministering in a variety of religious and interreligious contexts, working among Hindus, Muslims, Parsees, and tribal groups which had their own religions. Ernest and Phebe Ward studied tribal beliefs, seeking to understand them as fully as possible.

The Wards were active in the India Holiness Association, Ernest himself serving as the association’s first president in 1910. During times of severe famine, the Wards cared for orphans and ministered to human need as best they could. Some of the orphan girls Ernest and Phebe cared for and helped ground in the faith later were students at Pandita Rambai’s Mukti Mission and part of the great 1905 revival there.

There is much more to the Wards’ story than is covered in this book. Marston’s *From Age to Age a Living Witness* has only one brief reference to the Wards, though Byron Lamson does tell some of their story in *Venture! The Frontiers of Free Methodism* (1960). There is still plenty of room for additional research and writing on this remarkable couple, their family and their connections both in North America and with other major figures in the history of Christian witness in India a century and more ago.



You can listen to Dr. Mahendra’s interview on the *Light & Life Podcast* at <https://bit.ly/smahendra>.