

Brought here to love others

By [L. Gail Irwin](#)

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I like to read the mission notes in our UCC/DOC Global Ministries e-mailings, and I always give special attention to those written by my seminary classmate Jeff Mensendeik, who does mission work in Japan. He was close to the situation in northern Japan during the tragic tsunami in 2011. (I wrote about his ministry setting [here](#) and [here](#).)

Recently, he wrote about [his return to Fukushima](#) to visit one of the tiny Christian churches that maintain an outpost there. I was struck by the way he described his encounter with this small fellowship, and the contrasts with some American churches I visit.

Although the Fukushima church only has 10 members, 60 percent of them were present in worship the day he visited. My latest church draws about 24 percent of the members on a Sunday.

After worship, tea and crackers were shared, much like an American coffee hour. But at their gathering, they engaged in honest conversation about the state of their church, not just chit-chat. They celebrated the way the national church in Japan has shown generosity in providing resources so they could repair their church and parsonage. They lamented the continued work needed on many homes in their village, and the loss of so many young people who vacated Fukushima because of the fear of radiation poisoning.

Most poignant were the words of Pastor Sasaki, who explained his refusal to leave Fukushima by saying, "I feel the eyes of the villagers on me." He understands that a courageous spiritual leader needs to stay present with his/her people, to share their pain and joy, refusing to give up hope.

What is courageous spiritual leadership in the face of shrinking budgets, graying hair, and the slow trickle of spiritual vitality? Sometimes I hear older clergy talk about retirement a little too wistfully, and I want to tell them: "Be quiet about your retirement! The church needs you *now!*" Sometimes I see dedicated clergy burn out

and take secular jobs that seem to be free of the uncertainty and stress we feel in the church.

Well, okay, some of us do really need to leave church leadership.

But I hope there are some leaders out there who still feel in their hearts that we were brought here to love others, and who still seek God in the faces of their parishioners, as Pastor Sasaki does.

I met such a pastor recently. He's in his mid-80's, still serving here and there, supply preaching, visiting nursing homes and the homebound as he is asked to. "It's good to work," he said to me.

In midlife, I'm starting to understand what he means. We were made for this. It's not really a sacrifice to stay put when everyone else seems to be fleeing the system. It's just who we are, being where we belong. We were brought here to love others.

*Originally posted at [From Death to Life](#)*