

Some lessons take a long time to learn

By [Diane Roth](#)

September 28, 2015

One afternoon I got a friend request from someone on Facebook. I did not recognize the name, for a variety of reasons, one of which was the name was written in Chinese script. I saw that we had one friend in common, another missionary friend of mine from 30 years ago when I lived in Japan. Still, I really did not recognize the name. I couldn't pronounce the name. I no longer read Japanese.

So, I sent this person a message, asking them, "Are you one of my former students from Japan?"

He sent me back a message, writing his name in English letters and saying that he was both a student at the high school and that he also attended the church to which I was assigned. Did I remember him?, he asked.

It was 30 years ago.

His name did sound familiar though, even after 30 years, and even though I don't have very many particularly vivid memories left. I remember the seventh grader who taught me the Japanese word for thief on the first day of school, when I picked up the pencil from his desk to use as a visual aid. "This is a pencil," I said. "This is a *dorobo* (thief)," he replied. I remember a young girl who couldn't remember the difference between *chicken* and *kitchen* in English. She would always sing the Kentucky Fried Chicken song to help in remembering. I remember that I would have simple Bible studies in English before church sometimes.

So, I accepted his friend request. Then, he sent me a message back, thanking me, and telling me one thing, which was a gift.

He told me that a year after I left Japan, he was baptized, in another Lutheran church in Kumamoto, the city where I lived. Another one of my students (I learned) is the pastor of this congregation.

I went to Japan, following the call of the Holy Spirit (so I thought). Jesus wanted me to go and help him make disciples, so I thought. I did not know how to do this, but I trusted Jesus, at least some of the time.

But we were not making conversions right and left while I was there. Many people were interested in Christianity, but not so many seemed interested in actually becoming Christian. Perhaps we were failures (so I thought).

When I found out that my former student had gotten baptized, I said, "That's wonderful!" to which he replied, "Yes, God led me."

Thirty years ago I was a missionary in Japan. I kept telling myself that I was planting seeds, and that God was changing lives, whether I could see it or not.

Thirty years later, I am a pastor, and I am in a new place. I am impatient. I want to see things happening in my new community. I am looking around for signs of some kind or another. A good old fashioned baptism would be just the ticket. But I am planting seeds, and (the Holy Spirit reminds me), God is changing lives.

Thirty years later, I am a pastor, and God is reminding me again about what the church is for. It's not for programs (although we may have them) or potlucks (although they are delicious), or just to add more people to do the work I want to get done. The church is for changing lives, whether I can see it or not.

"Yes, God led me," he said.

God, lead me, too, I pray.

*Originally posted at [Faith in Community](#)*