

“Pray without Ceasing.”

Danish Missionary Society in Japan, Part 5: Else and Kresten Christensen, 1981-1998.

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“Else and Kresten E. Christensen, pastor of Vivild and Vejlbjby Parish, have been accepted as missionaries for The Danish Missionary Society (DMS) as of 1 September 1980 and are meant to serve The Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church. (Kristeligt Dagblad 22. februar 1980)

Introduction

Else and Kresten. That is how they are known to most. Else and Kresten Christensen were sent to Japan by the Danish Missionary Society (DMS) in August 1981 and served Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church (JELC) till they were abruptly laid off in September 1997 and had to return to Denmark in March 1998. They were the DMS missionaries in Japan to serve the longest and also the last. I first met them as a volunteer of DMS in Yokohama in 1987, and again in Kyoto in 1996. This article is based on an interview we made on 22 April 2014 in their home in Denmark, combined with their collection of community letters sent to their backers. The letters are mostly in Danish, quoted here in my English translation, and marked (Letter (Dk)). Those originally in English are quoted as they were written and marked (Letter (Eng)).

The article follows the chronology of their life and work in relation to Japan: Sep. 80-Jun. 81, Selly Oak, Birmingham, England; Aug. 81-Aug. 83 language studies in Tokyo; church work in Kikugawa-Kakegawa Sep. 83- July 87; Yokohama/Yokosuka Sep. 87- 29 March 92 (furlough Aug. 89-Feb. 90; Summer 91, May-Sep 92); Sendai Sep. 92-Mar. 96; and work at the NCC Center in Kyoto Apr. 96- Mar. 98.

In addition to their own words, in 2014, a study leave permitted me to visit the congregations that had been served by Else and Kresten. In 2000, DMS merged with Santal Mission to form Danmission. The organization gave me access to the archives stored in the Erhvervsarkivet in Aarhus (from 2016 transferred to the Danish National Archives in Viborg). The relevant documents are in ”07337-679 Danmission 1912-1997 Bestyrelsesskrivelser [Records of the Board] 1997.”

Else (1936~) and Kresten Emil (1937~) married in 1957. She is a trained kindergarten teacher, and he was ordained a pastor of the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1968. In 1980, they had three older children and he was serving the second parish of his career, when they decided to apply and become missionaries to Japan. Their family and career situation is exceptional among the Danish missionaries I have researched, for the others went when they were ten if not twenty years younger than Else and Kresten Christensen. In a society where age correlates with prestige this may have been an advantage for the work of the latter.

Recruitment and preparations

Kresten, “I did not know anything about the church, inner-mission, or overseas mission when I grew up in Vejle. I was not involved in overseas mission in my first position as local pastor on Læsø Island, 1968-1973. But then I got the position as pastor of Vivild-Vejlby Parish, on the northern part of Djursland, in Jylland. It was a parish dominated by the Danish Innermission and had an active *missionskreds* (mission supporting group) with a particular interest in DMS. Ms. Carli Højlund was a core member and she made sure to get me involved. Soon I was the *kreds*-leader. Consequently, we got *Dansk Missionsblad*, DMS’ monthly newsletter. In the late ‘70s, the back page was a full-page call for an ordained missionary to Japan. I told Else it would be exciting for a young person to try. However, as it was repeated, apparently nobody applied, and I wondered why, till it dawned on me that it might be a call for me.”



Kresten and Else Christensen, 2014

Else, “I was also raised in Vejle, and I heard of mission in the Sunday school. We inserted our donations in the figure of a black child to support the hunger-stricken children in Africa who had not heard of Jesus. My parents sent us to Sunday school every week, until we refused to go in the teenage years. And as a scout, I heard of Christian mission; sometimes a missionary to China or Africa would come and tell us stories. It wasn’t very important to me. As for going to Japan, I thought the idea ridiculous. For half a year or more, Kresten served me the advertisement on the dinnerplate, and every time I brushed it aside. No, I did not have a full-time employment. But I was 42, and what should happen to our daughter Mette, getting ready for university, our older son Thomas, who had just started high-school, and our youngest son Simon, eleven years old? Besides, the children loved their horse, cat, and dog respectively, and I couldn’t imagine them getting rid of the animals. As Kresten kept pushing, I told God, “You must remove these mountains from my path, if it is Your will, I should go.” He did. Mette’s horse was in a stable, where it could remain as she would move away for her studies at a teacher’s college; Thomas’ cat died, and when we brooded the idea of us going to Japan at a family committee, he immediately mentioned a family he would move in with while finishing high school; and Simon’s

dog could stay with some relatives, and he thought it exiting to come with us. With these practical issues cleared, ...”

Kresten, “...I first talked with the Secretary General of DMS, then we were called for a meeting with the board, and finally accepted as missionaries.”

Else, “I had never needed English, so we asked for an extended period of study at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham and were exceptionally permitted a full year, so from September 1980 till June ‘81, Kresten, Simon, and I lived and studied in England.”

PRAY WITHOUT CEASING - On 9 August 1981, Bishop Thorkild Græsholt, chairperson of DMS, commissioned the couple as missionaries to Japan during the Sunday service at Vejlbj Church (cf. Rougsøbladet 13. august 1981). Based on Paul’s encouragement of the Thessalonians to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thess. 5:16-18 NRSV), Græsholt told the couple, always to pray so it would not rot, and evil would not possess it. “Keep yourself fresh with prayer,” he said (Græsholt 1981). Having thus parted with family, friends, and fellowships of the congregation and scouts on 23 August, the three left for Japan.

Tokyo, August 1981-July 1983

Marit and Erik Wengel, missionary colleagues, had found them their first home in Japan in Koyama, Higashikurume-shi, conveniently located 10 minutes by bicycle from the Christian Academy Japan, where Simon began in the 7th grade (reg. the Wengels, see Hermansen 2019b). At 13, he could have started in the 8th grade, but they agreed that taking one step back would make it easier for him to keep up with the lessons and give him a chance to master English. The adults had a trying one hour-commute to the language school about 25 km. to the east in Tokyo center. Else fainted the second time she rode on the crammed, rush-hour express in the morning, so from then they took the slower local train.

Before they left Denmark, a friend from the congregation volunteered as liaison for distribution of a quarterly community newsletter to about 200 supporters.

The first two years, the letters voiced appreciation for the kindness of the Japanese people, Simon’s school and the “small new built Japanese-style house” located so “we can see the sky and the sun can shine through our windows (this is not common in most Tokyo)” (Else, Letter (Eng.), January 5th. 1982) on the one hand, but on the other also echoed the culture shocks caused by the crowded, noisy city, and the frustrations caused by the Japanese language studies. “On our furlough, I was asked, how to study Japanese,” tells Kresten. “I answered, “It’s very easy. You study five hours a day at a language school, do your homework five hours a day, and after two years, you can, perhaps, buy a stamp at the post office.”

Theologians in Denmark study Hebrew, Greek, and Latin besides English, German, and French, so Kresten was used to language studies, whereas Else was practically starting from scratch – “I had only completed a two-year pedagogical course, and then studied English for the first time, when we were at Selly Oak,” she says. Physical stresses on the commute made it hard, but their teacher at Japan Missionaries Language Institute (in Ochanomizu) was “disgusting,” making it harder still. “She was resigned shortly after Else had to stop,” explains Kresten. “I probably had what they now would diagnose as a depression,” Else recalls. “I took a break, and when I felt somewhat able to resume my studies, I was introduced to Ms. Tachibana for private lessons, by Father Goldman in the Roman Catholic church in our neighborhood.” Ms. Tachibana proved a competent teacher. Eventually, Else could resume studying at a regular but different language school, and at half pace. “Kresten MUST master Japanese for his work,” I said, “but I *hope* I can learn it, for otherwise, I cannot stay here.”

In Tokyo, they were assigned to Japan Evangelical Lutheran (below JEL) Itabashi Church. It was “a small congregation – about 30 members – all very kind, and some of the young people speak some English,” (Letter (Eng.), January 5th 1982). In their second year, they asked for permission to visit other JEL churches in Tokyo and then to be transferred to JEL Musashino Church (cf. Letter (Dk), 5. oktober 1982, and 17. maj 1983). In Denmark, they had visited the former DMS-missionaries to Japan Anne Marie and Frode Leth-Larsen a couple of times, and they remained in touch (reg.

Leth-Larsens see Hermansen 2014b). Answering Leth-Larsen's request for "prayer themes," Kresten and Else wrote, "We have met the leadership of JELC two times, and on both occasions, they gave us endless speeches about all the projects they have started and the committees they are members of. We feel a lack of humility – not the pretended kind – but so others will sense that the glory is not ours if somebody accepts the gospel. Pray that leaders, pastors, and missionaries may have humility that we all give glory to Christ alone." (Letter (Dk), 10. januar 1982).

Though missionaries sent to JELC and as such at work in a Lutheran church every Sunday, Christensens sometimes attended worship at an Anglican, a Catholic or another denominations. And to get to know the Japanese people and their culture, they visited local festivals, shrines, and temples, and observed the "small" tradition: a vending machine at Haneda Airport selling prayers for a safe flight; the striking of a bell for purification on New Year's Eve. Such details were described in letters home with an epithet like, "We may find it superficial, but what do we know about what stirs in the heart of others?" (Letter (Dk), 12. februar 1982). During these first two years, they often socialized with Wengles, who were one year ahead of them at the language school. Less frequently, on a summer vacation, at the annual meeting for DMS missionaries in Japan, or at a Christening ceremony they also met DMS' third missionary couple Anne Sofie and Leif Holm, who lived in Kobe at that time¹.

In the second year, Kresten was asked to preach in Japanese two times, giving him a taste of the task lying ahead. They had been told, their assignment would be due on 22 February, only to be informed that very evening, that the decision unfortunately had to be postponed. "It is fortunate that we only have studied polite words in English and Japanese," (Kresten, letter (Eng.), 24 February 1983). In a letter of 17 May 1983, Kresten wrote, "As far as we can tell, you can find us in the town of Kikugawa from 1 September. Officially, we have not yet been told, but everybody, except those who ought to, says so, and we have to vacate this house by 1 July. So last Friday-Saturday, Else and I went to looking for an abode." (Letter (Dk), 17 maj 1983)

¹ Due to the poor financial situation of DMS, Anne Sofie and Leif Holms volunteered to withdraw from Japan in 1983, so Christensens could stay (cf. Hermansen 2019a, 123).

Kikugawa-Kakegawa September 1983-July 1987

JELC officially decided to have the Christensens move to the Kakegawa-Kikugawa Church in Shizuoka Prefecture. They had found a house in Kikugawa. It was located about 2½ kilometers from the church on a compound owned by a tea farmer. It was new and comfortable, except for the highway noise at night, when lorries carried goods to Tokyo.

The church had a congregation in both Kakegawa and Kikugawa cities, and in 1983 they were served by a Japanese pastor and a foreign missionary, Ms. Tuff from the US, who had been working in the area for 2½ years. She was not ordained, so she had had English classes and taken care of the women’s meetings. Kresten had hoped to be working with Ms. Tuff, but she was transferred elsewhere before she could introduce him properly. The pastor resided in Kakegawa and the first year, work relations were amiable.

“It was a hard transition from the big congregation of Musashino Church [100 to 150 attendees, cf. Letter (Eng.), June 14th, 1983]. The core members were all present. 3 women and a man in their 70s, and the three young women in charge of the Sunday school.” (Letter (Dk), 12 juli 1983).

Kresten included a short review of the previous six months in the Christmas letter of 1983. “26 July, we moved to Kikugawa. (...) 1 September, commenced the new work here in Kikugawa. – I am responsible for the worship service the first three Sundays every month. In Kakegawa – Kikugawa and at Shin-Rei-San (the Danish Farm, started by the Nordic East Asian Mission)² -. It is impossible for me to write a new sermon once a week, so I preach the same one at all three churches, and in that way, I learn new vocabulary and phrases well. Here in Kikugawa I have three English classes for adults and 1 (2) for children every week. Once a month there is a women’s

2 Shinreisan, spelled Shin-Rei-San in Danish sources, is known as Denmaaku Bokujō in Japan. It is located in Misawa, Fukuroi City, about twenty kilometers south-west of Kikugawa. It was initiated by The Nordic Christian Mission to Buddhists in 1963 (cf. Hermansen 2016), but around 1970, the mission renamed itself as Nordic East Asian Mission. In 1969, Shinreisan Lutheran Church was consecrated, and since then the congregation has been served by a JELC pastor.

meeting in Kakegawa and every Thursday I participate in a Bible class at Shin-Rei-San. (...) Till now we have been busy sorting out things in the church, and we will probably need another six months to fix the church both inside and outside. Right now, some of us are sanding and vanishing the church floor, and next we will have the exterior painted by a company. These practical things have been difficult to do for the congregation because they are elderly people.” (Letter (Dk), Julen 1983)

Kresten, “I have been asked how long it took me to write one sermon and the very first took forty-two hours. I wrote it in English, then a woman in the congregation translated it to Japanese for me. I tape recorded them, and years later, when I listen to one of them, I realized that I had said the opposite of what I meant.”

Most years, Else and Kresten sent three or four community letters, but some years only one – the Christmas letter. Christmas has become the occasion for outreach by churches everywhere, also in Japan. The first Christmas in Kikugawa was no exception.

“Else surprised the Japanese when she told them about our Danish Christmas traditions. Elaborately, she described how we in Denmark decorate our Christmas tree with angels, stars, straw-wreaths, and glass-balls – and when everything else is done, we hang a lot of refrigerators on the pine twigs! Yes, you read correctly “refrigerators” and were likely surprised, too. The point is, in Japanese a refrigerator is called *resoko* (sic) and a wax candle is called a *rosoku* (sic), and Else mixed the words up as she talked.” (Letter (Dk), Januar 1984).

At home, Christmas became an occasion for them to invite their owner, his wife, and his mother, plus friends of the women to experience Danish Yule-hygge; watching the Christmas tree and getting a treat of Danish cookies. “Our landlord explained that his mother and the other old women rarely experienced new things during the year, so this was special for them,” Kresten told his Danish readers. “We invited them to join us in singing “*Kiyo shi, kono yoru*” (*Silent Night*) and most of the women knew it.” (Letter (Dk), Januar 1984) This visit was a highlight for all parties. Christmas Eve in the church turned out differently from intended. Though Kresten had urged for early action, the advertisement was only posted on the night of 23

December, so few people came. A woman fainted during the program. They learned from this experience, and the following years attendance increased.

In May 1985, Kresten wrote, “Now spring has really come. – We also hope it has come for our work here in Kikugawa. There has been more than enough to do. After returning in October I was asked to have service every Sunday, alternating between the two churches, so now I have to write two sermons a month. Besides that there are 7 english classes now, and this winter a lot of repair work to be done in the church. But it has been hard to find out, how to work together with the pastor, who had started, while we were on home-leave. The former pastor gave the responsibility for Kikugawa church to us, now we are not even told, what the pastor has decided, so it is a little hard to cope with. Unfortunately it is not a unique situation. Most of the missionaries have been through this frustrating experience. Anyway it is spring outside, and God has once made an eternal spring in our hearts with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the believe in his guidance every day - so why worry??” (Letter (Eng.), Japan in the beginning of May 1985).

As we talk, Kresten explains, “I was sent to Kakegawa-Kikugawa because JELC wanted me to connect with Shinreisan. JELC had previously attempted to incorporate Shinreisan, but when it was sensed that the church ultimately wanted to merge to sell off the land, Shinreisan declined. I was sent to mend the connection.”

He goes on, “When we came in 1983, besides the church, Shinreisan had a dairy farm and the Children’s Home *Kodomo no ie* with some 20 children and teens, sent there by parents because they refused to attend school. I visited that home once a week to introduce the children to Christianity, to do activities with them, and to do some maintenance work. Shinreisan had little money, so its facilities were in a poor condition. I introduced the situation in *Dansk Missionsblad* to appeal for support, but later I met people in Denmark who told me they would not support something so shabby! A strange logic.”

Else and Kresten continued their weekly visits to the children’s home and built up a good relationship with the leadership of Shinreisan/Denmaaku Bokujō as well. Kresten was appointed a member of the board, so he participated in the meeting where

an agreement with JELC was signed (Letter (Dk), 20 april 1988).

Else and Kresten left Kakegawa-Kikugawa in July 1987, “All in all, these have been four educational years filled with events in the everyday life and the Christian community in the churches. We have had our share of problems that at times seemed insurmountable. Problems with cooperation or rather the lack thereof with the Japanese pastor, we should have worked together with. On the other hand, we have developed friendship with pastors from neighbor churches and people in our congregation. (...) We cannot report on tremendous progress here, - about congregations exploding with new members. On the other hand, the little group of housewives has become outgoing. They have realized the importance of sharing the message we have received, and of bringing it out of the church building, for many false prophets are actively propagating to get more members. The Moonies and Jehovah’s Witnesses are now active in this countryside area as well.” (Letter (Dk), juli 1987).

Yokohama & Yokosuka, September 1987 – March 1992

From Kikugawa with about 42000 inhabitants, Else and Kresten moved to Yokohama's about 3 million people. They had been assigned to JEL Yokosuka Church but could not find a suitable and affordable home near the church. Asking the JELC secretary of missionaries for help, Kresten had been told that the American board had two houses available in Yokohama – one “probably beyond your means” and one “a bit old.” So, he went to the older one, was permitted inside by the then tenants, photographed the place, and went home to Else in Kikugawa. He told her he had found a very nice abode in need of a little repair. “When he showed me the photographs, I told him, I would return to Denmark,” says Else.

The house had not been kept in repair for a long time, so for instance all the toilets were broken. Kresten persisted, however. They moved there. Some of the time they lived in the garage, and for a week Else lived with Wengels while Kresten worked on the repair, doing most of it on his own, to save the mission thousands of kroner from “outrageously expensive professionals.”

“It probably took me three months to get it fixed. And my agreement with

the US owners was to pay rent once the expenses had been met. I don't think we paid anything the first year and a half,” Kresten laughs. When I visited them in that house in the autumn of 1987, I was asked to help paint some of the exterior.

“Yokosuka Church began in the home of pastor Fujimoto Yoshikazu and when the congregation had grown sufficiently, they built a church, but then they lost some of the vigor and called for a missionary,” Kresten tells. “Fortunately, when we came, two dedicated families joined the church.” “Now, we were a Japanese and a foreign pastor, so what to do in one church? We decided both of us would be present every Sunday and alternately preach and do the liturgy. Our collaboration with pastor Fujimoto was excellent.”

Their house was located in Mitsusawa Shimocho about 50 km./ one or two hours by car from the church. The first years, they went to and from Yokosuka on the same day, but by 1990, the road congestions made it a trip of three hours (cf. letter (Dk), 18 juli 1990). They then stayed in Yokosuka, initially sleeping in Fujimoto's office, later renting a room near the church, where they would stay Thursday through Sunday. “It would have been ideal to live near the church,” explains Else, “but as it were, we got in contact with neighbors and other people in Yokohama.” “You taught English, and I also had some classes. That was how we got in contact with Tsuneko. As a child, she had attended a Catholic school, and therefore was no stranger to Christianity. She helped me translate my sermons into Japanese. That was a significant improvement,” adds Kresten.

When they began, the average attendance was about 12 persons. A year later, in September 1988, Kresten wrote that “from March till now, we have about 24 participants on average. It is the result of 1000s of invitations handed out.” The Sunday school attendance, too, had grown from two to 13 children plus two mothers, in part attracted by the English conversation option after the Sunday school class (cf. Letter (Dk)). In 1990, they had “42 students between 15 and 55 years” in combined English conversation and Bible study classes (Letter (Dk), 18 juli 1990).

Christian, “I have read and heard of missionaries who reached out via cooking classes. Did you?”

“We never had cooking-classes. When we lived in Kikugawa, I would visit the women of the congregation to learn Japanese cooking. We had had some introduction in Tokyo, but in Kikugawa I could learn more. On the other hand, in Yokosuka we had baking classes,” explains Else. “In preparation, I translated the recipes and wrote them in hand. Then we loaded the oven from our house in the car together with an oven bought for that purpose and brought them with all other necessities to the church, where we set up tables and ovens and had the classes. It was a success. Members of the congregation aside, others joined, including some men, who wanted to bake bread rather than cakes. One of them got so dedicated that he went ahead, bought an oven, and brought it along for the baking lessons. Kresten, too, was baking and pastor Fujimoto was there as well and very good at talking with everybody. I am a skilled cake-baker, but one of the ladies, Tsuneko, she had studied baking with a professional, and she was an expert.”

[Mogens Amstrup came in September 1990 to be a DMS-volunteer at Shinreisan. He stayed some months with E&K for language and culture studies.]

In the Autumn of 1991, JELC headquarters told the couple its time in Yokosuka would end on 29 March '92. And it asked if they would then transfer to Sendai. “It was unusual. Normally, the church would tell missionaries where to go next, but in this case, the headquarters asked us to visit the church and let them know if we would accept the transfer. Some of their people had visited us in Yokohama and seen that we could renovate,” Kresten explains. So, they visited their potentially future church in January, and Else concluded, “It needs a bulldozer.” Kresten was less pessimistic and took photographs to plan the procedures of renovations. On the way back towards Yokohama, Else made a memo on what kind of church she envisioned Sendai to be: an “A4-Church” – *Akehanasareta* (Open), *Akarui* (Bright), *Atataikai* (Warm), and *Ai ni michi* (Filled with love). (cf. Letter (Dk), marts 92).

Sendai September 1992 – March 1996

“In the beginning of May we went back to Denmark on furlough. Our friend Tsuneko went with us. Together we enjoyed six wonderful days in Switzerland. – Then

a 3-week sightseeing tour around most of Denmark, and a one week trip to Finland to visit our daughter and her family. June 10th I (Else) and Tsuneko went back to Japan. I had to move out of the Yokohama house the end of June. It was a busy time packing our things, but also a joyful time, because friends from Yokohama and Yokosuka came to help. To move alone was too much for me. I went down with a depression, and had to call Kresten and ask him to come back. He cancelled 3 weeks of meetings in Denmark, and hurried back. Together, we had a little time to get the things in place, painted and repaired the house here, before Kresten started working in the middle of August.” (Letter (Eng.) Christmas 1992).

In Sendai, they first had to repair the missionary house and to do away with loads of trash. They finished on 1 September and had by then already housed nine members of a visiting choir from Tokyo. The young people felt the house to be a paradise, whereas the tall, grey wall enclosing the ground and the heavy traffic near the house did not match Kresten's image of Paradise. The next step was to repair the church building and revitalize the congregation. (Cf. Letter (Dk), 1 september 1992).

Else says, “We got the permission to tear down the parsonage and make a parking area instead (done in autumn 1992 cf. Letter (Dk), februar 1993) . The church, on the other hand, we repaired. I wonder what it looks like now (in 2014).”

Christian, “I can show you, for I visited the church in March. I have some photographs.”

Else, “Dare I look?”

Christian, “Don’t be afraid. One week before I visited them, they cleaned up the hall and removed a curtain that they had used for partitioning. Till then, a part of the hall had been used as a storage of materials for the Lutheran Church relief work after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011.”

Else and Kresten, relieved on seeing the pictures, “It looks fine.”

Kresten, “The ceiling has a unique history. When we arrived, the church was very dark, so immediately I decided the ceiling had to be painted. Another part of the church was being painted by professionals. They permitted me to borrow two ladders and I placed a board between them. Standing on that I could paint the ceiling.”

Else, “I refused to be in the room.”

Kresten, “Yes, but I managed. And it still looks good, wow.”

[*Peter, DMS-volunteer for Shinreisan, lived with E&K in Sendai from 15 January~1 March 1993 for language studies.*]

Like the building needed a repair, the congregation needed a revitalization. Else and Kresten believed in the participatory approach and convinced the congregation to join them in the repair-works of both. Before Advent 1992, they did as much of the building-repair in and out as they could handle themselves. “From the outside, the church still looks miserable and uninviting,” but with the celebration of the 1st Sunday of Advent – New Year in the Church calendar – “we are now focusing on inviting people in. With words, songs, music, and human warmth we must cover the many years of neglect,” (Letter (Dk), Advent 1992). Only 17 people congregated for the advent celebration, but that equaled half of the congregation, and “the organist is serious about her talent – rehearses it at home – and with that kind of music, the praise-singing voices of a mere 17 people can reach heaven.” (Else, letter (Dk), Advent 1992). Like they had done it in Kikugawa, at Shinreisan, in Yokohama, and in Yokosuka, Else and Kresten spent time at church folding Froebel stars for Christmas decoration. Once they had seen photographs of Christmas trees full of the stars and lit stearin candles, “everybody wanted to fold stars, from Keiko at 7 to Nishimiya at 84.” (Else, letter (Dk), Advent 1992). On Christmas Eve, “the church was waiting – more than 200 candles lit on tables, along the walls, on the alter and on a nice big Christmas tree. As we were readying the church, we received several telephone calls. Members, who apologized for not being able to come. Others came when the service was almost over. Nevertheless, it was a nice Christmas Eve. 4 flute players started the service off splendidly. We also managed the treat for about forty guests after the service – though those who had promised to help, did not show up. Tsuneko had come 350 km down from Aomori to celebrate Christmas with us. Wherever she is, there is no reason for panicking. We had hoped to reach more people with the message of Christmas, but establishing contacts takes time. In November-December, Else had called on more than a 1000 households with an invitation. Church members, too, participated in inviting

and distributing “Christmas News”. We had discussed the need for telling non-Christians about the meaning of Christmas. ‘Yes, indeed it is necessary,’ said the chair of the church council. ‘There is a church in my neighborhood. Last year, when the pastor was decorating the Christmas tree outside the church with electric light-chains, a neighbor asked him, “What are you doing?” – I am decorating for the Christmas celebration. – “Oh, you also celebrate Christmas in the Christian church,” said the neighbor.’” (Kresten, letter (Dk), Sendai februar 1993).

“When we came to Sendai Church, the pastor of the other JEL church in town, told me we should alternate and I should teach Bible classes at his place, too,” tells Kresten. “I said, “No.” And I showed him the agreement I had in writing with the headquarters that stated, I was solely and fully responsible for the affairs of Sendai Church as its pastor. It surprised him, but he had to accept it as a fact.”

In February 1993, Kresten was hospitalized for six weeks as he underwent an operation for volvulus. He had asked the congregation to carry on with the worship services in his absence and it accepted. Even Else dared give a sermon (cf. Letter (Dk), 14. marts 1993). In a letter of 19. juli 1993, Kresten wrote that they had hoped to get the church building fixed before Easter, but the JELC headquarters procrastinated so when the permission finally came, the carpenter was busy elsewhere, and they had to postpone the repair work to the autumn. “On the other hand, we will not postpone the planned activities.” Else had distributed 1500 invitations for English classes. Two mothers showed up. When Else explained that classes would only commence with at least five children at the same level, one of the mothers managed to find more children, and so the first two classes began. They gradually expanded to four classes with altogether 22 children. Every class included a 15-minute “Sunday school” where Kresten told Bible stories. He himself had an English class for adults followed by an optional thirty-minute chapel in English and Bible study in Japanese. “Emi told me in the first class, that she was a devote Buddhist, wherefore she would not participate in the Christian part.” That was okay. After the second class, she stayed for the chapel, and the after the third, she asked if she could participate in the Japanese Bible study. “That is an encouragement which shines a light of hope, when we feel down because

it is so hard to call the church members into action.” (Cf. Letter (Dk), 19 juli 1993). Emi continued in the English class. For Christmas Eve 1994, she helped ready the church hall, including counting all 208 candles, so Kresten was certain none of the children could complain that he had exaggerated when he promised there would be 200 candles. In the first lesson after New Year, Kresten asked everybody to tell of a special experience they had had during the holidays. Emi said, “I experienced the warmth at the Christmas Eve worship, so I decided to participate in the New Year Day worship, instead of visiting the Shinto shrine as I usually do. It was a very impressive experience for me. They celebrated the Lord’s Supper, and I knew it was only for Christians, so I remained seated. But Kresten motioned me to join them. I was standing there, but what to do? I squinted to the side and saw how the others reach out to receive the bread in their palm. ‘So, that’s what I am supposed to do,’ I thought, and did the same. But instead of placing a wafer in my palm, Kresten placed his hand on my head and said ‘Jesus is here to “proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”’ (Luke 4:18-19 NRSV).”” (Letter (Dk), 24. januar 1995).

Kresten had to undergo a second operation to cure another case of volvulus. He was hospitalized in mid-November 1993, but only operated on after four weeks of the doctor’s attempt to avoid operating. This happened while the church building was finally under repair. It meant that “Else had to take care of me at the hospital, supervise the artisans, and clean-up the church on Saturday to ready it for the Sunday service, of which she was also in charge. It became too much, so she sent a mayday to Denmark, and Simon arrived to help.” (Kresten, letter (Dk), Torsdag d. 17. februar 1994).

In 2014, this is how they recall the situation.

Kresten, “Eight or nine months after the first operation, my stomach became very painful. The doctors couldn’t figure out the cause, the x-ray did not show any anomaly, so unfortunately, they believed it could be cured with medicine. After four weeks of trying various medicines, they made a barium examination where you are tied to a stretcher and turned upside down – then they realized I needed an operation

immediately. It turned out that, during the first operation, they had cut through the greater curvature of the stomach. When Else asked, if I would survive, the doctor answered, ‘*Kami Nozomi* (God willing).’”

Else, “I did not lose hope but appreciated the honesty. Then followed four more weeks, where he could not eat solid food. They put him in a steam bath to alleviate the pain. However, when I visited him at the hospital, he did not complain. Instead, he gave me instructions for directions of the construction workers ‘I want the plumbing like this; tell the electrician to pass the wire from here to there’ etc. I had to memorize it all. Japanese craftsmen are not used to getting such directions from a housewife, and they have their usual way of doing things. But somehow, I manage even the specialized vocabulary, for it was so important to Kresten that things became the way he wanted them to be.” “It was very exhausting. Fortunately, one morning, as I was getting ready, Tsuneko showed up. Her husband had encouraged her to go and see if I needed help. I did. She persuaded me to call the parents of all my English class students, explain the situation, and cancel classes till I was ready again. I thought, ‘if I cancel now, will they return?’ But she assured me it would be alright to do it. So, I did.”

“Else was concerned if her children would return to the English lessons after more than a 2-month break. All of them came, with an additional two – 30 lovely kids, singing ‘*Iesu wa Shu Hareruya*’ (Jesus is Lord, Hallelujah), so very pleasing when they attend the ‘Sunday school’ before the lessons. It is so delightful to meet the children and their mothers again. Although none of them are members of the church, they seemed the most concerned for us, and visited me the most at the hospital, both mothers and children.” “Finally, in January, I was able to leave the hospital, and as both Else and I needed time to recover, we went to Denmark for some weeks.” (Letter (Dk), Torsdag 17. februar 1994).

The final stretch of the repair of the church took place in the autumn of 1994. A group of students from Japan Lutheran College arrived on a weekend. Kresten had told them in advance that they were welcome, provided they would work diligently, i.e., without the long tea-breaks as he had observed were customary among volunteers. They had agreed on the condition. He had bought five shuffle sanders. That way, five

would work and two could take a break. They managed all the floor of the church in a couple of days. In the evening, Else and Kresten invited the young people for a barbecue. Together with Kouki, a young man from the church, Kresten vanished it professionally “saving fifteen thousand Danish Kroner” (Cf. letter (Dk), Julen 1994, and our interview April 2014).

Speaking of costs, Else tells, “As missionaries we were not allowed to make money. I first wanted to teach my English lessons for free but was told that students or their mothers would find them more valuable if they paid. Mr. Nagashima from the church then took care of the accounting. It was a blessing, for when we needed money for new windows, curtains, a professional workman, etc., we did not have to file applications with the headquarters and be told it would be too expensive but could go ahead and buy what we needed.”

Kresten, “Yes, and when we left the church, the surplus was theirs to keep.”

Christian, “When I visited Sendai Church, Mr. Nagashima was also there. He had many fond memories of the time you were there. He admires your talent for organizing things and eagerly told me about the camps you made, and how you once took thirty children to the sea for a swim, for instance.”

Kresten, “I was on my toes, I remember. We had an adult standing on the shore for every child in the sea.”

Else, “Both of us are scouts, so we knew a few things about camps. Back in Kikugawa, we once took the children for a one-night camp on the Shinreisan ground.



JEL Sendai Church incl. the Christensens, 1996?

All except the 3-year old, loved sleeping in a tent.”

Kresten, “And in Yokosuka we told pastor Fujimoto, we would like to have a camp in the church. He asked, ‘How will you get the tents up?’ and I told him, ‘No problem, we’ll plug them in the floor’ (laughs).”

Else, “He clearly did not know you can get plug-free tents.”

“This is the third time we organized a children’s camp. The previous two attempts drowned in rain, but this year we were rewarded for Else’s persistence that we should give it a third try. (...) 3 days with sunshine and warmth. (...) As one of the adult participants said, ‘It was my first camp. Everything was new. The morning and evening prayers, the hike, the bonfire on the beach. But above all – walking through the dark night from the beach and back to the camp. Dark silence and thousands of twinkling stars.’” (cf. Kresten, letter (Dk), Slutningen af september 95)

[In October-November 1994, they housed three DMS volunteers. Charlotte, Steen, and Marianne.]

“Probably we can only enjoy the bright and inviting rooms for another short while. The last chapter of our time in Japan, might begin next year in August with a move to Kyoto where we will be staff of NCC (National Christian Council). Our tasks will include studying the deeper layers in Japanese thinking and religiosity, planning meetings and seminars, trying to strengthen the relations between NCC and the churches in Japan, and maintaining the contacts with Scandinavia.” (Letter (Dk), Julen 1994).

[Lene and Henrik, two volunteers, resided with Else and Kresten in the autumn of 1995, mentioned in Letter (Dk), Slutningen af september 95.]

“What did we achieve ...What did we not manage?” Else started *Letter (Dk), end of March 1996*. She then listed: The church building had been renovated. A church council of five people had been established. Instead of 10 persons per week, Sundays included, the church was now used by 75 children and adults during the week. Many [members] were wounded or weak, but three active families had joined the congregation. An American missionary family would succeed them. Still, the church had to reach out even more. She also mentioned the the case of Aum Shinrikyo, the

religious group that had launched Sarin nerve gas attacks in Matsumoto city in 1994 and in the subway of Tokyo in 1995, and a Christian group that toured Sendai city in a speaker-car and aggressively sought to threaten people into conversion, and who had no room for conversation – two instances of what might keep people from joining the church, she wrote.

Else and Kresten moved to Kyoto in the spring of 1996. At their last worship service in Sendai Church on 24 March, “the little hall was filled not only with 92 persons, but also with hymn singing, music, and joy in the sadness of being about to part.” “In the late afternoon [of 26 March], Kresten left the packaging chaos to make his last home visit. Nishiyama, the oldest and probably the most faithful member of the congregation, had attended our farewell worship service on Sunday, but his wife is now bed-ridden. She is not baptized, and has wanted to be for a long time, but while she were well, they thought she needed to ‘study’ a bit more, and after she got ill, her husband has insisted she must make the decision on her own, which is rather hard after a brain haemorrhage. As usual, Kresten said a few prayers, and then, as he was about to get out of the door, Nishiyama said, ‘My wife has decided, she wants to be baptized.’ Therefore, two hours before Kresten left Sendai for new tasks and challenges in Kyoto, we were six people gathered in Nishiyama’s little living room for worship and baptism.” (Letter (Dk), Kyoto i begyndelsen af september 96).

[Three weeks after they had moved to Kyoto, Else was called home to Denmark where her sister Kirsten was seriously ill. Else went immediately, but they only had one day together before her sister died.]

Kyoto April 1996 – March 1998

Else did not have a specific project in mind, when she moved to Kyoto, but having held worship services in the style of Taizé in Sendai Church several times, “We firmly believed it was a form that matched the Japanese mentality, as silence and meditation are significant elements of their religious world. Here in Kyoto, I have joined a group that seeks to introduce the worship in the style of Taizé in many churches.” (Letter (Dk), Kyoto i begyndelsen af september 96).

Else celebrated her 60th anniversary in 1996. In the summer, she went with a group to Taizé in France. The Anglican priest, Kato Satoru, was on the tour, and introduced her to Shingon Buddhism and its headquarters on Mt. Kōya. In an Easter letter of 1997, she retold his story of conversion from Shingon Buddhism to Christianity, attracted by the promise of forgiveness and peace when partaking in the Eucharist.

Kresten’s interest in Japan’s other religions sometimes shows up in the letters home and articles he wrote for *Dansk Missionsblad*. An early instance was his 1985-report on his experiences with seated meditation at Mt. Hiei, during a stay organized by Notto R. Thelle on behalf of the NCC Center (“Danish missionary beaten by a Buddhist monk” in *Dansk Missionsblad* 3, Marts 1985, pp.2-3). In a letter of *1. juni 1994*, he reflects on the business of “prayer pieces sold in Buddhist temples” (ema), and the same year in *Letter (Dk), August 1994*, he told about a visit to the Shugendō area Dewa Sanzan in Yamagata Prefecture and in *Letter (Dk), Sendai*. The following year, in *Letter (Dk), Slutningen of september 95* his attention is on the New New Religion Aum Shinrikyō.

“My first encounter with the religions at NCC was very real and down to earth. The center had accumulated (books, journals, own publications) and loads of old newspapers. (...) Traces of years of dust were on all the walls and in the curtains. Professor Yuki, the boss, gave me his permission to paint and tidy-up. Else helped me with the cleaning and the purchase of curtains. Two staff members helped me sorting through the piles. About one ton went for paper recycling. (...) After the horrible acts of the Aum-sect have been revealed, the center has decided to focus [its research and activities] on new religions and the reasons many young people are attracted by them. Next week we will have a 3-day seminar on “Youth and religion.” I am getting still more convinced that the churches have petrified and are unable to communicate the gospel in a form that young people find meaningful. Therefore, I will focus my work on finding a way the gospel can be vitalized for the creation of a whole world – a healed humanity.” (Letter (Dk) Kyoto i begyndelsen af september 96). In the Christmas letter of 1996, Kresten wrote, “I am still in the process of finding the best

way of spending my time at the NCC-Center. There are three Lutheran churches here in Kyoto, but only two pastors, so I have been asked to take services as often as possible. Else was asked to take charge of the remodelling of the interior in this JEL Kyoto Church, so we spent 2 weeks cleaning up, painting and planning what to buy. 2 weeks ago when the advent was on the agenda, she was asked to do all the decorations for Christmas, and teach them our traditions. We decided that the theme for all the decorations should be "The living light." (Letter (Eng.), Kyoto, December 96.)

In April 1997, Kresten went on a short trip to Denmark to participate in a meeting, give five or six presentations, and be recorded for a television program about the work in Japan (cf. Letter (Dk), Kyoto i midten af juli 97).

While he was away, Else had been involved in planning a Taizé-retreat for pastors and missionaries working in the Lutheran churches in Nara, Osaka, and Kobe areas. Kresten, too, participated and reported it a success for all involved, she wrote (cf. Letter (Dk), Kyoto i midten af juli 97). In our interview, however, she said that people from various denomination participated.

The couple had been looking for housing in Kyoto since before moving to the city but could not find a suitable *and* affordable place. The first year, they lived in a 60 square metre apartment in JEL Kyoto Church. In January 1997, they were introduced to an old missionary house in the Shūgakuin area of Kyoto. Else was strongly against the idea of yet another renovation, but Kresten agreed to the offer. They had become acquainted with three homeless men, who were chased away from their cardboard boxes under one of the bridges spanning Kamo River near Kyoto Church. Else and Kresten offered them housing in their new house three weeks before they themselves moved in. In return the men trimmed the garden together with Kresten and Simon, who came to assist his parents. In six weeks, the house was ready, and for a couple of weeks the homeless stayed in one half of it, till Else and Kresten found them another place of living (cf. Letter (Dk), Kyoto i midten af juli 97).

This July '97 letter ends with a section headed "A tour to America," explaining their plans for a three-months study-leave in the US in the autumn have been postponed till the winter due to the relocation within Kyoto in June. Kresten wrote,

“Why a period of study now that only a few years remain? some may think. I would rather say, “exactly therefore.” For many years we have had to give inspiration, optimism, joy, and energy to the four churches we have been assigned to. Our resources are almost drained, so it is our hope to get recharged for the remaining 5 or 6 years.” (Letter (Dk), Kyoto i midten af juli 97).

The layoff

Else and Kresten communicated their shock. First in Letter (Dk), Kyoto d. 8. september 1997. “A Tour to America – that’s how our previous letter ended. The situation has changed. The sky was soon getting dark. Friday 5th September, around noon, the post delivered the September issue of *Dansk Missionsblad*. It was a delight to see the monthly almost exclusively focus on mission in Japan. “Mission in a rich country,” “dialogue of religions – mission at the front.” “Mission ... encounter ... dialogueexchange” these were some of the titles of the articles dealing with mission here. The back page had this appeal: The gospel to Japan. Support DMS to make theological progress that the Shintoists, Buddhists and Christians in Japan can meet in an equal dialogue about their faiths; a deaconal endeavor that the Christian view on human nature may give those excluded by the competitive society a dignified future.” This was an encouraging and a joyful reading for us, who often have found it hard to continue, because we had so little to show. It was a clear indication that our efforts had not been for nothing. We felt it supported the materialization of the visions we had for our work in Kyoto.

It was a short joy ... very short.

Exactly six hours later, each of us received a fax identically worded: ‘In consequence of the ominous economic situation, the board has decided to terminate your position in DMS with a six-month notice and layoff at the end of March 1998.’ We know well that mission in Japan does not depend on us, but we find it very hard to see the connection between the appeal for bringing the Gospel to Japan in the DMS newsletter, and the simultaneous layoff of the only missionaries here. We thought is extremely cold and impersonal. After all, we have served DMS for 17 years.

It was a big decision for us in January when we accepted to make the American missionary house habitable, but Kresten felt it was the only option, if we wanted to spend the remaining 5-6 years of our commission to Japan in Kyoto. All the work and money we have spent seem wasted, and we cannot comprehend why the board of DMS did not have a clue of where the economy was heading when it decided, in March, to let us start the repair.

DMS has told us to be loyal and not to share these issues with you in a community letter. We definitely do not wish to be disloyal, but what is the alternative? You are the ones who have followed us and prayed for us and our work here all these years. Now, more than ever, we need your prayers that we may find the path forward.

We know it is hard to lose one's job in Denmark. But at least most people can remain in their house, keep their friends, and remain in their congregations or whatever fellowship they belong to.

We must part with it all.

(..)

The renewal we expected to gain through our 3-month study leave in the USA has been cancelled as well. It feels unacceptable. DMS may find itself justified in the decision because it would gain nothing from it, but even so, it might benefit us when we start job-hunting.

In case we cannot get new employments, we are not entitled to unemployment benefits, for we are not members of a labour union – wherefore the job release scheme (dk. fortidspension), too, is not an option, although both of us are more than 60”.

“It was a shock. We had an agreement that we could stay as long as we wanted. And to our disappointment, a study-leave to USA from January to March, we had already been granted, was also cancelled. (...) There might have been a possibility for staying in Japan and getting support from another Mission-Society, but the time was too short to figure out under what conditions it would be, and furthermore Kresten had a feeling, that he should rather work as a pastor than as a researcher.” (Letter (Eng), Kyoto February 14, 1998).

In a letter of 16 August 1998, Else wrote, “As we worried about the future – packing, moving, parting, ending our activities, we carried on with the daily work, even though it felt impossible to keep everything together. – I felt completely empty.

I thought it might be better to stop visiting the homeless under the bridges, since I could not keep up the connection.

One day, I went down to the river by bicycle anyway.

I started chatting with some men, I had not met before.

One of them had organized an impressive office under one of the bridges. He had an office table and chair, and a bookcase leaning against one of the bridge pillars. He also had a guest chair, and he invited me “inside.” We talked about the weather – I was served tea. I told why I was in Japan, how long we had been here and that I was very sad we would soon be departing.

When Matsumura-san, the ‘office-person,’ learned I was from Kyoto Church – he pulled out his Bible from the among the other books in his bookcase.

I am a Christian, but I haven’t read the Bible or attended church for many years.

We talked about church and Christianity – and believing Jesus. I gave them the little pamphlet about Kyoto Church.

Before I left, two of the homeless said they would attend the worship service on the following Sunday – our last at Kyoto Church.

I wondered if they would keep their promise.

Kresten was in charge of that worship service, and later he told me about his sense of joy when turning around by the alter he saw both Matsumura-san and Kanatani-san sitting next to me. They were in the best of their clothes, though it is not easy to be dressed up for Sunday, when you live in a cardboard box under a bridge.

Matsumura-san knew all the hymns and had a beautiful tenor voice. (...) Kanatani-san was inside a church for the first time in his 72 years of life. (...)

It turns out that Matsumura-san’s late father had been a well-known professor at Kyoto University. And he, himself, had studied theology and music when he was young. Why he ended up under the bridge, he did not tell us.

(..) A friend later wrote to tell me that Matsumura-san and Kanatani-san still attend church on Sundays, come for Bible-studies on Wednesdays. (...) And that Kanatani-san was baptized on Pentecost.”

In a Letter (Dk), 18 august 98, Kresten wrote, “No, it is hard to understand that our work in Japan had to end that way. Neither JELC nor the NCC Center could comprehend that DMS fired us without any attempt to ask them if there were other options.

It is impossible to accept that firing us was necessary due to economic difficulties given the board at the meeting, they decided to fire us, found it had sufficient funds to employ new missionaries and raised the budget for this year [1998] by 3 million Danish kroner!!

We were left completely speechless when the chairman of DMS in the March issue of Dansk Missionsblad among other things wrote, “If only those in Japan had had backers, who supported them! Then the layoff would neither have been necessary nor possible!” – We cannot grasp that the board thus blames it all on you – all of you, who have been our “backers” and in so many ways have supported us in prayer, with encouraging letters, through the fellowship we have had on furloughs – and without a doubt also shouldered the expenses of the work in Japan³. – You must find that kind of appreciation for years of faithfulness and donations incredibly insensitive and wounding.”

In the interview Kresten says, “When I asked a board member, ‘how come the board had decided to call the missionaries for Egypt, at the same meeting where it terminated us,’ he answered, ‘because we already had promised them.’ I told him, ‘We had also been promised we could stay till retirement!’ That was obviously the end to our relationship with DMS.”

After a few months in Denmark, Else and Kresten were commissioned as missionaries to Albania by the Moravian Church in Denmark. The then ongoing

³ “A few hours before we were to go to the airport for our return to Japan, we participated in the Sunday worship at Herlev Church, whose congregation has adopted us = decided to support our work with funds and prayers.” (Letter (Dk), Torsdag d.17. februar 1994.). Former missionary to Japan, Frode Leth-Larsen was one of the pastors of Herlev Church.

conflicts in Albania and war in neighboring Kosova confined them to work mostly in Tirana. Despite finding Albanians open to the Gospel and the bringing of emergency relief to Kosova refugees meaningful (cf. Letter (Eng.), Christmas 98), theological disagreements with and fraught within the local church organization made them decide to terminate their commitment in 1999 year (cf. Letter (Eng.), Advent 99).

Back in Denmark, the local bishop told Kresten that he had only once instated a pastor more than 60 of age. “However, The Millennium is new, so much can still happen before it ends,” Kresten wrote (Letter (Dk), 1. uge i Advent, Anno Domini 2000).

Indeed, he succeeded in his second attempt, so Else and he moved to Korup Parish on Funen Island, where he served for seven years till retirement in two half-time positions as pastor to Korup and Næsbyhoved-Broby churches. Else joined “Folkekirkens Tværkulturelle Center (Cross-cultural Center)” a church outreach to Christians and Muslims in Odense. It had been started by the Bishop of Fyen, Kresten Drejergaard, in 1999 and given direction by another former DMS missionary who returned from the Middle East in 2001 (Cf. Hougaard Larsen, eds., 2019) “I benefitted from my experience of having been the foreigner,” she says, “it gave me credibility.”

Some reflections.

On *The layoff* ... When the Christensens went to Japan, the DMS secretary of missionaries to Asia was Rev. Karen Berntsen. In 1988, former missionary to Japan, Erik Wengel replaced her. During his term, at a meeting in the JELC headquarters (in 1990 or 1993?), the question of the continuation for Christensen came up, and it was agreed upon that the couple could stay till retirement – “the remaining 5-6 years” as they phrased it in their community letter of 8 September 1997. Mr. Wengel was succeeded by Th.D. Jørgen Skov Sørensen in 1996. He had only been in that position for about a year, when the firing was faxed to Else and Kresten. In an interview made on 07 September 2016, Sørensen did not remember the details of the procedure. Together with the then still new Secretary General of DMS, Rev. Harald Nielsen, and a board member, he had visited Christensen in Kyoto in the spring of 1997. At that

time, there had not been any plans or intentions of reducing the commitment in Japan. Harald Nielsen assumed the position as Secretary General of DMS in the summer of 1996. In an interview we made on 15 March 2018, Mr. Nielsen recalled the situation vividly. “I made a principal mistake back then. I told the board that it should handle the firing, but of course, as the administrative head, it was my duty to do it. As it were, the chairperson of the board, Rev. Verner Tranholm-Mikkelsen, took care of the communication. Besides the fax, he also sent a letter, but would never show it to us, because, he said, it had been of a private, pastoral nature.” Asked if he was actually opposed to the firing, Mr. Nielsen said, “No, it was according to my recommendation, for the economy of DMS was really in a bad shape, and we spent eight or nine percent of our total budget on Japan. This was the reason we gave and stood by towards our backers and the general public. Additionally, Kresten Christensen had told me, he felt his move to the NCC Study Center had been a mistake, for he preferred the pastoral work to research. The Christensen case taught me the hard way. We also had to reduce our commitments in Hong Kong where we had two missionary couples. The wives were salaried but had no actual work, so we laid them off. Instead of merely firing them, we negotiated an agreement. One of them was a qualified nurse, and she had wanted to be released from her contract with DMS, because she could easily find better paid work. The other needed some local qualifications to get work as a teacher, so we paid for the necessary courses. I regret, I did not handle Christensen’s case myself, and talked with them in person – that way we might have been able to mitigate firing.”

According to the archives of Danmission, I was given access to, the decision for the termination was approved at the closed section of a board meeting of 29-30 August (minutes dated Hellerup, d. 22 august 1997, archived as BMS skrivelser 1997/26 [12 Aug 2014 IMG_0404]); BMS (Board Meeting Documents) 41 and 42, both of 7 Nov 1997, contain correspondence following the announcement of the layoff. Individuals and groups, seven in all, asked for clarification and voiced disagreement with 1) the layoff as such, and or 2) the method of communication, as well as 3) the secretary of missionaries’ demand for loyalty by not informing others. Answers were given by the chairperson of the board, the secretary general, and the secretary for mission in Asia.

In answers to 1), references were given to a) the bleak financial situation following faltering donations despite appeals to the donors, b) exceptional high costs of having missionaries in Japan, c) the attempts made to involve the JELC and the Christian Mission to Buddhists without success, d) the fact that DMS had laid off five and a half salaried positions in its headquarters since 1996. In answers to 2), it was explained a) that fax was the most secure form of communication and therefore used all the time vis-à-vis missionaries, b) besides the fax, a more personal letter by the chairperson had been sent simultaneously, and c) the secretary general had subsequently talked with Else and Kresten on the telephone. In answers to 3), no comments given. Thus, it seems to have been JJS who sent the fax. On the other hand, the longer letter of explanation is said to have been signed by both the chairperson of the board, rev. Verner Tranholm-Mikkelsen, and chair of the committee for personnel.

From Japan, the JELC president Aota, expressed regrets with but also understanding for the decision. The director of the NCC Center, Professor Yuki, found the lack of communication prior to the decision strange considering the idea of *partnership in mission* in vogue then and asked why an alternative had not been sought for. (cf. Yuki Hideo, letter to DMS/ JJ Sorensen, Kyoto, October 3, 1997 [12 Aug 2014 IMG_0325]). Also, Anne Marie Leth-Larsen approached DMS with ideas for alternative financing. She was informed along the line in 2c and in addition told that if donors gave more to Japan, the funds would likely be equally less for other works of DMS, resulting in more layoffs.

*On Else and Kresten and their works in Japan...*this article relies predominantly on information produced by Else and Kresten Christensen themselves. The memories they shared in our interview 16 years after their return from Japan clearly matched what they had told their backers in Danish and English newsletters from Japan. As we spoke, more and more names and details surfaced that for the sake of space have been left out here. On my own visits to their homes in Yokohama and in Kyoto Church, I witness the light and order and benefitted from the prayers and generosity they shared where they went. The Japanese word *kiyomeru* 清める means ‘cleansing’ and is an intrinsic element of Japanese religiosity and social life. Logically,

it is called for when things or people have been worn down; the Japanese verb *kegare* 汚れ ‘dirty’ is etymologically rooted in the phrase *ke ga kareta* 気が枯れた meaning ‘the spirit has withered.’ As documented, everywhere Christensen went, they saw a need to and later were asked to cleanse and thereby reinvigorate places physically and mentally worn down. They did so with their collaboration, work and witnessing of the light of God. However, in addition to their statements, I have witnessed the difference their work made in the National Christian Council’s Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto. In 2014, I visited the congregations in Kikugawa, Yokosuka, and Sendai. While the physical dust had returned to some of the corners, in all three places I talked with members of the congregations who fondly remembered the vitality brought about by Else and Kresten. One purpose of this research is to document the relationship between the parties in mission: the missionary, the family, the senders, backers, recipients = local people, and churches. The letters of Else and Kresten are helpful, as documented with extensive quotations: they frankly tell of challenges, failures, and successes and transmit the styles and senses of humor of Else and Kresten hopefully even in translation. Else and Kresten, is how they are often referred to as if they were one. Their letters mirror their personalities: Else with a more cautious approach to the new but as strongly commitment to tasks once taken as Kresten, the more optimistic of the two. Stress could push her into a depression, whereas Kresten ended in the hospital, when his body could not stomach more. Individually and together they trusted what happened to be God’s decision; to learn of it and accept it, they prayed ceaselessly.

Appendices

1. The “Japan is expensive”-argument reflected economic realities. The 1980s were labeled *fattig-firserne* (Eighties of Poverty) in Denmark, justified by an annual inflation of 4 to 10 percent and an unemployment rate above 10 percent (cf. Sørensen et al. 2018), but in Japan they were the decade of the *bubble economy* (cf. Gordon 2019, chp. 16). This caused a rising exchange rate: from 100 JPY: 2.49 DKK: 0.45 USD (24 Aug. 1980) through 100: 5.42: 0.74 (24 Aug 1988) to 100: 5.93: 0.86 (24 Aug

1997) (cf. Exchange rates). DMS salaried its missionaries equally. This meant that in 1997, missionaries in Bangalore, in Aden, and Kyoto, having served between 15 and 35 years, by the book all received about 24000 DKK/ month. However, once Danish taxes and other required expenses and savings had been reduced and what remained, had been adjusted to local living cost they were paid about 3000/ 6000/ and 13000 DKK respectively (cf. DMS-skr. 36-1997 Lønbehandling af alle missionærer i DMS: Beregning af missionærernes lønninger pr. 1. april 1997, in DMS archives).

2. Weaving Froebel Stars (or Danish Christmas Stars) was a regular element of Else and Kresten’s Christmas preparation activities where they went. In their Christmas Letter of 1995, Kresten describes an impact it had. “8 years ago, before our first Christmas in Yokosuka Church, we had three days of preparation activities. Many people want to learn the technique of weaving the Danish Christmas Stars. Some are fast learners, – others are not as fast, - some never learns. Pastor Fujimoto’s mother was 84 and was of the third kind. Every day, she made an effort using her rheumatic bended fingers. She couldn’t do it. Time and time again, we had to unweave the result and redo it. This was hopeless.

We moved away from Yokosuka Church simultaneously. Fujimoto a 100 km. to the south, and we moved 400 km to the north. “Obaa-san” (Fujimoto’s mother) was too weak to sit in an ordinary car, so we made a bed in our big van, and I drove her to a daughter’s house where she would spend her last days.

Two weeks ago, Else went to plan the accommodation for the annual Women’s Conference in January. She visited pastor Fujimoto on the way. Obaa-san was there as well. Two years ago, she had moved in with him again.

It was a heart-felt reunion. Obaa-san is now 92, and she was sitting upright in her bed – not very mobile, but healthy and of sound mind. She grasped Else’s hand with her supple fingers. It was a miracle.

Pastor Fujimoto had regularly visited Obaa-san during the two years she lived with her daughter. He believed she needed something to do with her hands. He told Else, “One day, I took along some strips of paper for the stars.” Obaa-san showed no interest, but my niece happened to be visiting on that day as well, and she wanted to

learn the technique. Every time my niece visited her mother, she would weave stars while talking with Obaa-san. Gradually, the old woman got interested and at last she began to weave with her stiff, bended fingers. And look, Fujimoto said smiling with triumph. He pulled aside a curtain, revealing boxes and boxes full of stars along the wall. Probably more than ten thousand stars.

Obaa-san weaves paper strips every day. Her fingers move supple and her head follows suit.

There is one word I have to root up from my vocabulary: "HOPELESS".

Nothing is hopeless. It may seem hopeless, but hope is here. It came to us with Jesus.

When God became human,
hope came into our world.

When we were baptized
to belong to him, we were "reborn
to a living hope in Jesus Christ our
Lord."

We wish all of you a
blessed, hope-full Christmas.

PS. There are three homes
for the elderly in pastor Fujimoto's
town. He wishes to get many stiff
fingers started, so every time he
visits them, he brings paper strips
along.

Yours sincerely, Else and
Kresten."

Før den første jul i Yokosuka kirke for 8 år siden, havde vi 3 dage med juleklip. Der var mange, der gerne ville lære at flette danske julestjerner. Nogle lærer det hurtigt. - andre er mere søm til det. - nogle lærer det aldrig.

Pastor Fujimotos mor paa 84 år hørte til den sidste gruppe. Med sine gigtkrogede fingre masede hun paa hver dag, lige lidt bjældet. Gang paa gang maatte vi have det hele op, og begynde forfra. Det var haabløst. Vi flyttede fra Yokosuka kirke nærtidig. Fujimoto 100 km. sydpaa, vi flyttede 400 km. nordpaa. "Oba-san" (bedstemor) Fujimotos mor, var for svag til at rulle den lange tur i en almbil, saaa vi indrettede en liggeplads i vores store "van", og jeg kørte Oba-san ned til en datter, hvor hun skulle være den sidste tid.

Eise var sydpaa i forrige uge for at planlægge indkvartering til det nærliggende kvindestævne i januar. Paa vejen besøgte hun pastor Fujimota. Oba-san var der ogsaa. Hun var flyttet tilbage til præsteboligen for 2 år siden.

Det blev et varmt gensyn. Oba-san, nu 92, sad strukt paa sin seng. - Ikke saa rørig, men rask og aandsfrisk. Hendes smilende fingre knugede Eises hænder. Der var sket et under.

De to mor, Oba-san havde boet hos datteren, var pastor Fujimoto jævnligt toget paa besøg. Han svarede, at Oba-san tænkte til noget at beskæftige hænderne med... Fujimoto fortalte: "En dag tog jeg nogle stjernestrimler med. "Oba-san, lad os prøve om vi kan huske at flette stjerner." Ingen interesse fra Oba-san, men min niece, som ogsaa var paa besøg, ville gerne lære det. Hver gang min niece kom paa besøg, flettede hun stjerner, men hun snakkede med Oba-san. Lidt efter lidt blev interessen væk, og til sidst gik hun igang med de stive, krogede fingre." - og se nu udledt Fujimoto med et triumferende smil! Han trak et luthersk sæk, og det lange væggen stod kasse ved kasse med stjerner. Der var nok langt over 10 hundrede.

Hver dag er Oba-san igang med strimlerne. Fingrene bevæger sig smidigt, og hjernen følger raskt med.

Der er et ord, som skal luges ud af mit ordforraad.

"HAABLØST"
Der er intet, som er haabløst. Det kan nu haabløst ud, men haabet er der stadig. Det kom til os i Jesus.
Da Gud blev menneske kom haabet ind i vor verden.
Da vi blev døbt til at høre som til, blev vi "gennedt til et levende haab, i Jesus Kristus, vor Herre."

Vi ønsker jer alle en velsignet, haabfyldt jul.

PS. I pastor Fujimotos by er der 3 plejehjem. Hans ønske er at fæse med gang i mange stive fingre, saa han får stjernestrimler med hver gang han er paa besøg.

Kærlig hilsen Else & Kresten

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