



Reverend Yumi Asano

On July 1st, 2016, Reverend Yumi Asano, the head minister of Konko Church of Imaike, Aichi prefecture, Japan was appointed to the post of Director of the Konkokyo Headquarters' Administrative Office, making her the first female cabinet member of Konkokyo.

Reverend Asano was active as a member of the Konkokyo Ladies Network, and a member of the House of Delegates of Konkokyo as well.

We will introduce her desire on world peace as follows.

Praying for Peace and Cherishing All Life

By Reverend Yumi Asano, Director of Outreach Department

We are taught that the Konko Faith emphasizes the importance of practicing faith in one's everyday life. Practicing faith is the principle, or the foundation, of our daily life. It is the way of life based on the viewpoint of the Konko Faith. When we live a life with the wisdom of practicing faith, the world of faith can be realized, and the workings of Ikigami Konko Daijin will appear vividly in this world. We do not practice faith only while sitting in front of Kami altar.

One day, after finishing work, I was taking a relaxing bath and thought, "How comfortable! I'm so happy." Then, I wondered how many blessings I had actually received in order to have this bath. I tried counting all the blessings I had received: water, gas and equipment such as a shower-head, a bathtub, etc. Blessings were not limited to material things. I was

able to take a bath especially due to my good health and the support of my family. As my thoughts broadened, the teaching, "Have a grateful heart for all that benefits you," came to mind. I felt the need to thank everything that surrounded me. Then, all at once an idea struck me, "There is the premise that Japan is in a state of peace." If Japan had been at war, I could not have taken such a leisurely bath since I would have been left vulnerable, totally undressed just to bathe.

While bathing, at the moment when I felt at peace, I thought of people: people fleeing in the middle of a war, people sighing out of grief for being in temporary shelters, people suffering from an illness and people whose hearts were bursting with worry. I prayed for them, then, I felt Kami born within my heart.

I felt convinced that there should be peace throughout the world for every-

one to be at peace. You may think that this is obvious, but we may not truly understand this concept. We, humans, sometimes fight for the sake of saving a life. This is because we regard a person who threatens our life as an enemy. However, it is not easy to recognize that an "enemy's" life is also precious and to be protected.

Life, even our own life, does not belong solely to ourselves. I believe all life must be connected to each other. Our life came from an immeasurably distant past, 3800 million years ago, when life first appeared on Earth, and it will continue, far into the future. In addition, our chain of life expands broadly and vastly, and thus, my life and yours has been brought into existence here and now.

While I take a bath, I pray for peace and cherish all life, then, Kami is born within my heart. This is my humble way of practicing faith.

Gender Equality in Konkokyo

The Konkokyo International Center (KIC) hosted a Round Table Discussion on December 8 and 9, 2016, addressing the theme, "Gender Equality in Konkokyo." Professor Noriko Kawahashi from Nagoya Institute of Technology and specialist in post-colonial feminism in religion was the guest speaker. Fourteen ministers, members and believers also participated in the meeting.



Professor Noriko Kawahashi

Opening remarks were provided by Reverend Shin-kichi Kawai, the Director of the KIC. According to the Reverend Kawai, most believers in Konkokyo are women and the number of male and female ministers is almost equal. Yet, the administrative heads within the organization and head ministers are overwhelmingly men. The so-called "allocation of church roles" may be an important factor for this outcome.

The need to understand, seek and promote, not only gender equality, but also lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (hereafter LGBT) equality, appears to be of increasing concern as witnessed in requests from ministers and believers especially outside of Japan. This development may be attributed to the rise of strict fundamentalism and conservative ideologies coming, in some cases, from religious groups. Therefore, it is important for Konkokyo to review the human origins of our religious tradition and interpret its meanings and applications in our current environment. There is much to gain and learn by listening to the ideas and concerns raised by Profes-

sor Kawahashi, the individual wives of ministers and others. Reverend Kawai urged all participants to try to understand the difficulties confronted by women and other groups due to discrimination despite their individual efforts to succeed in life.

As the wife of a Buddhist priest herself, Professor Kawahashi then addressed the gathering with a brief description of her experience living and working at a temple. Based partly on this experience, she presented her observations about gender equality from the viewpoint of a researcher and wife. She cited three characteristics in religious bodies in regards to gender and sexuality. The first is the historic marginalizing and ignoring of women to the periphery of society and, thus, the need to listen to their voices today. Second is the need to critically understand the role and impact of male centrism in religious bodies. The final characteristic involves the suppression of groups such as LGBT. Professor Kawahashi made the point that there continues to be a suppressive aspect to religious bodies despite their so-called public greatness. Religious authorities

have created a stratification and/or classification of genders, races and other rankings to be accepted by believers and followers. Women, as one of those groups, have been assigned less value leading to their subordination to men.

Professor Kawahashi continued her presentation noting a disparity within the Buddhist priesthood. She described how Buddhist priests are very insightful on some human rights issues including women. Priest comment on the need to learn more about the concerns of women and other subordinated groups or how "the age of women" has arrived when addressing a predominately male audience, while at the same event, women are relegated to the rear of the room serving tea. On those occasions, she has been tempted to ask the priests, "Are you willing to look after a baby or will you care for a child so your wife can join the session?" Despite these circumstances, some women have nonetheless achieved a noteworthy and meaningful life.

However, due to the prevailing discrimination in religious bodies, women have confronted limited freedom and, therefore, it is critical for people to understand how men have monopolized power within a religious body. A woman of faith in Christianity, Buddhism or a new religion will currently confront subordination due to gender discrimination and thus limitations within that religious body. There may even be a psychology within religious bodies that is unaccepting of women



as equals.

Professor Kawahashi concluded her remarks emphasizing the need for greater gender and LGBT education within religious bodies and the need to address and change the biases that currently exist within these organizations.

After Professor Kawahashi's presentation, the participants shared some observations about the current state of gender relations in Konkokyo.

"Although there is no overt misogynistic doctrine in the teachings of Konkokyo, prejudice exists just as it does in the mainstream of Japanese society. Socio-culturally, women in Konkokyo were taught to pray in less noticed locations which has a notable impact in many churches and seems to be a prevailing norm. As recently as twenty years ago, women ministers did not deliver sermons or appear on stage during services at the headquarters. Those who were head ministers were usually widows. This seems compatible with the fact few women are heads of departments or administrative offices in Konkokyo and in the mainstream of Japanese society."

"It is said that 'Heaven is father and Earth is mother' which was interpreted as passivity and subordination for women. As of this writing, the discussion of equality has begun, but only on a superficial level, and the opinions held by male ministers on this matter has been difficult to determine."

"When preparing sermons containing references to family related issues, it is important for ministers to be sensitive to individuals in their congregation who have discord within their family. This could include divorce, childlessness, and difficult relations between family members. This is by no means suggesting that such topics be avoided, but simply more awareness of how such topics are presented in a sermon."



"It is often presumed women should prepare food for the after service Naorai party. Even when a woman wants to listen to a sermon, there is an unspoken rule that she should be preparing the foodstuffs during the giving of the sermon. Men take for granted the idea of Naorai preparation being performed by women."

"A letter from a minister, who admitted he was gay, was published in the Konko Newspaper. The letter revealed the inner conflict with the teaching about 'prosperity from generation to generation, prosperity of family and descendants.' However, he came to realize he could have his 'children in faith,' which saved him from his inner struggle. Although less publicized and known, there are Konko Churches in Japan and abroad that conduct LGBT wedding ceremonies for members of those communities. There are also workshops being conducted in Japan to better educate the public about the LGBT community and I hope that Konkokyo would become a place where the voices of the people of any sexual orientation could be heard."

"I am now managing temporary housing facilities for women who are victims of domestic violence. Some of these women were abandoned by parents and grew up in child welfare institutions, while others have no one to rely on because they are totally estranged from their families. I thought of es-

tablishing a church for the people who came to the shelter as a kind of family environment beyond blood relatives. My vision is to build a church where people from diverse backgrounds could come and go, and one that is open for anyone."

"The direction pursued by Konkokyo will be decided by those in decision making positions and the majority of believers. Should gender inequality continue to persist and should bias against the LGBT communities continue, I have to wonder and ask if Konkokyo has a future. I would like to see a new vision pursued within the Konkokyo community which is rooted in the idea of equality for women and LGBT individuals."

The participants appeared to understand the importance of the presentation topic and identified some areas of gender inequality in the churches and the administration. They also began to imagine a more gender-equal faith community in Konkokyo. As the Konko faith is passed from one generation to the next, the issue at stake is whether Konkokyo can become a religion seeking to truly liberate those who are oppressed. KIC and other leaders of the organization, as well as believers overall, should educate themselves on their own shortcomings and listen to the views held by women and the LGBT community in order to make Konkokyo a more open place.

KCNA Welcomes a New Chief Administrative Minister

On January 1st, 2017, Reverend Amy Uzunoe-Chin had been appointed as the Chief Administrative Minister of Konko Churches of North America (KCNA). She expressed her feeling, saying, "Never Forget Kami-Sama."

We're beginning to see many people dangerously beginning to become more self-centered, believing we are able to solve, fix, and cure everything with our own human powers. We are likewise becoming more distant in our relationship with Kami, forgetting that is the true foundation of how to live worry-free.

Technology and convenience are great, but like everything in this Universe, a balance is important to maintain harmony. The value of having face to face interaction, especially with our youth, is critical in nurturing and teaching them basic human behavior such as etiquette or morality.

Our Founder spoke about these "human-centered" views and returning to a more "Kami-centered" heart, so now the Konko Churches of North America (KCNA) Office wants to focus on that by introducing our new Four-Year Movement, "Smile from Within." I believe that truly living with faith brings joy to one's life; if one person possesses this, others will gravitate towards them and Kami can help more people.

This provides a vision for KCNA groups to realize Kami in their lives and develop their faith through meaningful, daily actions, giving them the skills, help, and confidence to grow physically, mentally and spiritually. We want to truly be able to "Smile from Within" through "Heart, Mind, and Body"(2017), "Positive Talking"(2018), "Paying it Forward"(2019), and for "Eternal Happiness"(2020). The aim of each of these simple and practical yearly sub-themes is to benefit the local churches and our believers by reinforcing Kami's teachings through daily practice.

We want believers to live a worry-free life and to see their faith foundation is not only based on appreciation to Kami in whatever we do and say, but by practicing a faith that helps others and is appreciated by Kami too.



Kondo Fujimori Memorial Library Established in Cambodia

A dedication ceremony for the Kondo Fujimori Memorial Library at the Kok Sdao Primary School in Cambodia's Kampomg Chhnang province was held on February 5, 2017. Reverend KONDO Fujimori is the disciple of the Founder and the founding minister of Konko Church of Namba.

The planning and construction of the library, financed through donations, was spearheaded by the Preparatory Committee for Reverend Kondo Fujimori's 100th Memorial. It was a part of the committee's efforts to perpetuate the path set by Reverend Kondo Fujimori

and to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the passing of the founding minister. The library occupies 117 square meters of the elementary school and includes a collection of more than 1000 books.

About 300 people, sixteen from Japan, school children,

parents, teachers and representative from the Board of Education, attended the ceremony. The prayers were said by the local priest along with a Konkokyo service. All sincerely prayed that the library will become a vibrant center of study and community activities. It is hoped that every child

who studies and uses the resources of this valuable facility benefits and grows to become a valuable citizen contributing to Cambodia's future.

A 6th grade student representative, Veoun Vonsoksvan, showed joy as he expressed gratitude for having access to the library.

Before this library was built, he said that he had nowhere to get books although he had a great interest to read.

As part of the effort to support the library, Konko Church of Namba will launch a new organization whose goal is to continue to support the library and the student users.



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Konkokyo International Center

E-mail: kic@konkokyo.or.jp Tel: +81-(0)3-3818-3701 Fax: +81-(0)3-3818-3793 Twitter: @konkokyo_kic

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/KIC1993>

2-17-11 Hongo, Bunkyo-ku,
Tokyo 113-0033 JAPAN

URL: <http://www.konkokyo.or.jp/eng/kic/>