

Rev. Toyohiko Kagawa



Some people may ask, “Who was Toyohiko Kagawa?” Toyohiko Kagawa (1888 -1960) was a dedicated Japanese Christian pastor, evangelist, pacifist, social reformer, humanitarian, labor activist, writer, and founder of the Friends of Jesus movement. Before World War II, he was considered the most famous Japanese in the western world and was often compared with Albert Schweitzer in Africa and Mahatma Gandhi in India as one of the greatest modern saints.

Kagawa was born in Kobe on July 10, 1888 to the concubine of a wealthy businessman. Both parents died while he was only four years old and he was consequently sent to Shikoku to live with his father’s legal wife. His new stepmother who was not very pleased to have Kagawa with her and her family. He attended junior high school in Tokushima and also studied English with American Presbyterian missionaries. He became a Christian through their influence and was baptized at the age of 15.

As a strong pacifist, Kagawa often spoke out against Japan’s war with Russia (1904-1905). When he finished high school, he felt a strong call to be a minister, so one of the missionaries enrolled him in the Presbyterian College, Meiji Gakuin in Tokyo. After two years at Meiji Gakuin, he transferred to the Kobe Theological Seminary. Kagawa was greatly influenced by his readings of John Wesley, Saint Francis of Assisi, and Leo Tolstoy. Through his readings and his own faith, Kagawa felt that love was the essence of Christianity.

In seminary, he became troubled by what seemed to be the seminarians’ over-concern for Christian doctrine and wanted to act upon his faith rather than just talk about it. He was inspired by the story of the Good Samaritan and took action. Therefore, on December 24, 1909, at the age of 21, Toyohiko Kagawa moved into the Shinkawa slum area to live among the poor and offer aid to those most in need.

From 1909 to 1923, (except for the three years from 1914 to 1917 when he was studying in the US), he lived among the slums in a small, broken down shack which he often shared with others. In 1913, he married one of the volunteers who worked alongside him, Haru Shiba. They later had three children, two sons and a daughter.

Part of Kagawa’s deep concern for workers and labor unions came about while he was studying at Princeton Theological Seminary and Princeton University. It was during that time he had gone to visit an economically

depressed area in New York City. It was also in New York he observed a demonstration of 60,000 workers and he realized that to change the situation of the economically oppressed, he had to be in solidarity with the oppressed working people.

Upon his return to Japan, Toyohiko Kagawa worked for the organized labor movement, economic cooperatives, and universal suffrage. He also led strikes against the major factories in Kobe and was arrested in 1921 and again in 1922 for his leadership in the strikes.

He wrote a book in English about the cooperative movement, brotherhood economics while on board a ship to the United States in 1936 and also wrote a three part auto biographical series of novels (Crossing the Death Line: Before the Dawn, A Shooter at the Sun and Time to Hear the Voice of God) . These books became bestsellers in Japan with sales of over 4 million copies. He used the revenues from his substantial book sales to fund his work in the slum, cooperative movements, and other ministries.

In 1923, a powerful earthquake hit Tokyo and Yokohama. The day after the earthquake, Kagawa went to Tokyo to help. The government back then was overwhelmed by the many needs so they asked Kagawa to be the Chief of Social Welfare. He accepted and he helped rebuild the areas devastated by the earthquake. For this he was honored despite his insistence that he was only doing what God had called him to do.

As a strong pacifist and community organizer, Kaagwa started the National Anti -War League in 1928 and also organized the Federation of Labor. In the 1930s he addressed world problems, such as soil erosion, by persuading many of Japan's farmers to plant fodder trees to conserve soil, supply food, and feed animals (the three dimensions of his system). His interest in helping the farmers sell their produce and getting food to the people was among the many reasons he was involved in establishing retail food cooperatives.

During his 1930 -1936 visit to the U.S., Kagawa was estimated to have spoken in 150 cities and 44 states before audiences of 75,000 persons according to Christian Century magazine (edition 53, no. 29, July 25, 1936).

After Japan's invasion of China, Kagawa publicly asked the Chinese people for forgiveness. On August 25, 1940 he was arrested for his anti-war activities and questioned by the military police (*Kempeitai*). After his release from prison, he visited the United States in April 1941 in order to try to avert war as a member of the Cristian Peace Mission from Japan. Later, after returning to Japan, E. Stanley Jones (a Methodist missionary who have been a missionary in India but was stranded in the U.S. during the war) sent a cable

to Kagawa on December 1, 1941 asking him to call a week long anti-war prayer vigil which was held in churches on both sides of the ocean.

After the war was over, Kagawa was part of the transitional Japanese government and became a leader in the postwar movement for democracy in Japan. In 1945 he established the International Peace Society in Tokyo. Japan was also experiencing severe food shortages and exceptional inflation in 1945 and Kagawa helped establish co-ops across Japan. Within two years over 3 million people became co-op members.

In 1946 Emperor Hirohito asked Kagawa to visit him. During that visit Kagawa asked the Emperor to get closer to his people and fill them with a desire for democracy and justice. About a week later the Emperor appeared in public for the first time and visited Kagawa at the settlement Kagawa had established in Tokyo where 20,000 refugees were located. (Kagawa had established many such settlements in the larger cities and country areas of Japan.)

When Kagawa was in the U.S. on a preaching tour in 1950 he visited 37 places and gave 400 lectures in five months to an estimated audience of 350,000 people. Although he suffered from ill health off and on (tuberculosis and trachoma which he had contracted in the early days of his ministry in the slums), he continued speaking and writing extensively throughout his life and published over 300 books and leaflets.

Kagawa was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1947 and 1948. He was nominated for the Noble Peace Prize in 1954, 1955, 1956 and 1960. After his death at the age of 71 on April 23, 1960 he was awarded the second highest honor in Japan - the Induction into the Order of the Sacred Treasure.

Kagawa's legacy lives on. His writings and books have been translated into over 38 languages. On April 23 every year he is commemorated in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Episcopal Church as a "renewer of society."

There have been many books and articles written about him. One excellent book is *Toyohiko Kagawa: an Apostle of Love and Social Justice* by Robert E. Schildgen. There is a manga written in Japanese about Kagawa which has been translated into English and Korean. A movie was also made about Kagawa's life. His last book, *Cosmic Purposes*, was published in Japanese in 1958 and has also been translated into English.

There are five Kagawa resource centers/museums in Japan. Two are in Tokyo, one in Shikoku, and two in Hyogo prefecture. The Kagawa Memorial Center in Kobe is a community center with a café known as Tengokuya

(Heaven's) Café, a museum, a robust day care program, afterschool care programs for children with special needs, a tutoring program for children in Japanese schools, and other various programs for children and adults in the community.

Interest in Toyohiko Kagawa has been revived as people read his books and learn more about the history of the Co-op. It is with sincere hope that future generations will learn and be inspired by Kagawa's life work and his tremendous impact on society. He was a man who truly lived his Christ, lived his faith and made a great impact on Japanese society.

By Rev. Claudia Genung -Yamamoto, UMC missionary in Kobe