

The Establishment of the Nagasaki YMCA: An Introductory Sketch

Lane R. Earns

The modest two-story structure situated along the streetcar tracks at Ofunagura-machi which serves as the current home of the Nagasaki Young Men's Christian Association offers little indication of the organization's long and illustrious past. The beginnings of the Nagasaki Y.M.C.A. date back almost one hundred years to a visit by a touring American evangelist who arrived in the city on November 9, 1896. The week-long visit by John R. Mott (1865-1955) of the World's Student Christian Federation inspired the immediate establishment of an association of young students under the supervision of Sasamori Uichiro (1867-1911), a teacher at the boys' Methodist mission school, Chinzei Gakuin. Mott and Sasamori would become instrumental in the institution of student and city Y.M.C.A.s in Nagasaki, as well as the construction of the town's first Y.M.C.A. building at Fukuro-machi (present-day Sakae-machi) in 1906.

There had been Y.M.C.A.s in Japan since 1880, and by the time of Mott's arrival in Nagasaki there were eight associations in the country. It was with Mott's tour of Japan, however, that the Y.M.C.A. movement began to gain momentum. Prior to his departure from Japan, Mott addressed a two-day national convention in Tokyo which had been called to form a national student Y.M.C.A. At this convention, Ibuka Kajinosuke of Meiji Gakuin was appointed President of the new organization. By spring 1897, twenty-five of the student Y.M.C.As in Japan had entered the Union. They represented "nearly all the Christian Schools for boys and most of the higher Government schools and colleges...." In Nagasaki, there were student associations at Chinzei, Tozan Gakuin (the Reformed Church boys' school), and the Medical College.

In April 1898, the Y.M.C.A. national headquarters in Tokyo dispatched Ibuka, John T. Swift and Galen Fisher to tour colleges in western Japan. The mission began its tour with a visit to Nagasaki, which was hosting the Training Conference for the Y.M.C.A.s of Kyushu.

Mott returned to Japan from September to October 1901; Nagasaki being the last stop on his tour. While in Nagasaki, he gave "an evangelistic talk to a packed house of 400." Among those in the audience were Sasamori and his students.

The inspiration provided by Mott's second visit led directly to the creation of a city-wide association and an intense fundraising campaign to erect a building for the Nagasaki Y.M.C.A.; both efforts were headed by Sasamori. In November, a small group of Nagasaki residents that included Sasamori, Suganuma Motonosuke, Miyakoshi Shinjiro, Umeda Shingoro and Hirotsu Tokichi, met to form a Nagasaki Y.M.C.A. This was followed on February 27, 1902 by the first general meeting, at which time the appointment of a fifteen-man Board of Directors completed the establishment of the association. In an April letter to Mott, V.H. Helm, Secretary of the Japan Y.M.C.A. mission, recounted the subsequent events in Nagasaki.

A city [Association] has been organized in Nagasaki with Dr. Sasamori as president. They have a board of fifteen directors including a group of laymen who in caliber, influence and position are unsurpassed by any city in the country outside of Tokyo....They have taken of the building question with great vigor. Their idea is a hall seating at least 500....Dr. Sasamori says: 'the board is very enthusiastic to build an [Association] hall....The board pledges to raise at least 5,000 yen toward the new building if you can help us out with the rest of the sum which will be 15,000 yen.' He

further says: ‘As to the 20,000 yen building I am willing to devote my time and energy when I go to America in order to get contributions.’”

Before leaving Japan, Sasamori wrote to Mott of developments concerning the Nagasaki Y.M.C.A. and of his plans to travel to the United States to solicit funds.

“[The Nagasaki Y.M.C.A.] is the result of your work here. We have more than 100 members and are planning for a new building. The board of Managers pledges to raise here 1/4 of all expenses....The night school and preaching services for city young men are already started and are quite hopeful. If you would give a permission or an approval, I am instructed to raise \$10,000.”

Sasamori’s travel plans called for him to leave Nagasaki on May 29, 1902 and, after a brief consultation with Y.M.C.A. officials in Tokyo, depart Japan on June 3. He took with him a document entitled “An Appeal for an Association Hall for Nagasaki, Japan.” The appeal was endorsed by the Y.M.C.A. National Committee of Japan, the Board of Directors of the Nagasaki Y.M.C.A., local Japanese pastors, and Western missionaries/teachers. In the appeal, Nagasaki was described as having 25,000 men between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five who had come from their country homes to the city in search of an education and/or employment. There they encountered “The dregs of many nationalities [who had] gravitated to form a cess-pool of deceit and vice.” The few churches in the city did what they could for these young men, but it was not enough. What was needed, according to the appeal, was a Y.M.C.A. that could provide “entertainment, practical instruction, and friendship...on the basis of a positive, winning Christianity....” It was with this goal in mind that Sasamori left for the United States on his fundraising tour.

Sasamori arrived in Seattle on June 19 and left immediately to meet Mott for the final day of a conference at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. From there he proceeded to the Y.M.C.A. Intercollegiate Conference at Northfield, Massachusetts, where he discussed fundraising plans with Mott and other leading Y.M.C.A. officials. As a result of this meeting, it was decided that fundraising efforts in the United States should be postponed until the fall.

In August, Sasamori represented Japan at the World’s Student Christian Federation meeting at Soro, Denmark. There he convinced members to hold the next Federation conference in Japan. Unfortunately, the Russo-Japanese War delayed the meeting until 1907. From Denmark Sasamori moved on to Oslo, Norway, where he was the Japanese representative to the World’s Alliance Conference.

Sasamori returned to the United States in early September to begin his fundraising tour. A new U.S. goal of \$12,000 (\$2,000 more than the original request) was set. If Sasamori could collect pledges totalling \$7,000, the national organization agreed to contribute an additional \$5,000.

In addition to pleas for money for the building fund, Sasamori occasionally made other requests on behalf of the Nagasaki Y.M.C.A. After praising the excellent spiritual and intellectual skills of his students, he lamented that physically they were not very strong. What they needed was baseball equipment in order to harden their bodies.

Practically we have no other game but baseball, which has been introduced to Japan and which is one of the best of [the] harmless games....When I left the city [our students] wished me to get [an] American bat. I am sure it will be a great encouragement and inspiration to them if some kind Association will give them as a present a whole set of baseball equipment. Such kindness will not

only make them more interested in this game but will also inspire them to be better Christians and to do better class work in this coming year.

Whether he received the equipment or not is unclear. Even if he did, one wonders whether the boys actually became better Christians and/or students through their diamond activities!

On his fundraising tour Sasamori visited Baltimore; Philadelphia; New York City; Bridgeport, MA; Brooklyn; Dayton, OH; Greencastle, IN; Bloomington, IN; Terre Haute, IN; Chicago, IL; Racine, WI; Milwaukee, WI; Omaha, NB; Portland OR; and Seattle, WA. The Central Branch of the Brooklyn Y.M.C.A. developed a vigorous campaign to meet its \$2,000 pledge for the Nagasaki building fund. It issued 2,000 shares of stock at one dollar apiece to raise the needed money. Those purchasing ten or more shares were made honorary life members of the Nagasaki Association.

Sasamori's October 5 visit to Greencastle, Indiana marked the return to his alma mater, De Pauw University. In 1885, at age eighteen, the Hirosaki native had left Japan to attend De Pauw. "Sasamori was awarded the degree of bachelor of philosophy in 1891, bachelor of sacred theology in 1892, and doctor of philosophy in 1893, becoming the only person to earn three such De Pauw degrees."

By the time of Sasamori's departure from Seattle on October 21, he was still \$1,000 short of the \$7,000 needed to ensure the additional \$5,000 pledge from the U.S. national organization. In spite of this shortfall, Mott agreed to try and help him meet his goal. The \$12,000 pledge from the United States for the Nagasaki Y.M.C.A. building was, however, based on two conditions:

First, that the friends in Nagasaki secure the lot and pay for it in full. Secondly, that some satisfactory arrangement is made concerning the tenure or holding of the property

The other issue that arose during Sasamori's trip to the U.S. was the possibility of stationing a foreign secretary in Nagasaki to assist the operation of the Y.M.C.A. Sasamori felt that two secretaries (one each for the student and city Y.M.C.A.s) were needed, while Mott indicated that the national organization would supply one man for southwest Japan in 1903.

Sasamori returned to Yokohama from his trip abroad on November 7, and arrived in Nagasaki on November 19. He reported the two stipulations regarding U.S. pledges to the Board of Directors, and noted that "They all gladly accepted them as they are all the first class Christians."

The effort to raise funds in Nagasaki proved even more difficult than that in the United States. In March 1903 Galen Fisher of the Japan Y.M.C.A. headquarters in Tokyo wrote to Mott asking that part of the pledged U.S. money be sent to Nagasaki as soon as possible "to exert a moral stimulative influence over Japanese businessmen who distrust the reality of the American backing." Sasamori wrote to Mott concerning the same matter in May, asking that some of the money be released in order to ease the funding effort in Nagasaki. He complained that it was "much harder work to raise a hundred dollars [in Nagasaki] than a thousand dollars in America. The Japanese people in general are not used to giving a large sum for public enterprises and especially for Christian enterprises.

In July, Mott responded to the requests of Fisher and Sasamori by agreeing to send at least \$5,000 to Nagasaki. This he hoped would enable Sasamori to raise the additional \$4,000 needed in local pledges. In the same letter Mott also noted that the Foreign Committee hoped to decide on a foreign secretary for Nagasaki within a few days, and that this person would sail for Japan in early autumn.

V.W. Helm, Secretary of the Y.M.C.A. mission in Japan, visited Nagasaki in October to help solicit funds among Japanese and foreign residents of the town. According to Helm, at least ¥6,000 (\$3,000) would be needed to purchase a lot to house the new Y.M.C.A. buildings. The building would tentatively include a two-story main structure with classrooms, reading rooms, social rooms and administrative offices, plus a large auditorium for public gatherings.

Helm and Sasamori organized a dinner and general meeting of local businessmen and dignitaries at Fukuya Restaurant to discuss the issue of fundraising. Governor Arakawa sent a letter endorsing the movement, which Sasamori read to the gathering. The Chairman of the City Council and a local newspaper official also endorsed the fundraising efforts in short speeches. With such widespread support, it appeared as if raising the necessary money for the building fund and lot would be relatively simple.

The situation changed dramatically, however, when Sasamori and others in the movement went around in the spring of 1904 to collect money from those who had endorsed the project. "In the midst of our work the declaration of war [against Russia] came out, and it became necessary for us to postpone our movement for several reasons, but the greatest among them was the fact that this war will cost much to our people and that we must give up every other enterprise in order to save money for the war. This sentiment was so strong that the public library movement, and the movement of raising the funds for the School for the Blind and Deaf, which were going on at the same time with our Y.M.C.A. work, were given up for the time being. If we had continued our work in spite of it, the people might have criticized us as not being patriotic. At that time the Buddhists had their meeting and have spoken to that effect. Under the circumstances we thought it wise to wait for better times to come, and to keep, on the other hand, the sympathy and confidence of our people here."

By the time of the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War ¥2,500 had been raised and Sasamori was confident another ¥500 could easily be added. He felt, however, that the remainder would have to wait until the end of the war.

It was a difficult time for Sasamori, because not only was he disappointed in his inability to raise the necessary funds, but in June his health broke down and the person sent to be the foreign secretary in Nagasaki, N. Wilbur Helm, had to return to the United States because his wife became very ill. > While waiting for the war to end, his health to improve, and a replacement for Helm, Sasamori proceeded with plans for a student evangelical campaign in November.

Good news was not long in coming, as by December land prices in Nagasaki had fallen to the point where with a little help from the Y.M.C.A. headquarters in New York, a good lot could be purchased. The lot chosen was the site of a Shinto shrine (Ryumon) in the center of the city.

This [shrine] will be taken down for to give a place for our Christian edifice....Last spring the price of the lot was forty yen per six feet square....Now we made arrangement with the sect to buy it for nineteen yen per six feet square....The Board of Managers decided to take the lot, and all missionaries here endorsed the movement.

The total price for the lot was ¥5,500; less than a third of what it would have cost earlier in the year. Since the money collected in Nagasaki had nearly reached ¥3,000, the Board asked Mott if the New York headquarters would pick up the remaining ¥2,500, so that construction of buildings

could begin early the following year. Sasamori was also able to report the encouraging news that a student Y.M.C.A. had recently been established at the commercial school in Nagasaki and that twenty-seven students had been converted to Christianity in the November evangelical campaign.

The U.S. national organization agreed to pay the additional ¥2,500, so in January 1905 the lot was purchased. Around the same time, the Rev. Henry Stout of the Reformed Church consented to postpone his return to the United States in order to supervise the construction of the Y.M.C.A. building. With the building issue resolved, Sasamori turned to the problem of a foreign secretary for Nagasaki. He wrote to Mott that he hoped to receive a secretary by the time the building opened. This matter was also quickly resolved when on April 1 John Merle Davis, the Kyoto-born son of missionaries, agreed to take the position in Nagasaki.

Much of the first half of 1905 was consumed by an exchange of blueprints between Sasamori and the Y.M.C.A. headquarters in New York concerning the proposed three-story main building and auditorium. Modifications had to be made to meet the strict specifications of Y.M.C.A. facilities without going over budget. With the blueprints approved, the building construction, headed by a Japanese carpenter and supervised by Stout, could finally proceed. On May 26, 1905 the stone-laying ceremony marking the beginning of construction took place.

Although Sasamori continued to have problems with his health, his dream of a full-fledged Y.M.C.A. in Nagasaki was rapidly becoming a reality. On August 23, 1905 the Nagasaki Y.M.C.A. received permission to incorporate from the Minister of the Interior, thus making the association a legal entity even before its building was completed. Davis, the foreign secretary, arrived with his wife in December, and in January the Board of Directors purchased the lot adjoining the one where the building was being erected. Finally, on May 14, 1906 the new Y.M.C.A. building at no. 9 Fukuro-machi was dedicated.

The three-story red-brick structure contained a 750-seat auditorium, a large gymnasium (un-equipped), reading and dining rooms, a library, and small class and meeting rooms. The dedication ceremony, presided over by Sasamori and attended by about 600 people, was conducted in the new auditorium. According to a newspaper account of the ceremony, all sections of the community were well represented. Those attending included representatives of the Governor's and Mayor's offices, Rev. Evington of the Episcopal Church, Bishop Harris of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Rev. Pieters of the Reformed Church, Galen Fisher of the Japan Y.M.C.A. headquarters in Tokyo, "nearly all the resident missionaries, prominent Japanese merchants, and students from the Medical, City, and Mission schools...."

There were many speakers over the course of the evening, but the principle one was Bishop Harris, who came down from Tokyo for the occasion. Harris spoke of the Y.M.C.A.'s beginnings only fifty years earlier in Britain, and how in 1906 there were 3,000 institutions and 800,000 members worldwide. He also noted the good work of the Y.M.C.A. among Japanese soldiers in Manchuria during the recently-completed Russo-Japanese War, and the subsequent ¥10,000 donation to the organization by the Japanese emperor.

Both the building and the ceremony met with favorable responses. Of the building, the local English language newspaper said, "Nagasaki has reason to be proud of the new addition to its public buildings, as it presents a handsome appearance and is probably the finest of its kind in Japan." Regarding the ceremony, the same newspaper referred to it as "a memorable one in the history of

Nagasaki....”

On the following evening, one hundred people, both Japanese and foreigners alike, who had contributed to the funding of the facilities were honored with a dinner in the Y.M.C.A. gymnasium. Sasamori also used the occasion to plea for more money to furnish and equip the new building and to pay for the land under it. Those gathered spoke of a Y.M.C.A. that they hoped would reach out to young men in the city irrespective of religion or class. Bishop Harris echoed the sentiments of many when he said, “May the youth of this city crowd into this building and share its noble influences.”

On May 19, the first public activity, a concert of Western and Japanese instrumental musical selections, was held in the Lecture Hall of the Y.M.C.A. The new building was already being used for what would become one of its primary functions—to bring together people of different races, faiths, nationalities and customs in a positive learning environment. A mere seven years after the closing of the foreign settlement brought an end to the separate and unequal legal distinctions between Japanese and foreigners, the various residents of Nagasaki (with the assistance of friends in the United States) banded together to support the construction of a building that everyone hoped would provide a constructive alternative for young men to the all-too-prevalent vices of an international port town.

Eighty-seven years later, the Nagasaki Y.M.C.A. continues with its mission. The dream of two men, John Mott and Sasamori Uichiro, lives on as an example of the best in international cooperation.

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