

Creating a Context for Spiritual Formation through Interview Reports at Hokusei Gakuen Women's Junior College, Part

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INTRODUCTION

The tepid response to the message of Christ in Japan as a whole has also characterized Christian educational ministry in this country. As a microcosm of both Japanese and Christian educational institutions, Hokusei Gakuen Women's Junior College (HGWJC)¹ has also experienced the same barriers to spreading the Gospel within its sphere of influence.

One occasion for students to encounter the Christian faith is in a classroom setting at HGWJC from me, a male foreigner removed by one generation. The instruction is largely in the students' second language. Their hearing the message of Christ within this context inevitably impairs its communication due to language, age, and gender barriers. Linked with my imperfect understanding of the students' cultural background, this arrangement serves as a wall which divides students from the Christian faith. Beyond these actual barriers also lie students' assumptions and expectations as to my capacity to comprehend their current beliefs, appreciate their feelings, and help them to overcome the obstacles which separate them from faith. Especially in view of the widely recognized tendency of many Japanese to view Christianity as a foreigners' religion and

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thus irrelevant to their lives, these cultural issues represent formidable bulwarks which must be scaled if the Gospel of Christ is even to receive serious consideration by many students.

In order to address these issues, I have structured an interview report project which focuses on the conversion and subsequent Christian life of a local church member as interviewee. HGWJC students personally interview someone within the Japanese cultural context who has embraced Christian faith. The discussion thus begins where the Japanese Christian was at one time (i.e., where the interviewer stands spiritually). This provides interviewers the opportunity to participate in the church member's life journey, which is often similar in many ways to her own. Interviewers have an opportunity for a series of dialogues designed to build relationships of friendship and to provide a context for students to encounter Christ and respond in faith.

THE INTERVIEW PROJECT

Purposes

The interview project research as a whole is an attempt to demonstrate one way in which, stated in Christian terms, God is drawing people to Himself.² The series of articles of which this one is a part, explains how a project can be developed with this end in mind. Together, they hopefully build, on a solid biblical and theological foundation, an implementation strategy and evaluation criteria for this interview approach. The focus is on the need for ministry which enables witnesses who are of the same ethnicity, gender, and general age level. This is imperative for Christians to effectively convey the message of Christ to non-believing Japanese students. The project measures the effectiveness of communication by and to people within a certain cultural demographic: college-age Japanese women. The overarching strategy of the interview project is to foster an authentic Japanese Christian faith which is not a “foreign import” but grows from the native cultural population.

The primary aim is to gather data from the students themselves in order to demonstrate how questions can be answered, how seekers can be brought to faith, and how spiritual formation can be encouraged. This study undertakes tasks which include determining the effectiveness of the interview project, reflection report, and survey process as tools for gaining insight useful to those in Christian ministry. This involves three key issues. The first is how HGWJC students view Christ and faith-related matters before participating in this project. The second is how these views may change through the interviews, including what shifts in perception occur and through what processes. The third addresses what areas of difficulty (particularly misunderstanding and resistance) remain between interviewers and an acceptance of Christ and His teachings. In other words, what educational benefit, if any, do students derive from the interaction with interviewees and subsequent reflection about faith?

This project is designed to determine what openness toward the Gospel of Christ may be evident in interviewees and whether indications are present that spiritual formation has occurred in students through the interviews. A key issue is what data exists to show that through the interview process students have become more fully equipped to recognize God's leading and make an informed choice about accepting Christ's claims as Savior and Lord. This is a separate matter from whether their response is positive or negative and whether they reach a point of decision sooner or at a later time.

In addition to the purposes relating specifically to Christian educational ministry, the interview project has been designed with two culture-related purposes in mind. The first is to empower cultural insiders. For this reason, an attempt is made to choose as many college-age or near college-age Japanese Christian women as possible to serve as interviewees. The intent is that there would be fewer cultural, gender, and generational barriers for interviewees to hurdle in order to present Christianity as an attractive possibility for HGWJC student interviewees. This decision also fulfills a second purpose: to create an environment for building personal relationships. People who encounter fewer barriers between them often see a more open door for authentic friendship and understanding. Local witnesses more naturally encourage seekers to attend church with them, thereby enhancing the faith process and encouraging spiritual formation without any misunderstanding of motive.

Hopefully, this examination of the interview process reveals that God is using it to accomplish certain goals related to interviewees. One is to guide student interviewees from a vague understanding of Christ to a clearer one. The second is the transformation of their negative attitudes toward religion into a more accepting view of faith in Christ. The third objective is to move interviewees past encountering the Christian faith merely cerebrally, in abstract form, into knowing it experientially and concretely through discussions with people whose lives have been transformed by faith. Finally, this interview process seeks to help interviewees go beyond conceiving the Bible's teachings as relevant only on a universal level and move toward understanding Scripture as God speaking personally to them and others within their life context.

Despite the profound difficulties in proclaiming and living out the Gospel in the Japanese context, Christ's Great Commission remains in effect. He continues to call people of Japanese and other cultural backgrounds into saving, life-fulfilling relationship with Himself. He commands His followers to go into the world and to make disciples of all nations, teaching them everything He has commanded. How God continues to accomplish His purposes, even in "unresponsive" Japan, will be discussed within this context of interviewing, data gathering, reflection reports, and surveys. Investigating how Christian faith is taking root, growing, and producing fruit in the lives of Japanese people may provide support for the idea that even in cultural environments which are highly resistant to organized religion, the Gospel of Christ has the power to transform the lives of those who seek Him and enable them to pass it on effectively to others.

Goals

Stemming from these purposes are several specific goals which I hoped God would enable the interviewers to reach. Objectives first include some students' following Christ in professing faith, being baptized, and beginning a life of discipleship while at HGWJC. For others, it is to show in reflection reports, surveys, or other measurable ways that they are seriously considering the opportunity of complete forgiveness and new life Christ offers them. These goals are undertaken realizing that it may take until after graduation or much longer for many to profess faith, be baptized, and begin growing in discipleship. Rather, this second goal may really be defined as planting and scattering seeds.

Other goals relate to those who may never come to faith. A third objective is for these interviewers, even though they show no clear serious consideration of faith in Christ, to indicate that they have gained a more positive impression of Christian life through participation in the project. A fourth goal is for those who show nothing positive in their attitudes toward Christian faith to demonstrate that they have nevertheless received a more accurate and fuller understanding of what the Bible teaches and the nature of Christian faith. On this basis they can better make a more informed response to Christ and, perhaps, a positive decision later. A fifth and final goal for interviewers overlaps the others. It is for friendships to be formed which will result in Hokusei students' beginning regular participation in the life of their interview partners' churches.

Strategies

Prayer

With these goals in mind, I chose four primary strategies to implement. Each is designed to overcome sociocultural barriers to communication of the Gospel. The first is structured, active prayer, which makes possible and empowers all the others. The kind of prayer Jesus Christ taught was not a strategy or technique for obtaining what one desires but rather a connection with God, who empowers believers to effectively do kingdom work. Having interviewees give their testimonies without also having them pray risks leaving the testimonies lacking the power they should have. They might succeed in producing interest or even admiration in the listener but not yield the hunger for faith or desire to know Christ personally, which are indispensable if any lasting spiritual benefit from the interviews is to occur.

Implementing the spiritual disciplines into practical ministry yields a power unavailable elsewhere to direct ministry toward growth in relationship with God. Prayer appears as the first and most necessary of these disciplines for this project's purposes.

Storytelling

Beyond prayer, another strategy that proves valuable is storytelling. Structuring the dialogue between Christian and non-Christian as interviews serves to avoid reducing God's word to abstract ideas and stripping

it of its human context, so prevalent in classroom situations. Implementing the simple, comfortable, culturally accessible communication form of storytelling provides a way around the in-built resistance which many students demonstrate toward anything which smacks of religion. "Prayer and story become the primary means by which you get past people's self-defense mechanisms."³

Storytelling, especially testimonials, provides a mode of communication which is far more acceptable to many modern, thoroughly secular Japanese young people. They are more open to this format than other means of proclaiming the Gospel, such as sermons in churches or literary distribution. The relational environment of storytelling allows the Holy Spirit to work freely and provides the interviewer a model of discovering God's work in her life and receiving Christ as the Lord of life.

Sanctioned Discussion About Christ

A third strategy is sanctioning. The interview system functions as a way to sanction discussion about Christ and puts the taboo topic in a culturally acceptable form. Robert Whiting notes the usually reticent, timid-looking Japanese who during baseball games "becomes a veritable wildman, yelling and screaming nonstop for nine solid innings."⁴ Although Japanese are frequently described as reserved by nature, many can be quite expressive when in a situation stamped with social approval.

The interview project's purposes obviously differ essentially from that of a cheering section. Nevertheless, providing a clear occasion on which people can discuss faith opens the doors to expression of interest and the pursuit of understanding of Christian faith, a matter which is often meticulously avoided in ordinary Japanese life.

Purposeful Matching of Interviewers and Interviewees

A fourth strategy is the matching of interviewers with interviewees who are for the most part in the same demographic groups. Age is one factor. Of a total of seventeen interviewees participating in the 2001 project, twelve were under age thirty, two between thirty and forty, one between forty and fifty, and two between fifty and sixty. Of fifty-five interviewers, all but two were twenty or twenty-one, and only one was older than twenty-three. Thirty-nine HGWJC interviewers talked with interviewees who were in their late teens or early twenties, ten with interviewees in their thirties, three with an interviewee in her forties, and three with a partner in her fifties. Gender and ethnic identity are also considerations. All interviewees included in the report and survey analysis were female Japanese.

INTERVIEW REFLECTION REPORTS

Purposes

After conducting their interviews, students reflected upon their experience through writing reports. These Interviewer Reflection Reports allowed them to review and express their thoughts about the interviews with a greater breadth of scope and freedom of expression than the more highly structured surveys. The central purposes were the same as for the project as a whole. They included that of interviewers' documenting as accurately and as much as possible in their own terms how they had experienced the interview project. In this way they could assess whether or not the interview process was an effective means of learning and, if so, how effective. A secondary purpose was to provide a degree of verification of the results of the Interviewer Reflection Survey.

Some purposes related to the English Bible course itself. The reports were assigned for students to demonstrate improvement in their knowledge of the Bible and proficiency in English as they participated in the interview process. Specifically related to the interviews, the reports were designed to ensure that interviewers had actually received exposure to Christian faith through interviewee testimonies and were able to reflect on this experience and form responses.

Goals

The report's specific goals were primarily to track what changes the interviews had helped to bring about in interviewers' impressions about Jesus Christ or God (students often distinguish between the two), the Christian faith, interviewees or Christians in general, church, the Bible, the interview project, the interviewers themselves, what progress toward belief in Christ (if any) had occurred, and what post-interview obstacles still remained between interviewers and their acceptance of Christ. Also, it was hoped that the Interview Reflection Reports would reveal how changes in impressions about Christianity occurred or what served to trigger them. This information was meant to be used in the teaching of English Bible class and in leading other student-oriented Christian activities.

Strategy and Methodology

The approach I selected to achieve these goals was asking interviewers to write about the interview in English. This included answers to both assigned and freestyle questions which they had asked and their subsequent thoughts and feelings related to the discussion.

Introducing and Processing Reports

In both terms, Interview Reflection Reports were due the sixth week of class. All interview report students

received the maximum possible 15 percent for their work, with the exception of those who submitted it late. I accepted these reports during class time only and deducted 3 percent per week, with 8 percent the maximum possible deduction for late submissions. I wrote responses to interviewers' reports to provide feedback regarding the report and to stimulate the continuation of the reflection process. Nearly all, both those handing in reports on time and those late, had received their reports back within a week of submitting them.⁵

Materials Included in Examining Reports

Whereas in the first term, fifteen of seventeen reports submitted were included in the examination of the data,⁶ in the second term I randomly selected fifteen from the total of thirty-nine. Obtaining a random sample for the second term consisted of shuffling the stack of reports and then taking every third one (i.e., the first, fourth, seventh, tenth, and so on). After reaching the bottom of the stack, I continued the process from the top until I reached number fifteen. This number was large enough to provide an adequate sample and matched the number included in the first term. Selecting reports in this fashion resulted in including sixteen of the year's total seventeen interviewees in the analysis.

Two minor problems emerged in obtaining these samples. First, I discovered that when the selection had taken place, one report was missing from the stack (it had been taken to be recopied). Second, one of the fifteen I drew first happened to be from the only second-year student who chose to do the interview report in the second term.⁷ I eliminated her report from the examination and selected a replacement by continuing the method described above.

Contents

The following analysis is based on students' descriptions of the interviews they conducted and their reactions to them. These shed light on how interviewers' perceptions of Christian faith and life may have changed through discussions with their interviewees. Students' accounts of the answers they received to the three required interview questions reveal the core of each interview to which they added further questions and comments in the reports. Outlines of individual testimonies have been reconstructed in list form, though space limitations prohibit including them here.

Analysis of Report Contents

Questions Required for the Interviews

Almost all interviewees successfully completed the required questions. All received answers for both the first question, "When and how did you become a Christian, and what was happening in your life which occasioned this?" and the second, "What does Jesus Christ mean to you and your life now?" Although not every interviewer asked the second question directly, all interviewees answered other questions in ways which

indirectly provided replies to it. Although six interviewers neglected to ask or report on the third question, “What words from the Bible do you especially like? Why do you like them?” other interviewers who spoke with the same interviewee did record answers to this question.

Interviewees' Reported Answers to Question One

Interviewees' responses to the first question demonstrate the wide variety of life experiences through which some Japanese have come to faith in Christ. Even though all are Japanese women living in the same city, the paths they took on their journey to faith in Christ differ greatly. Some appear much stronger in their faith at present than others. Some took many years to become ready to accept Christ, while others received Him quite willingly soon after learning of Him. Some came from strong Christian families, and others had no apparent Christian influence in their backgrounds. While some embraced faith at a young age, others did so later in life. Influential figures in their journey to faith in some cases were Japanese; in other cases, they were foreigners. In some instances, those influential figures were family members or teachers. None of these descriptions of interviewees applies, however, to an overwhelming percentage of the sixteen interviewees described in the reports.

Common points linking interviewees appear to reveal faith developing in the context of normal life experiences, not merely through adopting certain doctrines or abstract concepts. Only two of sixteen describe conversion experiences which could be called rapid or dramatic; the other fourteen (some explained in much clearer terms than others) were comparatively gradual in nature. Exactly twelve of sixteen interviewees point to specific individuals or small groups of people encouraging them in their discovery of faith. About eight specifically recall coming to Christ through some event or situation involving trouble or pain which served to highlight their need for God's presence in their life. Thirteen were actively involved in a church or parachurch organization before becoming a believer. Five had direct contacts with Hokusei Gakuen.

Interviewees' Reported Answers to Question Two

The responses which interviewees give to the second question about their perception of Christ or God also reflect the diversity of viewpoints which exists, even among people of a common faith.⁸ For some, Christ (or God) appears kinder and gentler while for others, sterner and more demanding. Whereas some view God primarily through an intellectual lens, others relate to Him more through emotions. While some interviewees appear to understand God centrally in terms of what He gives them, others describe attributes of His character which exist above and beyond daily human life.

Common themes are Christ as one who protects (nine of sixteen interviewees point to this), one who provides (noted by eight of sixteen), and one who leads them (which five indicate). Positive characteristics (“guiding me,” for example) far outnumber negative ones (such as “scolding me when I do wrong”);

some ninety-five positive descriptions appear as opposed to three negative ones.

Interviewees' Reported Answers to Question Three

Interviewees include varying numbers of Scripture passages in answering the third question regarding Bible words the interviewee especially likes and why. Most interviewees either do not elaborate on why they like particular Scripture passages, or interviewers do not report it.

Interviewees note twenty-four separate verses or passages as favorites: nineteen from the New Testament and five from the Old Testament. Matthew 11:28 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 respectively are mentioned by two separate interviewees. Three take note of Matthew 6:34.

Answers to Other Questions

The number of questions interviewers asked in addition to the required three is somewhat imprecise. Some students record each question verbatim, while others state it in descriptive sentences in what appears to be an answer but with no corresponding question written directly. In many cases, more than one interviewer spoke with the same interviewee at once. Consequently, they may have heard questions from fellow interviewers and benefited from contemplating the answers to them which they heard yet not reported on them.

Though space limitations do not allow for them here, I compiled two relevant lists: one of questions interviewers asked (many of which were optional) and one of comments interviewers wrote based on these questions. Although verbatim answers to each question are not listed, these compilations do provide a general view of the portions of interviews based on interviewers' personally created questions.

Interviewers' Comments

Interviewers' responses to the interviews are divided into the same categories as the Interviewer Reflection Survey questions: Christ (or the Bible's God), Christian faith, the church, the Bible, the interview project, and the interviewee. From within these categories, I have also compiled comments which relate to the interviewer herself: remaining barriers to her acceptance of the Gospel or her clearly stated intention to pursue Christian faith in the future.

Several factors render definitive and objective categorizing or analysis practically impossible. The divisions between the categories and inclusion in multiple categories are necessarily somewhat subjective. Language usage obscures the meaning in some cases, particularly in the use of "I knew" and "I thought."⁹ The open-ended nature of the report assignment allows students to write their impression with very little structuring of their expression provided. This results in their recording comments which often vary widely from student to student not only in content but in form, with relatively few falling into neatly divisible categories. Therefore, for purposes of evaluating the reports' content, greater value may lie in examining types of

interviewer responses and their size in proportion with one other, rather than closely scrutinizing particular numbers of comments within a given category.

Taking the results as a whole, it is clear that interviewers address in both Interviewer Reflection Reports and the Surveys basically the same issues and give essentially the same types and similar proportions of comments regarding these issues. Without being asked to address in detail more than the three basic questions in their reflection, interviewers wrote comments which fall into the same broad categories as those the surveys address (“Christ” or “The Interviewee,” for example). Even within each category, the types and proportions of responses appearing in the reports often resemble those in the survey results, such as “Reversals of Previous Impressions.” Comments which indicate the types of changes in perception and processes through which these changes occurred also correspond generally to those in the survey results. Points of difference include the scarcity of clearly stated negative comments in the reports. The anonymity which the survey allowed may have resulted in a greater freedom to express negative impressions and opinions.

In a strict sense, perhaps any reflection necessarily involves a degree of cognitive, affective, or evaluative change. However, some modifications in interviewer viewpoints are abundantly evident while others are barely discernible. With this great variety in mind, I have included in the breakdown of interviewer comments (see Tables 1-4 in the Volume I article in this series) those which reveal clear-cut change of three main types: reversals, extensions, and emergences. Some represent reversals of previous viewpoints, including transformations in concepts, emotions, and personal values. Other shifts in perspective are extensions of previous beliefs, impressions, or judgments. Still others consist of moving from non-awareness to a minimal or advanced degree of awareness, an emergence of a particular impression.

On Christian Faith. Of fifty-one total comments in this category, twenty deal with changes in impressions regarding Christian faith. These remarks represent seventeen different interviewers. Their perspectives parallel those in interviewer survey results in that there were both negative and positive impressions of Christian faith held prior to the interviews. However, comments which point to clearly negative attitudes (six of twenty) are fewer proportionally than in the surveys. References to positive change, including from non-awareness to awareness, appear in every case and nearly mirror interviewer survey results.

Exactly fifteen comments mention the process through which the changed viewpoints occurred. All but one consist of positive impressions interviewers received of interviewees' character or life. The report remarks resemble those found in interviewer surveys. Only one other category of comments appears, and it is not germane to the interviews.

On General Perceptions of the Interviewee and Christians. Of the eighty-three comments interviewers make regarding their interviewee or about Christians in general, thirty-three indicate clear change. This reflects the

views of twenty interviewers. As in the survey results, some interviewers' pre-interview impressions about their partner or Christians in general are clearly negative, as shown in five cases. The others had impressions which were apparently positive, partly positive, or neither clearly positive nor negative. The vast majority of the changes which took place through the interviews are either positive or not clearly stated in positive or negative terms (only one interviewer notes negative change).

Of the changed impressions, eleven demonstrate reversals of previously held impressions. Among these are shifts from negative to positive evaluations or attitudes. For instance, three suggest that they had prejudice toward Christians due to Christians' religion, but that this bias went away in part or full due to the interview experience. Other reversals involve increased cognitive perception, such as (in two comments) going from viewing Christians as people who virtually never rebel against the teachings of Christ to seeing them as free individuals who sometimes make choices which go against God's guidance. Other responses indicating reversals vary widely.

About twenty impressions indicate not altered but new awareness or realization. These comments differ greatly from each other with no predominant theme. They include interviewers' realization of God's ability to lead, being impressed with the interviewee's kindness, and receiving encouragement from her.

Of the thirty-three comments, fourteen show something of the process through which the altering of the interviewer's perspectives occurred; however, no consistent pattern of comments appears. Transformed impressions in interviewers developed through such things as the interviewee's smile, her accepting attitude toward non-Christians, and her confession of struggling with her faith.

*On the Church.*¹⁰ The comments deal with issues involving the church's atmosphere and members. Comments related to the church are few in comparison with the surveys, and negative comments do not appear in the reports. However, the more positive comments indicate changes in many of the same directions as the survey, including coming to perceive church as a place where people may be made to feel welcome.

A total of three interviewers comment five times altogether on church-related matters. Of these comments, none reveals a reversal in viewpoint. One shows an extension of an opinion held before the interview: reaffirmation and deepening of the perception of church as a nice place. Interviewers note two things regarding church: that it can be enjoyable and why people worship. The kindness of its members and the interviewee's explanation of worship are key elements in the interviews which led to these realizations.

On the Bible. A total of twenty-three comments pertain to the Bible. Of these, twelve indicate changes in impressions related to Scripture. The remarks come from eight different students. In comparison with the surveys, interviewers volunteer little regarding their prior impressions of the Bible or their conceptions of its nature; however, three do note reversals in their impressions related to it. These include correcting

misconceptions of the Bible; one interviewer had thought of it as a fairy tale book and two as something which inhibits believers' freedom and individuality. A total of nine interviewer comments indicate new awareness, which includes discovery of interest in learning the Bible.

There are six comments shedding light on how interviewer impressions changed. As in the case of the interviewer survey, some focus on the interviewee's life or words and mention how strong an impact the Bible's words have had on interviewees. Another two note the interviewee's answers to their specific questions about the Bible.

On the Interview Project. Interviewers refer thirty-three times to the interview project itself. Among these, twenty-eight comments (from twenty different interviewers) reveal changes in their perspectives which came specifically through the interview process. Interviewer reflections parallel the survey results in that they include a wide range of responses related to the interviewer's personal growth, many of which deal with the various categories under examination: Christ or God, Christian faith, the church, the Bible, the interview project, and the interview. Report comments differ from survey results in that the former contain no specific advice on improving the project.

Ten comments indicate impressions reversed through the interviews. Another four deal with cognitive changes (about what Christian faith is, for example), three relate to affective changes (including one coming to have good feelings about Christian matters and one coming to have mixed feelings about them), and three involve evaluative changes (all from negative to positive).

A total of eighteen comments deal with awareness which did not exist before the interviews. Cognitive changes include recognizing how faith helped the interviewee in her family life. Among the affective changes are feelings of being spiritually healed through the interview and a newly discovered desire to learn the Bible. Evaluative changes vary widely and, like the others involving new awareness, are most frequently stated in general or vague terms, such as declaring the interviews "good" or "helpful" for the interviewer.

Mention is made in only five cases of how the change in impressions actually came about. They include sundry influences on interviewers, such as the interviewee's encouragement to see the Bible as enjoyable reading as well as the interviewer's quiet reflections about the interviewee and other Christians she had met on campus.

On the Interviewer. Within the other categories, sixty comments pertain not only to those categories but to interviewers themselves. Of these remarks, thirty-nine (by eighteen of the thirty interviewers being examined) give clear indications of change as a result of the interviews. These range from deeper recognition of the interviewer's religious cultural identity to newfound hope that God would support her life to a realization of herself as a person with relatively few opinions. The interviewers' words reflect the great diversity among their

reflections. Comments fall into only a few clearly divisible categories. Nevertheless, the following three key groupings are possible: ten remarks show a more positive attitude toward Christian-related things, seven interviewees reveal a greater awareness that God's power is accessible to them in their personal lives, and three picture themselves as abandoning anti-Christian prejudice.

Of the changes which interviewees note, thirteen include descriptions of the process through which they occurred. Cognitive changes came by way of such things as the interviewee's views on issues interviewees had wondered about (e.g., how a good God could create people capable of sin). Also, shifts in interviewees' affective states took place. For instance, an interviewee's encouragement led one interviewer to a greater sense of security about her future. Transformation in evaluative areas appears in cases such as the interviewer who came to view her own difficulties more positively and as necessary occasions in which God works.

On Remaining Barriers to the Gospel. Interviewees record eight comments (all from different interviewees) indicating specific issues which at this point in their growth process make acceptance of the Christian Gospel insurmountably difficult to them. Whereas the survey results focus on perceived pressure from Christians to join church activities, the issue interviewees mention most frequently in the reports (three cases) is the inability to view the Bible as believable. In two instances, interviewees point to difficulty in accepting ideas about God: that He is loving and that in Christ He died for the interviewer. Other problem points (one case each) include family opposition to accepting Christian faith, remaining prejudice within the interviewer, and hesitancy to entrust herself to God.

On Intentions to Pursue Faith. Interviewees give clear suggestions (twelve comments by nine students) that they intend to continue their learning process beyond the interviews by giving active consideration to embracing the Christian faith. All are similar to the expressions of desire to move closer to Christ or Christianity, which appear in the survey results. In the reports, the most commonly stated intention (six times) is to continue the dialogue with a Christian person. Interviewees in five comments show their desire to know either Christianity or the Bible (both in one interviewer's case) more fully. Two indicate a willingness for a greater knowledge of Christ. The other comments (one each) focus on going to church more, having a bigger dream for life through faith in God, and being more careful to follow the Bible's teachings.

My Responses to Interviewees

I responded to interviewees' comments by writing in their papers answers to questions they asked me, giving comments based on particular words in the reports, and asking further questions to encourage students to continue their thinking. In some cases, the Bible lesson the class happened to be studying at that time provided an occasion for teaching an aspect of the Christian faith which had surfaced in the interviews. This

opportunity served to link the reports to the class as a whole.

It also aided in further establishing lines of communication between individual students and me as the teacher. This benefited the interviews and provided a context for interviewees to learn about pursuing a relationship with Christ in other parts of the class or outside it. In this sense, the interviews were not an end in themselves but served as a point of departure or a bridge to ongoing dialogue.

CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the Interview Reflection Reports

Despite difficulties in expressing themselves in English, interviewees in general demonstrate their competency in communicating the contents of their interviews along with their thoughts and feelings about them. In this process, they also reveal an understanding of the Bible and the Christian faith which, though often flawed and certainly elementary, also constitutes a grasp definitely firmer than the perceptions which they held before beginning the assignment.

The largest number of interviewer remarks beyond those on the required questions appear in the Interviewees category (eighty-three), and the second greatest (sixty) in the Interviewer section. This may indicate the tendency of interviews or testimonies to focus on the people in the conversation rather than the God about whom Christians are to testify. Nevertheless, fifty-one comments do fall into the Christian Faith category, thirty-two into that of Christ or the Bible's God, and twenty-three into the Bible area. This suggests that interviewees are in fact giving serious consideration to those things which are to be focal points of the class. The Interview Project and Church sections receive relatively few remarks.

About two of three interviewees comment on Christian faith, the interviewee, the interview, and themselves. Approximately half comment on Christ (or God) and the Bible. Under one in three remarks on the church, remaining barriers to the Gospel, and intentions to pursue faith.

Christian faith, the interviewee, the interview, and the interviewer are the subjects about which the greater proportions (over half) of interviewees who note clearly changed perspectives comment. Comments about Christ or God, the church, the Bible, remaining barriers to the Gospel, and intentions to pursue faith come from less than one-third of interviewees.

The most frequent type of change noted in interviewer impressions is new awareness or realization as compared to an alteration of perceptions which already existed. The latter kind of change also appears frequently, though less than the former. Although they are the most common type of change, comments showing new awareness tend to be less specific than others. By far the least common type of change is extension or deepening of previously held negative beliefs or viewpoints.

Although the great variation among interviewer remarks militates against forcing them into rigid

categories, recurring themes in the first seven sections include general changes in attitude from negative to positive, discovering interest in Christian teachings and life, and realization of the similarities which exist between Christians and non-believers.

The processes by which changed impressions came about vary greatly enough to severely limit the value of strict, narrow classification. Nevertheless, in broad terms interviewers were frequently spurred to significant change by being favorably impressed with the faith and life of the interviewee, her attitude and manner during the interview, her answers to specific faith-related questions, and encouragement she gave to the interviewer regarding difficulties in life.

Interviewers point to two key remaining barriers to the acceptance of the Gospel: difficulty believing in the Bible's authority and accepting its teachings on the character of God. A small but significant percentage of interviewers give evidence of active personal interest in Christian faith which may in time result in a choice to follow Christ.

Regarding the Interview Project As a Whole

Results of interviewer surveys, interviewer reports, and parts of interviewee surveys support one other in indicating key aspects of interviewers' viewpoints.¹¹ First, the study points out specific negative perceptions interviewers state they possessed before the interviews. Considering Christian faith, Christ or God, the interviewees, Christians, church, and the Bible (these aspects of Christian life taken as a whole), the five most common impressions used to be that Christian life is "rigid," "difficult to understand," "unbelievable/unreliable/unrealistic," "difficult to approach," and "generally negative." Negative impressions far outnumbered those more open to interpretation, which in turn contrast the very few positive views.

Second, interviewers indicate those particular impressions which may change even through a single conversation with a believer and those which most often do not. Changes in impressions in general involve the same matters as the most common previous impressions. The following are the most common: "rigid" to "flexible," "generally negative" to "more positive," "different from me" to "like me," "unbelievable/unreliable/unrealistic" to "more believable/reliable/realistic," "difficult to understand" to "easier to understand," and "not interesting/relevant" to "more interesting/relevant." Shifts in a positive direction far outnumber those more open to interpretation or negative in nature.

Third, interviewer responses shed light on the processes through which change in their impressions occurs. The largest group indicate that concepts they encountered in the interviews affected their impressions, followed by something directly related to the Bible, then some aspect of the interview itself (such as the atmosphere in which it took place), followed by the life experiences of the interviewee, and finally the personal character of the interviewee. Comments show great variation within each of these categories.

Fourth, interviewers point to specific obstacles which must be overcome if the Gospel of Christ is to ever

gain genuine and widespread acceptance.¹² Over two-thirds of the responses in the survey results reveal these barriers. The perception that Christian matters are difficult to understand is the most commonly noted problematic area. It is followed closely by and overlaps with the view of them as simply unbelievable, unreliable, and/or unrealistic.

Fifth, reflections written by interview participants provide evidence that students, in many cases, have gained greater intellectual understanding of issues relating to Christian faith. This intellectual understanding will allow students a more informed personal choice about accepting Jesus or not. At least half the interviewees indicate greater comprehension in every matter the survey deals with except for understanding Christ or God (only nine of twenty-six note progress in this area).

Sixth, many interviewees express more accepting attitudes toward Christian faith and related matters. A majority of interviewees note increased openness toward or affirmation of Christian faith, the interviewee/Christians, and the Bible. Over one-third (nine of twenty-six) reveal a more positive stance toward Christ/God and the church.¹³

The viewpoints of the students on faith-related matters may also represent to an extent those of many modern people of Japan. To the degree that they do, they instruct those who seek to present the message of Christ to Japanese in a relevant, informed, and effective manner in similar contexts.

NOTES

- 1 HGWJC has since 2002 been Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College. However, because this paper deals with a research project completed before the name change, and for the sake of clarity, references to the organization will all remain as HGWJC.
- 2 In the following discussion, references to God will follow biblical usage of gender-related vocabulary and a translation referring to God with masculine pronouns. My intent is not to imply that God is limited to the “ masculine ” attributes which many cultures ascribe to deity or ignore the feminine references to God within Scripture. I work from the assumption that the human intellect is incapable of fully grasping God and that no language is adequate to define or express God's nature. God condescends to us in using imperfect human languages, speaking in terms understandable to people within existing cultural contexts.
- 3 Eugene H. Peterson, *Subversive Spirituality*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company and Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 1997), 241.
- 4 Robert Whiting, *You Gotta Have Wa*, first edition (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1990), 114.
- 5 The only variations in this pattern in Spring 2001 were four cases in which either I took an extra week to return the reports or up to a few weeks elapsed when interviewees missed class or otherwise failed to

- receive their reports which were available for them. In Fall 2001 there was a mistaken due date typed on the syllabus. Exactly nineteen fall term interviewers submitted reports on time, while sixteen handed them in one week late; two did so two weeks late; one, three weeks late; and one, five weeks late. As a result, I returned the last report six weeks after the submission deadline.
- 6 The only exceptions were two interviews which strayed a bit outside examination parameters.
 - 7 She had already submitted a report in the first term, and thus her comments had already been included in the research project through the report and the survey. No other interviewers in the project had two reports or surveys from this year included in the process, and the content of the report showed nothing which would negate or alter her comments in the first report.
 - 8 Although the assigned question dealt specifically with Christ, many interviewers recorded it in terms of “ God ” or with a combination of “ God ” and “ Christ. ”
 - 9 These phrases, especially common in Japanese language reflection reports, often lack enough context to make it clear whether the realization occurred as a result of the interview or had taken place beforehand and was already part of the interviewer's way of thinking. In the appendices, comments containing these phrases have been included or excluded according to their syntax and general context.
 - 10 As in the Interviewer Reflection Survey, this category deals not with the church as the body of believers in Christ, which is included in the “ General Perceptions of the Interviewee and Christians ” category, but with the church as an institution and a meeting place.
 - 11 Appendix 2 in Volume 1 of this journal (March, 2003) contains the results of the Interviewer Reflection Survey and offers more detailed statistics on interviewers. From it come data which follow in this section. An additional appendix will appear in a future volume providing data on Interviewee Reflection Survey responses, on which the following is also based.
 - 12 The data indicating remaining barriers to faith are not a collection of responses given directly to a question in the Interviewer Reflection Survey but of comments from various sections. The remarks indicate the obstacles which interviewers clearly state remain between them and full acceptance of the Gospel of Christ. These data will appear in a future volume within this series.
 - 13 The data indicating inclinations or intentions to pursue faith in the future, represent not direct responses to a survey question but comments interviewers record in various sections of the Interviewer Reflection Survey. They show interviewers' clearly stated openness toward or intention to consider Christian faith in the future. These data will appear in a future volume within this series.

[Abstract]

Creating a Context for Spiritual Formation through Interview Reports at Hokusei Gakuen Women's Junior College, Part

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This paper is a continuation of the article by the same title in *Hokusei Review, Junior College (Hokusei Gakuen University)*, Volume 1, March, 2003. Both of these and the remaining section not yet published in this series are built on the theoretical framework for Christian education described in the paper "Mission, Ministry, and Theological Foundations for Christian Education" in *Journal of Hokusei Junior College*, Volume 36, 2000. This edition of the series provides a more detailed description of the interview project's aims and the approaches taken in it. It then introduces the student reporting portion of the interview process, including an overview of the reports' contents and an analysis of them. Interviewers' reports generally agree with the results of interviewer and interviewee surveys, that this project is a useful tool in raising students' awareness of the meaning of the Christian faith. This, in turn, provides them with an opportunity to freely respond to it (whether negatively, positively, or by delaying evaluation of it) as part of the spiritual formation aspect of their educational process. The reports supply a context for students to express in their own words (1) what views of Christian faith and related matters they had before direct exposure to it, (2) how their impressions evolved through the interview dialogues, and (3) what obstacles may remain to their acceptance of the message of Christ.

Key words : cultural context, testimony, spiritual formation