



Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church (JELC)  
 Congregations in Kumamoto  
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**THANK YOU from KUMAMOTO  
 during this CHRISTMAS SEASON**

The pandemic continues to affect the world. In Kumamoto, the number of newly infected cases was announced in November and December; there were only 3 and 1 respectively! Cases decreased from more than 5,500 in Au-

gust. Hitoshi and Satoko sincerely thank you for your prayers. Hearing about the spread of the infection in the United States, they pray for the health and safety of everyone.



**TRULY “CHRISTMAS” SERVICES**

Since 2020, there were more than 60 Christmas services/devotions that Pastor Sumimoto and Pastor Adachi lead during 2021 Christmas. Although the number of cases of infection are small, all facilities (churches, senior care homes, children's homes, kindergartens, and nursing schools) were cautious, and there were no meals after worship this year as well. Therefore, during Christmas worship, Hitoshi focused more on the meaning of the word of CHRIST-MAS in his messages.

“CHRIST” means anointed one and “MAS” means worship, therefore Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus and we worship the Savior.



**TWO BAPTISMS**

During Advent, on the 3rd Sunday, there was a baptism for Naomi at Matsubase Church. At Matsubase Church there have been just 5-10 worship attendees, especially after the pandemic restrictions began. However, Naomi, a non-Christian nurse, started attending. The fact there was a baptism in such a small church made people strongly feel God's blessings and love. Pastor Sumimoto recalls that the one baptism in Matsubase was as much of an event as the 20 baptisms at Kuwamizu Church where around 5 baptisms happen in a year.



Also, on the 4th Sunday of Advent, the baptism for Richard, a Canadian-born English teacher, who has lived in Kumamoto for 3 years, happened at Kuwamizu Church. When he was a little, he attended a church in Canada, but he didn't have the opportunity to be baptized, and when he was in middle school and high school. As an adult he stopped attending church. However, when he was in college, he took some Bible classes. After he came to Japan and worked at a private English school in Kumamoto, one of the students, from Kyushu Gakuin where Hitoshi teaches Bible studies, and his mother brought Richard to a worship service at the Kuwamizu Church earlier this year. Since June, he started attending one of the Bible Study classes led by Rev. Sumimoto and Adachi.

## MATSUBASE CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE COMMEMORATING 70 ANNIVERSARY SINCE LOCAL MISSION STARTED



The year 2021 was the 70th anniversary of the start of Bible studies at two family homes in Matsubase village. During the Christmas Eve service in 2021, following the 60th anniversary in 2020 from the dedication of the sanctuary building back in 1960, Worship time was set

aside to commemorate the 70th anniversary. After the Christmas Eve service, partly because COVID spread has been minimized, there were performances by Naomi, who was just baptized two weeks ago, and by Uki-city Mixed Chorus.

Jesus Christ, who was born 2021 years ago, continues to greatly influence people all over the world, and in 1951 the mission began in Matsubase in Uki-city of Kumamoto Prefecture. Hitoshi and Satoko are grateful that the mission has been supported by local communities, local groups (like chorus and gymnastics groups), global communities, like ELCA and JELC, and most importantly, Jesus Christ.



### EVEN in A NEW TUNNEL Reflection by Hitoshi

Since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, have entered tunnels. Hitoshi uses tunnels to symbolize humanity's ordeals during the pandemic. People have endured this pandemic for 3 years. Instead of entering one bigger, longer tunnel, Hitoshi feels like people entered and exited various tunnels depending on the country or region.

In Japan, Hitoshi thinks that people have passed through the 1st to the 5th tunnels, from short ones to slightly longer ones. Some tunnels were brightly lit, while others were quite dark. The fifth tunnel lasted from Spring to the end of Summer and it was very dark.

People in Kumamoto are grateful for being out of the fifth tunnel during the Christmas/Holiday season. Although they are not sure if they will enter the 6th tunnel, looking at the world situation, they are prepared to enter the next one. In addition, Hitoshi and Satoko are praying for the healing, comfort, and encouragement of the Lord, remembering those who are in difficult circumstances all over the world.

While being out of the 5th tunnel and preparing for the next, Psalm 90:1 "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations." was chosen as the verse for 2022 for Kuwamizu and Matsubase congregations. Whether people are in the tunnel, or they exited it, believers' dwelling place remains the same, the Lord, for generations. This verse makes you want to sing the hymn ELW632:

1 O God, our Help in ages past,  
our hope for years to come,  
our shelter from the stormy blast,  
and our eternal Home.

2 Under the shadow of your throne  
your saints have dwelt secure;  
sufficient is your arm alone,  
and our defense is sure.

It is a hymn with rich images. It seems that you might imagine that you are more protected when you are passing through a tunnel. Even if you enter a new tunnel, remember that we remain in the Lord, always rejoice, pray constantly, and thank God for everything. The Lord's love and protection endures even during difficult times. Let's walk together in faith and celebrate the 2022nd year after Jesus was born to the world. Amen.

