



Pastor's Column

Reverend Mark Nakagawa

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Dear Centenarians:

Earlier this month, I had the privilege of participating on a panel discussion that dealt with the topic of 'faith and culture.' The occasion was the annual gathering of United Church of Christ (U.C.C.) clergy and laity here in southern California, their version of the United Methodist annual conference session that takes place this month in Redlands.

In addition to myself, the panelists also included a Jewish rabbi, a Muslim layperson (the Muslim faith has no recognized clergy) and an African American U.C.C. pastor.

For my part, I began by relating a conversation that took place the day before, at the Nikkei Interfaith meeting in Little Tokyo. One of the Buddhist ministers reflected that during his childhood, the temple sold Christmas trees in the parking lot, and also held an Easter Egg hunt in the spring!

I went on to share my own personal experiences of being raised in the Japanese American church, and how that didn't get in the way of associating with those of the Buddhist and Shinto faiths. In the historical development of the community, our forebears figured out ways to get along with each other in spite of the religious differences that identified us; mere survival was more important than getting caught up in religious arguments.

A larger issue was the critical decision of the first-generation *Issei* to assimilate their *nisei* children into American society, and sending them to the Christian church was one way to accomplish that. A present day legacy of this assimilationist attitude is the presence of Boy Scout troops that are sponsored by Buddhist temples, in a number that equals or succeeds those that are found in Japanese American churches.

All of the panelists shared their experience of living out their faith within a specific cultural and ethnic community. To say the very least, I was inspired by the richness of experiences that were reflected in the persons who sat alongside me! The one important commonality we shared was in living out our respective faiths in diverse and pluralistic communities.

It was another reminder of the increasingly rich and diverse world (not to mention city!) that we live in today, and also of the ways in which diverse peoples can come together in fruitful dialogue about religious faith.

In recent weeks, we have witnessed senseless acts of violence that call into question closed-minded attitudes that certain people harbor about race, religion and culture. In the face of these events, we are called and challenged to model the openness of Jesus, who embraced people's differences rather than fearing them, and who opened doors for God's love to be the defining reality of the world in which we live.

Grace and Peace,

Reverend Mark M. Nakagawa