

Rev. Kana Shimasaki – PROFILE

Narrator:

This month on UMC.org Profiles, the Rev. Kana Shimasaki, associate pastor of West Los Angeles United Methodist Church in California, shares her faith story.

Rev. Shimasaki was born in Tokyo, Japan and came to the United States as a teenager. She's been blind since she was a child, but did not let that keep her from accomplishing any of the dreams she had for her life. She's lead several Japanese-speaking congregations, overcoming obstacles and growing closer to God every step of the way.

Rev. Kana Shimasaki:

I was born and raised in Japan. I am a middle girl. I have an older sister, and I have a younger brother. My parents were not Christian. They were very typical Japanese. Generally, they did not have any religion, only occasionally we used to go to Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines. But we were not Christians.

I am legally blind, partially blind. When I was 18 months old, according to my mother I became very sick, so the doctor gave me some type of medicine to reduce the temperature, and it worked, but a few hours later I started to act funny, and a day later or two days later they found that I did not see anything. My parents took me to many hospitals throughout the country of Japan, and yet doctors said they could not do anything more to it. So I entered school for the blind when I got to school age. I was there until 6th grade, but it was my dream to go to regular school, so with a lot of convincing, I convinced my parents, convinced teachers, they finally gave in. So when I was in 6th grade I was finally able to go to public school. But six months later I had to go to junior high school, and most of the public schools refused to have me, and I had to look for a school where I could go. My parents were very frantic about finding a school for me, so they visited each private school in town, and the mission school founded by southern Presbyterian school was the only one who opened their doors for me. So that was how I entered the school and how I got to know Christianity. When I entered mission school when I was in 7th grade, I studied the Bible for the first time, and I began to go to church, because they required it. So I became a Christian, the first person, first Christian in my family. And then, one by one, my mother and my father followed.

After finishing the junior high school in Kochi, Japan, I wanted to come to America very badly, because I wanted to study English more and wanted to meet different people. And I knew

my career in Japan would be very limited because of my sight limitation. In those days, most of the blind people and the legally blind people became massagists, and I didn't like that. So, I wanted to try something else. When I was 16, I came to the states to go to high school in Atlanta. The missionaries who were at the Christian school in Kochi helped me to go to school in Atlanta. So I went there and I was there for two months, then they thought it would be better for me to have special education for the blind, so they sent me to school in Arkansas. I was there for a year, but again I wanted to go back to a regular public school setting, so I finally moved to Fresno and with the help of a Japanese-American couple in Fresno I was able to go to school there and finish high school finally in 1979. The couple who helped me in Fresno were very earnest, faithful United Methodists, and that was how I got to know the Methodists for the first time.

After graduating from high school, I went back to Japan, went to college in Tokyo, finished it. I was in Japan for five years, and then came back to the states in 1984. My parents wanted me to be a teacher in my hometown, but I instead came back to California and studied at San Francisco State University, majoring in rehab counseling. So I did that and I really wanted to seek hospice as my career, but somehow it didn't work out and I ended up in seminary. At that point, I had no idea, I never intended to become a pastor. I just wanted to know more about the faith and the Bible and so forth. I started the process for ordination without strong conviction. And during the process, I was told by the ordained ministry people that probably this was not the right thing for me because of my sight problem. So when they said that, I knew in my heart that I had to do it. Because they said no, I became more certain that this is yes. So I think God worked in a funny way to lead me into it. When I was rejected by the church because of my sight problem, it strengthened my faith once again. And I was taught that I should depend on God, and so this was also an important landmark in my life. I cried a lot, and sometimes I was very angry at God too. I was angry at people, I was angry at God and I didn't want to talk to God, so I shut up myself before God. But I think I was still facing God. And gradually God gave me strength and faith that I am okay the way I am. And what I learned from this was that it is very important for me and for all of us to know that I am who I am because God created us as that. So this is the source of my strength. The fact that I can't see well is really a central part of who I am, and it is inseparable from my faith as a Christian.

During this very difficult time, I received a phone call from the D.S. in Hawaii and he asked me to come to his district and serve a Japanese-American church in Honolulu. So I left California and went to Hawaii. And they were very helpful for me to restart the process. So immediately after I got to Hawaii, they gave me a local pastor's license. So I served Harris Church for four years. I was the associate minister, and my primary job was to lead the Japanese speaking congregation. So I did the service every Sunday for them in Japanese. The people at

Harris Church were very hospitable and it was very comforting to me. When I went to Harris, what I was needing the most was a healing. And like I said, the people were very caring and comforting and affirming, so gradually I was healed and I regained my strength. So as I was serving the church, I realize now that the church was serving me.

They gave me a new appointment in Los Angeles in 1996, so I came back to California, this time in southern California, and served Centenary United Methodist Church as an associate pastor for seven years. Again, my primary job was to serve Japanese-American, Japanese speaking group. Majority of people from Japan are not Christians. Japan is not a Christian country. Probably less than 2% of the total population is Christian, and that includes both Protestants and Catholics. So we are very, very, very minority. So people that come from that country to this country are not interested in Christianity in general, so it's very hard to reach out to them. So that's the main struggle for us who want to spread the gospel to them.

My goal here in West L.A. Church is to serve whoever I need to serve. My senior minister at West L.A. Church is my best friend, and so we support each other. When she's having a rough time I listen to her, and she does the same for me too. So we are a good team. I am indebted to so many people who have been good to me, who have supported me, especially when I needed help. Like the missionary who helped me to come to America when I was in high school, she taught me the importance of prayer, always trusting God. And the couple in Fresno, the Methodists who I met for the first time, they were very faithful people. Looking back to those years, I know it was God who was leading me into faith and leading me into this career.

Life is tough, it's full of challenges, but God loves us and God means that and desires that we should have a full life filled with joy and hope and I believe we can do it because we have been made to be that way. So don't give up. Be authentic to who you are. It doesn't mean that we will not change. To be who we are includes who we will become by the grace of God. So we have full potential to be better and more wonderful.

Narrator:

Our thanks to Rev. Kana Shimasaki for sharing her story with us.

This month's Profile was produced by Pam Price; editor was Lane Denson. I'm Hilly Hicks and Profiles is brought to you by UMC.org, the official online ministry of The United Methodist Church, a ministry of United Methodist Communications.