

“Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’”

LUKE 1:13

Christmas in Japan

Christianity first came to the islands of Japan during the 16th century, and the first Christmas celebration was reportedly held in 1565 by Father Frois. Christianity was forbidden during the 17th century, and it wasn’t until 1858 that foreign missions were again allowed to come to Japan. This year, the United Church of Christ in Japan celebrates 150 years of Christianity in Japan.

Today, Christians represent less than 1% of the population, although Christmas (pronounced *kurisumasu*) or *seitansai* (literally, “holy birth festival”) celebrations have been embraced by many people in the wider culture. As in the United States, a commercial atmosphere has developed around the holiday. The message of Christian love has also led Christmas to become established as a festive event for couples, somewhat similar to Valentine’s Day. Many families celebrate on Christmas Eve with a special Christmas cake. Churches celebrate with candlelight services, church concerts, and nativity pageants. In some churches a unique tradition has arisen. After the service on the Sunday before Christmas, Santa visits the children and gives them presents. In return, the children give Santa gifts of rice, so that they learn that it is important not only to receive gifts, but to give them as well. The rice is shared with children in need. In these ways, Christ’s messages of loving one another and helping those who are in need are powerfully represented to the children.



The United Church of Christ in Japan is a partner of Global Ministries.

(Note: This was adapted from an article in the *Kyodan Newsletter*, December 2007, by Mira Sonntag.)

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