

My Faith Journey with Buena Vista UMC—

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By Wendy Hanamura

I was born into Buena Vista United Methodist Church fifty-four years ago. From my first breath, I have been a part of this community. When I was born in the 1960's, Buena Vista was almost 100% Japanese American, with a congregation well defined into three generations: *Issei*, our immigrant grandparents; *Nisei*, their American-born children; and *Sansei*, my generation, more American than anything else.

Buena Vista was the place your parents brought you to learn how to be a Japanese American. To learn the values of our culture: *Enryo*, or restraint; *giri*, duty. This is where you learned how to put those concepts into practice. For instance, say it was a hot day and you were really thirsty. We learned if someone offers you a cold drink, you should say, "Oh, thank you, but I'm okay." If they offer a second time, you hesitate slightly, smile and say, "No really, I'm fine. Thank you." But if they persist and offer you a drink a *third* time, then you may gratefully accept. You should never accept a kindness until the third offer because you don't want to inconvenience the other party, or they might not really want to give it to you. But if they offer it three times, then you know you can accept. We lived by a code of conduct that no one outside our community understood.

There was something else I understood from the time I was a young child: that this community had suffered. Buena Vista was founded in 1898—117 years ago! This church had been the center, the salvation of a community that was poor, oppressed, and full of immigrants—some of them undocumented. I remember it being said that one *Issei* was a "wetback" because he had come over the Rio Grande from Mexico. At the turn of the century, why was our church 100% Japanese American? Because back in those days, Japanese weren't allowed to worship at the White church across town. Japanese spoke little English. If you were to walk around the streets of our neighborhood--Blanding, Oak, Buena Vista--you would find yourself in Japantown, a ghetto full of bath houses, Japanese grocers, and single room occupancy hotels. The people you would meet worked as gardeners, dry cleaners, domestics & cooks. My grandparents held all of those jobs.

The *Issei* were also grounded in a strong faith; they were early Christians during a time when Christians were persecuted in Japan. My grandmother's minister in Kyushu urged her to marry a man she had never seen before, Tomokichi Hanamura who was a "high church official" in Alameda. I suppose that was true, my grandfather was an official of Buena Vista. But he made his living as a gardener. So family legend has it that every day Grandpa Hanamura would ride away on his bicycle wearing his church suit, only to change into his gardening clothes when he got out of sight. Of course, my grandmother knew the truth, but she never wanted him to lose face by letting on that she knew.

Another family story has it that my grandfather used to tithe 10-20% of his income to the church—which his wife and sons said was too much. But my grandfather loved this church more than anything. My father, Howe Hanamura, grew up on these church grounds. He attended Sunday School here and came to Buena Vista to play after school with the other church boys, including Taizo Imura and Rolly Kadonaga.

So I have always felt that Buena Vista is in my bones, I feel it in my DNA. And when I read our church mission statement, I know it is born from our long history as a Japanese American community:

God works in human history and in the unique experiences of oppressed communities.

In 1942, after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, it was a time of fear and chaos and war. Alameda, with its Naval Air Station, was in a Zone A, requiring Japanese nationals to evacuate even earlier than most. Like all the members of our church, my family was evacuated from Alameda, fearing what would happen next. The night before evacuation, records show there was a last service in this church, and the congregation sang the hymn, "This is My Song," sometimes called the "Song of Peace:"

*This is my song, Oh God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my sacred shrine.
But other hearts in other lands are beating,
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

I was born in the 1960s into a very different time. A time when our church was grappling with the question, “What would this church be in a new era of civil rights and Martin Luther King?” At the time I was just a child, but I recall my father was the lay leader. A young, white minister named Rev. Buckwalter came to serve at our church, and he was proud to have walked with MLK. Reverend Buckwalter encouraged one of the youth to become a conscientious objector and my father, a veteran of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, was livid. For him, fighting in the war had been a path to redemption, a way to prove his loyalty and defend freedom. My father quit his post, and that fight roiled the church. It called into question in 1968, *How do you express your conscience? What does your faith call you to do?*

I came into high school during calmer times. It was the late 1970’s and I was 16 or 17. Our membership was dwindling, and there was a lot of discussion that we should combine with Lake Park and Berkeley Methodist United to form one church. As one of the last Sansei kids, they made me a Sunday School teacher with Janice Okamoto, and we had four students—Kristi Furuichi, Julie Dongon, Chris Chin, and the minister’s son, Chris Hanaoka. Almost 38 years later—until this year, here I am still teaching!

My first truly religious experience came at Jr. High Camp, where I felt the Holy Spirit in and around me. The Camp Director that year was Alan Hanamura; I remember a perky counselor from Livingston named Wendy Suzuki (now Horikoshi.) And the Ministerial Advisor was the youth pastor from San Jose, a charismatic preacher named Mel Kawakami.

I continued on to the high school camp of the time, Lake Sequoia Retreat, which was such an amalgam of Asian identity, Christianity, and empowerment. It was there during my first year that I met a funny, sensitive, smart Japanese American boy who would become my husband--Michael Okagaki, from San Jose.

Yet, I had a lot of living and exploring to do first. I went off to college at Harvard and spend the summer before my Senior year living and working with the *hibakusha*, the survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Perhaps it was immersing myself in the A-bomb, or just the panic of not knowing what was coming next, but when I returned to Harvard senior

year, I slipped into the one and only gully of depression that I've ever experienced. I spent many days reading sad novels in my dorm room, not wanting to come out.

I had been driven for so long, had worked so hard without a break, and for the first time I didn't have a plan. I felt the weight of so many decisions on my shoulders. But Harvard had something called the Bureau of Study Counsel where you could get help to get studying again. When I walked in, who should be my counselor but my former Jr. High Camp minister, Mel Kawakami? I remember Mel saying, "Wendy, what if you didn't have to decide?" and my depression lifted. I truly felt the hand of God holding me, helping me. So when our mission statement says this, I know it to be true:

Our faith, deepened and shared through life's experiences, guides us.

Flash forward to 1985, when I came home after many years to work at KPIX-TV. I was 24, and I got a call from Buena Vista's new minister, Michael Yoshii, asking me to lunch. Maybe I should have run. But instead we were having a sandwich in the park when across from us a homeless man toppled over and fell to the ground. Michael and I rushed to help him, and I could feel my life turning, a new direction opening up.

Michael had come to call me to lead the youth of Buena Vista. "What youth?" I said. It was still the same kids I had taught in high school, plus Chris recruited his cousin, Tara Lee. But I said yes, and Michael paired me with another young woman I didn't know, named Sharon Bayle. It was those years, 1985-1989, where my true faith was forged.

Leading a bunch of teenagers was hard. More kids started coming: some were angry; one was little bit of a hoodlum. Another boy came from the housing projects because his mother wanted him to have some grounding influence to avoid trouble. How do you nurture true faith during those crazy teenage years? I had to grapple with my own faith deeply, and in doing so, that's where I found belief. So when our mission statement proclaims this tenet, I know it has been important for me:

God calls us to welcome all people on their journey of faith regardless of age, abilities, physical

condition, race, gender, sexual orientation or socio-economic class.

When it was time for me to get married, I was worried because I had become more Christian, more church-going, more devout than my husband-to-be. When you ask Michael to perform your wedding rites, he takes you through a series of counseling sessions as a couple. I will always remember what he said: “Wendy, when you get to the top of the mountain, you may find Michael waiting there for you.” So true. There is no one more spiritual, more empathetic than my husband Michael. And I have always believed there are many roads up that mountain to a state of grace.

My mother’s side of the family is Buddhist, and I have always felt great comfort at services in the Buddhist Temple across the street from our church. My grandmother was Buddhist, but all her best friends were members of this church. Someone from the temple said of her, “You’re starting to smell like a Christian.” But she didn’t care. It was with eyebrows raised that my parents became one of the first Christian-Buddhist couples to marry in Alameda. So when I hear our mission statement proclaim this, it mirrors my own experiences:

Within each person and all of creation, God can be known through many traditions.

This church has changed so much since I was a little girl. There was a time when we knew every family so well, too well, perhaps. Everyone was so poor—only way to survive was to help each other. We were a tight-knit, insular community, deeply rooted in our cultural experience. Inevitably, Buena Vista is not like that anymore.

Yet, it feels so right to me that we have transformed into a community that looks outward, that supports the needs of the oppressed. Palestinian villagers in the Gaza cut off from their farms unable to support themselves? That was us. Those in transitional housing, with no permanent place to live? 70 years ago, that was us too. Undocumented immigrants? Some of our pioneering members were too. The disabled and LGBTQ communities marginalized and shunned by society for so long? That was us, that is us, today.

So when our mission statement calls us to be a voice for justice, I believe our history demands that we answer that call.

As a prophetic voice for justice, we will be an example and influence in our local and global community.

On the last night in Alameda, before they were to live in desert camp behind barbed wire for three and a half years, the members of this church sang this song:

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine.
But other lands have sunlight too and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
Oh hear my song, oh God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.*

*May truth and freedom come to every nation
May peace abound where strife has raged so long;
That each may seek to love and build together,
A world united, righting every wrong.
A world united in its love for freedom,
Proclaiming peace together in one song.*

And finally, the most important and central of all our stated beliefs:

God's hope, love, justice and healing are embodied in the life of Jesus.

That has been what my life at Buena Vista has led me to believe.