



PACIFIC MOUNTAIN REGION

**Bob Stewart
Archives**

THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA L'ÉGLISE UNIE DU CANADA

Interview with Rev. Tadashi Mitsui

October 7th, 2019

Oral History Recording Summary

Interviewee: Rev. Tadashi Mitsui

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Transcribed by: Victoria McAuley

Interviewed by: Kimiko Karpoff

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Time Log (minutes)	Description of Content
00:01	Beginning of Interview. Introduction, permission, and information about VJUC involvement
02:23	Rev. Roy McWilliams and the beginning of the VJUC
04:19	Moving out of First United Church
07:04	Post-war needs of the VJUC congregants
10:00	Experience as a new immigrant
13:30	Major memories of VJUC (including: Japanese-speaking events and the Nisei Fellowship)

Time Log (minutes)	Description of Content
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20:00	Christmas dinners
20:45	Prominent church families
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42:21	End

KK: My name is Kimiko Karpoff and it is October the 7th, 2019. I am interviewing Tad Mitsui as part of the Vancouver Japanese United Church history project of the Pacific Mountain Region Archives. Tad, do I have your permission to proceed with this interview?

TM: Yes, you do have my permission.

KK: Thank you. So Tad, just to give a little bit of background, can you say when was it that you actually were at Vancouver Japanese, and what was your role there?

TM: My role was to start looking after the Japanese United Church in Vancouver in the Japanese-speaking section of the church in 1957, September. When I arrived with my wife.

KK: You were there as the minister?

TM: Uh, not quite. I suppose the best way to describe it is "lay supply" because I was not quite ordained. I was not ordained in Japan. I was about to be ordained. So I was still a candidate. So, I came to Vancouver and the Home Mission Board asked me to go to Union College of B.C. to study and complete my training in the knowledge of the Manual of the United Church and the history of the United Church. Which I did the first year. And then, the second year, 1958, I was ordained by B.C. Conference.

KK: So, you said, "...to take care of the needs of the Japanese-speaking congregation." What were those needs? What were you finding when you went there?

TM: At that time, the Japanese-speaking congregation was started by Rev. McWilliams, Roy McWilliams, former missionary to Japan, who was very, very active in the education of children in the internment camps. And when the Japanese started to come back, he started to have gatherings of Japanese-speaking people in the homes, as a, sort of like a, home-church style—a dozen there, a dozen here. And he had the Japanese-speaking congregations in Vancouver, Steveston, Surrey, Aldergrove, Haney, and Hope. And, of course, the Vancouver part of that group grew very, very fast. And Home Mission decided that they needed a full-time minister. And they requested the United Church of Christ in Japan to supply a Japanese-speaking minister. And I was chosen and I came to Canada in 1957, September.

02:23

KK: And where were they meeting at that time?

TM: They were meeting in an auditorium of First United Church on Hastings Street and Gore Avenue.

	Time
KK: So, you were there till when?	
TM: I was there until 1968.	
KK: Tell me about the shift then to new church building.	04:19
TM: You mean... what do you mean by new?	
KK: So, well, so during that time...	
TM: Oh, we moved from church to church you mean?	
KK: Yeah.	
TM: Yeah. Um, the First United Church auditorium was not an ideal place to hold the worship service because it was an auditorium, it was noisy, and there was no worship centre or anything like that. And also, another major reason why they were not happy was because we were allowed to use it only in the evening. And so, Rev. McWilliams held the services in the evening in the auditorium and then they were not very happy and as people started to plan other things, like the bazaar, and bible study, and prayer groups, it was kind of a cumbersome process to negotiate with the First United Church to find other spaces to hold those congregational activities.	
So, I don't remember when it was, but a couple of years later (maybe you should know all these details), but some years later we started to look for an alternative place to meet. By then, the English-speaking part of the Japanese United Church was worshipping in, at that time it was called Columbia Street United Church on 6th Avenue on Columbia Street, which used to be a Japanese United Church, Fairview United Church. But anyway, that English-speaking group was looked after by theological students from Union College, so we decided that the most logical thing to do was to move with the English-speaking congregation into Columbia Street United Church. I can't quite name the year we moved, but I think it was a couple of years, or three years after I arrived.	
KK: What did you find were the particular needs of the people at that time? It was still within memory of the post-war.	07:04
TM: Yep.	
KK: And so, what were the stories that you would hear or the particular needs that the Japanese-speaking congregation members would talk to you about?	
TM: What I remember most remarkable was, well people were complaining, you know—complaining's not the right word—remembering the hard times they went through during the, what they called “evacuation”, the separation of the family, and the living conditions, etc. However, most	

remarkable to me was: "What did we do wrong, to get such a treatment?" And most often, they spoke about, they thought it was wrong to live in the same area of the city, that must have scared people. So, it's a typical expression of victims again victimized because of their, sort of, forced feeling of guilt. I thought that was amazing. And they should have—I felt, as a person who came from Japan—they should have felt much more, how should I say, grievance? More vocal in grievance. I didn't hear that. Even amongst the second-generation, English-speaking Niseis. That was quite remarkable to me.

KK: Interesting. And how was it for you to hear the stories of their experience in the context of the experience that you had had in Japan?

TM: Um, well, I never thought about it that way [chuckles]. I was too busy trying to adjust myself in working with Japanese Canadians, so I never thought about comparing my experience in wartime life in Japan, and the life of Japanese Canadians who went through the internment. No, I never thought about comparing those two. I don't think I mentioned too much about my experience amongst the people I was minister to. I was doing ministry.

KK: Right. And you were also a new immigrant, so you were adjusting.

10:00

TM: Uh, that was a [laughing] difficult part. I was recruited to look after the Japanese-speaking congregation. But after a couple of years when Home Missions realized that the English-speaking, Japanese-speaking congregations were worshipping in the same building, they decided not to supply theological students anymore. So, I was told to look after two congregations, and uh, to have to start preaching in English was a near-death experience. It was so hard. Very difficult. I remember spending every day of the week writing English sermons, delivering it to one of the professors at UBC to check it over and then she, very kindly, corrected all of the awkward expressions and mistakes in syntax or that sort of thing. And often I came home about midnight Saturday night and had to do two services, one in Japanese, one in English. That was the most difficult part. I thought I was going to die. And it was at that time I went through a lot of health problems. I was hospitalized twice, etc. That part was very difficult.

But anyway, it was really enjoyable because people were basically very kind and understanding in terms of my difficulty in adjusting myself in the life of Canada. You know, I didn't even drive, so they were very kind teaching me how to drive, how to buy a car. They even raised funds to pay for the deposit on my first car. And my overwhelming memory was

kindness. They were very kind, including those Niseis; I am sure they must have suffered listening to my terrible English in some [cases].

I remember [chuckles] this one time, I didn't have any announcements in the Nisei service, so I asked the people, "Are there any announcements?" And I don't know how I said it, but people looked at each other and didn't know how to, sort of, answer to my request. Anyway, there were very, very many awkward experiences like that. But they all took it kindly. They never criticized. I never heard anybody amongst the Niseis who complained about my English. Uh, well anyway, I was eternally grateful for their kindness.

KK: What are the major memories of life in the congregation during that time? 13:30

TM: Could you repeat the question again?

KK: What are your major memories of life in the congregation? What were the kind of things that were important to the people of the congregation? What events or activities?

TM: Let me speak about the Japanese-speaking congregation part first. It was a time, uh, well the year, I think it was 1968, was the year the U.C.W. mission study [had an] emphasis on Japan. So, suddenly the congregation as well as myself, personally, were very popular in Vancouver City. We were invited to a lot of congregations, particularly UCWs; our UCW sponsored a lot of teas in different congregational U.C.W. groups, and our bazaar and the Spring Tea was one of the most popular event in Vancouver City.

I remember having so many people from other congregations come and we made a lot of money from those two events and the women were very, very busy planning and doing all the fundraising events. That is something I remember. Somehow I felt I should be with UCW women throughout the preparation and during the actual day of the bazaar and tea. As a minister who had to preach the next day, I should not have done, but they were so keen and I felt I should be with them, and that was not only a big, sort of, exhausting event, but a happy event. Those two events really erased this, how should I say, reputation [of the] Japanese Vancouver United Church, amongst presbyteries in Vancouver. I remember those things very well.

KK: Can you...

TM: Another thing is, the Niseis had a Nisei Fellowship under Gordon Imai, who was still a theological student. And he organized a Nisei Fellowship to do a many social events at Columbia Street United Church. They had a

huge Christmas dinner. They had all kinds of recreational events including a dance and a scavenger hunt, I think it was Halloween Day, driving all over the city and looking for something that was assigned to find. Well, those social events were very, very memorable and they raised the spirits of a lot of people, including mine. But, well, I had a lot of fun as well, but it was very difficult time.

KK: Can you describe one of the bazaars? 17:25

TM: One of the bazaars... The biggest one I remember was when we were worshipping in the Renfrew United Church on First and Renfrew Street. They had a big basement and it was full; I remember finding, what do they call it, the business that supplies all kinds of games. You know, we didn't do a spinning wheel, but we did lot of games, and food was very popular. You know, chow-mein and -- what did they make? Chow-mein was the most popular. I don't think sushi was in the mind of Canadians as yet. I don't quite remember what the other kinds of food we had. Anyway, the food section was the most profitable.

Now, what else did we sell? Oh! One thing I remember is there were Japanese trading companies donating a lot of cheap samples, which the companies in Japan must have sent them. Cheap products. They didn't know what to do with them, and they just occupied space in their warehouses, so they dumped a lot of cheap toys and [other] cheap stuff, and they were very popular. Yeah, [Mitsuis] and [Mitsubishis] and other trading companies gave us [items]. And one of them was managed by— what was his name?—Mr. [Arakawa]. I can still remember him. He was instrumental in attracting all these cheap samples of Japanese products. At that time... nowadays it's made in China, but at that time, cheap stuff was made in Japan, including totem poles and [unclear]. I think those were money makers.

KK: You also talked about Christmas dinner. 20:00

TM: Yep.

KK: Was that a traditional Canadian dinner, or did you have...?

TM: It was done by the Nisei congregation, and they hired a catering service. So it was a proper, Canadian Christmas dinner.

KK: Who are some of the families that you remember from those congregations? 20:45

TM: Both Issei and Nisei?

KK: Yeah.

TM: You mean the names?

KK: Yeah, do you remember...

TM: The two most active families were Mr. Tasaka and Mr. [Momosei], and their families. I think Mr. and Mrs. Tasaka's daughter is married to a Wakabayashi and I think she's now a well-known artist. I went to see her exhibit on internment camps at Royal Ontario Museum just a few months ago. Amongst the Nisei, Gordon Kadota and all the Kadota family: Charles and Richard... and all these were very, very good. Oh boy, names are not very good for me. They all escape.

KK: Hm.

TM: Imai, Gordon Imai's family. Who else? Do you know the Japanese food [Stokokobi]? Yoshida—yeah, the Yoshida family. Uchida, Chizu Uchida and her family, both Uchida senior and Chizu, and her sisters were all very active. Oh, Chizu Uchida was a gem. She not only played the organ for both services, English and Japanese, [but for] me personally, she typed all my thesis for my Master's degree and I didn't pay for it and I feel bad but she's gone now so it's too late. Uchida, Tasaka, Kadota... oh, they are all prominent families and they were pillars of the churches, both congregations.

KK: And was there Sunday school?

23:20

TM: Yeah. There was a Woman's Missionary Society missionary, Grace Namba, helping me. She not only helped the Japanese United Church in Vancouver, she helped all the mission points that Rev. McWilliams started. All the way up to Hope. Grace helped me starting a Sunday school. But in the beginning, I think until I left, we used that small micro-bus to collect all the students, because Japanese were living all over the city. But Grace was great in starting a Sunday school. She helped me until the end of my ministry in Vancouver. She was a great help. [Pause].

So that Sunday school helped to recruit the new immigrants who started to come in during the '70s—no, '60s. Early 60s. A lot of young couples came to Vancouver from Japan directly. They're, I suppose, new type of Isseis. They have a lot of Japanese-speaking kids, so we had Sunday school both in English and Japanese. And Grace looked after English-speaking kids and I looked after Japanese-speaking kids. And Grace used her station wagon, and I used my Volkswagen micro-bus to collect all the kids and we had a very thriving... Oh, and later a lot of parents decided to help us collecting, picking up all these kids for the Sunday school. So we had to have Sunday school separate from the worship service. I remember at Columbia Street United Church we had a service in the morning and Sunday school in the afternoon.

KK: So what size of a Sunday school are we talking about?

TM: What size?

KK: Yeah.

TM: Oh. I think we had, maybe 50 kids. That was the part of the reasons why we started to look for a bigger church where we could worship. Because Columbia was not big enough. So, when we had a joint-service in English and Japanese, the church was not big enough. So that's when we started to look for the church. I remember negotiating with Canadian Memorial Church, which offered the chapel, and Renfrew United Church because Renfrew Church at the time was a very popular church for the weddings amongst the Niseis. I did a lot of weddings in Renfrew United Church, so we finally decided to move to Renfrew United Church. Because of the thriving Sunday school.

KK: And what kind of activities did you do with the Sunday school children?

TM: Activities... We did picnics, we did beach parties... well, you know, the usual things that Sunday schools did. I remember at one of the beach parties—it was mainly for the mothers of the kids—and the kids got tired of playing at the beach and some were sitting down. And mothers kept talking, so one of the kids came to me and said, "Mr. Mitsui, can we go home?" So I said, "Well, it's up to your mums. Tell them to stop talking and go home." And one of them went to their mum and said, "Mr. Mitsui said shut up and go home!"

KK: [Laughter].

TM: That's one thing I remember about those activities. We did a lot of beach parties because in the summertime it was good, having the beaches in Vancouver. Kids lay on the beach at English Bay. And also we did summer picnics together in a place like... what's the name of the beach, near the border? Peace Park?

KK: Peace Arch Park?

TM: Yeah, I remember that park. We went there a couple times. Usually we went to the parks near the beach. Crescent Beach, White Rock...

KK: These were far away.

TM: Yeah. We could do it because—kids without parents—we stuffed them into a van and Grace's station wagon and by then, most of them had cars.

KK: The people who were coming to the Vancouver Japanese United Church, were they Christian in Japan?

29:30

TM: No.

KK: Or was Christianity new?

TM: In fact, I think the Kadota family—well, Gordon's father (I don't remember his name) and his wife—were the only ones who were Christians in Japan. When they came to Canada they were already Christians. I don't think all the rest were converts in Canada and the ones who came back to Vancouver from internment or removal were the majority converted during the war. You see, I don't think any of the first group of people I started to worship with in Vancouver even knew, for example, Rev. Shimizu. You know, if they were members of the Japanese United Church before the war, they should have known Rev. Shimizu; he was a very active leader of whole community. But no, Rev. Shimizu was a stranger.

So, when there were some disputes amongst the congregation, Home Missions invited Rev. Shimizu from Toronto to mediate. By then, Home Missions thought that Rev. Shimizu was such a prominent clergy among Japanese Canadians, he would have an effect in bringing about peace in the congregation. But no, it didn't because a lot of people didn't know who he was. It was quite a revelation to me because most of them were converted during the war. And in fact, a person like Mr. [Tadaichi] Asai who was, I think, a fisherman—no, gardener—said, "The reason why we decided to become Christian is because of those United Church people who helped us educate our kids, etc. Churches were so good to us while governments and the people in cities were nasty to us. But except the church..." So, they decided to convert to Christianity and join the United Church. I think his comment was something I'll never forget. I think I quoted him in my thesis too. Mr. Asai. I thought that was quite interesting.

So, they remembered your grandfather, Rev. Ono, Rev. Kabayama... who else? Yoshida? No. Anyway, [your grandfather's generation of] ministers. They remembered those, but they didn't remember people like Rev. Shimizu, Tak Komiyama, who moved further to the East like Hamilton and Toronto. They must have been very active before the war in the United Church.

33:00

KK: Yeah, that's interesting too because that would suggest that the people who were in the area and connected with the congregation before displacement didn't come back there.

TM: That's right. Yeah. I thought that was very interesting.

KK: Okay.

TM: So, I thought it was interesting that they did not raise too many complaints about the sale of Powell Street United Church because I don't think any of them remember worshipping in there, you know, amongst the group of people except Kadotas.

KK: Yeah, that's why...

TM: It took such a long time to start raising the issue.

KK: Um-hm.

TM: Because I personally did not hear any complaint about the sale. It was only Russell Ross, the minister of First United Church, who told me about it and apologized. So I said, "Oh! That's new to me".

KK: So you didn't hear it from the congregation members.

TM: No!

KK: You heard it from...

TM: No, they didn't.

KK: Rev. Ross. That is interesting.

TM: So that shows it's a different generation of, or different group of people who came back to Vancouver first. I think most of the members who were the members in Powell Street United Church moved to Montreal, Hamilton, and Toronto. Who include the family of George Takashima, you know. George went to kindergarten at Powell Street United Church. Of course, his family moved to Hamilton, right?

KK: So, do you have any sort of other major memories or a story that you can tell about the congregation that you'd like to share? Or an event or a story or just something that really sort of either highlights or epitomizes life in that congregation?

35:47

TM: Hm. Hard to pick one. I only have good memories. Well, in retrospect, I thought it was a Canadian custom to be kind to some newcomers, so I regret—took it for granted the kindness offered to us. They were so extremely kind. And forgiving. So that was a general impression. I cannot list all the kindnesses that they offered to me. But, that's the overall impression. Now, what else?

Oh, another thing I learned is, even amongst good people, conflict is normal. And I learned that lesson because in the beginning, I didn't understand why they fought over small things. And it was quite a revelation to me and helpful when I went to Africa, knowing that conflict is normal. I don't think it's an illness; it's normal. The question is how to handle it. That was the best lesson I learned in Vancouver.

37:35

KK: And how did you handle it?

TM: I don't think I handled it well. I ran to the Superintendent of Missions every time they'd start fighting. And often the Superintendent came, like, oh, Percy Bunt, uh, Henderson. What's his name? The two Superintendents I remember, they came, they were very helpful, and often in those mediation processes, Gordon Kadota was very, very helpful. By the way, Kimiko, Gordon died, I hear.

KK: Yeah.

TM: Oh okay. Anyway, I owe him a lot. Gordon and Chizu Uchida are the two persons who were particularly helpful to me. I just owe them a lot. And I regret so much that I could not say that to them while they were still here.

KK: Hmm. Is there anything that you would want or think it would be important for you to share for this project for the Vancouver Japanese United Church history?

TM: What should I say? Could we come back to subject some other time? [Laughter]. I haven't thought about it.

KK: Okay. Yeah.

TM: Uh, what would I want to say... Something...

KK: Yeah, I just wanted to make sure that...

TM: Oh, one thing I think I should emphasize is the universal lesson to all the countries and societies that oppressed people. Or, even amongst the women and men issues, not just between racial groups or economic classes. We have a tendency to victimize victims again and again. We have a very clever way. We—meaning universally speaking about human beings—have a very clever way of making victims feel guilty. That's a terrible thing. It happens amongst women, it happens amongst Japanese Canadians. You know, there's a lot of things people said when I got to Canada, and meeting all these people that went through the terrible time, [and what they said] was, "What did we do wrong? Maybe it was wrong for us to live together in the same area of the city all the time, so let us not repeat that again." But this sort of victim, chest-pounding, (*mea culpa*) is worse, something I didn't understand. But it happens all the time amongst women, amongst First Nations. You know, I think that's the best lesson I learned. Took me a long time to realize that, but...

40:16

KK: Thank you for sharing stories and wisdom.

TM: You're welcome.

End

42:21

