

Light + Life

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Shining in Santa Monica

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Jeff Finley is this magazine's executive editor. He joined the Light+Life team in 2011 after a dozen years of reporting and editing for Sun-Times Media. He is a member of John Wesley Free Methodist Church where his wife, Jen, serves as the lead pastor.

by Jeff Finley

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines resplendent as “shining brilliantly” and “characterized by a glowing splendor.” Resplendent Light Community Church truly reflects its name and the biblical call to “let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

Resplendent Light isn't one of the largest Free Methodist congregations in California, but the 8-year-old church plant has made a big impact in the well-known beachfront city of Santa Monica. After a denominational leader pointed to Resplendent Light as a congregation living *The Free Methodist Way*, Light + Life contacted the church's lead pastor to learn more about how the church is making an impact.

“We're a small church, but we collaborate. We reach out. We are resourceful,” Pastor Cliff Asai explained.

Even as the pandemic has caused Resplendent Light to shift worship services and fellowship groups to Zoom, the church has continued multiple ministries in the community. Long before COVID-19 arrived, Asai emphasized to his congregation that church isn't limited to the building.

“Church takes place six days a week out there,” he said. “We get refueled and refreshed on Sundays, but the harvest is ripe. We need to be out there and doing His work — not just talking about it but living our faith in community.”

Compelled to Multiply

Asai has lived the value of Christ-compelled multiplication for much of the past two decades. Around the year 2000, he sensed God calling him to be a church planter.

“I really didn't know what that meant, and I didn't investigate it too much,” he said.

He was serving at the time as a longtime board member of the Venice Free Methodist Church in Los Angeles, and the church was meeting with architects and considering an expansion that would require land acquisition and additional parking. In 2002, the church received the cost estimate to expand the church building.

“It was just astronomical, so there was then a decision made by the board to expand the kingdom by church planting,” Asai said.

The board's decision caused him to remember sensing two years earlier that God wanted him to help plant a church. When the board asked for volunteers for the committee to explore church planting, Asai agreed and realized he was responding to God's call.

“We spent two years planting, raising funds, setting aside and then basically seeking people who wanted to go,” he said.

A group of 45 was sent from Venice FMC to plant Westlight Community Church under the leadership of Venice Associate Pastor Keith Tanita, who is now the superintendent of the Pacific Coast Japanese Conference.

“We actually started the church in our home. My wife, Susan, and I opened up our house to host the first few meetings to plant this church. We eventually planted the church in West LA,” Asai said. “I was part of the lay team who worked with Pastor Keith to establish the church.”

Four years after planting the church, Tanita decided to leave Westlight because of a call to serve in missions work.

“He talked to me about possibly taking over the church as an executive pastor. Of course, I had not been to seminary. I was a trained lay person, but I wasn't a pastor, and I had three other associate pastors,” Asai said.

Despite Asai expressing concern about his lack of pastoral experience, Tanita convinced him that his professional background and leadership experience made him the ideal person to serve in

the role, and Asai's wife and three sons expressed their support. He began taking courses through the denomination and then continued his education at Azusa Pacific University.

He served Westlight in a halftime pastoral position from April to August 2009. He began serving fulltime as the lead pastor in September 2009. Several years later, he sensed God leading Susan and him to leave Westlight and plant a church in Santa Monica. They launched Resplendent Light in February 2013 in the Santa Monica Business Park. The church plant attracted people who already were serving the community, and their ministries became part of the church.

"They're all led by lay people kind of like how I got my start," Asai said. "Basically, I was a consultant and prayed with them, and we launched these ministries."

On the Beach and the Street

The Free Methodist Way involves love-driven justice that includes "valuing the image of God in all men, women, and children, acting with compassion toward the oppressed."

In discussing ways church members show love to their community, Asai pointed to two of Resplendent Light's ministries that work with homeless people. These ministries aren't just about meeting physical needs but also about introducing people to God-given revelation and life-giving holiness.

"There's On the Beach Ministries, which came out of a desire once a month to set up an open air place along the famous Santa Monica Boardwalk and to meet and greet and, most importantly, to pray with people, share the gospel and share a meal," he said.

Two other Free Methodist congregations, Westlight and Venice FMC, participate in On the Beach, and other area churches are also invited to help.

"Other churches that have joined us are people who see the same vision and the same mission, and it doesn't have to be all formalized. We just gather together and collaborate. Our mission is to share Christ. It doesn't matter who gets the credit," said Asai, who added that "this ministry was started by Dan Ige, and he was working very closely with Nate Cherney, who's the associate pastor at Venice, and we started doing outreach there and, more importantly, we started to pray. Out of this once-a-month activity was birthed this other ministry called Church on the Street."

Ige and his sister, Shirley Burke, and her husband, Devin Burke, decided to take church to the streets of Santa Monica from 9 to 11 a.m. each Sunday. Along with food and fellowship, Asai said, "they share a devotion, and they reach out to the homeless, passersby, people who are visiting the area. ... I really consider this the genesis of another church plant. Again, it's lay-led, and I think that's the beauty of training and equipping your people to lead ministries."

Asai said he previously apologized for being part of a small church, but he now realizes small churches "have to be very resourceful. In fact, I've been accused of being a missionary more than a pastor. That's how the Free Methodists got their start — as missionaries. We follow God's Word, and where God calls us, we go."

Collaborating With Students and Senior Citizens

Resplendent Light also demonstrates cross-cultural collaboration. Doug and Haunani Whittet have lived out this value internationally, and now they're doing it locally and regionally.

"They've spent 23 years in Japan as field missionaries," Asai said. "Since their return to the United States in 2011, they started attending Westlight and then came with us when we planted Resplendent."

The Whittets now serve as missionaries to international students — primarily from Asian countries — attending college in Southern California.

"What the Whittets do is they go on campus, or they put out flyers, and they minister to anywhere from a dozen to two dozen students," Asai said. "They take them over to their home. Doug is a great baseball fan so he takes them to the Dodger games. A lot of the students from Japan love going to baseball games."

He said the Whittets are "bilingual, bicultural" and have "a friendship ministry, and that's a flavor that we have throughout everything we do. First you have to be a friend before people really listen to your message. We're interested in the person first and to pray with them and to open ourselves up."

Other members of Resplendent Light have also connected with the students. Asai said he asks the Whittets "periodically to share the progress of their ministry, and we pray for many of their students weekly." Before the pandemic, some of the students attended services, and Asai said members would "embrace these students when they came in and just love on them. Many we stay in contact with after they return to their home countries. ... Many of them have become Christians in the process."

Asai also highlighted the ministry efforts of Paul and June Sumida, who lead Bible studies twice a week for approximately 15 to 20 senior citizens.

"It's a specific ministry to seniors, and they meet out of their home," said Asai, who added the Sumidas "are longtime Free Methodist members. They've been members of the Free Methodist Church since 1954. In fact, they were the first couple to get married at the Venice church."

The Sumidas are "in their 90s, but they're still active in ministering to seniors, predominantly Asians but they invite everybody," Asai said. "It's a very strong ministry of faithfulness and perseverance. ... I consider them very much a vital part of our church."

Their gatherings include singing and praying, and they attract some seniors who feel ignored by other churches. Asai explained, "There's a drive at churches to attract millennials, and sometimes the older adults in the congregation don't have as many opportunities to serve or have fellowship time together."

Asai believes God empowers people of all ages, and their previous experiences may be preparing them for new areas of ministry.

“Unlike a lot of pastors, I entered the ministry later in life. When most people are retiring, I decided to respond to a call,” Asai said.

After positions with several municipalities, Asai served for nearly 14 years as the senior ethics officer for Los Angeles County’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

“You might think it’s a glamorous position, but most of the time you’re being thrown out of offices because they don’t like to hear what you have to say,” Asai said. “It prepared me for the ministry, because you face a lot of rejections, but you’re also trying to counsel people on what is the right thing to do — the best choice that they have available.”

SMPD Chaplain

That counseling experience has proved valuable as Asai has served for seven years as a volunteer chaplain with the Santa Monica Police Department. In recent years, the chaplains’ program shifted from largely ceremonial duties, such as providing an occasional benediction, to active involvement in the department’s operations, such as becoming part of the police wellness program. The city now pays for chaplains to go through a training program, and friendships have formed between the chaplains and department staff along with the Santa Monica Police Officers Association.

“Once a month, I’m on call for seven days. My name is on the watch commander’s list,” said Asai, who added the department recently “had a death of an employee off-duty, and when they got news of that, they wanted a chaplain there at roll call when they announced the death of this employee and to be available.”

The chaplains are not there to proselytize or recruit people to their churches, but they are asked to be present.

“Our purpose is there to minister to the needs of the personnel that are there at the moment and if they need any follow-up,” Asai said. “It’s really been neat to get to know the officers as men and women. Many of them are of faith, and they’ve been reluctant to share that until now. I’ve prayed with a lot of the officers before they go on patrol.”

Two years ago, the department designated a small conference room as the chaplains’ office where Asai can be found on Tuesdays and Thursdays. He said he often provides snacks, which encourage department members to “sit, break bread together and fellowship.” In the police employees’ interactions with him and other chaplains, “the Holy Spirit awakens something in them.”

When he arrives to the office, police staff members are often already there waiting to see him. If they request prayer, Asai asks

Resplendent Light members to pray for them at the church’s Friday prayer group.

“I go back and tell them, ‘We’ve been praying for you.’ Most of them know me by now, and they know that when I say that, I mean that,” he said. “People have told me they sense the difference, and they’ve seen prayers answered, and they’ve seen a change in their own life — in their marriage, in their child-rearing and things of that nature. We’re known by the fruits, and it’s so neat to see the Lord getting all the credit here.”

Like many cities, Santa Monica experienced both protesting and rioting in May 2020. The California Highway Patrol, the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department and the California National Guard joined local police for a joint command. The chaplains were asked to “be present and wander around the assembly area,” Asai said. “They said, ‘We’d just like you to be out there and be available to talk to people,’ and so we did. As a result, many people in the Police Department remember that.”

The chaplains’ presence gave them additional credibility with police officers, but they weren’t in the streets for the accolades.

“If you look at Jesus’ ministry, He wasn’t in the synagogue preaching all the time. He was out amongst the people, and you meet people where they are,” Asai said. +



Resplendent Light takes the church to the community through On the Beach and Church on the Street.

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