

Mike Yasutake

Wednesday, January 23, 2002

September 25, 1920 -- December 29, 2001

The Rev. Dr. Seiichi Michael Yasutake, a second generation Japanese American, was born in Seattle, Washington, and spent his early years in Seattle and Japan.

Since his ordination in the Episcopal Church in 1950, he served in a number of capacities in both the diocese of Chicago and the national church. For fifty years he was a "voice of conscience" for the Episcopal Church as well as many national and international communities.



After his "retirement" from full-time employment, Mike assisted at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Evanston and was priest-in-charge of a Japanese Episcopal Congregation at St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Chicago. During the last two decades, Mike was the Executive Director of Interfaith Prisoners of Conscience Project (IPOC), which he founded in 1980 with the purpose of mobilizing support in church and society for the release of political prisoners in the United States and of monitoring prisons on human rights concerns. IPOC is sponsored by the [National Council of the Churches of Christ](#), USA.

Up until the very end of his life, Mike was concerned about the violations of the civil liberties of those persons who are likely to be persecuted. In the wake of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, he was alarmed that there was a resurgence of hate crimes against persons of Middle-Eastern descent. He met with Muslim leaders in the Chicago area to help safeguard the civil liberties of all those Muslims living decent lives in the United States.

One quality that stood out among Mike's many outstanding qualities was his unflagging courage to stand up against opposition, criticism and stubborn resistance. Concentrating on peace and justice issues at all times through many organizations, he stayed active up to the day of his sudden death from a massive stroke.

Mike's childhood and his early life experiences are relevant to explain his fervor and passion in challenging social injustices in the United States and in the world.

Due to family circumstances he traveled back and forth between the United States and Japan in his early childhood. When he was three years old, his mother was forced to leave him with his paternal grandparents in Japan to return to Seattle to seek medical help for his critically ill younger brother. When Mike was seven years old, he returned to Seattle to join his family and was enrolled in a kindergarten class. He remembers being ostracized not only by white classmates, but also by his Japanese American peers because he spoke no English. He felt like an

immigrant in his land of birth, which made him sympathetic in later years to the problems facing immigrants in Japan (Koreans) and the United States.

In 1939, after graduation from high school, he returned to Japan for a year and a half to pursue training in kendo, the Japanese art of fencing. He always claimed that his observations of the militaristic climate in both Japan and the United States during this period deeply affected his attitude toward war. He heard a barrage of propaganda in Japan against the United States that he knew was false and when he returned to Seattle before the outbreak of World War II, he heard the same kind of racist attitudes expressed, this time towards Japan. As chair of the US-Japan Committee for Racial Justice, he dedicated himself to combating human rights violations in both Japan and the United States.

On December 7, 1941, when the public was still reeling from the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Mike's father, a prominent community leader, was attending a luncheon meeting of his Poetry Society at a restaurant. Three FBI agents appeared at the restaurant and took his father, Jack Yasutake, into custody. Jack Yasutake was incarcerated in the Justice Department camps, separated from his family. Several months later, Mike, his mother, two brothers and a sister were removed to Minidoka, Idaho, one of the ten concentration camps built to detain 110,000 residents of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast for the duration of the war.

In 1943, after a year and a half of concentration camp life, Mike was allowed to leave camp to enroll at the University of Cincinnati. He believed that his equivocal response to the so-called "loyalty oath" which he was required to sign when he left camp prompted the government authorities to seek him out in Cincinnati to interrogate him about his loyalty because of "sensitive military research" that was being conducted at the campus. The controversial loyalty oath demanded that the Japanese and Japanese Americans "forswear allegiance to the emperor of Japan" and promise to take up arms to defend this country. Mike told the agents that he had never sworn allegiance to the emperor in the first place and therefore should not have to sign that part of the oath, and furthermore, he was opposed to war and would not bear arms. He was summarily expelled from the university. He then moved to Boston and enrolled at Boston University where he earned his B.A. degree. He received his Master of Divinity degree in 1950 at the [Seabury Western Theological Seminary](#) in Evanston, Illinois.

In 1951, he and Ruth Tahara, a registered nurse, were married, and they established residence in Oak Lawn, Illinois. He and Ruth raised a family of three children while he served as Vicar and later Rector at St. Raphael the Archangel Episcopal Church. It was while living in Oak Lawn from 1953-1963 that he became more aware of and involved in minority issues as his family was one of the few "minority" families in the community. When he actively worked to integrate the neighborhood, he was met with a great deal of resistance from the community.

During the height of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and the 1970s, an opportunity to become more involved in current social and political issues came about when he was offered a position as regional campus minister of the Episcopal Church in the Midwest Province. He identified himself with and stood with many young students who were publicly calling for social justice and peace. He became involved in the students' anti-war movement and visited and supported war resisters in prisons. It is worth noting that some of the students of those years are

today political prisoners or professionals, such as lawyers, working in defense of these political prisoners. During this period, he returned to graduate school and received his Ph.D. at Loyola University of Chicago in 1977.

The following year he was hired as a counselor at the YMCA Community College in Chicago and soon became Director of Counseling. It was there that he met and hired Carmen Valentín. Carmen had excellent credentials but was having difficulty find a job because of her outspokenness against racism at her previous teaching position. He said he knew she had a reputation for being a "troublemaker." He felt if a person in the context of an oppressive situation was not a troublemaker, she wouldn't be worth much as a counselor.

They formed a formidable pair at the college, according to Carmen, working on behalf of minority students including protecting Iranian students from Iranian counter-insurgency agents, and Arab students who were at risk because they disagreed with the United States government's position in Palestine. "It was a scary time," Carmen says of that period. "We were a great team. We made that Empire shake." Carmen's subsequent arrest for her support of Puerto Rican independence alerted Mike to the plight of political prisoners in the United States.

In spite of his experience in the civil rights movement, he said, he was completely ignorant, like most Americans, of the existence of political prisoners because of the media control in the United States. He decided at this point that he needed to educate the public about what the government was doing and founded IPOC to mobilize other people to work on behalf of political prisoners. Carmen, who now lives in Puerto Rico, was among 11 political prisoners released in 1999 by presidential clemency after serving 19 years of her 98-year prison sentence.

Carmen says of their release, "He [Mike] had a tremendous, tremendous part in bringing about our release. He organized incredible support from the religious community, and I think that's what the [Clinton] administration really listened to." Mike's support of the Puerto Rican independence movement, advocacy for other political prisoners, and activism confronting the injustice of racism and militarism often made his employers uneasy, cutting his tenure in different positions shorter than he would have preferred.

In addition to supporting the people who have joined the struggle for Puerto Rico's independence, Mike fought for the civil rights of African Americans who have taken stands against racism, Native Americans who have demanded the return of their land, people who have witnessed against nuclear development, and the rights of indigenous peoples. As Executive Director of IPOC, he worked through many organizations in his struggle. Mike was active in the [Episcopal Peace Fellowship](#) for more than four decades and served on the National Executive Council. In 2001, he traveled to Las Vegas to participate with other members in civil disobedience at the Nevada nuclear test site.

In order to involve more Asian and Asian Americans in global human rights issues, he founded the Episcopal Asiamerica Ministries Advocates. It focussed on Asian and Asian American solidarity regarding the Puerto Ricans in the United States, and the Buraku and the Koreans in Japan. He served as head of the human rights committee of the Chicago [Japanese American Citizens' League](#). He also served as board member of the Episcopal Church Publishing

Company, publisher of *The Witness* magazine. This small publication features articles on important but often controversial social and political issues confronting the Christian community and the world, and supports many of Mike's causes.

In 1999, Mike applied for and received a grant from the Charles Bannerman Memorial Fellowship Program. He embarked on a project to bring together leaders from Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines, Hawaii, Okinawa, and Cuba together to fight, as he stated in his proposal for the grant, "the effects of U.S. actions and force the United States to take responsibility, for the environmental, health, economic and social effects of its military and economic policies." He had already visited and met with the leaders of most of these areas; his last trip was to Guam only a few weeks before his death.

Recognition of his work came relatively late in life. In the Spring 1995 issue of [Religious Socialism](#), he was identified as one of two "living Americans presently engaged in activity defining him as a radical who might be honored by the future generations of the American left." (The other was Noam Chomsky.) He was described as "a dissenter who walks his talk."

In 1996, several groups supporting political prisoners honored him with a Tribute in a benefit for the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. In 1998, his Alma Mater, Seabury Western Theological Seminary, awarded him an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree. In 1999, the [Peace Museum of Chicago](#) presented him with their Peacemakers Award along with eleven community peacemakers, including the Secretary of State, Jesse White, and Sr. Mary Kay Flannigan.

On July 10, 2000 at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Denver, Colorado, the Episcopal Peace Fellowship presented him with the John Nevin Sayre Award for Peacemaking "for serving as a consistent, persistent, vigorous and nonviolent witness for peace for more than a half century." He believed that all people of faith are called to join the struggle for empowerment of the poor, powerless and colonized (a large portion of them being people of color).

Mike was a familiar presence at the General Conventions of the Episcopal Church looking for deputies to sponsor his resolutions. His most recent resolution adopted by the General Convention was titled "[Rehearing for Mumia Abu-Jamal on Death Row](#)." This resolution declared that racism is manifest in our judicial and penal systems and called for the rehearing of the case of African American Mumia Abu-Jamal, radio journalist, author and human rights activist who was sentenced to death following a trial reported to be replete with irregularities. Since passage of this resolution by the General Convention, Mike and a national committee have been mobilizing religious leaders to act corporately to press the government to stop the execution and to grant Abu-Jamal a new trial. On February 28, 2000, Mike and religious representatives were among 185 who engaged in civil disobedience in front the Supreme Court building demanding justice for Abu-Jamal. They were arrested and convicted for "impeding traffic on Capital grounds."

Mike was trained in the martial arts of kendo while in Japan as a teenager and advanced to black belt level in 1939. In the late 1970s after a hiatus of some forty years, he took up kendo again for exercise and discipline and until the last week of his life, practiced twice a week at the local dojo in Chicago. He achieved the rank of 5th degree black belt when he was 73 years old.

The death of his beloved wife, Ruth, in 1998 ended their partnership of 47 years. She worked as a full-time elementary school teacher for many years in Evanston. As the key organizer of family affairs, her efficiency and support made it possible for Mike to become involved in a multitude of activities.

Mike is survived by three grown children (and their spouses): David (Debra) and Gregory (Debbie) Yasutake, and Sandra (Richard) Conners; and eight grandchildren: Cara (20), Joseph (17), Nicholas (11), Kalyn (11) Guy (11), Jonothan (9), Patrick (7), and Kelly (1). He is also survived by three siblings: Tosh and Joseph Yasutake, and Mitsuye Yamada.

In Celebration of the Life and Ministry of the Rev. Dr. Seiichi Michael Yasutake

C. Nozomi Ikuta
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church
Evanston, Illinois
January 12, 2002

Open thou my lips, O God, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, and worthy of the extraordinary pastor, priest, prophet; father, grandfather, and brother; and friend whose life, ministry, and witness we have gathered here to celebrate. (Matthew 22:34-40)

Konnichi wa. Buenas tardes. Aloha k̄ȳkou. In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, and in the name of people everywhere who struggle for justice, freedom, and dignity, and especially in the name of Chicago's Puerto Rican community with whom Rev. Yasutake and I worked especially closely together -- greetings.

We all know that the Rev. Dr. Seiichi Michael Yasutake was a great soul, a devoted brother, husband, father, and grandfather, a faithful priest, and a fearless prophet. We know that his sudden departure from us leaves an enormous void that will never be fully filled. And yet, for me, as I suspect for many of you, these last, terribly sad weeks following his passing have also been uniquely blessed, filled with phone calls and e-mails and messages from other people touched and moved by this incredible man. As I reflected -- and learned more about -- Mike's life, I thought about the way he exemplified the Great Commandment, read in today's Gospel lesson, to love God, and our neighbors as ourselves.

For Mike, this love was never merely sentimental or abstract. Rather, it was grounded in concrete acts of sacrifice, courage, and generosity. In this brief meditation, I would like to suggest just three lessons that Mike's legacy of love may have for those of us who must now continue on without him.

First of all, Mike loved himself. Of course, I don't mean this in the sense of being selfish, which is the opposite of the way he was. And I also don't mean it in some artificial sense of feeling good about oneself by ignoring one's faults. I mean it in the sense that whether it was as an

Episcopal priest or as a Japanese American, or as a pacifist, Mike was completely at home with who he was. As an Episcopal priest, he wore his collar whenever he was "on duty" -- whether that was to attend a meeting, march in a protest, or visit a prisoner, and the worship services he led were strictly by, and out of, the *Book of Common Prayer*. To know him was to know that he was an Episcopal priest.

Mike was also deeply at peace with his identity as a Japanese American. This is harder than it may sound for someone who lived through as much discrimination as he endured -- whether it was as a Japanese-speaking seven-year-old, newly returned to the U.S. and placed in kindergarten after four years in Japan, or later, as a 21-year old whose father was taken into custody after Pearl Harbor, or as the victim of the ongoing racism which continues to infect our society as a whole.

As a Midwestern Sansei, I know personally how easy it is to allow such experiences to make us withdraw or seek to blend in. But whether it was from spending those formative, early childhood years in Japan, or the discipline of kendo, in which he earned a fifth degree black belt, or the beautiful Japanese decor with which Ruth adorned their home, or his association with Puerto Ricans who were intensely proud of their culture -- or, as I suspect, a combination of all of these -- Mike was very clear about affirming and embracing his cultural heritage. And in so doing, served as a role model, instilling a sense of pride in many younger Japanese and other Asians.

I believe that this sense of himself, undergirded by his faith, gave him the courage as a student at the University of Cincinnati to refuse to take the oath demanding that he forswear allegiance to the Japanese emperor and promise to take up arms for the U.S. When the FBI questioned him, Mike told the agents that "he had never sworn allegiance to the emperor in the first place, and therefore should not have to sign that part of the oath, and furthermore, he was opposed to war and would not bear arms."

Mike frequently referred to the war years as critical to the development of his social consciousness, and in the process, helping to educate subsequent generations about the civil rights violations inflicted upon the Japanese of that era. His self-love as a Japanese American led him to advocate for the rights of the Japanese community as a whole.

Second, he deeply loved his neighbors. Self-love, acceptance, and advocacy for the Japanese community were only a small part of his justice work. During the turbulent decades of the 1960s and '70s, he helped with voter registration in the South, marched with Martin Luther King in Chicago, and visited war resisters in prison.

In 1976, as Director of Counseling at the YMCA Community College, Mike hired Carmen Valentín -- a decision which would shape the rest of his life. In 1980, she was arrested as a radical fighter for Puerto Rican independence, and Mike spent the next nineteen years visiting her and the other Puerto Rican political prisoners and advocating for their release. In September, 1999, Carmen and ten others were granted clemency by President Clinton -- a victory which never would have taken place without Mike's participation in the campaign for their release.

But Mike's solidarity concerns did not end with the Puerto Rican community. It extended from Asia and the Pacific to the Caribbean, from Koreans and Okinawans to Hawaiians to Japanese Latin Americans to Puerto Ricans in the island of Vieques. In November, just a little more than a month before he died, he traveled to Guam as one of the organizers of a conference addressing the human rights concerns of people affected by Japanese or U.S. militarism. Mike clearly loved and served his own, Japanese community. But he also insisted on looking beyond his own particular community. For Mike, a neighbor was any one who needed his voice and heart in a struggle against injustice or oppression.

Third, Mike's love of self, community, and neighbor were rooted in his love of God. He certainly respected and had many friends who do not identify themselves as Christians, but it was clear that his faith did not just motivate his justice work; it enabled him to confront injustice without becoming bitter or cynical. Even while fully aware of the frailty of individuals and institutions, including the church, his outlook was always one of hope. In my mind's eye, I can see Mike's inimitably philosophical smile, paradoxically acknowledging experiences of injustice and oppression as a part of life while deepening his resolve to struggle against them.

In the 1950s, for example, Mike and Ruth encountered such tremendous discrimination that they were unable to obtain housing in Oak Lawn, except on church property. Later, Mike wryly commented that although the city had eventually voted them "Family of the Year," "they wouldn't let us live anywhere."

Or, when Mike and a several of his students went to help register voters in the South after civil rights workers there were murdered, the house where Mike was living was blown up. But he discounted the trauma by acknowledging that although the frightening episode had taken place, it was "not while I was in it."

Perhaps the clearest evidence of his unfaltering hope was in his insistence that the church raise a moral voice, even for causes that were not popular or well-known. He was a fixture at General Conventions, introducing resolutions on a variety of human rights issues -- most recently, one in support of the black political prisoner and journalist, Mumia Abu-Jamal.

I will miss him, and I do miss him, so very much. Just the other day, while arranging for another prison visit, it just wasn't the same without having him in the loop. We all know that the world has been terribly impoverished by his death. But we were even more enriched by his life and legacy. Parting with him is such sweet, sweet sorrow. But there is not a doubt in my mind that it is better to have loved and lost him, than never to have had the opportunity to love him at all.

Mike lived an abundant life, and died a painless death, surrounded by his children and grandchildren. Now part of that great cloud of witnesses, his prophetic legacy will live on -- as long as those of us he touched continue to seek the reign of justice and love for which he strove so mightily.

On the wall, by the entrance of a building important to Mike, there is a quote by Bertolt Brecht that describes Mike's legacy best:

There are some people who struggle for a day, and they are good.
There are others who struggle for a year, and they are better.
There some who struggle for many years, and they are very good.
But there are those who struggle their whole lives --
These are the indispensable ones.

This, then, is the challenge with which he leaves us:

- To love ourselves, embracing our cultural identities and affirming the image of God within each of us and our communities.
- To love our neighbors, demanding justice, freedom, and dignity for everyone and standing with all those who struggle for them.
- And to love God, manifesting the eternal spirit of love, hope, and forbearance which transforms every defeat into victory, every sorrow into joy, and every disappointment into a new opportunity for work and witness.

With God's help, may it be so for us.