

Randy Stafford's Testimony - February 2003

A few years ago, I was given the email address of my father's cousin-by-marriage, a long lost relative I last met when I was 5 years old. I wrote to her and she replied "Praise the Lord! What has been happening in your life these 40 years?" I was thrilled to find that she was a Christian, and for the first time in my walk in Jesus, sat down and penned a 'testimony.' I have changed a few things for clarity, and updated it to more recent times. My memory of every event may not be exact, but it is close. Junko, my proof-reader, kept me honest against any attempt to embellish or exaggerate.

Pre-perusal disclaimer: the following is what happened, not what I wanted, per se. However, since being apprehended by Jesus, I have only wanted Him. I have never sought signs and wonders, and still do not. But I do accept that the Lord today pours forth many gifts, ministries, and miracles by His Spirit, according to His will, not our desire for them. I believe this is where many believers have strayed from the Lord and found themselves serving false prophets and false gifts. In our church we have experienced many of the gifts, and seen His hand touch us. But we do not 'name and claim' or 'command the blessing.' We believe, we serve, we share, we wait, and He is always faithful to do more than we ask. Finally, feel free to share any of this with whomever. I am neither ashamed nor proud (I hope and pray) of this history, but ask only that it may encourage and strengthen God's people.

(my testimony)

Dear Friend in Christ,

Greetings and love to you from Japan in the name of Jesus!

I am so sorry for not getting back to you sooner. I have been very busy getting everything ready for school. In addition to shepherding this church, I am principal of our school of 12 kids, and am a "tent-maker," meaning that I used my own finances to start our church, and we are still completely self-supporting. (Something like working my way through college) Though our church of about 50 souls is very faithful in their giving, our mortgage, taxes, utilities and such are very expensive. I do all kinds of work to supplement the church's finances. Presently, I build computers and sell them mostly to Christians.

Naomi (my older daughter) told me that you wanted to hear about my conversion to Christ. It is truly a miracle, and I would be glad to share my story with you. I am not sure how much you have heard from Buz and Doreen (my older brother and sister), so I will start at the beginning... I was born in Louisiana, but Dad, as a pilot for the US Air Force was constantly being moved from this base to that. My first vague memories were of Bunker Hill AFB in Indiana. I think we visited you while we were there. I remember a little about a farm. From there we went to March AFB in California, where Dad retired and got a job in Seattle as a test pilot for the Boeing SST program. After Congress shot down the SST program 3 years later, there were no jobs in Seattle, and Dad was hired by Japan Air Lines as an instructor. I moved there in 1969, when I was 12 years old. I went to a military DOD high school, and met Junko when we were 17 years old. I went away to college in Hawaii for two years, but wanted to be with my sweetheart and returned to Japan. I went to Sophia University (in Tokyo) for two years, but was not very serious and dropped out a semester shy of graduation. Junko and I started an English conversation school, and were successful enough to get married in 1980. Up to this point I was very much against Christianity. I really do not know why. I tried Buddhism for a while but was unable to "empty myself." I studied martial arts, but could not "transcend." I studied philosophy, but upon studying the philosophers themselves, I found that most were hypocrites and could not live with their own "systems." I applied myself to dissipation and sin, and was quite "successful," but never satisfied. However, we did well financially and

decided to go to the US to “make our fortune” in 1981. We went to be with big brother Buz in Minneapolis, and had plans to open a liquor store there, but everything fell through. Then, Buz was transferred to Pittsburgh a few months after we got there. We knew nobody in Minneapolis, so we followed him to Pennsylvania. About this time, Junko started to get sick. We thought it was a minor thing, and both started working at a Japanese steakhouse in downtown Pittsburgh. Junko was diagnosed with cervical cancer and had to quit working. I was giving her a vaccine that was supposed to arrest the spread, but she got progressively worse. She was on a special diet, no red meat, no dairy products, etc., but it did not help. She could hardly walk for more than a few minutes. In early 1982, she was introduced to a Japanese woman living in the same apartment complex. She was a zealous Christian, and told Junko that faith in Jesus would heal her. I was not impressed, but Junko began going to church and prayer meetings. Her physical health was still deteriorating, but she was finding hope in her heart. To top it off, I lost my job, and was unemployed. Then, on July 4th, 1982, I was invited to a Independence Day picnic. I thought, “beer in the park,” but was shocked to find it was a church picnic! I was very angry. I wanted to “relax” and get drunk, I wanted a cigarette! But somehow (by grace!), I stayed. After lunch, a little old Italian fellow (the pastor) stood up, and started preaching. I was really turned off, and wanted to leave. But a few of the words caught my attention, and I listened a bit. Though I was against Christianity, and very much in love with sin and myself, I found that I could not deny ANY of the words he spoke. I can hardly remember the scriptures he quoted, but I know that he preached better news than any I had heard in my entire life. At the end, he asked all to bow their heads, and if they believed the words to raise their hands. (It was a setup! I was the only unsaved person there, and everyone knew it but me!) I raised my hand almost against my will, but had to admit that what I heard was true. Also, the words of hope and salvation were my heart’s desire. I count that day to be my “Re-Birth day.” After the picnic, I was still fuming in my desire for self and sin, but the truth had been planted, and I could not escape. I battled for weeks and gave my poor wife a very hard time. At the end of August I was still fighting everything Christian, but Junko announced she was going to be water baptized, and asked if I wanted to join her. “NO WAY!” I replied, but agreed to take her to the church that evening. I, myself had still never been inside a church! As I dropped her off she asked again if I would come watch, and I reluctantly agreed. (She says I volunteered) When she asked if I wanted to be baptized, I shocked myself by saying, “Yes, but I wasn’t prepared.” She said that she had brought a change of clothes for me in her bag. (Sneaky!) As the service was just about to start, I was rushed into a changing room to get ready. Again, completely against my will! I should have been suspicious about a “change of clothes,” but I still had no idea that it was a full-immersion baptism. I thought, “This must be a messy sprinkling or a big cup of water.” I was under the impression that I was just going to get my head wet. Had I known... Anyway, because it was the hottest day of the summer, the air conditioner was really going full blast. I entered the sanctuary full of about 300 people, and found the other candidates lined up and joined them. The first person called was... me! I walked up front and was told to take off my watch. I asked why, and casually opened the clasp... and it broke in my hands and fell to the ground. I was getting angry! Then I was led to a platform, and up some steps, and behold, a pool! I could hardly back out, but I did NOT want to get in. For some reason beyond me, I did enter, and was baptized in Jesus’ name. (Acts 2:38) I am surprised that steam did not explode around me, I was furious. But I did submit. As I got out, the next was Junko, and I waited for her. When she came out and joined me, a big fellow came over and said, “Please wait, my son, I believe the Lord has a word for you.” I had no idea what that might mean. About 6 or 7 people were called forward and they began to speak about Junko and me. One said, “My son, I have protected you until now.” Another said, “My daughter, you shall be covered with healing and new life.” Another, “Do not be anxious, but give yourself to God.” “You will walk in new life, and everything you have wanted will come about.” “Rejoice in the Lord, for He does love you.” For about 20 minutes they prayed and prophesied over us. I was still upset, and very cold, and couldn’t wait to get out of there. After the service was over, I said to Junko in the car, “I’m never going there again.” She said, “Yes, dear.” I went the following Sunday. And I went to a home meeting the next Wednesday. And I went to a Christian foundation class on Friday. I was drawn, not by Junko or other people, but by a thirst for truth, reality, honest fellowship and freedom from sin. Outwardly, I was trying to hold on to my past life, but inwardly as new life had begun. A few weeks later, I was invited to join a new Ministry Training School that had just started at the church. They certainly had more faith in me than I had. During all

this, Junko was still sick, but her situation had stabilized. Unfortunately, mine had not. I was still without a job, but we still had a small amount of cash from our Japan days. So, we decide to take out a loan and start a Japanese fast food restaurant in a shopping mall. We worked like crazy, and made a good try of it, but the mall was unpopular, so we were out of business within a year. We lost everything. In addition, I had defaulted on our lease and had a half million dollar debt as well as a dozen vendors hounding us! Pittsburgh was very depressed at the time, and there were no jobs at all. A friend hired me daily for some construction work, but it wasn't enough to satisfy our debts. One day, in the midst of this, we were invited to a older couple's home for dinner. Junko was still on her special diet, and red meats and dairy products continued to make her ill. We thought these people knew about this, and were shocked to find a bacon-loaded salad and a big roast ham set before us. Junko looked at me and asked what to do. For some reason, I said go ahead and eat it. She did, and said it was good!

We went home fearing a relapse, but she woke the next morning feeling great. Soon after, she told me she should go to the doctor because of some irregularity. We went to a doctor recommended to us by a friend, and he called us into his office. He said, "Congratulations! one of you is very pregnant!" I said, "Doctor Silverstein, Junko has had cervical cancer for almost 2 years, is this possible?" He looked at me and said, "Nonsense, she could never get pregnant." He took a biopsy and asked us to come see him again for the results. I brought Junko's medical records, X-rays, diagnosis, and medication with me. He looked at everything and said, "These must be a mistake, as they show a typical case of cancer, but my tests are all negative. Furthermore, there is no evidence that your wife has ever had cancer, no scar tissue, nothing. She is obviously very healthy and very pregnant." Naomi was born the next spring, a very healthy miracle baby. While we went through our first pregnancy together, our finances were still in bad shape. We received an eviction notice to be out of our apartment by December 24th. Fortunately, in Pennsylvania you cannot be forced out while someone in the household is pregnant, so we stayed until February. At that time, a church friend was moving out of a small house rented to them by a kind widow. It was very inexpensive, and our landlady asked for no deposit. Over the next few years, she was so understanding, even when I was late with the rent. I became a carpenter, working at whatever came along. After Naomi was born, we still had creditors come banging on the door, and even had the sheriff come to place all of our possessions up for auction. (Twice!) However, at our worst times, I was sent work from heaven in the form of being a Japanese interpreter. Through an acquaintance from my restaurant days, I was introduced to an iron-products manufacturing company that needed help communicating with the engineers from their Japanese partner. I was asked first only for a day or two, but it stretched out to almost two weeks. My pay was more than triple what I earned as a carpenter. I was able to appease the sheriff with the money. After that, I was asked to interpret for a Japanese television company that was in Pittsburgh to do a story about organ transplants. It just so happened that both of these fields, engineering and medicine were hobbies of mine, and I was able to do a good job. Back to being a carpenter, painter, electrician and plumber, we were again beset by our creditors. During all this, I finished the 9 month foundations course and continued on in the ministry training school. I started ministering the gospel at a mission for the homeless in the Pittsburgh North Side. It was funny, often the people coming to the mission had more money in their wallets than I did! Every time our money well went dry, I got a call at the last minute (sometimes past the last minute) from someone who needed a Japanese interpreter. The vice president of the iron-products company was an elder in the Lutheran church, and he would spend hours with me in the car while we commuted to Ohio, talking about Jesus. He was a great influence to me in my faith. Little by little we paid off our debts, and after three years we had paid almost all but the large judgment from our mall landlord. I graduated from ministry training school, and was teaching the foundations class at our church. Junko was healthy, and Naomi was a normal, but rambunctious toddler. We were at a special meeting at our church in early 1986, and one of the guest speakers spoke over Junko and I that we were to return to Japan and serve the Lord there. Junko did not want to leave our church "family," but I knew it was time. We prayed about it and knew together that we should go, but we were still penniless. Above that, I felt that God did not want us to be financially supported, but to go out by faith. I applied for a visa to live in Japan, and we received notice in September that we had 30 days to arrive in Tokyo or my visa would be forfeit. Through a good many miracles,

we paid every debt (but the BIG one), and had enough money for air fare. [Note: The final debt was for lost revenue and damages incurred by our mall landlord. Two years after we were evicted, they found another tenant, which should have nullified a portion of our debt, but a judgment had already been awarded. I would have to go to court to change the judgment, but that would cost money, too. We didn't hear anything for a while, so we left it alone, assuming our landlord had given up. Four years after we returned to Japan, we received a registered letter stating that we did still owe the money, and that it was almost \$800,000 with interest! We contacted a lawyer friend in Pittsburgh, and she investigated for us. She found that the statute of limitations was almost over, and it was a last attempt to get money from us. We were told to sit tight, which we did, and later were told that we were completely free from the debt and that our former landlord has used it as a huge tax write-off.] We came to Japan with a bit less than \$1,000 in cash. This did not last very long, but the Lord was faithful and provided work for both Junko and I teaching English. We went to a church in Tokyo for a few months, but felt the leading of the Spirit to start our own church. This was not my plan at all! We started with meetings in our living room. Just about this time, Priscilla was born. Junko was pregnant the whole time we were preparing to come to Japan! Soon after Priscilla was born, we were lent a room over an auto-body shop. We had our first church service there on Easter Sunday of 1987. A year later we moved to an old woodshop that we rented from Junko's father. It was very run-down, but we cleaned it up, and praised God. By this time we had 20-25 saints in our church. In 1992, a fierce typhoon hit Yokohama, and a corner of the building's foundation was washed away. The whole structure was tilting! To repair it would cost a lot of money, and already the roof leaked and the walls had rust holes. We asked for an answer, and believed we were to build a new building. We had no money in the bank, but also no debts. None of the members of our church had any building experience. In fact, none of them even knew which end of the hammer was which. I asked my pastor in Pittsburgh if I could look for volunteers from among my home church, and he agreed. I went to the bank, and they agreed to lend us enough to import the building materials from the US and build with volunteer labor. My old boss (actually, same age as me) was willing to come, as well as several elders, deacons, ushers, and even the pastor's son! All these men came on their vacation time, and a few even paid their own air fare. Even my boss' wife came to help on the interior. We made a three-story building of about 3,000 sq.ft. Our first floor sanctuary can seat about 100 people. We use all the seats several times a year, for Christmas, Easter, our annual school drama, etc. This brings us back to the school... From the very beginning we were home-schooling our own daughters, but about 8 years ago the whole church decided to start our own school. It is completely part of our church, and all of the teachers are volunteers. I say this tongue-in-cheek, as you are required to help if your child is in the school. We teach from pre-school to high school. The older kids teach the younger ones, too. We teach mostly in English, which means most of the parents must learn English, too. Our first subjects are respect, communication and love. Our next priorities are music and the arts. All kids learn basic computer skills. Finally, we teach math and science as common sense. Though we place little emphasis on "academics," our kids' aptitude scores are well above average and their grades are always good to excellent.

Sadly, about four years ago, we were cut free from our relationship with my pastor in Pittsburgh. It is a long story, but the short version is that he began to exercise un-Biblical authority over us, while neglecting our spiritual needs. I truly believe he had the best of intentions, but some domestic issues in his own church created instability in the balance of orderliness and grace. Several saints in his church were asking for some flexibility concerning some rather rigid rules. They were summarily excommunicated from the fellowship. (and I mean totally cut off!) I was ordered to follow suit and have no contact with these people (about 100!), but many of them were faithful saints with legitimate questions. I asked for an opportunity to review the situation, but was then falsely accused of collaboration, and even being a ringleader of insurrection! I appealed to my pastor for audience, but he was adamant. If I did not cut these people off, and completely submit myself and my church absolutely under his authority and rule, I would also be excommunicated. Well, I could not deny the salvation of these people without Biblical witness, nor could I place my flock totally in the hands of someone half a world away, who had little knowledge of Japan. So, he sent me a note that we were heretic, and excommunicated. To be frank, it sounds terrible, but it was the grace of God to us. We were growing increasingly uncomfortable with

an escalating sense of control and rigidity. Many things that seem important in America are trivial in Japan, where we struggle in a society with less than one-tenth of one percent faithful Christians. Many songs, sermons and teachings from America (or elsewhere) are incompatible with the life we live here, and in fact stifle the moving of the Holy Spirit, creating an artificial faith in God. We are now free to explore the depths of grace that the Lord has provided for us here. We are loosed from the bindings of certain prejudices and the doctrines of man into a place of blessing reserved for this particular local church, an expression of the body of Christ. I still pray for my pastor, and for the many saints and friends that we are out of touch with, and for restoration of fellowship, sharing and love.

Two years ago, Naomi went to Honolulu to study at Kapi'olani Community College, an extension of the University of Hawaii. She went there with Eri Sato the first year, and last year Nozomi Takehara joined them, all graduates from our church school. We call them the "Three Strands," (not easily broken) from Ecclesiastes 4:12. Because the Lord is with them, they are actually the "Four Strands!" Naomi is studying Information Technologies, and will graduate with an Associates in Science degree this May. She intends to pursue another degree in New Media Arts, which is an Associates in Technical Science. These two fields are very up-to-date, with a lot of hands-on experience with computer hardware, applications, and software programming. She chose Kapi'olani because of their excellent teachers and high ratio of jobs upon graduation. We are blessed that she is doing well with school, but even more that she is serving a good local church with zeal and faith. She is very active in campus ministries as well as ministry in the church. All three girls have an excellent reputation among the Gentiles and among the saints. Praise the Lord!

Presently, we are in the midst of renovating our church building. It is ten years old, and was built with economy, but with future upgrades in mind. The Lord has made it clear that it is time to implement those upgrades, and has blessed us with the finances and the means to accomplish His will. We are adding a room over the garage, connecting to a storage room that will also enclose our baptistery (presently outdoors, but attached to the building behind the platform). We will also take off the old metal siding, which was practical but not very pretty, and replace it with modern 'fiber-concrete' horizontal lap siding from Australia. Finally, we want to put up a cross on the outside of the front of the church, something we have been seeking for some time. All this will be accomplished with volunteer help from churches in the US. Saints from 5 states are committed to come, some paying their own way! We look forward to sweet fellowship while working together to build the church of God! I have been a Christian for 21 years, and back here in Japan for the past 16 years. I am blessed! My own children are water baptized and serving God. The other saints in this fellowship are full of similar testimonies. I am now 46 years old, very satisfied with my Savior, and looking forward to the adventures yet to come.

(end testimony)