Kent Ijichi
Narrator

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Loyola University Chicago
Interviewer

Kent Ijichi: KI
Ayana Cooper: AC

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Abstract: Kent Ijichi is a member of Christ Church of Chicago, where he has served in various capacities over the last two decades. This oral history took place at Christ Church of Chicago, located in the Roger's Park area. The interview is approximately 37 minutes long. The conversation followed Kent's favorite memories within Christ Church of Chicago and his experience in the church community. The interview took place as a part of the *Gathering Places* project at Loyola University of Chicago. For more information, see http://beta.gatheringplaceschicago.com/.

AC: So, hi. My name is Ayana and I am here with Mr. Kent from Christ Church of Chicago. Would you be willing to give me a brief introduction of yourself, please?

KI: Yes. Uh, my name is Ichiro Kent Ijichi, but I go by Kent. Um, A personal history?

AC: Of course.

KI: Okay. Um, I am a 78 year old, Japanese American, and I've lived in Chicago most of my life. [I've] grown up in Chicago. I lived on the south side, went to Hyde Park High School. I went to U of I. Um, I actually, I'll just stay on who I am, right?

AC: yes.

KI: Okay. That's about it, I guess.

AC: Well, that was a very good introduction. Thank you so much for doing that for me. So, jumping right into the first question, why did you say yes to this oral history? What made you want to participate?

KI: Well, I was asked by someone to do it and I thought, "that would be fine". At the time I thought there would be other people doing the oral history, but I guess because of various people, their situations, they were not able to do it.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: And I wanted to stay on to do it. So hopefully I am not too confusing in giving you my answer, so.

AC: No, I'm sure it'll be great. I am looking forward to what you have to share with me. So you kind of explained a little bit earlier. Mm-hmm. But because that was the pre-recording, I'm gonna ask again. Um, how long have you been a member and when did you join?

KI: I've been a member of Christ Church of Chicago since, uh, 1995. So I've been a member for 28 years. Um, I've served in different capacities with the church. I was on the choir. I was on diaconate. I was a co-moderator at one time. I helped in the search, the building search, when we purchased the building. I was the building go-to guy for a while.

AC:Okay.

KI: So anything that needed to be done with the church, I would do. Whether it was electrical, uh, roofing, plumbing, whatever.

AC: Okay. So you had quite a few jobs in the church. Um, what was the most rewarding or the one that was most fun to you?

KI: Um, well each part had different aspects too. It was a joy to be on the choir and I was probably on the choir for maybe 10 or 12 years.

AC: Okay.

KI: And it's a joy to sing. Even though I'm not on the choir now, when they sing, I know most of the hymns that they sing. So I kind of mouthed the words as they're singing.

AC: Okay. Yeah. We love a good choir moment. Um, Is there a favorite memory you have within, you know, your choir history?

KI: Probably within choir…No, uh, probably just doing Christmas is most fantastic.

AC: So did you guys carol?

KI: We didn't carol, but we had a Christmas Eve service.

AC: Okay.

KI: And that was a joy.

AC: Okay. I love that. Um, could you tell me the moment that you realized that this was your place? Like this church was meant to be your home?

KI: Well, let me go back into my background again. I was born in a relocation camp. Uh, and the Japanese Americans during World War II were put in relocation camps, and I think there were 10 of them. So my parents who were in Altadena, California, they were shipped to Heart Mountain, Wyoming. So I was born in Heart Mountain, Wyoming. Then when the war ended and the Japanese Americans were released from camps, my parents came to the Midwest. So we came to Chicago.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: And a lot of the Japanese American churches back then, uh, they found it comforting to –whether it was Christian or Buddhist or whatever religion –to be together at that time. Coming out of relocation camp. So at that time on the south, living on the south side, I belonged to a church called Ellis Church.

AC: Okay.

KI: Which was a Japanese American relocation church, [a] Christian Church. And then as memberships go in churches, uh, it declined. So they joined another church which was Kenwood Church. And so, uh, Ellis Church joined Kenwood and it became Kenwood Ellis.

AC: Okay.

KI: And then as I grew into going to college and growing a little bit older, I kind of grew away from church.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: But back in ‘95, I decided I would come back. I was aware of Christ Church of Chicago, but I had not attended any services. And in the beginning of 2000, uh, 1995, I started Christ Church of Chicago. And at that time they were at Berteau and Paulina.

AC: Okay. So, how do you see your role within the community? And that can be within the general community…

KI: How does the church see the role or myself?

AC: Yourself. And you can go into the church if that makes you more comfortable.

KI: I think the church, now that we're at Glen Lake and Rockwell, and there is a community around it and it's our church now. Uh, whereas the church that we were in previously at Bethany, it was not our church. We were renting from them. So it was difficult to expand any activities from that. Now that we're here, at what used to be St. Mark's, uh, we have opened it to different activities in the community. In the Japanese American community, the Japanese American Service Committee was renting space here. Was using space here for “Out of the House”, which is for older adults to be able to come and do something and meet other people. And so for a length of time that was happening. I know before Covid happened, probably 2015, 2016, 2017,

2018, that there was an Assyrian youth group that would come here after school and they would use this space. Also, a member has karate teaching, and he uses the fellowship hall for that. For both young and old. So building wise, being able to let other people in, it's always nice to do that. To share the space. So that's what we like to do.

AC: And then your personal roles within the church, how do you feel or how do you see that?

KI: Well, um, most of the members like to do [or] to serve other areas. So, we've been– we had been doing– I don't know if you're aware of a pantry called Adjust Harvests. Which is on Paulina, near Howard or north of Howard. And it's a place that people in need can go to have dinner. And our church– we have members that will go and help serve food there.

AC: Okay. That's wonderful.

KI: So that's one of the things that we do.

AC: Okay. Okay. So how important is Christ Church's history to you? Um, do you feel like you're affirming or, you know, departing from the past or?

KI: Well, I think we're growing. Because originally, [we were] a church that started as a result of Japanese Americans leaving relocation camps. At the very beginning it was mainly just Japanese American. But as we've moved here and grown and gone into different generations of Japanese Americans, it's kind of like we're becoming– we're trying to become more and more of what the community is. The community around us.

AC: Okay.

KI: So that's why in the summertime, we like to do outside, uh, things outside where people are exposed to who we are. They could see us, like just this past Sunday… uh, Saturday we had an Easter egg hunt. That was open to the community and people coming passing by. They can have their kids join in the Easter egg hunt, depending on their age group, and they would hunt around and find little Easter eggs. Plastic Easter eggs with little numbers inside, depending on what it was that they can go and get their prizes. So on and so forth.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: So..

AC: Oh..Keep going. I'm sorry.

KI: And we were doing food at the same time. Trying to introduce people to some of the foods that we've had. There were egg rolls that were done, somebody in the church made, uh, Filipino egg rolls. There was an Asian chicken salad that was done. There's something called spam Musubi Musubi. Which is a rice ball with fried spam on top, wrapped with nori or seaweed around it. So people had a chance to kind of experience that.

AC: So would you say that you guys are often sharing your culture as Japanese Americans with the community? Or, I mean, at every opportunity you get, I could see you doing that, right?

KI: Yes. We're trying to. Uh, and we're not, you know– that was who we started out as. And we still wanted to hold onto that, but we still want to bring the neighborhood community into the church.

AC: Okay. So what is your favorite memory from being in the church in general? Like not just choir.

KI: In general? I would say, we used to do church summer camps, which were fantastic.

AC: That sounds fun.

KI: We would go up to Lake Geneva. They would always reserve an area. Uh, there was a place in Lake Geneva that we would always reserve. And it would start out on Friday evening and end up on a –or Friday– some people would get there during the day on Friday. Most people, since they were working, would probably come later in the evening. And we would have dinner and campfires and things that were nice. Because it was a time where you can get to sit with others, with your church members. And spend the whole weekend and find out how they met. And, you know, what their interests were, so on and so forth. And it was very big at the time, but we hadn't done that for a length of time.

AC: So would you like to see more of those camps in the future?

KI: Oh, we love that. And we had talked various times about reinstituting that, having camps. Kids at the camp there, kids would have a chance to go canoeing in a rowboat, fishing. Again, we were doing campfires in the evening, singing folk songs, and roasting marshmallows. After I had done it for one or two years, I thought, well it would be interesting to look around and see what the area would offer. And there was a [horse] riding stable that was not too far away. So I got in contact with the riding stable and I proposed it to the church.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: And for [the] following years, may I say three or four years, we had groups that would go riding. I would take 'em out on horses to go riding.

AC: That sounds like so much fun.

KI: Oh, it was fun. It was nice. It was nice to get out of the formal church environment and have it more casual.

AC: Okay. Yeah. I love that. Um, we always love to get together and connect on a deeper, more personal level, as human beings. And I think it's really important when it comes to, um, not even just religious communities, but a community in general to get together.

KI: Yes. Yes.

AC: And get to know each other. Um, and I think Covid has really changed that for us. The human connection part because we had to be away from each other and couldn't really be in each other's personal space. So leading into the next question, how has Christ Church changed since you've been here? And you can include that over Covid or just however you want to go about it.

KI: For us, COVID really affected our church. We were kind of shut down for two, two and a half years, I would say. Where the only contact was on Facebook. Doing service on Facebook. And it's such a joy to get back together and see people in the church. You know, it's not quite the same. Because of Covid, you know? I'm a hugger and I used to hug people, come up and hug people. Now it's kind of like we're bumping elbows and stuff like that. So it has affected us.

AC: So has the culture changed completely or is it just like certain aspects of [it]? Like attendance or is it just overall?

KI: Well, it's cut back on attendance. And, you know, people are trying to get back into church. And with us doing things outside, it kind of like– it helps that along.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: You know, rather than being in a confined space, you're in fresh air and you can sit. And they'll have concerts during the summer outside.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: And I think that's happening again this summer.

AC: Okay. That'll be something exciting to look forward to. Especially because it's a way to adapt, you know, to the nature of our society and also still involve the community.

KI: Yes. And then two, I think Covid probably is still lurking there. So a lot of people kind of feel well, you know…even then, on Sundays, people will come in with masks on and so on and so forth. I will. You know, and then when we get out and we feel more comfortable, we'll end up taking the mask down.

AC: Which makes sense. Um, again, I'm sorry to hear about, you know, the passings in the church. And again, extending my condolences. COVID was really hard for everyone. And I kind of got, you know, from Elaine that the church's community and culture has changed quite a bit due to Covid. So, thank you for answering that question. I know that can be a hard question, um, to go about. So what do you see as the future of your congregation? Like how do you see it?

KI: Well, I see the growth coming from [the] youth. And from the community, so…

AC: Okay. And as far as that trajectory, like where, where would you like to see the church go? Um, or your hopes for the congregation?

KI: I would like to see the youth coming, more and more of the youth coming back. Then taking positions in the church.

AC: What has been the greatest challenge, would you say, trying to establish your place as a community? And as a congregation here in this community?

KI: Well, again, we're trying to expose the neighborhood more and more to us. And that's a situation where they could see us outside. See who we are, talk to us. I think that some of the membership we had picked up is from that.

AC: Okay. So what is your greatest, you know, opportunity as a congregation?

KI: Just giving to the community, I think. That's what we like to do. We used to [give to] different families. One of the members would get in contact with a group to see what they needed. And then, we would try and help them. Especially at Christmas time. There would be families that we would be giving to that if they had children, we can buy, uh, hats, gloves, jackets. Things like that to give to them at Christmas time.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: Recently it's been RefugeeOne, which is on the corner of California and Peterson here.

AC: Okay.

KI: Which are refugees that come over and that need help. And we try [to] donate to them and do what we can.

AC: Okay. And how has that collaboration been?

KI: Um, I haven't been in that contact.

AC: Okay.

KI: So I know it's been on and off.

AC: Okay.

KI: Where, you know, at Christmas time, we'll give to families. We're given names, uh, first names and ages and so on. And then try [to] help them. Whatever they need, whether it's clothing, or toys, or something for the house.

AC: So what would you like people outside of your church to take away from your community, or just, um, know about your community that you feel that they don't already know?

KI: That we are welcoming. That we're welcoming church. That we would want people to feel comfortable in coming to Sunday services. It's open. So they can come and see how our service is. I know services to various people, it affects them differently. So you can go from one Christian Church to another Christian Church to another Christian Church, and it's kind of like, how welcoming you feel with them, right? And how you've grown up through what you've experienced. Whether it's very conservative or it's very liberal. It's kind of like how the fit is for you.

AC: I understand that. So is there anything that I didn't ask that you would like to talk about?

KI: Um, gee, let's see.

AC: We can go more into your personal experience in the church or, um, more about how [things] kind of flow in the church. As far as like structure. Like, what does a normal Sunday look like? What does, um, celebrating holidays look like? What is the organization, the stuff behind, the church? We can talk about all of that if you would like.

KI: Yeah. There are different– of course there are different organizations within the church. The Diaconate, the Pastoral Relations Relations committee, the Women's Fellowship. And it's kind of, it used to be more formal. But now it's not as formal. They used to have meetings here constantly depending on which committee you were on. Whether it was Diaconate, Pastoral Relations, Women's Fellowship, [or] council meetings. We would have council meetings every so often. To plan out what was coming up in the church, the summer's off when there is no choir, so on and so forth. And I think recently, because generally the choir would have the summer off. So from June to about September, the beginning of September, the choir would be off.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: There would be no formal choir. But recently it's gone into the form of our outdoor concerts.

AC:Mm-hmm.

KI: And they'll have outdoor concerts. Um, geez, I can't remember… Is it every week or every two weeks that they would have concerts? And it would be established in the beginning of, you know– is it gonna be this type of music? Is it gonna be this type of music? Who is coming? And so on and so forth.

AC: Okay.

KI: So, and I think that's kind of been a joy, you know. And it's been outside it. And it's been a situation, again, where people in their neighborhood can see what our music ministry kind of, sort of is like outside.

AC: Okay. So if you don't mind me asking, can we talk a bit more about the church's history?

KI: Um, sure.

AC: I mean, just as far as like, you know, the new building. How do you guys feel in that space? More so the feelings that have come from…

KI: Yeah. Again, it's been a situation where previously we were in another church. It was a rented space. So we weren't able to do what we wanted, when we wanted. And moving here in 2000, it was a situation where we had this space and we could do what we wanted to do. And again, it was a matter of kind of serving the community. So if people needed to use space from us, depending on the timing and so on and so forth, they were able to use the space. Whether it was the local community. The JA community, the Japanese American community. They had the Japanese American Service Committee where they had the "Out of the House" here.

AC: Okay.

KI: And seniors would come here and have lunch here. They would be able to see other people. Um, it was the Assyrian youth group that came here after church and they were able to use the space here. I know at various times other people would ask us if they could use our church, but it was a matter of having their service and having our service. And how the conflict would happen. But we try and help out where we can. One of the services was Heartland Alliance. I'm not sure if you're aware of them.

AC: No.

KI: And so we would do things with [the] Heartland Alliance. I think at one time they had youth that were coming in here too. So, that was before the Assyrian youth came in.

AC: Okay.

KI: So, again, it's a matter of timing and, you know, when the space was available.

AC: Okay, so Mr. Kent, that was all of my questions. But while we're sitting here, I did want to kind of go back a little bit. Um, to your more personal history within the church, you know, deciding to come back to church.

KI: Um, okay.

AC: What was that experience like?

KI: Uh, well at the end of '94, my father-in-law passed away and then my mother (IL) in October. Then my mother passed away in December and I decided at the age of 50 that I would come back to church. That I needed church. And for me it's been a blessing to be back in church again. You go through different cycles of your life, I guess, where you're in. I was in church previously, like I mentioned, on the south side. I was at Ellis and then it became Kenwood Ellis. I was in choir there. They had a gym there. We would play basketball there. But when I started high school in college, it was something where I kind of grew away from church. Then again being a parent and then having my father-in-law and my mother pass away, I just decided it was the time to come back to church. That I personally needed to find Christ again.

AC: So, what is most important in your faith? Like maybe– like a ritual or something that you do? Um, if it's like prayer at home or…

KI: Well, we do prayer at home but it's also [the] sharing [we do] at the church, you know? Where we share our– the good and the bad.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: And since we've been with Christ Church of Chicago, my wife and I, have been with Christ Church of Chicago since 1995. It is like a second family to us.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: And in my situation, especially recently, my son, daughter-in-law, and the grandkids moved out to California. And so when we're away, it's kind of like we miss church. But at 8:30 in California, on Sunday, we're always online. Uh, watching and sharing church. Seeing what's happening in the church community and with the church family.

AC: So, I'm going to take like, just the silent room, like 20 seconds.

KI: Okay.

AC: Silent room test. Maybe not even that long, maybe like 10 seconds. But while we're waiting for [these] 10 seconds to pass in silence, I want you to think about three words you would use to describe Christ Church. So we're gonna start at 10 seconds now.

KI: Okay.

[A few seconds of silence.]

AC: Whenever you're ready.

KI: My feeling is that Christ Church is a very feeling church. That they want you to feel comfortable in church. And they are interested in you.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: They want to know about you. So that's kind of how it's been with my wife and I.

AC: okay. So feeling? A feeling church. A comfortable church.

KI: It’s a very comfortable. It is a very caring church.

AC: Okay.

KI: Um, you know, we suffer together and we have joy joyed together, so.

AC: Well, thank you so much, for your insightful, um, for your insights into the community and, you know, your relationship with faith in, you know, the community around you. As like Christ Church. Again, I just want to thank you for your time. Thank you for, you know, being a part of this oral history. I think it's really important to capture the words from the people that are in the community. Because as an outsider, you know, I can only say so much.

KI: Mm-hmm.

AC: Um, [and] do so much research and you've given a lot of insight that we can't find online.

KI: Well, I hope I did. I am not very– I'm not very good. But I hope I did.

AC: No, you were wonderful.

KI: Because it is, uh— Christ Church is a wonderful church.

AC: It is. Um, I can tell from the wonderful people.

KI: We could only hope to show that to people.

AC: Thank you so much. Um, we will be here–u h, my group and I will be here on the 23rd of this month.

KI: Okay.

AC: To kind of come in for the service– during the services.

KI: Oh, that would be great. We, my wife and I, won't be here.

AC: Okay.

KI: It's, again, a situation where, because my grandson's birthday coming up.

AC: Oh, happy birthday.

KI: Uh, we're expecting a third grandchild.

AC: Oh, congratulations.

KI: So, we will be spending a length of time in California and we will miss our church family. We will. So yeah, what I'm trying to do is come back in July. Because July 16th is our church picnic.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: And I did this last year where in the year before, where I was out in California and uh, I came back for a wedding. Which was on the same day as the church picnic. And I ended up sitting at the church picnic too long and I had to run back and get showered and changed for a wedding. But yeah, we miss our church. We miss the church. Yeah. My son and daughter-in-law, they ask us, "Why won't you move out here with us?"And it's like, well, we have church family back in Chicago, and friends, other friends. \

AC: And it's really established home here.

KI: It is, it is. It's it, it sounds cliche-ish, but it's a second home. It's our second home.

AC: It's not cliche.

KI: Again, you know, this past weekend we– people were working Saturday and Sunday to do our events here.

AC: Mm-hmm.

KI: And, you know, again, it was another situation of exposing ourself to the community. With the Easter egg hunt and the little[s]. They had a musician come in, but it was geared toward children. So he was doing– he was singing and having the kids sing. And having them play games with him while he was singing and stuff like that. So it was a matter of something happening on the day before Easter that the kids [could] partake in and have fun.

AC: I remember Easter's, when I was in church…Um some of my favorite moments for sure.

KI: Mm-hmm.

AC: So, you know, I know it always has an impact later. That they'll think about it. 'Cause obviously it's more than just an Easter egg hunt, but when you're younger, you know, that's the draw.

KI: Mm-hmm.

AC: And stuff like that. So I'm sure that they will be impacted for the rest of their lives. Um, yeah. It was so good to meet with you. I don't wanna take up too much of your time. Um, So, yeah. I will stop recording now.

KI: Okay.