

Meeting the Masters: Albert C. Church, Jr. (1930-1980)



Over 50 years of training in budo, I have been lucky enough to meet or train under many notable martial artists. This year, I want to share my impressions, some deep set, some fleeting, about the men and women I met on the way.

I consider Shihan Albert Curtis Church, Jr. to have been my primary aiki-ju-jutsu instructor. Even though I could not train with him for more than a week at a time, I phoned him at least once a month, often once a week, to ask questions and get insights. I followed his system and obtained my ranks from him. His Kamishin-ryu, was influenced by Hakko-ryu and by Dai-yoshin-ryu, a small off-shoot of Daito-ryu Aiki-ju-jutsu. I had already gained experience in Hakko-ryu and Aikido before meeting Shihan Church, so adapting to Kamishin was relatively comfortable for me and Shihan Church was open enough to allow me to teach modifications and additional techniques as long as I stayed with this general curriculum.

There are many little vignettes I could relate about Shihan Church, who was always called Shihan even though he was the *Soke* (inheritor) of one system and the *Shodai* (founder) of a large sub-divided stylistic family, but I have written some of these in *Tales of the Dojo* and *The Dojo Files*, so let me offer a couple of new observations here.

Shihan Church could size you up pretty quickly and, once he decided you were worth working with, he would trust you to do your best and promote you on the idea that your time had come to be bumped up. He trusted that you had been working diligently on the material you needed to know. I personally did not favor this method, feeling that he promoted too many people to high ranks too soon, but on the other side of the argument, it did make you, as a student, feel that Shihan Church was on your side, making you want to live up to a high standard.

He gave you a lot of leeway to modify things to suit your own body and disposition, but unfortunately that produced disagreements on what was “orthodox” Kamishin-ryu. His personal support made it seem that he took special interest in you, and because Shihan Church was accessible to many of his students nearby and far away, they attempted, sometimes for the good of the kai, sometimes for selfish reasons, to influence him. As a result, he was constantly looking for a balanced method by which to operate the federation, his curricula, and his rank structures in the several arts that he taught. To those of us quite a distance away, this could be frustrating. I remember his sending out a newsletter that announced he was using a semi-traditional kyu

grading structure similar to that used by the JKA (3 white belts, 2 green belts, and 3 brown belts). I was pleased because it was the structure I was already using and I had a cabinet full of white, green, and brown belts of various sizes for future promotions. One month later, the next newsletter changed the kyu belts to a rainbow of colors, which meant that I would have to purchase an additional array of belts to keep in storage. Usually, when Shihan Church sent down a directive, I stepped into action conforming to what he directed ASAP. This time, I waited, knowing that, in a month or two, he might just change the structure again.

I was concerned that he had taken on too much: the administration of a multi-faceted set of arts, administration of an organization that was growing nationally and internationally, and partial control of The International Black Belt Federation, while trying to maintain a job (an investigator for the Navy) and a family. How he maintained his jocular disposition was beyond me. But that was one of the non-martial things I learned from him, and still need to practice.

More on Shihan Church next time.