

Japanese Can't Get Enough Black Gospel Music

The genre is hugely popular in Japan, where less than 1 percent of the population is Christian

Black gospel music is taking Japan by storm, and some believe the increased popularity is opening a door for the black church to evangelize the Land of the Rising Sun.

Though less than 1 percent of Japan's population is Christian, gospel music is anywhere but on the margins. Reuters reported that a public broadcasting station ran a course on gospel music last year, and the Yamaha Corporation, which funds a nationwide chain of music schools, has 5,000 gospel music students. There are even gospel-style weddings.

Yet the gospel message is still as foreign as the Westerners who popularized the music. But some missionaries believe that's changing. Richard Hartley, leader of the Soul Resurrection, a gospel group that distributes recordings in Japan, says the music is serving as a form of pre-evangelism that is preparing the mostly Buddhist region for a revival.

"I think the music is priming them now for mass evangelism," Hartley says. "I think in the next few years you'll see a wave of evangelists to Japan. [Ministers] from all over the Christian body will be able to go there and preach."

Hartley, a New York schoolteacher, has been teaching courses on gospel music since 1997. He said the Japanese see gospel music as an art form and are most intent on mimicking black

Americans' soulful delivery and energetic performance style. And he has seen some come to Christ.

"When I explain to them the meaning of the gospel, they are very emotional," Hartley said. "Christianity, through the gospel music, is really taking a strong hold in Japan. You can't say 'Jesus' for too long without being changed."

Big-name gospel artists such as Mary Mary, Kirk Franklin and CeCe Winans have toured Japan, but ministers working in the nation said smaller groups who can interact with the people may have more lasting impact. Pastor James Adams of Abounding Life Church of God in Christ in Chicago took a team of 40 people to Japan in late October at the invitation of pastor Gerard Marks of Kobe Union Church in Kobe, Japan. Adams was surprised at their reception.

Adams had been told the Japanese were reserved, but after concerts, he said, he was approached by several attendees who wanted to know more about Christianity. Adams preached 10-minute sermons, and choir members gave testimonies about being delivered from depression and drug addiction.

"Buddhists were asking for prayer," Adams said. "They had sons and daughters strung out on drugs, the same problems we have. I preached that Christ can change your life."

Missionary Ken Joseph believes gospel music's popularity is serving as a call to the black church to evangelize the world. Joseph said the Japanese see blacks as people who can identify with their suffering. After the nation's recent economic crises, gospel music is encouraging and uplifting to them, he added.

"[African Americans'] suffering... gives [them] an openness to suffering people that others don't have," Joseph said. "Jesus didn't put out a call [to evangelize the world] to just one group of people."

Unlike in America, blacks are idolized in Japan and in other parts of Asia and the Middle East, Joseph said. Hartley and Adams said they were treated like R&B stars while in the country.

Adams still receives e-mails from concert attendees. One Japanese Christian wrote that two Bible clubs were started as a result of the concerts in Tenri, a Buddhist and Shinto stronghold.

Adams has received eight international invitations as a result of the Japan trip—which cost each participant \$1,300—and he believes the black church could be doing more to reach other nations. "We're not a big church... but God opened this door to us. There are a lot of people who are dying and lost, and we're not doing enough. As black people, we can do so much more."