

An Awakening: Youth Revive Japan's Dying Church

Whether they're in church or standing on a street corner, the members of Grace Tokyo Church loudly sing their songs of praise.

The congregation's young people are part of a new youth movement that many Japanese Christians hope will revive Japan's churches.

Philippines native Glen Nabarrete, who serves as the head pastor at Grace Tokyo, was born and raised in Hawaii. He and his family answered God's call to Japan in 1992.

A Dying Church?

The church in Japan is getting smaller every day. The average Japanese church has 30 people and many have less than 10 members.

Church historian Masakazu Suzuki says traditional churches are dying out.

"After the war, a lot of American GI's who came to Japan are Christians and later came back to Japan as missionaries. So after the war, the Japanese churches grew a lot," Suzuki told CBN News.

"Now after 50, 60 years, a lot of pastors are getting older, facing retirement," he said. "Also many members are getting older too."

Like most Christians, Suzuki believes God is using the recent disasters to open the hearts of the Japanese people.

"In Christian evacuation centers, some of the aged people, five or six died. Six to seven old people died. But through their love and unity, some family members who visit them

become Christian. More than 15 of them got baptized last month," Suzuki said.

Spiritual Awakening

There have been more than 1,200 aftershocks since the March 11 earthquake and there could be more, but Christians here are praying for another kind of aftershock and that is the spiritual awakening of the Japanese people.

Businessman Yuto Matsumoto saw how the power of God restored his marriage after a divorce.

"I worked too hard, not too much attention for my family," Matsumoto said.

His Christian daughter visited him in New York where he moved, and took him to watch the film "Passion of the Christ" on Easter.

Later, back in Japan, she brought him to the church their family has been attending since converting to Christianity.

"During the preaching, I couldn't stop crying. I don't know why," Matsumoto recalled. "Right after the service, I went to Pastor Scott and asked him how I can become a Christian. That was April 2004. I accepted Jesus as Lord. It was the beginning of my new life."

Two years ago, Matsumoto re-married Takako, his ex-wife. Today, they have a harmonious relationship with Christ at the center of their marriage.

He also shares his faith with his colleagues at work.

"It's very tough especially for the businessman because Japanese businessmen were taught to believe in his power, or on himself," he said.

Nevertheless, Matsumoto invites his co-worker to visit Grace Tokyo church where he serves as an interpreter.

The Joy of God

Pastor Nabarrete and his family answered God's call to Japan in 1992.

"I believe in this church," Nabarrete said about Grace Tokyo.

"One of the things we have that a lot of Japanese churches don't have is a lot of joy and a lot of laughter," he told CBN News. "I think that's one quality that God wants to bring to this nation. There is the reality of joy in serving God."

"And we also cater to young people," he added. "We let the young people step up, do preaching. Young people love it they want to participate for the growth of the church."

The youth go out of their way to spread God's love, singing gospel songs on the street, even when reprimanded by the police.

"The idea is just praise and worship on the street and let God move and touch people's lives. Someone stands near; we talk to them and invite them to church," Grace Tokyo youth leader Gerwin Echegoyen said.

"When I first moved in 1992, church growth was very small," Nabarrete said. "Our church at Yokohama Grace Bible Church was about 30 people in 10 years. So for us Tokyo Bible, two years with 60 people is phenomenal. God has been gracious to us here."

The young Christians hope that through their involvement, Japan's older churches can be made young again—and other dying churches can be reborn.