

# Japanese Christians Praying Hard for an Unprecedented Move of God

In the winter, the Japanese city of Sapporo draws skiers from around the world to its perfect, powdery snow.

When springtime arrives, it's the pale pink cherry blossoms that have tourists flocking to the city.

But this year, many of Sapporo's Christians are hoping to attract a crowd for an entirely different reason. They want their fellow Japanese to have an encounter with the living God.

"We want the to see God move in a way they've never seen before," says the Rev. Chad Hammond, director of Asian affairs for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA).

At the invitation of a group of Japanese churches, the BGEA is holding a large-scale evangelistic event May 9-11 in Sapporo, the largest city on Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido.

Out of 400 churches on the island, which is roughly the size of South Carolina, 140 are involved in the "Hokkaido Festival of Hope With Franklin Graham."

Hammond says the festival will likely be the largest gathering of believers ever for Hokkaido.

"The biggest Christian event that's ever happened up here gathered 2,000 people," Hammond says. "We've already had one meeting that had 500 people. That gives a lot of encouragement to these pastors."

The Japanese are largely indifferent to Christianity, and many people know almost nothing about Jesus. A typical church might

have 10-12 people attending regularly. According to some studies, less than 1 percent of the population of Japan is Christian, and this northern island is no different.

“I think it’s hard to understand what it’s like for these pastors, when they’ve given their heart to people and to a church, and they may not have a visitor come for six or seven years,” Hammond says. “So when you do an event like this, they’ve never had this stage before.

“Our heart here is to encourage the pastors and the churches.”

As always, it is also the heart of the BGEA team to see many people encounter Christ and accept Him into their lives as Savior.

To help share the gospel and drum up support for the festival, the team has enlisted a group of believers from around the world.

Brooklyn Tabernacle pastor Jim Cymbala, Swedish singer Lena Maria, guitar great Dennis Agajanian, gospel singer Alfie Silas and former Major League Baseball manager and coach Trey Hillman (now with the New York Yankees) have all joined forces with the BGEA to reach out to the people of Hokkaido.

“God has put Hokkaido on the hearts of these national figures,” Hammond said. “Someone like Jim Cymbala is a pastor of a very big church in the U.S., but he has a heart for the people here.”

Each pastor, speaker or musician has spent time in and around Sapporo in advance of the Festival, visiting churches, preaching the Gospel and encouraging believers to get involved in the May event.

“We’ve got 57 buses that are coming,” Hammond said. “We’re encouraging these churches, if you have 12 people in your church, get your neighbors, your business associates, your

friends and family, and get on the bus. The bus will hold 45 people, so we're challenging these churches to get a bus and fill it up."

While the team is praying for many thousands of people to come, the deepest longing isn't about numbers, but about hearts being moved by the Holy Spirit.

"We really want this to be a significant event where the pastors can really draw a line in the sand," Hammond said. "And they can look back to this event and see how God did a work that transformed Hokkaido."

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