Singing to the Lord  A New Song in Nepal

CC School of Worship teaches a biblical view of music ministry

In Nepal's first Pure Worship Conference, believers from several churches traveled together to the small Asian nation for the gathering. Nepal resonated with sounds of worship music. Six years ago, the gathering of more than 400 Nepali Christians would have been illegal. Even now, many attendees could face persecution from Hindu family or neighbors. Yet they sang at the top of their lungs, arms raised high, faces radiating joy.

Worship leader Scott Cunningham from Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa (CCCM), CA, has led worship in many countries and cultures. Yet as he stood on stage at Nepal’s first Pure Worship Conference in October 2012, he was so moved he momentarily couldn't find his voice. Scott recalled, “They were singing ‘God of This City’ in Nepali. I looked around at the younger generation, living sacrificially for Christ. We came to teach them about worship, but we learned so much from them about living for God.”

The team held an outreach concert in Nepal’s crowded capital, Kathmandu, after the conference, and nearly 1,000 people attended. About one-third reported having never entered a church before. Scott, who shared the Gospel after the worship team had played both Nepali and Western songs, later exclaimed, “In 15 years of ministry, I’ve never experienced the Spirit’s presence like that, giving me words to say and boldness to say them.” Realizing that Nepali culture is extremely reserved, Scott hadn’t planned to ask people to walk forward in demonstration of a commitment to follow Christ. However, he felt strongly compelled to do so. Defying cultural norms, more than 25 people came forward to acknowledge Jesus as Savior and Lord. More than 100 total responded to the Gospel by raising their hands and praying.

Reluctant Ambassadors

After overcoming many hurdles during a year of planning, CCCM’s group faced their greatest challenge shortly before departing. “All of a sudden, fear hit,” Scott summarized. “Many team members got so discouraged that they almost backed out. It felt like a tipping point—either it would fall apart or be amazing. But from the moment we arrived, we sensed God’s presence in all we did.”

Drummer Neil Godding laughed, “I started riding my skateboard to work, thinking, Maybe I’ll break a leg and won’t be able to go. I was kind of looking for an exit.” Neil has
Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom? 

James 2:5b

Forging Friendships

Singer and songwriter Madison, Scott’s 16-year-old daughter, recalled, “On the third day, I met the happiest, most beautiful girl I’ve ever known. She told me how blessed she was by this new music—but then she had to leave right away. She said her Hindu family would beat and disown her if they knew where she was. But it was worth the risk to her to follow the Lord. I thought, Could I face losing all my family and friends for following Jesus?”

Madison had also felt reluctant before the trip. However, she said, “From the moment we arrived, I knew God would take care of everything—there and at home. Soon, I was thanking Him for bringing me. I needed my perspective to change. “ Madison also sensed expected cultural and language barriers dissolving. Friendships grew between her and local worship leaders, especially with 20-year-old Jesmine. “That was another perspective-changer, “ Madison remarked. “A girl on the other side of the world was going through the same things I was. We prayed together and she told me, ‘God has not called us to blend in with the crowd, but to stand up for what’s right for His sake.’”

Congregants listen to a sermon at Smyrna Church. In accordance with local cultural customs, women and men generally sit on separate sides of Nepali churches.

Believers read from the Bible during a service the team attended at Smyrna Church in Nepal’s capital, Kathmandu.

Team member Karissa Tse, left, of Anaheim, CA, teaches praise songs to attendees with strong English skills. Photo by Sarah Monastra

Crohn’s Disease, which in his case makes exposure to strong spices and unclean water, especially without access to quality medical care, potentially life-threatening. Neil continued, “My Crohn’s flared two weeks before we left. Then the day before our flight, I was sure I would be back at the hospital the next day. But instead, I was at the airport. I put myself in the Lord’s hands, and He brought me through.” Though some other team members became sick with food-borne illnesses during the trip, Neil had no such problems.

Hearing local street musicians inspired Neil to take the drum workshop he led in an unanticipated direction. Scheduled to teach the next day but having left his handwritten notes at home, Neil was already brainstorming when he walked by and heard quality, passionate sound coaxed from simple instruments. “Western music seems to be driving worship, but Christianity is actually Eastern in origin,” he related. “I told them, ‘God created us in His image, as creative beings, so we don’t need to copy what someone else plays. Find who God made you to be. Do you need to play in a Western style? Why not play in the musical style of your culture?” Neil also sensed God teaching him about worship through his Nepalese brothers. “They had so much less than most Westerners, yet they were content”, he remarked. “They live in the joy of the Lord, conscious that they were saved out of Hinduism.”

Scott Cunningham, center, director of CCCM’s School of Worship, leads praise music. Band members include Scott’s 16-year-old daughter, Madison, left.
Young women worship during a main session. Praise was alternately led by the band from CCCM and the local Salvation Worship Ministries team.

She teared up, explaining that she had been praying for a guitar for five years. She had not told even her parents because she knew they had no resources for it.

**A New Generation**

The team was led by Pankaj and Tonielle Sarkar, who currently attend CC WestGrove but are raising support to return long-term to Nepal. Pankaj is from India and ministered in Kathmandu from 1997–2011; Tonielle is American. The two met when Tonielle traveled to Nepal with a CC WestGrove mission team that ministered alongside Pankaj. After temporarily moving to California in 2011 for their marriage, Pankaj attended CCCM’s School of Worship. A nine-month course directed by Scott—which Tonielle had previously attended—the program focuses on the spiritual, practical, and musical aspects of leading worship teams. Inspired by what Pankaj was learning, the Sarkars partnered with Scott to take a shortened form of the teachings to Kathmandu.

Years prior, Pankaj and two friends had founded Salvation Worship Ministries (SWM), an organization that trains young worship leaders to serve churches. “We teach students to play music, assemble worship teams, and conduct outreach and discipleship,” Pankaj explained. The ministry’s participants also provide praise concerts and record worship albums in Nepali, a language with few such resources available. “Nepal’s 30 million people worship 330 million gods and goddesses,” Pankaj explained. “But many youth don’t see a reason to follow the gods of their forefathers. And God is showing Himself through miracles.”

But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men’s hands.

Psalm 115:3-4

Initially, when people hear about Jesus, they’re ready to add one more god,” Pankaj continued. “But once they understand the Gospel, they hold onto it. Music is one of the greatest tools God has given us to reach people.” Despite SWM’s effectiveness, Pankaj was burdened to ensure that SWM students fully understood that worship goes beyond music. “Everything we do can be part of worshiping God,” he expressed. “God is seeking not only worship songs, but true worshipers’ hearts.”

*Those who worship Him [God] must worship in spirit and truth.*

John 4:24b

**United in Him**

“Sixteen churches are represented in SWM’s worship team—each member is from a different local church,” Tonielle said. “To a surprising and encouraging degree, “Churches have put aside disagreements and opened their doors,” she continued. “Then on the trip, I was touched by how deeply everyone connected. The team really encouraged the SWM students. I looked around on the last evening and saw Americans and Nepalese praying, talking, and playing music as if they had always been friends.”

The trip encouraged the Sarkars in their dream of starting a Kathmandu School of Worship campus. When asked if interested in attending, conference attendees almost unanimously said yes. The Sarkars expect to move back to Nepal in 2013 and start the school the following year. Scott and his team, who are planning a Kathmandu 2013 conference, intend to be highly involved. “I hope more worship leaders get involved in missions,” Scott exhorted. “Music is a universal language we can use to share the Gospel.”

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—Pankaj Sarkar

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**Members of the Salvation Worship Ministries band, including Jesmine, right, play during an outreach concert.**

**Chaz Celaya of CC Bible College in Murrieta, CA, leads an electric guitar workshop.**

**Young women worship during a main session. Praise was alternately led by the band from CCCM and the local Salvation Worship Ministries team.** Photo by Sarah Monastra