

Eyes on Heaven

Japanese troupe “Heavenese” ministers in Kansas

Story by Debra Smith
Photos courtesy of Committed Japan



Heavenese drummer Ikki Iwase, left, talks with an American youth after the performing arts group’s presentation at a middle school in Overland Park, KS.

It was 1998, and Japanese Pastor Marré Ishii was sitting with two American pastors in Tokyo. With a team of believers from all three churches, they had just completed an evangelistic outreach featuring American gospel music. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you guys bringing folks over here,” Marré said. “I hope one day to return the favor and help you minister in the U.S.”

Fifteen years later, remarked Pastor Jim Stewart of Calvary Chapel Kansas City, KS, “Marré made good on his word.” Marré, who leads CC-affiliated Tokyo church Committed Japan, brought more than 30 performing artists to Kansas in November 2012. Termed “Heavenese,” the troupe routinely presents their unique blend of Japanese and American gospel music around Japan. They had also previously ministered on the West Coast alongside the other American pastor, Lance Cook of CC La Habra, CA, but this was their first trip to the inland U.S.

“They call themselves ‘Heavenese,’” Jim explained, “to emphasize that they are not really, in the deepest sense, Japanese people—but are Heavenese people, because all followers of Christ are heaven-bound. That’s our truest, core identity: citizens of heaven.”

By faith he [Abraham] dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country ... for he waited for the

city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Hebrews 11:9-10

“The Gospel is laced throughout their show,” Jim continued. “They really connect well, especially with artistic and musical people.” The group’s largest event was held at downtown Kansas City’s Gem Theater, a venue Jim described as an island of multiculturalism amidst a tragically racially divided region. As expected, the concert drew an audience balanced between African-American, Caucasian, and Asian-American attendees. As well as presenting the Gospel to unbelievers, “We wanted to give Christians a chance to celebrate God together,” Jim described. “Though we’re unfortunately fragmented here on earth, we won’t be in eternity. So we wanted to enjoy worshiping together here and now. People really united around the Lord’s healing power.” Personally, Pastor Marré said, “I had never seen anything like it in my entire Christian life. It was beautiful to see such diversity.”

The travelers were hosted by CC Kansas City believers: “Some families had up to six guests,” Jim remarked. “The interactions people had opened the hearts of many to missions.” One family’s 7- and 9-year-old children are now taking Japanese lessons and anticipating taking a mission trip to Japan. Another host

family’s son, a drummer, took his guests to his high school to meet his band.

Jim said Marré is extremely evangelistic and strives to ensure that the church he leads stays well-connected to its community. In order to increase people’s exposure to believers through lifestyle evangelism and since skilled musicians are difficult to locate among Japan’s extremely low percentage of Christians—estimates hover around 1 percent—a few musicians who do not yet know Christ have been added to Heavenese. “They don’t denounce the Lord; they just don’t understand the Gospel yet,” Jim explained. “Japanese people generally haven’t been exposed to the Bible’s teachings about forgiveness through Jesus.” It can therefore take a long time, Jim continued, until people comprehend Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection well enough to surrender to or reject Him—just as many of Paul’s original audiences needed repeated exposure to the Gospel before committing to follow the Lord.

And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some ... said, ‘We will hear you again on this matter.’

Acts 17:32

Jim and his wife Loellen held devotions each morning with their three Japanese guests, two of whom knew Jesus. One morning as they discussed the story in John 4 of Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well, the group noted that God often lovingly moves people out of their natural life pathways in order to show them Himself. The words of Lue, the unbeliever, displayed awareness that

God had brought her to Kansas for a reason. Then on the troupe’s last night, Lue said she was sensing her heart opening to the Lord. “Soon,” Jim stated, “we were all on our knees holding hands as she gave her life to Jesus.” Before the trip, Marré said, “Lue was close to salvation but unsure about it. But she could not deny the reality of God’s love shown by those serving the Lord in Kansas City.”

From the long process of Lue’s absorption of Christianity, Jim saw a lesson regarding effective evangelism: “We’re so event driven; but God is doing all these other things in the midst of our events. Are we open to that? Are we paying attention to people and interacting with the world, instead of being isolationists? Do we talk with the plumber, for example, who comes to fix things?”

With Heavenese, Marré stated, “My goal locally is to prove that Jesus is for Japanese people. My vision internationally is to be a bridge between the East and the West. I have seen that partially accomplished but not fully yet.”

From the west, people will fear the name of the LORD, and from the rising of the sun [east], they will revere his glory. Isaiah 59:19a, NIV

CC Kansas City, KS
www.calvarychapelkc.com
info@calvarychapelkc.com
913-681-1635

Committed Japan
www.committed.jp



Musical and theatrical troupe Heavenese gives a surprise street performance in Kansas City, MO. Believers then distributed flyers inviting people to the next day’s concert.



Pastor Marré Ishii, left, of Tokyo church Committed Japan and Pastor Jim Stewart, left of center, of CC Kansas City, KS, pray with others.