

“But where are the children?” That was the obvious question when we reached the kids worship section of the Sunday morning service at Zushi Fukuin Church, SEND’s first church plant in Japan. I was filling in for the pastor who was preaching elsewhere. Someone yelled from the back, “They’re not here yet, so let’s do it at the end.” Eighteen adults nodded in agreement and the band cranked out another hymn. Yes, it was a hymn, and yes, it was a band — a young man strumming away on a black acoustic guitar, an older lady trying her best to keep up on a six-stringed Morris, a young woman slapping away on a bass guitar, all being driven by a man in a suit playing a piano with great enthusiasm. Not exactly what I was expecting to find at a JECA church started by the mission formerly known as Far Eastern Gospel Crusade, if you know what I mean.

“They’re here!” yelled someone again, and the service was back on track as a little boy and girl popped through the back doors, ran down the aisle, and sat themselves on two little stools set up for them at the front of the cozy chapel. The lesson started. I gasped as a fully costumed Jesus appeared through the side door, complete with a wig, beard, bobby-pinned crown of thorns and removable cloak. Two thieves materialized on each side of Jesus, fully decked out for the part, carrying homemade Japanese-size wooden crosses behind them. The most impressive thing was not that they were saying their lines from memory, with only the narrator reading from a script. And it wasn’t that these were church people going all out for two neighborhood children on a non-Easter Sunday when their pastor was away. No, the most impressive thing was

that Jesus said, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18 NIV).

SEND has been birthing churches ever since 1945 when it was itself birthed out of the GI Gospel Hour, a ministry among American servicemen who felt called to bring the gospel to their former enemies of World War II. Along the way, SEND operated three bookstores and the Fukuin Maru, a boat that carried missionaries to ministry locations in the Ryukyu Islands. A vision for camp ministry launched Okutama Bible Camp in 1968. While most SEND missionaries are involved in church planting in the Kanto area, some relocated to Tohoku after the disaster there in March of 2011.

Back at Zushi Fukuin Church, the service ended and we sat around the *oyatsu* (snack) table sipping tea. Church members began sharing excitedly about a charity rock concert they had held the previous week that 100 people came to. Rock concert? 100 people? The church officially has 24 members, most of whom are elderly. I had no idea how they got 100 people to show up, much less how they all squeezed into that building.

“It showed my friends that goof-ups like me are welcomed at church,” said the tattooed guitarist with a shady past. “Jesus came to seek and save the lost,” chimed in an obaa-chan with a walker. “We are few here, but we’re all trying to use our various gifts in obedience,” explained a middle-aged woman with tears in her eyes. It was all very refreshing, to say the least.

Rock on. **JH**

By Paul Suzuki, Area Director for SEND Japan



SEND ladies at Okutama Bible Chalet



Bible study