

JAPAN GOES CHRISTIAN—ON WEDDING DAYS AT LEAST

CHAPLAINS HOPE FOR SOMETHING MORE THAN WEDDING DAY BLISS

As Christian style weddings in Japan continue their enormous popularity many ministers hope to see more than a fashionable performance. The dominant reason chapel weddings are the continuing rage is that brides want to wear the wedding dress and walk the virgin road—to be a princess for a day with all her friends watching. This may chagrin some ministers, but many are just as eager to cater to this unprecedented opportunity.

Chapel weddings gained trendy status in the '80's with a few celebrities doing it Christian style. Today, bridal magazine *Zeksi*, reports over 70% of Japanese weddings are chapel type, far outnumbering traditional Shinto weddings. Despite most couple's claim to being Buddhists, Buddhist weddings are a rarity. Brides in vogue want the flowing white lace gown and a sparkling crown as opposed to being bound in up to 12 kimono and donning a large wig wrapped with a cloth designed to hide her "horns," as in the Shinto ceremony.

Yet, many couples have never read from the Bible, and are also unfamiliar with the Christian wedding ceremony itself. Samoan missionary Tone Faialaga had to stifle a laugh when the father escorting the bride lifted the veil during the exchange with the groom. And Hawaiian Sam Ishikawa in Okinawa says the one common element of these weddings is the giggling and fretting over a wedding kiss in front of family and friends. Surrendering to fears over the kiss some couples even settle for a handshake.

Though ministers are divided on the respectability of performing such weddings, some see it as a God-given-chance in a country that has rebuffed Christianity for decades. “If the Christian churches in Japan had seized upon this opportunity and embraced non-Christians in their desire to be married in a church, I believe the number of Christians in this country would have doubled,” proclaims missionary John Wright. Such claims are not far-fetched when considering on any given weekend the number of people attending a chapel wedding nearly triples that of church worship services.

But besides hoping for conversions, ministers hope to have a positive impact for the success of fledgling marriages, being aware that Japan has set a record for divorce each consecutive year for over a decade. Divorce will likely continue its rise as Japan has one of the highest levels of marital dissatisfaction in the industrialized world. In 2001 long overdue laws regarding domestic violence were established in response to a government study which found one in five women suffer physical violence from their husband. And if physical intimacy is a thermometer of marital bliss, Japan rates pathetically low here as well. One of Japan’s leading women’s magazines, Josei Jishin, recorded last Winter that 55% of couples in their thirties are “sexless,” an arrangement where husband and wife relate more like brother and sister, not even sharing bedroom.

Thus, when it comes to preachers, the one issue that seems to divide the sheep from the goats (or wolves in sheep clothing) is “pre-marital counseling.” Most genuine preachers

wish they could counsel, but struggle with hotels and wedding agencies for cooperation, other ministers refuse to perform the rites without it. A group of missionaries in the Osaka area banded together to put pressure on the wedding industry, repudiating any weddings without an hour of counseling.

Since wedding times and Sunday worship times conflict, the demand for bona fide ministers far outstrips the supply. Thus the wedding industry, not the church, has mobilized to meet this demand for preachers. Companies have constructed over 1,000 chapels across the nation, many importing entire defunct Anglican churches in the UK. A couple can have two-story stained glass windows of the Crucifixion, choirs singing hymns, pipe organist, and jumbo size Bible on display—everything. Everything that is except a Christian, including the “minister.”

Until recently, wedding agencies in Tokyo employed over 500 un-ordained foreigners and 200 non-cleric Japanese to perform weddings, but veteran missionary Kenny Joseph refuses to take this sitting down, “Phoney baloney preachers are giving us a bad name. And we’re weeding them out.” Joseph, a native of Chicago, has trained and certified over 90 “pinch-hitter” wedding chaplains, and is thankful that the application of laws preventing bogus ministers have recently gotten stiffer. Those who operate without a missionary visa may face a \$2,500US fine, three years in prison, and/or expulsion.

The lure for real ministers is also big. A three wedding/three hour commitment on a

Saturday or Sunday, typically earns the chaplain \$450US. With ministry and money so easy many missionaries have dedicated themselves to nothing but weddings. Nathan Mikaelson of Sendai bemoans the loss of an estimated 200 missionaries to the trend, but adds “perhaps they do more good there anyhow.”

Though media has trouped up the motivation of mammon among ministers, many, like South Afrikaner Philip Visser of Kyushu, a veteran of 2,000 weddings never personally touch their earnings which go directly into mission operating funds.

The phenomenon is a missionary’s dream-come-true: pagans build chapels, pack them with more pagans, and plead for preachers to come preach. “God is building churches with the world’s money! The thought is almost too much for me to contain emotionally.” exclaims retired missionary Doyle Book.

So how long will the trend last? 70 year old Hokkaido missionary Richard Goodall, from New Zealand responds with wit, “Until Christ comes back or the Shinto boys see their income source shriveling up.”

Contenders argue that tangible conversions are scant, but here and there impact is evident. A woman at a new church in Yamagata relates that before she had a clue about Christianity, her wedding was performed by a local minister. She was touched by the experience and later baptized. Last summer that pastor died with no knowledge of her conversion.

What are the chances of today's marriages making it? Missionaries from around the country are pessimistic, but they seem unanimous on one point: a Christian wedding might make the difference for finding something lasting.