

A Glimpse from the Past – Salvation

In 1895, when the Salvation Army started working in Japan, their misguided attempts to fit in with Japanese culture were labelled “religion tainted with lunacy”. This along with the fact that all Army publications were written in classical Japanese meant its mission work did not connect with most people. The saving grace for the Army came in the person of Gunpei Yamamuro (1872-1940), the first Japanese Salvation Army officer. Yamamuro’s analysis was that his fellow countrymen could not hear the meaning because of the way things were said, not because the messengers were foreign. High-flown language was a barrier to be challenged. Neither Yamamuro nor William Booth could be satisfied with a Gospel only for the elites. Yamamuro was appointed editor of the Japanese *War Cry* and immediately began publishing in colloquial Japanese, which was understood by all. Circulation soared. Romans 10:34 asks, “How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?”

As a sixteen-year-old new to Christianity, Yamamuro had prayed, “O God, ... will you use and lead me to work for the salvation of the common people, to be a man who conveys the message of the gospel in a language to be understood by the enlightened?” As a twenty-six-year-old, his prayer was answered when he wrote what was to become a landmark in everyday Japanese literature. *Heimin no Fukuin* (Common People’s Gospel) presented the message of Jesus in the language of the people, weaving the history, cultural values and religious traditions of Japan together with the words of the Bible. *Heimin no Fukuin* was so popular that it went through over 500 printings and sold more than 3 million copies over the years. It was translated into English in 1988 and continues to inspire people around the world.

Gunpei Yamamuro is known as the ‘Salvationist Samurai’ having indelibly marked The Salvation Army’s presence and work in Japan. He was appointed as territorial commander in Japan in October 1926 – only the second non-western officer to do so, and the first ever to reach the rank of commissioner.

Further reading

Salvationist Samurai: Gunpei Yamamuro and the Rise of the Salvation Army in Japan, R. David Rightmire, Scarecrow Press, London, 1997

The Common People’s Gospel, Gunpei Yamamuro, The Salvation Army, 1988

When Justice is the Measure, M. Christine MacMillan, James E. Read & Don Posterski, 2014

