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Japanese monks try to promote Buddhism through fashion, rap music

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TOKYO (AP) -- Japanese monks and nuns held a fashion show - replete with rap music and a catwalk - at a major Tokyo temple Saturday to promote Buddhism.

In the "Tokyo Bouz (monk) Collection" held at Tsukiji Honganji, nearly 40 monks and nuns from eight major Buddhist sects joined in the event aimed at winning back believers.

Following a rap version of a Buddhist sutra, five monks from each school walked on the runway, then chanted prayers and wrapped up in a grand finale with confetti resembling lotus petals.

"We wanted to show the young people that Buddhism is cool, and temples are not a place just for funerals," said Koji Matsubara, a chief monk at Tsukiji.

More than 1,200 years after it first arrived from mainland Asia, Buddhism in Japan is in crisis, priests say. Almost three-quarters of Japan's population of 120 million are registered as Buddhist, but for many, the only time they enter a temple is to attend a funeral. That has sent many of the country's 75,000 temples into financial trouble.

"Many of us priests share the sense of crisis, and a need to do something to reach out to people," said priest Kosuke Kikkawa, 37, one of the organizers of Saturday's event. "We won't change Buddha's teachings, but perhaps we need a different presentation that can touch the feelings of the people today."

The Tsukiji Honganji offers theological seminars in English for foreign visitors, and has fitted its main hall with a pipe organ for Western-style weddings to attract young couples. Some other temples have also introduced cafes, art galleries and other innovations to reach out to young people who are interested in a different lifestyle.

Japan's aging population has meant more funerals, but the declining population and birth rate means fewer young people to share the bill to keep temples afloat.

Buddhist monks traditionally wear simple black robes. But to appeal to more fashion-conscious youth, the monks wore green and yellow clothes, some with gold embroidery. Others wore elaborate, multilayered robes.

"Their robes were gorgeous," said Sayaka Anma, one of the audience in her 20s, after the monks' show. "I was a bit surprised in the beginning, but it was very moving."

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