FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Toru Goto's Grueling, Lonely Walk to Freedom

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Toru Goto being supported by a young woman and a makeshift walking stick on in Shibuya, Tokyo on10th February 2008. Illustration: ChatGPT



Toru Goto speaking during the online conference on September 19, 2026

An answered prayer on the sidewalk: The miraculous end to Toru Goto's 12-year confinement

Part 7 of "My Experience of Abduction, Confinement, and Forced Deconversion", a testimony on 19th September 2026 by Toru Goto (後藤徹), a Japanese member of the Family Federation and victim of attempted coercive faith-breaking - locked up for over 12 years in apartment turned prison. This first-hand witness account - of high relevance for the current dissolution case against the Family Federation in Japan - was delivered at a Zoom conference organized by Peace and Reconciliation Together (PnR-T), a Dutch-registered foundation focused on reconciliation, peacebuilding, dialogue, and healing historical conflicts.

Continued from part 1: Apartment Turned Prison: 12 Years to Break Faith

Continued from part 2: Escaped from 1st Confinement, But Abducted Again

Continued from part 3: Inside the Room Where They Tried to Break Faith

Continued from part 4: Trapped: 13 Breaking Faith of 1 in Locked Room

Continued from part 5: For 12 Years They Took My Freedom, Not My Faith

Continued from part 6: Thrown Out After Being Locked Up for 12 Years

I sat there in shock on the cold floor. It was only then that I realized I had finally been released.

I went downstairs and stepped outside. In the evening light, people and cars were passing by, their lights shining.

I took a deep breath. I was free.

When I looked back at the entrance, I saw the name of the apartment complex: Flower Mansion. I had been unable to step outside for ten years, and that was the first time I learned the name of the building in which I had been confined.



The location of the 8th floor apartment in Ogikubo, Tokyo where Toru Goto was held captive and treated in a dehumanizing way for 10 years out of a total of 12 years and 5 months

"I did it! I'm free!"

I was free for the first time in 12 years and five months.

But my joy was short-lived. I was severely weakened, had no money, nowhere to go, and was desperately hungry.

I thought that somehow things would work out if I could get to the Unification Church headquarters, so I began walking the approximately ten-kilometer journey.

After walking about five kilometers, however, I began experiencing severe pain in both knees. Eventually, I could no longer put any strength into my knees.

I found a wooden stick at a construction site and used it as a walking stick.

Night fell, and there were very few people on the main streets.

I had been thrown out with nothing but the clothes I was wearing: a torn sweater and sweatpants. My hair was roughly cut because I had been cutting it myself, and I was walking hunched over, supporting myself with my hands.

To people passing by, I may have looked like a homeless man.

When I was just over a kilometer from the headquarters, I finally could not take another step. I sat down at the edge of the sidewalk.



Supporters walk the route toward Shibuya's Shoto, retracing 17 years later the past journey of Toru Goto - February 10, 2025, Ogikubo, Suginami Ward, Tokyo

The cold winter air penetrated my clothes and reached my skin. I thought,

"If I stay here, I will collapse and die."

I hugged my knees and prayed:

"Heavenly Father, thank You for protecting and guiding me all the way to this point. I cannot move another step. If it is Your will for me to end my journey here, please let Your will be done."

At that moment, a voice - not an audible voice, but something that resonated within my heart - said:

"Don't give up."

I raised my head and thought,

"I'll go as far as I can."

Gripping my makeshift walking stick and gritting my teeth, I stood up.



Illustration of God-sent young woman helping Toru Goto on February 10, 2008

Then a young woman came walking toward me. I thought that if I spoke to her looking like this, she might become frightened and run away.

Nevertheless, I called out to her. She was startled and asked,

"What's happened to you?"

I explained my situation. Then she took a thin book with a black cover out of her bag.

It was, amazingly, a hymnbook of the Unification Church. Then she said,

"I'm a member."

She was the first Unification Church member I had encountered in 12 years and five months.

I was convinced that God had arranged for me to meet her. I asked her:

"Is True Father well?"

She answered with a radiant smile,

"Yes, he's well."

I thanked God from the bottom of my heart.

The woman hailed a taxi, paid the driver, and sent me to the Church headquarters. By the time I arrived at the headquarters, I could barely walk on my own.

To be continued. Part 8 coming soon.

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Abducted For Their Faith: Japan's Untold Story

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Haruhisa Nakagawa Eitaro Ogawa

An overlooked human rights issue: The long-silenced voices of thousands of Japanese believers abducted and subjected to coercive faith-breaking while held in prolonged confinement

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An overlooked human rights issue is beginning to emerge from the shadows in Japan: the experiences of people who say they were abducted, confined and subjected to sustained efforts to make them renounce their religious faith. In a 29th September 2026 article in *Bitter Winter*, Massimo Introvigne examines this largely untold story through the testimony of Christian pastor Haruhisa Nakagawa (中川晴久), a former anti-Unification Church activist who says that his own understanding changed radically after encountering believers, former members, activists and survivors of coercive faith-breaking [See editor's note 1 below].

Logo of Bitter Winter, the world's leading online magazine on religious liberty and human rights.



***Rev. Haruhisa Nakagawa** (中川晴久), pastor of Christian Church of the Lord's Sheep in Yokohama. Photo: Bitter Winter*

Nakagawa's account is particularly significant because he did not begin as an advocate for the Family Federation (formerly known as the Unification Church). Rather, he initially accepted the dominant anti-cult narrative surrounding the movement and became involved in efforts to "persuade" its members to leave. His subsequent encounters with the reality behind that narrative led him to question not only his own assumptions but also a broader system in which abduction and confinement could continue for decades while the experiences of those subjected to them remained largely outside public discussion.

Introvigne's article is based on a conversation between Nakagawa and literary critic Eitaro Ogawa (小川榮太郎). Ogawa is interested in the way public narratives are constructed and how, once established, they can influence institutions, political responses and judicial processes. Nakagawa contributes a very different kind of evidence: personal encounters with people on both sides of the controversy and, eventually, direct contact with survivors of what is commonly called deprogramming or faith-breaking [See editor's note 1 below].

According to the article, more than 4,000 Japanese members of the Family Federation were subjected to abduction and confinement intended to make them abandon their faith. Nakagawa and Ogawa argue that the significance of these cases extends beyond the religious community itself. If people were deprived of their liberty because of their religious beliefs, they contend, the issue concerns fundamental questions of freedom of religion and human rights in Japanese society.

One reason, they suggest, why the scale of the problem has remained obscure is the reluctance of many victims to speak. Some believers interpreted their suffering as a spiritual trial and endured it without publicly accusing those responsible. This attitude of endurance, while understandable within a religious framework, may have had an unintended consequence: thousands of individual experiences remained largely invisible.

Nakagawa describes how he himself initially contributed to the prevailing narrative. At the age of 27, he was approached by a mother who wanted him to persuade her daughter to leave the Unification Church. Several months later, the young woman escaped through an apartment window, reportedly fleeing barefoot because she feared being confined. Nakagawa began researching the movement, but almost all the material he found had been written by its opponents. He accepted their descriptions and became convinced that he was dealing with a dangerous organization.

His assumptions began to change only when he decided to

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investigate the movement personally. In 2012, he visited a Family Federation church in Yokohama undercover. What he encountered differed sharply from the picture he had absorbed from anti-Unification Church literature. He found members willing to speak openly, young people who described the church as a community where they could express themselves, and an atmosphere that appeared to him considerably more ordinary and welcoming than he had expected.

Further experiences raised additional questions. Invited by activist journalist Eito Suzuki (鈴木エイト), Nakagawa attended meetings involving anti-cult activists and lawyers and encountered at a gathering held by *National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales* [See editor's note 2 below] what he regarded as an unsettling attitude toward confinement. He recounts one conversation in which a pastor reportedly referred to having confined more than 700 believers.



***Activist attorney Masaki Gōro** (郷路征記). Illustration: Grok xAI, 22nd May 2026.*

According to Nakagawa, the angry reaction of acitivist attorney Masaki Gōro (郷路征記) present at the meeting appeared to focus more on the pastor's disclosure of the number than on the confinement itself. For Nakagawa, this became an indication that the underlying culture surrounding faith-breaking [See editor's note 1 below] deserved closer examination.

He subsequently attended meetings led by *Assemblies of God* Pastor Hisoka Murakami (村上密 – 1955-2025) from Kyoto for about a year. Nakagawa says he repeatedly encountered the same participants recounting similar experiences and eventually came to believe that the meetings were reinforcing a particular narrative rather than helping people recover. Encounters with former detainees – including a young man who had reportedly been confined for three months and appeared deeply distressed after escaping – further challenged his earlier understanding.

The 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三) became another turning point. Nakagawa had supported Abe through a social-media group and had observed what he considered increasingly extreme rhetoric directed against the Family Federation. The assassination prompted him to reconsider the relationship between such public narratives and the political and social climate surrounding the religious organization.

The decisive stage in his transformation came through conversations with former Family Federation representatives and, particularly, Toru Goto (後藤徹), who has testified publicly about his own prolonged abduction and confinement. Through these encounters, Nakagawa says he discovered the extent to which individual cases had remained undocumented. He came to believe that the officially recognized number of victims might represent only part of the picture, with the total potentially reaching as many as 10,000.



***The reality of faith-breaking**: Toru Goto, a member of the Family Federation, in 2008*

This discovery also changed his understanding of terminology.

Nakagawa rejects the expression "protective persuasion", which has been used by some anti-Unification Church lawyers to describe efforts to coerce members to abandon their faith. In his view, such terminology obscures the central issue: whether people were deprived of their liberty and subjected to psychological pressure because of their religious convictions.

*emaciated, with medical bandages, and barely able to move after being held in forcible detention by his own family in league with professional faith-breakers for **more than 12 years**. Photo: Kazuhiro Yonemoto / Japanese Victims' Association against Religious Kidnapping and Forced Conversion*

Today, Nakagawa is attempting to reverse that silence by creating opportunities for survivors to tell their own stories. At one gathering in Chiba, organized by the *Association for the Protection of Religious Freedom*, seven people reportedly identified themselves as victims simply through conversations and an exchange of business cards. For Nakagawa, the encounter demonstrated that the problem is not merely historical or isolated. He has subsequently begun an interview program with survivors, with the stated aim of documenting the experiences of thousands of people.

The significance of this initiative lies precisely in giving victims a voice. For years, public discussion of the Family Federation in Japan has overwhelmingly focused on alleged wrongdoing by the religious organization and on the experiences of people who left it. Far less attention has been devoted to people who say that they themselves became victims – not because they left voluntarily, but because others attempted to make them abandon their faith through confinement and coercive faith-breaking [See editor's note 1 below].

The conversation described by Introvigne therefore raises a fundamental question: **Who gets to tell the story?** If the experiences of those subjected to faith-breaking [See editor's note 1 below] remain undocumented while the people and narratives surrounding their confinement continue to shape public perceptions, the historical record remains one-sided and incomplete.

Ogawa and Nakagawa ultimately argue that bringing these testimonies into public view is not simply an internal matter for the Family Federation. It is part of a broader examination of religious liberty and human rights in Japan. The victims' voices, they contend, need to be heard alongside the established public narrative. Only then can Japanese society begin to confront the full human cost of a practice that, according to their accounts, has remained hidden for decades.

***Text**: Knut Holdhus, editor*

***Featured image** above: Pastor Haruhisa Nakagawa and literary critic Eitaro Ogawa. Photo: Bitter Winter*

[***Editor's note 1***: **Coercive faith-breaking** ("deprogramming") in Japan refers to the practice of coercively attempting to separate individuals from their religious affiliations or beliefs, typically through intervention by family members, professional faith-breakers (deprogrammers) or organizations hostile to new religious movements (NRMs). This phenomenon often targets members of such movements, e.g. relatively large faiths like the Family Federation or Jehovah's Witnesses, but also smaller groups like Happy Science (Kōfuku no Kagaku) and other newer religious movements.

***Also subject to faith-breaking attempts**: Members of **Soka Gakkai**. Here students belonging to the faith in 2001. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 3.0 Unp. Cropped*

However, also Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist-based lay organization with more than 8 million Japanese members, and affiliated with Nichiren Buddhism, has occasionally been subject to faith-breaking attempts.

The practice gained attention in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Parents or concerned family members often hired faith-breakers who taught them how to abduct

and forcibly detain believers. Almost all such cases involved confining the individual believer and cutting him or her off from the religious community. During the confinement, the believer was subjected to intense questioning or indoctrination designed to break his or her faith. The aim was to "rescue" the person from what the family often had been tricked by faith-breakers or lawyers to regard as harmful influence from the religious organization.

Critics of forced de-conversion argue that it violates fundamental human rights, including freedom of thought, religion, and association. Reports of psychological trauma and accusations of unlawful detention have sparked debates over its ethical and legal implications. In response, some religious groups, particularly NRMs, have lobbied for greater protections against such practices.

Japanese courts have been inconsistent in addressing cases of coercive faith-breaking. While some verdicts have condemned the practice as illegal detention, others have been more lenient, citing family concerns about "mental health" or alleged "exploitation" as mitigating factors.]

[***Editor's note 2***: The ***National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales*** (*Zenkoku Benren*) presents itself to the Japanese public as a benevolent coalition of legal professionals fighting for consumer rights. Established in 1987, the network claims its sole mission is to protect vulnerable citizens from fraudulent business practices and what it terms "spiritual sales". However, an objective examination of their history, methods, and underlying political motivations reveals a far more sinister agenda. Scholars of religious liberty and investigative journalists have increasingly exposed the network as an ideological weapon designed not to protect consumers, but to systematically dismantle minority religious organizations – most notably the Family Federation.

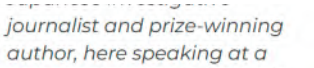
Prominent critics, including Italian sociologist Massimo Introvigne and the human rights organization CESNUR, have documented how *Zenkoku Benren* acts as a **primary instigator of religious intolerance in Japan**. Rather than operating as an objective legal resource, the network has long been accused of actively facilitating, or turning a blind eye to, the brutal practice of "deprogramming" or coercive faith-breaking. For decades, thousands of faith believers were abducted, confined, and subjected to severe psychological duress by professional faith-breakers working hand-in-hand with hostile relatives and network-aligned activists.



***Dr. Massimo Introvigne**, Italian sociologist of religion, founder of CESNUR, specializing in new religious movements and religious liberty. A prolific author, he has advised governments and international bodies, and served as OSCE Representative on combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance against Christians worldwide and comments on contemporary religious controversies. Here speaking at the UN Office at Geneva on 16th June 2025. Screenshot from*



Masumi Fukuda (福田ますみ), Japanese investigative



journalist and prize-winning author, here speaking at a press conference in Brussels, Belgium on 29th June 2026. Screenshot from live transmission by HRWF

2023. Screenshot from video by UPF.

Furthermore, acclaimed Japanese investigative journalist Masumi Fukuda has meticulously exposed the inner workings of the network, highlighting how it **manufactures legal grievances**. Fukuda's reporting reveals that many of the lawsuits championed by *Zenkoku Benren* involve former members who originally made voluntary, faith-driven donations but were later coerced by anti-cult lawyers **into retroactively claiming they were defrauded**. This **predatory litigation strategy** serves a dual purpose: it generates **immense financial payouts for the lawyers** involved while **feeding a sensationalist media narrative** designed to stoke public prejudice.

The network's ultimate objective has culminated in their aggressive push to strip the Family Federation of its religious corporation status. Critics argue this is a politically motivated campaign driven by an alliance of left-wing and communist activists seeking to purge religious voices from the public square. By weaponizing the concept of "spiritual sales", *Zenkoku Benren* has succeeded in manipulating public opinion and pressuring government authorities to violate fundamental constitutional rights to religious freedom.

To understand the ongoing religious liberty crisis in Japan, it is vital to look past the network's consumer-protection facade. *Zenkoku Benren* represents a dangerous precedent where activist legal networks can selectively target and destroy minority faiths under the guise of public interest.]

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