

Abduction Victims Finally Given the Stage against Faithbreakers

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Shunsuke Uotani (left) and Toru Goto (right) address an audience of ICSA members and deprogram.

For the first time, Unificationists challenged faithbreakers and their allies at a major international conference of academics held by the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), considered by many an anti-cult group, in Barcelona, Spain on July 8, 2011. Although some Unificationists have attended the ICSA conference for many years, this year's conference was the first to allow them to present their reports on faithbreaking, or so-called deprogramming. Two sessions, one by Unificationists and another by lawyers and activists opposed to the Unification Church (UC), were among several sessions of the ICSA conference that drew more than 300 attendees from around the world, including scholars and government officials.

Eileen Barker, the chairperson and founder of the Information Network Focus on Religious Movements, opened one session with an introduction to deprogramming issues. More than 4,300 Unification Church members have undergone abduction and forced confinement to break their faith, according to leaders of the Unification Church in Japan, yet none of their formal filings with Japanese police have resulted in criminal prosecutions. Representatives from an anti-UC organization, the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, Masaki Kito and Takashi Yamaguchi, along with two journalists from the Almost Daily Cult Newspaper, attended. Dan Fefferman, President of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom, offered a presentation that sought to clarify the testimonies of victims of deprogramming in Japan.

“The anti-Unification Church lawyers were very defensive, because in the past they always had the show to themselves,” Mr. Fefferman said of his experience at the conference, adding: “They were always unchallenged, but this time they had to stand up against our reports about human rights violation in Japan. The ICSA seemed shocked to hear our reports, and even though some of them were negative parents of deprogramming victims, they generally didn't approve of the deprogramming techniques.”



Toru Goto (far-left), Shunsuke Uotani (left-center), Luke Higuchi (right-center), and Eileen Barker (far-right) stand before their audience.

Toru Goto and Luke Higuchi, both victims of deprogramming, followed Mr. Fefferman's presentation with their personal testimonies on the subject. Responding to claims by lawyers that victims of deprogramming voluntarily stayed in condos specially prepared to confine church members, Goto said, “I was detained on the 8th floor. The entrance door was closed with security chains, which were padlocked. [There was] a window lock system. With this special window lock system installed, the window cannot

be opened from inside. I attempted to destroy this lock by kicking it again and again in vain.” Goto also emphasized that distressed relatives of church members often were manipulated by scare stories from the deprogrammers. “Although my family members carried out the actions of kidnapping and confinement, they were not the kind of individuals who normally would have dared to execute such malicious practices. Systematically kidnapping and confining someone were the last things they could ever devise,” Goto told the ICOSA session.

Just the presence of Unificationists at the conference challenged preconceived notions of the Unification Church, according to Luke Higuchi, president of Survivors Against Forced Exit (SAFE). “Because they [the organizers of ICOSA] had never met us personally, they’ve created their own images of us and are used to thinking of us as nothing more than zombies. But I believe that having conversations with Unificationists face-to-face at this conference has made a huge impact for the better, and has caused them to change their understanding of our movement. They were impressed with us,” he told Familyfed.org.

Shunsuke Uotani, a spokesman for the Unification Church in Japan, closed the session by presenting the particular cases of members who had been kidnapped and de-converted. Uotani reported that 80 percent of the individuals who have sued the Unification Church had previously suffered abduction and involuntary imprisonment. During a brief, follow-up Q&A, the anti-cult lawyers did not ask questions but spoke only to encourage the participants to attend their own session, which took place later that afternoon.



Masaki Kito, a representative of the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, gives his presentation.

Higuchi observed that Mr. Fefferman’s lecture was better attended, and that “there was not much interest” in the following presentation by deprogramming lawyers Masaki Kito and Takashi Yamaguchi, the lawyer who is opposing Mr. Goto in his civil case against the professional deprogrammers. “Mr. Kito seemed embarrassed because he was pressed for time and could only share one-third of his presentation,” said Higuchi, “and during their following Q&A session, the lawyers declined from answering questions from Unification members due to pending litigation.”

According to Fefferman, speaking on behalf of our members at this conference was “important step for us. We struck a good blow for human rights, but it’s not a total victory yet. There’s a lot of work to be done.”