

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Interfaith Call '25 to Protect Religious Liberty

Knut Holdhus
August 10, 2025



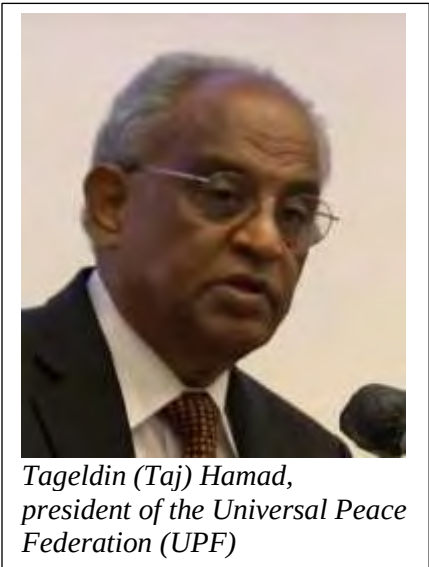
From the press conference in Seoul on August 7, 2025, that was part of the World Religious Leaders Conference 2025

World Religious Leaders Declare United Interfaith Stand Against Persecution in Asia as Anti-Religious Concepts of Totalitarian States Gain Ground in Democratic Nations Like Japan and South Korea

Large International Interfaith Conference in Seoul 5th to 8th August 2025

See also [Religious Freedom: 330 Faith Leaders Speak Up](#)

The Washington Times On 7th August 2025, The Washington Times carried a compelling report titled "[Faith leaders demand freedom of religion guarantees at Korea conference](#)". The piece by Andrew Salmon spotlights a five-day [Conference for World Religious Leaders](#) held in Seoul, South Korea. Drawing over 300 faith leaders from across the globe, the gathering was more than symbolic - it was, according to the paper, a united appeal for the protection of religious freedom amidst rising authoritarian and democratic pressures throughout Asia.



Tageldin (Taj) Hamad,
president of the Universal Peace
Federation (UPF)

Setting and Purpose

The Washington Times piece is written in a fairly straightforward, factual journalistic voice. Salmon manages to convey well the [conference](#)'s sense of urgency and moral seriousness.

Tageldin (Taj) Hamad, president of the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), the conference's organizer, framed the meeting as a vital response to mounting threats against worshippers. From the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar to restrictive policies in China and the criminalization of Bible distribution in North Korea - religious freedoms are under siege across the region. Hamad's words - "something sacred is under threat: That is our shared spiritual heritage" - anchor the gathering in a deeply empathetic and spiritual rationale for action.

Broadening the Scope: Modern Threats to Spirituality

Conference speakers didn't limit their concerns to overt religious persecution. Patriarch George Stallings Jr. offered a broader critique: the very structure of modern civilization - driven by science, technology, and institutional efficiency - is gradually constricting the space for spiritual life. He invited attendees to reaffirm religion's indispensable role as the moral compass and the soul of societies, counterbalancing laws with values and conscience.

A Three-Point Declaration

The religious leaders crafted a focused, three-part declaration:



George Augustus Stallings Jr. in Seoul Aug. 6, 2025



Kim Keon-hee, here in Washington DC July 10, 2024

1. **Prayer for religious freedom** - asserting it as "universal and inalienable", to be upheld by both national constitutions and international norms.

2. **Interfaith solidarity** - rooted in shared values of truth, conscience, and spirituality.

3. **Commitment to universal values** - truth, love, justice, and peace, seen as the ethical foundation derived from religious traditions.

This declaration emphasizes unity without diluting the particular strengths of different faith traditions, a clear strength of the approach.

Complexities: Family Federation in Legal and Political Crosshairs

A nuanced tension runs through the article, as the UPF is closely linked with the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) - formerly the [Unification Church](#) - which has ownership ties to The Washington Times. The [Federation](#) is under scrutiny: In Japan, it faces dissolution proceedings over alleged "spiritual sales"; in South Korea, it's embroiled in investigations tied to former first lady Kim Keon-hee. Kim is accused of [accepting luxury gifts](#) from a former [Federation](#) official through a shaman intermediary.

In response, [Federation](#) leaders claim political victimization, asserting that their anti-communism stance has made them a target, particularly by left-wing groups. Such allegations make it of course harder to get the message across and underscore at the same time that any religious organization today must be able to

navigate legal and reputational minefields.

Impact and Call to Action

[Strong criticism](#) was voiced when South Korean authorities [raided](#) the [Family Federation](#) and other worship sites - [raids](#) decried by speakers as violations of religious freedom.



Bishop Nancy Rosario from Church of God's Children, New York speaking in Seoul Aug. 7, 2025

U.S. Bishop Nancy Rosario called the conference "a clarion call [...] to expand the movement for continued global peace without fear of persecution," reinforcing the message that this moment demands courageous and collective responses.

Yet, as Patriarch Stallings insisted, declarations alone are insufficient:

"Talk is not going to cut it [...]. You have to put your feet to your faith."

He urged religious leaders to go beyond rhetoric,

"The religious leadership of our churches is spiritually impotent [if] they cannot bring any kind of challenge to situations where we see religious persecution rearing its ugly head."

Stallings suggested that "any movement to promote the declaration's three points" should ground itself in grassroots action

and spiritual reawakening.

Analysis and Reflections

The article by Andrew Salmon offers a compelling blend of vision and vulnerability. On one hand, the conference stands as a beacon of interfaith solidarity, moral clarity, and spiritual hope. The three-point declaration offers a polished framework that could galvanize global religious communities. The urgency is palpable, and the ethical appeal strongly resonates.

On the other hand, the UPF's affiliation with a religious movement facing serious allegations shows how vulnerable and exposed today's champions of religious liberty are. We live in a world where totalitarian regimes constantly work to export their anti-religious narrative to democratic societies like Japan and South Korea. And those regimes do not lack supporters in the free world. Unless one's faith is firmly rooted in strong conviction and a clear understanding of being in the middle of a battle between good and evil forces - and a veritable information war - the sense of urgency of the freedom-of-religion message is easily lost.

The Washington Times piece conveys well how serious the situation is for the cause of religious liberty. On one hand, the article celebrates a powerful, collective spiritual awakening among global faith leaders. At the same time, Salmon points out how advocates of freedom of religion or faith are up against powerful forces scheming to take hard-won freedoms away.

See also [Religious Freedom: 330 Faith Leaders Speak Up](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus

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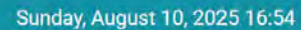
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August 3, 2025

Q

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“The seven of us are not believers.”

This was the position of the *Association of Experts Seeking a Fair and Impartial Trial*, whose members – including international lawyer Tatsuki Nakayama (中山達樹), professor of the former *Musashino Women’s University* Seishiro Sugihara (杉原誠四郎), and nonfiction author Masumi Fukuda (福田ますみ) – held a press conference on 6th August questioning the fairness of the legal process leading to the [dissolution order](#) against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (FFWPU, formerly the *Unification Church*).

The Tokyo venue drew reporters from 11 media outlets including NHK, Mainichi Shimbun, Nippon TV, and Kyodo News. However, when the Q&A began, only *Seiron* magazine and this newspaper raised questions. What did these experts – who seemed to have “silenced” the rest of the media – have to say?



International Attorney
Tatsuki Nakayama.
Photo: [Sekai Nippo](#)

Nakayama, the lead organizer and legal counsel for the [religious organization](#), pointed out:

“(The Tokyo District Court) claimed that ‘harm at an intolerable level’ continued even after the [religious organization](#)’s 2009 compliance declaration [\[See editor’s note 1 below\]](#). But it gave no definition or standard for what ‘intolerable level’ means.”

He urged the media to report that over 300 neutral international experts have voiced “grief and anger” over the matter.

Masaki Nakamasa (仲正昌樹), professor at *Kanazawa University* and a former member, noted a wide gap between the [religious organization](#)’s actual practices and its public image, citing specific examples:

“It’s said that the [Unification Church](#) threatens people with ‘You’ll go to hell’ to get donations. But that doctrine doesn’t exist, and I was never told such a thing.”

He also dismissed “[mind control](#)” outright,

“It’s fiction. If such a technique really existed, people would use it to get ahead in society.”



Masaki Nakamasa (仲正昌樹), political scientist and professor at *Kanazawa University*.
Photo: Reika Kato (加藤玲和)



Masumi Fukuda, here 20th Jan. 2024. Photo: Screenshot

Fukuda recalled that when she began reporting on the [religious organization](#) after the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三),

“I felt that ‘anti-cult’ forces and the media had teamed up to produce grossly biased coverage.”

She stressed that testimonies from former believers who left after [abduction and confinement](#) for forcible [faith-breaking](#) [\[See editor’s note 2 below\]](#) were being spotlighted exclusively:

“Public opinion in favor of dissolution is being built entirely on emotional arguments, without showing the reality of the [religious organization](#).”

What she fears most is that even the government and judiciary side

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with public sentiment. She lamented,

"This is the collapse of democracy."

Sugihara criticized the reliance on past court cases as grounds for dissolution:

"If you can dig back as far as you like, then any religious group could qualify for dissolution."

From within the religious community, concerns also emerged. Pastor Haruhisa Nakagawa (中川晴久) of the *Christian Church of the Lord's Sheep* (Yokohama), who supports religious believers victimized by abduction and confinement, stated:



Dr. Seishiro Sugihara.
Photo: [Sekai Nippo](#)

"Research shows that nearly 300 Christian pastors were involved in abduction and confinement. This is truly shameful. On behalf of the Christian Church, I want to apologize to those victimized."



Reverend Shindo Mizuta (水田真道), head priest of Kongoji Temple.
Photo: [Sekai Nippo](#)

Reverend Shindo Mizuta (水田真道), head priest of *Kongoji Temple* (Myoshinji branch of the *Rinzai Buddhist* sect, Numazu City, Shizuoka), said he initially supported dissolution. However, after meeting with members of the [religious organization](#) at his temple, he came to see dissolution as a threat to religious freedom. Addressing fellow clergy, he appealed:

"Put aside preconceptions and things we cling on to and look with clear, unclouded eyes. For us religious leaders, this is not someone else's problem."

Islamic commentator Humayun A. Mughal spoke of the pain religious people feel when their [place of worship is taken away](#):

"In Japan, religion is a matter of one's own conscience. I ask judges to follow their conscience when delivering a verdict."

Former *House of Councillors* member Satoshi Hamada (浜田聡) also sent a video message:

"In the ordinary Diet session, I [pointed out](#) the possibility that the Ministry of Education's court documents may have been [fabricated](#). There was no denial of [fabrication](#) in the government's reply. I hope the ministry will respond sincerely."



Former House of Councillors member for the NHK Party Satoshi Hamada (浜田聡), here speaking on 26th January 2025. Photo: [Yasuhiro Uno \(宇野泰弘\)](#)

In its statement, the association emphasized that they are not expressing agreement with or understanding of the doctrines or activities of the [religious organization](#). Instead, they outlined three concerns about the *Tokyo District Court's* 25th March [dissolution order](#):

1. Using past civil cases – where donation activity began an average of over 30 years ago – as grounds for dissolution.
2. Recognizing "continuity of harm" based only on abstract evidence like settlements, despite there being zero illegal donations in the past 11 years.
3. Ignoring suspicions of alteration or [fabrication](#) in government-submitted evidence.

They are calling on the *Tokyo High Court* for a [fair and impartial trial](#).

However, the press conference questioning the [dissolution order](#) seems to have been met by the mainstream media with the "freedom not to report". A heavy atmosphere of suppressing dissent hangs over the discourse, and the call for "[fairness and impartiality](#)" is something the media itself should also heed.

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Featured image above: Attorney Tatsuki Nakayama (center), the lead representative of the organizers, speaks at the press conference. On the right is Pastor Haruhisa Nakagawa of the Christian Church of the Lord's Sheep; on the left is nonfiction writer Masumi Fukuda. Photographed on the afternoon of 6th August 2025 in Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo. Photo: Takahide Ishii (石井孝秀)

[Editor's note 1: The **2009 compliance declaration** of the **Unification Church of Japan** (now the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification**) was a formal commitment by the organization to reform its practices in response to longstanding public criticism and legal challenges.

The **Unification Church** in Japan had faced numerous allegations related to recruitment tactics and donation solicitation, termed "spiritual sales" (霊感商法) by a hostile network of activist lawyers who had declared the **religious organization** an enemy. These issues led to multiple lawsuits orchestrated by the activist lawyers and significant media backlash. This prompted the **organization** to take measures to restore its reputation and demonstrate compliance with legal and ethical standards.

The **religious organization** pledged to stop possibly unethical donation practices, including what the hostile network of lawyers claimed amounted to "pressuring members into making large financial contributions under spiritual pretexts."

This was in response to accusations from the same activist lawyers that followers "were being manipulated into giving away substantial amounts of money or property."

The **Unification Church** stated it would enhance internal oversight to ensure compliance with ethical and legal standards. Measures included better training for leaders and stricter guidelines for evangelization and solicitation of donations.

After this compliance declaration, there was a significant decrease in the number of lawsuits against the **Unification Church** – since 2015 called the **Family Federation**. The **religious organization** has used this as evidence that it has improved its practices and should not be subject to **dissolution**.]

[Editor's note 2: 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.]

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