

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Japanese Government Seizes Church blocking Freedom of Assembly

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Entrance to the Suginami Church of the Family Federation - Suginami Ward, Tokyo



"Losing our church is losing our rights": Tokyo believers speak out with their freedom of assembly threatened as Japanese state moves to seize church properties

Tokyo, 25th June 2025 - Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper [Sekai Nippo](#). Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#).

[Series] Where Will the Believers Go? The Issue of the Family Federation's Dissolution and Its Corporate Facilities (Church Properties) (Part 2)

"Fears of Elderly Believers Dying Alone"

Suginami - Over 100 People Gather Daily

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)

See part 1: ["Liquidation Is Like Being Robbed of Our Assets"](#)

A 12-minute walk from JR Nishi-Ogikubo Station in Tokyo's Suginami Ward takes you through a residential neighborhood past antique shops and Showa-era bakeries. There, a four-story pink building appears, marked by a large sign reading: "Religious Corporation [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) Suginami Family Church."

Inside the entrance, a lobby with desks and chairs is lively with 5 or 6 women chatting. The building, which belongs to the Suginami Church with about 700 affiliated members, was purchased by the [organization](#) 15 years ago. Worship services are held on Sundays, and even on weekdays, around 100 people come and go.

However, if the dissolution of the [Family Federation](#) is finalized, the property could be lost during liquidation procedures.

Yosuke Yokokawa (横川洋介), the church's leader and pastor, argues,

"Losing the church is not just a matter of losing a place of worship."

He notes concerns that religious events such as the Seonghwa Ceremony (akin to a funeral) and prayer meetings could be banned in regular facilities due to regulations, making it difficult to find alternative venues. Yokokawa emphasized,



Demonstrators in Suginami, Tokyo May 1, 2025, protesting the dissolution order against the [Family Federation](#)

"The biggest loss would be the disappearance of the community formed around the church facilities."

He added, "Looking at the congregation, I believe their faith wouldn't waver even if the physical church were gone."

However, he expressed concern that "losing the church means losing the opportunity to gather, and the community would vanish."



Demonstration by young members of the [Family Federation](#) outside the national parliament on May 6, 2025, protesting the authorities' attempt to dissolve the [religious organization](#) and seize its assets

Religious practices would shift to the home, but in families where not all members are believers, he stressed,

"There are limits to what believers without family support can do at home."

A long-time female member explained,

"For those who don't have their family's understanding, the church has become a spiritual sanctuary."

This is especially true for elderly believers. Yokokawa voiced concerns:

"Many elderly members could end up dying alone."

Elderly believers who have lost their spouses and live alone often visit the church two to three times a month, providing an opportunity to check in on one another. Without the church, there's a risk of unnoticed solitary deaths, with individuals eventually being buried anonymously in unmarked graves.

On a Sunday in mid-June, a youth gathering was held at the Suginami Church. Separate from worship, it was called a Restoration Meeting, a monthly event for young believers. That day, around 15 men and women in their 20s and 30s - working adults - attended. They drove together to a riverside in northern Saitama Prefecture and enjoyed a friendly game of park golf, their laughter echoing across the area.



Demonstration by young members of the [Family Federation](#) in Kyoto on June 22, 2025, protesting the authorities' attempt to dissolve the [religious organization](#) and seize its assets

Between rounds, they spoke about the dissolution order.

"The church is part of my life. I can't imagine it disappearing."

These were the strong words of 22-year-old Saki Tanaka (alias). Born to a Filipino father and a Japanese mother, Tanaka is what's known as a "second-generation believer" and is in her first year working at the Suginami Church as a [Family Federation](#) staff member.

Tanaka said her turning point came in her second year of high school when her father collapsed in front of her. He had a brain hemorrhage. Though he survived, he was left partially paralyzed, and their family life changed dramatically.

She recalls wondering in despair, "Why did this have to happen only to my father?" What kept her going through that painful time was "having a place where second-generation believers could gather." For Tanaka, the church became her emotional anchor during those hard times.

She explains, "Even if the Suginami Church disappears, the relationships among believers will remain," but she also appealed that,

"There must never come a time when we have no place or environment to connect through our faith."

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“Liquidation Is Just Like Being Robbed of Our Assets.”

A Church Dedication That Finally Came True After 60 Years – in Koriyama

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)

See part 2: [“No Freedom of Assembly If State Seizes Church”](#)

The legal proceedings regarding the dissolution of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the Unification Church) have [moved to Tokyo High Court](#). If the High Court upholds the [dissolution order](#), liquidation of the organization’s [assets](#) will begin immediately, even before a ruling from the Supreme Court. If that happens, the church facilities where believers conduct worship and other religious activities may be lost, causing growing concern among the faithful that they will lose their spiritual home.



The [Family Federation](#)’s Koriyama Church. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

On 24th November of last year, a new [Family Federation](#) facility was completed in Koriyama, a commercial city in the center of Fukushima Prefecture. About 10 minutes by car from Koriyama Station, the single-story “Koriyama Church” was built by repurposing a former hot spring facility. It has a large parking lot.

Jun’ya Hirokawa (廣川淳也) (54), a church staff member proudly guiding visitors through the facility, explained that it was designed so that elderly believers could enter without removing their shoes. Hirokawa said firmly,

“This new church was the dream of all the believers, a dream 60 years in the making. Please don’t [rob us](#) of a church that’s just been completed.”

On 25th March, the [Tokyo District Court](#) issued a [dissolution order](#) based on the [Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology](#)’s request. In the court’s written decision, regarding freedom of religion, it states:

“Even if a religious corporation is dissolved by a dissolution order, believers are not prevented from continuing a religious group without legal status, or from forming a group or corporation anew in an appropriate manner. Nor are they hindered from conducting religious activities or preparing new facilities and items for religious purposes.”



Believers of the Koriyama Church speak about their feelings toward the church they built, amid the non-contentious lawsuit for the dissolution order of the [Family Federation](#). Photo: [FFWPU](#)

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However, according to the *Religious Corporations Act*, during the liquidation process following dissolution, religious activities generally cannot take place on properties owned by the corporation. Furthermore, if the repayment of debts requires the sale of real estate held under the corporate name, there is a possibility the church facilities will be [seized](#). Although the court acknowledged that this may “interfere with” believers’ religious practices, is this “interference” not a matter deeply connected to the core of religious freedom?

Whether it’s Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, Christian churches, or Islamic mosques, places of worship are essential for religious faith to function.

The Koriyama Church purchased the former hot spring facility in autumn 2023. Since the walls were damaged from years of hot spring use, they were all demolished, leaving only the steel framework. A full renovation was carried out over the course of a year, making it effectively a new building.

Situated on a large site of over 1,500 square meters including the parking area, the church facility occupies about a quarter of the property.



It

*The café space at the Koriyama Church, used for fellowship.
Photo: [FFWPU](#)*

features a sanctuary/auditorium capable of seating 200–300 people and a café space with a nice view where about 30 people may gather and chat.

After completion, the Koriyama Church distributed 1,000 flyers reading, “*Want to take a peek at the infamous Unification Church?*” in an effort to gain understanding from the local community. They also held an open house event. Young believers commented,

“I’m so happy that it’s become a church where I feel proud to bring people.”

The previous facility was half the size and had only one bathroom. Nearly all the Koriyama Church members had hoped for a new building, and staff had been searching for real estate for years. Yet few real estate agents were willing to sell to the [Family Federation](#). When they finally secured the current property and moved in last November, Hirokawa recalled,

“All the believers were filled with joy.”



Believers of the [Family Federation](#)’s Koriyama Church tiling during construction of the new church facility. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

During the renovation, simple tasks like laying floor tiles were carried out by the believers themselves. They laid them one by one, working together, and there are even a few spots where the tiles are slightly misaligned. The believers unanimously say that they feel a sense of attachment to the building because of the manual labor involved.

Takashi Ijuin (伊集院孝) (72), a believer who donated for the dedication of the church, expressed his feelings:

“Even if the building is in the name of the [corporation](#) and

legally belongs to headquarters, for us on the ground, this is our church. Taking away a church we built with donations given through our hard work is no different than having our own [assets stolen](#). It's heartbreaking."

The court decision may say, "There is no obstacle to preparing a new facility," but the burden of once again investing time, money, and labor is no easy matter for the believers.

See part 2: ["No Freedom of Assembly If State Seizes Church"](#)

Featured image above: The sanctuary of the [Family Federation's Koriyama Church](#). Photo: Yasuhiko Nagano (長野康彦)

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