

Religious Freedom at the Seattle Cherry Blossom Festival

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Unificationist Scott Dolfay manned an information table at the Seattle Center Cherry Blossom Festival.

I have been a Unificationist since I joined in my hometown of Seattle in 1981. I am blessed with Satomi Yamamuro, and in 2002 we were offered our only child, Taichi, from the Hirosawa family from Hiroshima. Because of our close relationship to the Japanese people, I have always felt a deep responsibility to do something to stop the religious injustices in Japan.

It is possible that Seattle has more connections to Japan than any other American city. There are many companies headquartered here with major trade relations to Japan: *Boeing, Microsoft, Starbucks* and *Costco*. Many Japanese tourists come to see the Seattle Mariners due to their expatriate baseball stars. The first Japanese Consulate was established in the area in 1895.

This year commemorated the 70th anniversary of Japanese internment during World War II as well as the 100th anniversary of the City of Tokyo's gift of 3,020 trees to Washington, D.C. This year, Seattle was one of 13 U.S. cities to receive cherry trees from Japan through the Cherry Blossom Centennial Initiative. These were presented at the opening ceremony of our annual Cherry Blossom Festival by astronaut Naoko Yamazaki, who carried the Seattle cherry blossoms into space in 2010. For years this has been a very important public-relations event for the Seattle Consulate. Out of the 10 cities in which Unificationists staged public protests in front of Japanese consulates in November of 2010, Seattle's Consul General Ota was the only Japanese official who agreed to receive materials regarding the scandal of religious kidnappings.

We decided to set up an information table showing the Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS) documentary (2010) on religious kidnapping in Japan and hand out flyers at the festival. We hoped to collect signatures to pass on to the Japanese Consulate. Seattle Center rules require that a table with power have a review of all banners, flyers and media used as well as a fee and insurance. Due to a late application, this had to be done as a "free speech event." However, with more time it could have been an official "Seattle Center event." This would have required a bit more cooperation but would have cost much less and would have brought greater prestige. Either way, we were required to stay within the general area of the table. This wasn't a problem because our table was, generally speaking, in the middle of the festival.

The weather was great all three days. We had a little bit of a late start: the signature count was only 22. I was able to give a flyer to a van driver from the consulate. While packing up at the end of the day, I saw

Congressman Jim McDermott pass by with a bevy of kimono-clad young ladies and Japanese dignitaries. I grabbed a flyer, scribbled my name and phone # then waited until he separated from the group. I told him of our table while handing him the flyer. Saturday, we had a much better turnout and more volunteers, so we got 120 signatures. Sunday, after church, volunteers came again, and we got more than 220 signatures!



As mentioned, a Seattle Center employee reviewed our materials. She watched the entire SBS report. I could tell she was profoundly moved by what she saw and understood what we were doing. At first, many church members didn't really understand what was happening until they came by. Once there, they got inspired to reach out to the public, getting many more signatures than we would have otherwise.

The petition was a slightly modified version of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom (ICRF) online petition. Only the name, signature and date were asked for with an optional e-mail address space. Since it was not a legal document, signatures from foreigners and youth were also sought as the purpose is to convince the Japanese government that this issue cannot be hidden and must be dealt with for their own interest.

The area around our table was popular both with tourists and Seattleites. We saw a lot of foot-traffic. Some were attracted from afar by seeing the banner "Stop Japanese Kidnappings Now." We decided that next year, we need a banner in Japanese, too. Most people were drawn to the poster board of Mr. Toru Goto, victim of forced confinement. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but the details followed. The SBS report was playing on a separate table; this wasn't promoted as much at first but by Sunday I realized how important it was and how to draw the public's attention to it. Our flyer had on one side the ICRF website; the other had our national church site <http://www.familyfed.org/projects/>. At first I had reservations about sending people to a church site, thinking that it would not be viewed as objective. However, I came to understand that with the right explanation it is great on many levels.

There were consistently similar questions raised based on the views of our visitors' given worldviews; which included Christian, Japanese, secular, those of a non-Christian faith, and skeptics of the Unification Church. I felt all of these could be dealt with. It would be beneficial to have some volunteer orientation prior to a similar event. As I see it, a similar event could be held in any public place at any time of the year. I even found people showing positive interest in the church and asking about our Sunday service. I wrote this testimony to encourage other Unification Church communities to do similar events and to pass on lessons learned, so that when they do, they are better prepared.