

University of Bridgeport Students Raise Awareness of Religious Intolerance in Japan - Neil A. Salonen

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Members of a chapter of the Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles (CARP) at the University of Bridgeport (UB) hosted an event to raise awareness of the religious injustices against Unificationists in Japan on Tuesday, March 28, 2012. The chapter worked closely with UB's Student Programming Board (SPB).



Second-generation Unificationist and mother-of-three Lena Yasutake gave a presentation about forced conversion in Japan at the "Religious Freedom: World Café" event at Bridgeport University.

The event, titled "Religious Freedom: World Café," was a cooperative effort from CARP and SPB and kicked off International Awareness Week at UB. About 110 people, half of whom had no affiliation to the Unification Church, attended the event.

"This week is International Awareness Week, and it's a big event on campus," said Rebecca Ward (23). "Throughout the week, there will be an event every day that has to do with raising awareness about different issues around the world. It concludes on Saturday with the International Festival. Different groups on campus will give presentations that portray their culture, such as dancing or singing, and there's also a big display of different cultural foods."

Ward, UB's student body vice president and a second-generation Unificationist, organized the event together with Unificationists Deborah Fiala (23), the student body's executive secretary as well as the president of CARP, and Tasnah Moyer (23), the student body's correspondence secretary.



Participants discuss the human rights issues in Japan in small groups, through which organizers of the event hoped that people would be encouraged to act.

According to Ward, the inspiration to put on this event was fueled by Fiala. "This was an issue she was very passionate about," said Ward "We wanted to make an event that really catered to our school. UB is very unique in that everybody here knows about the Unification Church. It's not a big secret; everybody knows who the Unificationists are on campus, who the Unificationist professors are. It's a very open atmosphere.

"This issue of faith-breaking, however, is one that not many people know about on campus. So, we wanted it to be addressed. At the same time, we wanted to make an event that wasn't just about Unificationists. We wanted it to appeal to our very diverse campus, because we have anyone and everyone represented here at UB. So I think because we went with this approach, all of us were very comfortable in organizing this event.

“It seemed a little backwards for us to say, ‘We have an issue, we need help.’ Yes, we do have an issue, and we want others to know about it, but we also want to hear about what everyone thinks about religious persecution and why it exists.”

UB’s unique situation as an affiliate of the Unification Church, as well as its richly diverse campus, spurred CARP members to organize their event in a “World Café” style, which means participants broke up into smaller discussion groups towards the end of the evening. They hoped to foster discussion and to encourage people to act.

“We wanted to have representatives from different faiths lead our discussion tables,” Ward continued. “So, many guests were invited by these discussion leaders. That’s really how we encourage diversity here.” CARP posted announcements around campus as well as online, but most of the marketing was done through word of mouth, according to Ward.

Ward said CARP designed the event with the hope that “people leave with a new level of awareness. Hopefully, they’ll go home and sign the online petition to stop religious persecution [which can be found at religiousfreedom.com/index.php?option=com_mad4joomla&jid=3&Itemid=490]. If not, I just hope they have a new outlook on religious persecution and an appreciation of the religious freedom we do have. It shouldn’t be taken for granted.”



More than 110 people, half of whom had no affiliation with the Unification Church, attended the event.

The World Café opened with two musical presentations, including UB’s Gospel Choir, which sang “Lord, You’re Worthy,” and Lauren Sneed, a high-school student who sang “Motherless Child.”

UB’s president, Neil A. Salonen spoke about the importance of religious freedom, the right to practice one’s faith and about how fortunate the United States is to have such a basic guaranteed right. He was followed by Lena Yasutake, a second-generation Unificationist mother of three and a teacher at Bridgeport International Academy, who gave an overview of the Unification Church.

Luke Higuchi, president of Survivors Against Forced Exit (SAFE) shared his testimony about forced conversion in Japan. He played the short documentary, “Japan’s Hidden Shame,” and afterwards Unificationist Gail Veith shared her own experience of being kidnapped by faith breakers in the United States.

Yasutake offered a factual presentation of the situation of religious minorities in Japan and asked the audience to sign the petition. Following her presentation, a Japanese choir, dressed in traditional garb, sang two songs in Japanese. The participants then sat at round tables for three, ten-minute discussions.

The World Café, or roundtable dialogue, covered three topics: personal experience with religious persecution, why discrimination exists, and what individuals can do to foster religious tolerance.

The evening ended with a raffle, with prizes donated by local businesses in Bridgeport. Through the raffle, CARP was able to raise about \$300 for SAFE.

Colin Capaci (21), UB’s student body president and practitioner of Taoism, led one of the discussion tables. He said, “I think the event was excellently presented. There were several elements to it that were beneficial to different kinds of learners. There was empirical research presented, emotional stories presented, and round-table discussions. I mean, you found your niche here, from any perspective. And in terms of the cause itself, I think it’s such an important issue to be presented here at UB in particular. People need to be aware that these kinds of things do exist. As the soon-to-be adult generation, it’s important to know what’s happening in the world, in particular things we can relate to, where we can make a difference.”