

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Kenryu Kageyama, From Troubled Teen to Church Leader

Knut Holdhus
October 26, 2024



Kenryu Kageyama talking about his struggles as a second-generation religious person - July 20, 2024, Chuo Ward, Niigata City



[Sekai Nippo](#)

Young Japanese man tells how he went from being a rebellious and troubled teen to finding a deep faith that can help others

Tokyo, 14th October 2024 - Published as the 33rd article in a series in the Japanese newspaper [Sekai Nippo](#). Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#)

Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat - Part 5: The Distorted Image of the "Second-Generation"

From Troubled Teen to Church Leader

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

[Nippo](#)

See part 1: The Kishida Administration's Reckless Actions: [1st article](#), [2nd article](#), [3rd article](#), [4th article](#), [5th article](#), [6th article](#)

See part 2: Ripples to Local Assemblies: [7th article](#), [8th article](#), [9th article](#), [10th article](#), [11th article](#), [12th article](#), [13th article](#), [14th article](#), [15th article](#)

See part 3: Believers Suffering Discrimination and Human Rights Violations: [16th article](#), [17th article](#), [18th article](#), [19th article](#), [20th article](#), [21st article](#), [22nd article](#)

See part 4: Media Crossing the Line: [23rd article](#), [24th article](#), [25th article](#), [26th article](#), [27th article](#), [28th article](#)

See part 5: The Distorted Image of the "Second-Generation": [29th article](#), [30th article](#), [31st article](#), [32nd article](#)



Press conference at the Japanese Family Federation headquarters in Shibuya, Tokyo 16th Oct. 2023

On 20th October 2022, three months after former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was shot, the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)) held a press conference. As numerous television cameras lined up, twenty second-generation believers took the stage to report that they had been appointed as leaders of churches across the country. One of those who stood there was Kenryu Kageyama (影山権龍).



Kenryu Kageyama speaking in Niigata, July 20, 2024

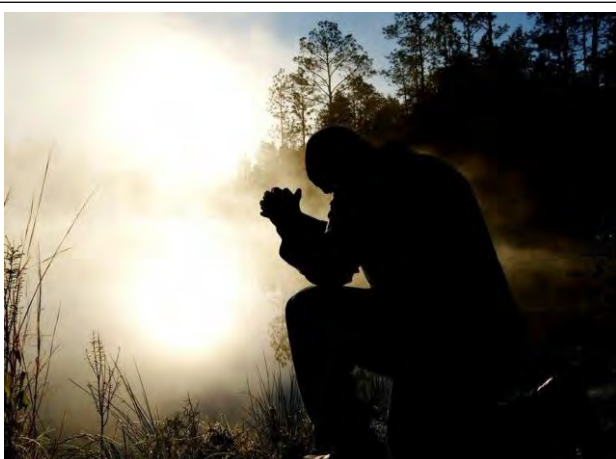
"It was truly a bolt from the blue. I never expected it."

He expressed his honest feelings that he felt utterly unqualified for the role. On 20th July this year, Kageyama took the stage at a symposium held in Niigata City on the theme of freedom of religion and shared his story:

"In my middle and high school years, I was rebellious. I opposed my parents' faith, disliked the word 'religion,' and did not believe in the [existence of God](#). I even found my parents' presence bothersome.

At that time, I witnessed people around me turning to alcohol and cigarettes to escape reality. Additionally, when I was in the second year of junior high school, a close senior, one year older than me, was beaten to death in a group assault on a field late at night. That cast a shadow over my heart.

The gap between the [church teachings](#) - like 'going to church is wonderful', '[God](#) exists', '[living for others](#) is beautiful', 'you are a child of [God](#)' - and reality was too large. So, as I entered university, I thought about cutting ties with my parents and abandoning my faith.



Praying out in nature

Even in such a situation, I was able to open my heart to a senior second-generation believer whom I looked up to as an 'older brother' in the [church](#). When I confided all my troubles to him, he unexpectedly responded, 'It must have been tough, it must have been painful, you endured well.' When I asked why he was crying, he said, 'Because Kenryu, you are my younger 'brother'. If my younger 'brother' is suffering, isn't it natural for us to share that feeling as 'siblings'?'

Feeling the warmth of my senior's heart, I recall, 'I felt a bit of love reach my heart, which had been frozen faith.'"

During the workshop, as he prayed in the mountains, he deeply realized, "I have suffered, but my parents have suffered too." In that moment, he felt what he called "the voice of [God](#)" saying, "I have loved you and always will." It was the answer he had long sought.

Kageyama points out that there are many similar second-generation believers,

"The negative image of second-generation religious believers being forced into the faith and abused is ingrained - so it's as if we're all viewed as victims by society. However, I want to emphasize that there are many second-generation believers who positively and willingly practice their faith."

Kageyama currently serves as a [church](#) leader for a wide range of age groups. The attack on former Prime Minister Abe highlighted the [church](#)'s structure, where voices from grassroots members were often not reflected in the organization. The 2nd-generation leader says,

"We haven't been proactive or creative in our approach. We need church management that reflects the voices of grassroots believers. The [church](#) should be an organization that supports its members, and the main actors in [church](#) management should be each individual believer."

With this conviction, he established a church management committee. An elderly believer who participated in the symposium lamented that, while church leadership had gotten younger, "there aren't many people from the younger generation." Japan faces a demographic shift toward an aging society, and the membership of the [Family Federation](#) is no exception. Kageyama has a strong awareness of the issue, saying,

"Religious communities across Japan are grappling with the issue of passing on faith. Our challenge is to build a [church](#) where we can pass the baton to second-generation members while preserving the traditions established by our elders."

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See part 2: Ripples to Local Assemblies: [7th article](#), [8th article](#), [9th article](#), [10th article](#), [11th article](#), [12th article](#), [13th article](#), [14th article](#), [15th article](#)

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Not In Media: 2nd-Generation Faith Freely Chosen

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• October 11, 2024 • Knut Holdhus



Challenging negative media narrative on 2nd-generation faith: A young Japanese lady tells her story, how she of her own free will chose her faith.



Logo of the Sekai Nippo

Tokyo, 1st October 2024 – Published as the **29th article** in a series in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#)








Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat – Part 5: **The Distorted Image of the “Second-Generation”**

Reconciliation with Parents and the Path of Faith

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of *Sekai Nippo*

See [part 1: The Kishida Administration's Reckless Actions: 1st article, 2nd article, 3rd article, 4th article, 5th article, 6th article](#)

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When parents are devout believers of the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification** (formerly the Unification Church), society often perceives their children as being in a miserable situation. While the media has widely covered the experiences of second-generation members who have left the church, such as Sayuri Ogawa (a pseudonym), whose father was a local church leader, the existence of second-generation members who have chosen faith of their own free will has been ignored.



Front page book cover of Sayuri Ogawa's book in Japanese.

"The very relationship with my parents was what determined whether I stayed in the church or left."

So says Mieko Ōshita (a pseudonym), a woman in her 30s living in Chiba Prefecture. As a child, she lived in Gunma Prefecture, where her father, a church leader, was so busy with his work that he only came home once every one to two months. Despite his hard work, his pay was low, and her mother supported the family. She couldn't buy the clothes she wanted, and they used second-hand furniture. Her mother, who single-handedly supported the family, sometimes became hysterically angry.

Oshita says with a wry smile,

"Up until elementary school, I thought that life was normal, but as I reached adolescence, I started comparing my home with those of my school friends and realized how different my family was."

Feeling uncomfortable due to the lack of a relaxing space at home, Ms. Oshita gradually immersed herself in club activities and socializing with school friends. She began coming home late, and sometimes she even sneaked out at night, causing her parents to worry. However, she couldn't understand why staying out late was such a problem.

The teachings of the religious organization required both men and women to maintain "purity" in their relationships in preparation for future marriage. However, the strict guidance on chastity made her feel like she had no freedom, and this stirred feelings of rebellion in her. She said,

"At home, I often clashed with my parents, and there were even times when I threw away food right in front of them."



Front cover page of one version of *Unification Principles* in Japanese – 原理講論

This led to constant conflicts. Not knowing how to deal with her pent-up emotions, she began planning to "stop being a second-generation believer and run away from home" after graduating high school. She packed her favorite clothes into a bag and confided in her friends about her family's faith, asking them for help.

A turning point came just before graduation. While talking on the phone with her sister, who was living away from home, her sister revealed that she too had struggled with their parents and faith during high school, to the point where she became so stressed that she lost the ability to speak and even considered suicide.

When Mieko Oshita confided her own feelings, her sister revealed that she too had once thought about leaving the church. She recalled,

"My sister told me, 'How can you deny the faith our parents have dedicated their lives to without even understanding it?' That made me decide to learn about the church properly before making a choice."



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Studying the [teachings](#). Illustration: Microsoft Designer Image Creator, 11th October 2024.

Ōshita had the chance to talk with an instructor who was an old acquaintance of her parents. The instructor shared stories about how her parents had been in the past. Hearing about her parents' lives from a third-party perspective, she gradually understood her true, hidden feelings:

"I wanted to be loved by my parents, and I rebelled against them because I was lonely."

Later, when Ōshita had the opportunity to talk things over with her parents, she expressed everything she had been feeling. Her parents apologized, saying, "We are truly sorry."

Although there were times when she felt emotionally unstable, each time, her parents were there to listen and understand her feelings. She says with a smile,

"Not only did I change and grow, but my parents did too."

Regarding the second-generation believers who have left the [Family Federation](#) and appeared in the media, Ōshita shows understanding, saying, "There are probably second-generation members who have felt forced into the faith without genuine feelings, and their anger is completely justified." However, she also offers her perspective:

"It's painful to resent the parents who raised you. That's why, like me, some might question the [church](#) rather than blame their parents. Perhaps there's a desire to turn what is really a parent-child issue into a political or religious issue. Shouldn't we take such complicated feelings into consideration?"

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Featured image above: A photo of Mieko Ōshita (right) when she was a baby. On the left is her sister, who is one year older. Photo: Mieko Ōshita

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