

After Japan disaster, faiths join to prevent suicides

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Tokyo, April 13 (ENInews)--In the aftermath of the 11 March earthquake and tsunami, a Christian network is joining with Buddhists to provide bereavement services to prevent suicides, according to a Japanese interdenominational network.

The Sendai Buddhist Federation through the Miyagi Prefecture Liaison Council of Religious Corporations has established a counseling room at a funeral hall in Sendai, said the Rev. Naoya Kawakami, who heads the Sendai Christian Alliance Disaster Relief Network. A joint memorial service also is planned, he said.

The goal is to offer grief counseling and spiritual support, or "condolence," to those whose loved ones were killed or remain missing.

"The condolence for unidentified casualties is in sight as our major task," said Kawakami, pastor of a United Church of Christ in Japan congregation in Sendai. "In order to address this task, patience, tolerance, love and wisdom [are] needed at each occasion. Please pray for us so that we may be filled with the power from the above."

As of 13 April, the death toll had reached 13,392, including 8,190 in Miyagi Prefecture, while 15,133, including 8,025 in the prefecture (state), remained missing and 59,806 buildings had totally collapsed, the National Police Agency reported.

The network's suicide-prevention project followed a warning by experts responding to the problem of suicide, including Yasuyuki Shimizu, the government's cabinet consultant who heads Lifelink, a Tokyo-based nonprofit support center.

"Studies of suicides have revealed that, when one's family member reaches an unanticipated death, the bereaved suffer from a guilty conscience," Kawakami said. "They say that, in that case, condolence can be the most effective measure to prevent [such suffering], and, on the contrary, if no condolence is expressed,

tragedies of [committing suicides] to follow [the loved one in death] often occur. We have taken this matter seriously and began to grope for what we can do."

Different religious groups must collaborate with the administration to combat the problem, he noted, explaining that "the government is in a position that cannot support a specific religion due to the principle of separation of religion and the state [under the Japanese Constitution]."

From 1 to 4 April, about 500 unidentified bodies of victims brought from Sendai were cremated at Mizue Funeral Hall in Tokyo. Priests of the Tokyo Buddhist Federation instead of those at Buddhist temples in Sendai led prayers because the disaster's devastation prevented holding memorial services in Sendai.

Some Christians, invited through the National Christian Council in Japan, read the Bible and prayed in front of an incense-burner stand at the hall's front gate while listening to the Buddhist sutra, or scripture reading, being recited for the funerals, the Japan Baptist Convention, one of the council's member churches, reported on its Japanese blog.

Meanwhile, the Federation of Inochi No Denwa, a nationwide Christian-run group operating a telephone counseling lifeline, opened Inochi no Denwa Disaster Dial, a telephone hotline for mental-health care concerning the disaster, for callers from the four northeastern prefectures struck by the earthquake.