

Japanese Christians express concern over militarism

Sixty years after the end of World War II, some Christians in Japan are concerned about the increasing militarization in their country.

Besides promoting nationalism and passing more stringent laws on wiretapping and military emergencies, Japanese politicians have targeted Article 9 of the constitution for change, according to the Rev. Toshimasa Yamamoto, chief executive of the National Christian Council in Japan. The government also has sent its Self-Defense Force to Iraq.

"Article 9 holds that the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation," he explained.

Yamamoto and his wife, the Rev. Claudia Genung, spoke about the peace and social issues in Japan during a July 7 briefing at the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries. The couple is assigned by the board as missionaries to Japan.

The push toward nationalism has affected public education, Yamamoto said, citing incidents in 2004 and 2005 when teachers and other school staff who refused to sing or play the piano for Japan's national anthem were punished. New history textbooks also downplayed Japan's past wrongdoings.

Laws promoting the national anthem and flag violate articles in the constitution guaranteeing freedom of thought and conscience and freedom of religion, according to Yamamoto. Both the anthem and flag are symbols of past imperial militarism, he said. "We Japanese invaded neighboring countries and killed innocent citizens while singing the Kimigayo anthem under the Hinomaru flag."

In the past, Japanese Christians were forced to place the emperor above God and to worship the emperor at Shinto shrines. "By doing so, we took part in oppressing the peoples of Korea and other Asian and Pacific countries," he added. "We will never forget this history."

The elimination of Article 9 in Japan's constitution would accelerate tensions and fears between Japan and the rest of Asia, Yamamoto believes.

"It is widely pointed out that Article 9 has been accepted by Asians as Japan's promise to never again embark on military aggression overseas," he said. "It is life insurance for Asians."

Although Christians represent only about 1 percent of the Japanese population, the National Christian Council in Japan tries to make their voice heard. Council members are the United Church of Christ, which includes the Methodist Church; the Anglican/Episcopal Church; the Evangelical Lutheran Church; two Baptist churches; and the Korean Christian Church in Japan, as well as Christian-based organizations such as the YMCA and YWCA.

Together with Buddhists and the small Muslim population, they have formed an interfaith peace network to create awareness of proposed changes to the constitution

that threaten peace.

The council also relates to Christians in nearby countries and has been sending food since 1995 to alleviate the famine in North Korea. "We have a long tradition of an ecumenical network among the churches of northeast Asia," Yamamoto said.

The council's newsletter, Japan Christian Activity News, has focused on peace-related issues along with social justice activities, according to Genung, who serves as editor.

A growing social concern in Japan is homelessness, affecting some 40,000 to 50,000 people. "It has doubled in the last seven years, according to government statistics," she said.

The church where Genung is a part-time pastor feeds 300 to 500 homeless people on Saturdays in a downtown Tokyo park. They also distribute soap, razors, shoes and tickets to a public bath.

The couple serves on the board of Second Harvest Japan, formerly known as Food Bank Japan, which "tries to collect food that otherwise would be discarded" and offers it to single mothers, the elderly and migrant workers as well as the homeless.

This article is written by Linda Bloom

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