National Christian Schools Human Rights Education Conference: History and Present Activities

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The National Christian Schools Human Rights Education Conference, known as Zenkiri, began with the first "Christian Schools" Liberation Education Exchange Meeting at Yata Liberation School (矢田解放塾)[1] in August 1990. The activity changed names several times - National Seminar for Considering Human Rights Education in Christian Schools (adopted during the third meeting), annual National Christian Schools "Human Rights Seminar" (adopted during the fourth meeting), and finally in 1994, the name National Christian Schools Human Rights Education Conference (Zenkiri) was officially adopted. Zenkiri was also formally established in 1994. Since then, the organization has held thirty-five human rights seminars nationwide, mostly at Christian schools, building up many years of experience.

Faculty, staff and Christians connected to Christian schools have mainly led this conference. Today, Zenkiri is an open organization and works together with anyone interested in human rights education.

Three Streams Leading to Formation and Organization

Three main groups shaped the formation of Zenkiri. The first group was composed of Christian organizations working for Buraku liberation. The second group included Christians focused on issues facing Zainichi (Resident) Koreans in Japan. The third group took part in summer training sessions of the Association of Christian Schools in Japan. All three groups shared the goal of the National Christian Council Japan (NCCJ) of uniting Christians involved in school education around human rights education.

To walk with the Buraku liberation movement, the NCCJ set up a Buraku Liberation Committee, whose members led the first two seminars at Yata

Liberation School. As the movement grew, a group focused on Zainichi Korean education joined in. This connection goes back to the late 1960s, when protests against job discrimination faced by Jong Seok (朴鐘碩君) led to the Hitachi Employment Discrimination Trial (1970-1974).[2] Zainichi Koreans and Japanese formed the "Association to Support 朴君" to support the legal fight. After winning the case, groups across Japan who wanted Koreans and Japanese to live together formed the Council for Struggle Against Ethnic Discrimination in 1974. At the same time, Japanese educators began to discuss how to support the children of Zainichi Koreans from former colonial Korea who made up about 90 percent of non-Japanese residents then. This led to the creation of the National Research Council on Education of Zainichi Koreans in Japan in 1979.

Some Christians involved in this movement deepened their work through Bible study and sharing teaching practices, and later joined Zenkiri. The third group came from the summer training sessions of the Association of Christian Schools in Japan. While the Association focused on "character education," a Zainichi Korean teacher pointed out of the need to move from "character" to "human rights," and groups that agreed to this suggestion joined Zenkiri.

To build a stronger foundation and help the movement grow, a new approach developed over time. Regional blocks were set up across the country, and each block held its own activities. There was also a nationwide human rights seminar every year. Kanto and the areas north of it formed one block, while Chubu, Kansai, Chugoku-Shikoku and the Southwest each had own blocks. Covering Tohoku and Hokkaido has been a continuing challenge. The early seminars mainly offered workshops on Buraku discrimination, Zainichi Korean education, and basic human rights education.

Some Initiatives of Zenkiri

In the 1980s, many private schools did not ask for residential registration certificates when admitting students, unlike public schools. Since Japan officially allows the use of common Japanese names (*tsūshōmei*), most Zainichi Koreans used Japanese-style names to avoid discrimination. As a result, Korean students often became invisible in private schools, and interactions between Korean students and teachers could feel distant. To address this, Zenkiri carried out yearly surveys of Protestant and Catholic private schools to help people understand the real situation of non-Japanese students.

The Ministry of Education required student guidance records to use names from residential registration certificates. Non-Japanese students had to submit documents like foreign registration certificates instead. Zenkiri encouraged private schools to follow the same rules as public schools and added questions about non-Japanese student identification to Zenkiri surveys to raise awareness. Although there were privacy concerns, Zenkiri believed that nationality was not private information. Zenkiri promoted the idea of "calling and stating real names," a slogan from the National Research Council on Education of Zainichi Koreans in Japan, in private schools too. Japanese teachers and students were asked to use real names for Korean students, while Korean students were encouraged to use their real names instead of common Japanese names.

To enable Zainichi Koreans to value their identity, stand up against discrimination, and live with pride in Japanese society, they must establish an education system rooted in coexistence, one that facilitates the learning of both Japanese and Korean history and culture. This meant preparing textbooks and extra materials, and starting clubs like Korean culture study groups.

These efforts were also used for students from Buraku communities. Zenkiri members helped create teaching materials like "Crown of Thorns" for the NCCJ Buraku Discrimination Issues Committee, and encouraged Christian schools across Japan to buy and use these materials in classes and homeroom activities.

Changes in Global Human Rights Conditions and Human Rights Education

It is important to note that these efforts were supported by progress in Japan's human rights situation, thanks to both domestic and international civil movements. This included joining international human rights conferences in 1979, campaigning for the ratification of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1982 and to become state-party to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 1995.

In the 1990s, after the Cold War ended, a new global political and economic system developed. More non-Japanese from different countries settled in Japan, and the Japanese society experienced change as a result. This led the National Research Council on Education of Zainichi Koreans

in Japan to change its name to the National Research Council on Education of Non-Japanese Residents in Japan. In the 1960s, there were about 650,000 Zainichi Koreans from former colonial Korea, but by 2024, this number had dropped to about 430,000, even with new arrivals. Now, Chinese residents are the largest group of settled non-Japanese, with a population of about 870,000. These changes affected schools and created new challenges for Zenkiri in working with non-Japanese students aside from Zainichi Koreans.

In the 21st century, new nationalism grew both in Japan and around the world as a reaction to globalization, creating challenges for Zenkiri. This includes the introduction of the national flag and anthem in schools (Law Regarding the National Flag and National Anthem, 1999[3]), changes to the Basic Act on Education (2006),[4] and making moral education a formal subject (2015). In response, Zenkiri made statements at general meetings and organized protests in schools against these government actions. Zenkiri also added peace education as another key focus.

With Christian schools in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Okinawa, Zenkiri discussed different ways of teaching peace, shared educational practices, and reported on peace training at these schools. Zenkiri also took up in its workshops issues like the American military bases in Okinawa and the militarization of Miyako Island.

New Challenges in the 21st Century

In the 21st century, a wider range of human rights issues came to light. Even during the American and French Revolutions, women were treated as second-class citizens and did not have the right to vote at first. After the women's suffrage movement, gender equality and justice in the workplace became important topics. Since many Christian schools are girls' schools, women's empowerment is a major focus. The visibility of transgender people in schools has also increased, and there have been efforts to share information about LGBTQ issues and school uniform policies. The 19th seminar theme, "Are Children's Voices Being Heard?" and the 25th seminar theme, "Listening to the Voices of Those Made Invisible," show that Zenkiri continues to support students with diverse identities and keeps human rights at the center of its work.

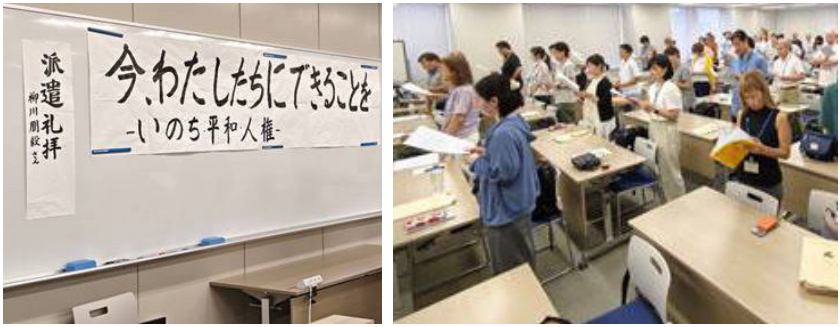
Activities of Zenkiri

1. Looking Back at Past Seminars Through Their Themes and Locations

Since autumn of 2024, Zenkiri held planning meetings to decide on seminar theme, select speakers, and design workshop sessions. In early 2025, it set up a fifteen-member organizing committee. The committee discussed social conditions, and addressed concerns in respective fields. The committee adopted the theme for 2025, "What I Can Do Now: Life, Peace, and Human Rights."

Zenkiri held its 35th Human Rights Education Seminar in August 2025 with this theme at Kwansei Gakuin University's Umeda satellite campus. The convenient location brought together seventy-one participants from across the country.

Opening prayer, 35th National Christian School Human Rights Education Seminar: "What I Can Do Now—Life, Peace, and Human Rights" (Osaka city, 11-12 August 2025).



Closing prayer, 35th National Christian School Human Rights Education Seminar: "What I Can Do Now—Life, Peace, and Human Rights" (Osaka city, 11-12 August 2025).

Taking the time to prepare carefully and discuss thoroughly is a treasure of the Human Rights Education Seminar, a point of pride for Zenkiri.

The following introduces past seminar themes and the distinctive features of the host locations, mainly those held since 2000.

The 13th seminar, "Can You Hear the Children's Voices?" (2002), the 22nd, "What Keeps Children's Lives Alive and Connected—Toward the Recovery of Dignity and Freedom" (2011), and the 26th, "Children's Lives and Human Rights—Educational Issues for Christian Schools" (2015), took place in the Kanto region, including Tokyo and Yokohama. The seminars focused on listening to children's voices and responding as adults who are shaped by what they hear. It is crucial to have the heart to listen to the "voiceless voices" of children under the pressure of intense academic competition in large cities—especially those children who live within that environment as a minority.

Choosing themes for the Kansai region is sometimes difficult to do. For example, the 18th seminar, "These Are Difficult Times, But Let Us Live Well—Because We Ourselves Are the Ones Who Create the Times" (2007), the 23rd, "Tsure mote iko ka, anjo iko ka—Connecting Experiences, Learning from the Field" (2012), and the 34th, "Nevertheless... Rejoicing, Laughing, and Walking—Life, Peace, and Human Rights" (2024) were held in the cities of Kyoto, Kobe and Osaka. Zenkiri wanted to share creative ideas, using words from Saint Augustine, Peter Frankl, and the Osaka dialect. Still, much discussion had to take place to make decisions, sometimes worrying that the themes might not be meaningful to the teachers as hoped for.

Since Christian schools are found all over Japan, some seminars were held outside the big cities. In 2001, the 12th seminar took place at a Catholic school in Maizuru, a town on the Sea of Japan coast. Its theme was "Toward a School Where Each Individual 'Lives'—The Possibilities that Human Rights Education Draws Out." In 2017, the 28th seminar was held in Gunma prefecture with the theme "Let's Go Meet Today—Now, Knowing, Encountering, Living Together." Then the 29th seminar was held in Kochi prefecture with the theme "To Create a World Where We Rejoice Together—SAY! ☆WA." This title was a play on the names of the host schools, "Kyoai" and "Seiwa." This hopefully reflected the reality that while planning was hard work, people also enjoyed doing it. Sometimes, the host schools involve everyone in the schools in supporting the seminar, and Zenkiri was always very grateful for their help.

One seminar that stands out was the 24th held in 2013 in Sendai, a city affected by the Great East Japan Disaster. The theme was "Disaster and Human Rights—Considering 3.11 from a Human Rights Education Perspective." Zenkiri arranged a bus tour for everyone to visit the disaster areas. Seeing the remains of a primary school where many lives were lost was shocking. Seminar participants also heard strong and thoughtful views from local residents about the nuclear accident and the government nuclear policy.

Along with lectures on the main theme, the Zenkiri program that receives praise every year is the Bible Study session led by a guest speaker. Through this, participants are exposed to deep scriptural understanding, surprising new interpretations, and readings of the Bible from perspectives such as Feminist Theology and Queer Theology. This not only satisfies intellectual curiosity but also allows participants, as Christians, to experience the freedom and liberation of the spirit, leading them to realize the importance of reading the Bible as a guide for living.

2. Workshops

Each Zenkiri Seminar includes five to eight workshops. The workshops always included discussion on how to address Buraku discrimination, educational issues concerning Zainichi Koreans or non-Japanese residents in Japan, and themes related to war and peace. Furthermore, the commitment to annually organize workshops on gender discrimination and sexual diversity from an early stage is a unique characteristic of the Zenkiri Seminar. Workshops that broadly re-examine the significance of human rights and dignity education, often using formats such as workshops and group discussions, are also popular. Zenkiri sometimes set up workshops that take advantage of the host location's unique characteristics and consider themes as important such as how to ensure children excluded due to physical disabilities or developmental disorders can receive inclusive education. Workshops focusing on child abuse and suicide offer valuable opportunities to learn from specialized knowledge.

3. Fieldwork

Fieldwork is another source of pride for Zenkiri. Seminar participants have been inspired and informed by learning about the struggles for human rights in various regions, as well as the efforts and challenges involved in preserving the memory of disasters and wars. The scars of war damage,

including the atomic bombings, the traces of forced labor of Koreans under colonial rule, and the sites of isolation and exclusion of people with Hansen's disease are found all across Japan. Visiting these places, often referred to as dark tourism, and listening to guides' accounts leave a profound impression that cannot be gained through classroom learning alone.

4. Adoption and Sending of Statements

The Zenkiri Seminar invites speakers from minority groups to teach about human rights and social issues. Zenkiri believes that it is essential to be exposed to the speaker's personal disclosure, learn what was not known, and then change one's self based on that new knowledge. Furthermore, Zenkiri decided that it must raise its voice in protest against a society that discriminates against minorities and against undemocratic educational settings. The Zenkiri Seminar includes a general council meeting that adopts statements and letters of protest which are sent to the Prime Minister and relevant ministries and government agencies. The specific requests included:

- Allowing teachers to choose textbooks that accurately teach the reality of war;
- Cessation of forced usage of the national flag and national anthem during school ceremonies;
- Elimination of discrimination in educational fees for students of Korean schools;
- Cessation of military buildup in Okinawa.

Organizational Structure

Zenkiri holds national steering committee meetings four to five times a year to share issues and prepare for the Christian Schools Human Rights Education Seminar in August of each year. Deciding on the venue is an important and difficult agenda item. However, Zenkiri has been able to borrow school facilities somewhere each year. After the COVID-19 pandemic, Zenkiri gradually restored its original format while experimenting with hybrid online options, and continued to call for participation from schools and Christian organizations while exploring adaptation to changing times. Many first-time participants join each year, and some of them become repeat participants. Zenkiri operates with support and endorsement from many

education-related organizations, including the Association of Christian Schools. Catholic and Protestant schools collaborate, with steering committee members from both schools. Finances are supported by annual membership fees and donations to the council, enabling committee members from across wide areas of Japan to gather. As an activist organization, while facing various challenges ahead, Zenkiri continues its activities through cooperation and dedication among steering committee members.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reflections of Eriko Yoshida, a steering committee member of Zenkiri, are most relevant:

> I have consistently aimed at bringing concrete actions back to the Christian schools where I work. By thinking of the students who are always in my mind and considering, "I will try this approach for the new semester," or "I will interact with them with this new awareness," I have allowed the Zenkiri Seminar to support me in my role as an educator. When we hold up an ideal, difficulties in the current situation become apparent. However, by repeating the mantra, "Hope for the future, courage for the present," and believing that "It is God who gives the growth," I have remained involved with this council, aspiring to be a "coworker with God."

Endnotes

1 The Yata Kaiho Juku (Yata Liberation School) was a bastion of youth development for secondary school student associations and youth group activities since early 1970s. It hosted events such as the "Junior High School Third Year Camp," where third-year junior secondary school students lived together with the aim of preparing them to enter senior secondary school.

The Yata Branch of the Buraku Liberation League opened a temporary facility for this school in 1973. The facility was completed in 1980. However, the school closed at the same time that the Osaka Municipal Community Center in Higashisumiyoshi closed in 2014.

2 This is a case filed by Jong Seok Park against Hitachi company for withdrawing its offer of employment because he was Korean and for using supposedly false name (his Japanese alias) in the registration for company employment exam. The Yokohama District Court ruled that using a Japanese name did not constitute falsification. The court decision also explained the discrimination being suffered by resident Koreans in Japan.

Hifumi Okunuki, Forty years after Zainichi labor case victory, is Japan turning back the clock? *The Japan Times,* 21 January 2015, www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2015/01/21/issues/forty-years-zainichi-labor-case-victory-japan-turning-back-clock/#.VMC1zcbCVco.

3 Cabinet Office, National Flag & National Anthem, www.cao.go.jp/en/flag_anthem.html.

4 Basic Act on Education (Act No. 120 of December 22, 2006), Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/lawandplan/title01/detail01/1373798.htm.