

Buddhist priests team up in bid to lower sky-high suicide rate

By MASAYA KUROSAKI
Kyodo News

NARITA, Chiba Pref. — Buddhist priest Eiichi Shinohara is at the forefront of a nationwide campaign to prevent suicides, which last year surpassed 30,000 for the 12th consecutive year since 1998.

The 65-year-old priest from Chojuin Temple in Narita, Chiba Prefecture, heads Jisatsu Boushi (Suicide Prevention) Network, a nonprofit groups set up by priests of various Buddhist sects in March 2009.

The network is active in 37 areas in 22 prefectures, including Tokyo and Hokkaido, as well as in Hawaii, providing counseling facilities similar to domestic abuse shelters. Shinohara's goal is to establish at least two of the facilities in each of the 47 prefectures.

Suicides first cracked the 30,000 line in 1998, when 32,863 people took their own lives, according to the National Police Agency. It has hovered around that level for 12 years straight.

Shinohara said existing counseling services are no match for the number of people seeking help. He first agreed to a consultation request in 1992 and has since been working around the clock, 365 days a year. More than 6,000 people have approached him for advice.

Shinohara makes it a principle not to set time limits for consultations and chooses to listen instead of ask questions.

The face-to-face meetings normally start in silence. Those coming to see him "obviously cannot talk easily because their mental torment is deep-seated," he said.

One person who came to see Shinohara sat in silence and looked at the trees outside the window intently before finally saying, "I feel relieved."

Then the priest realized that 11 hours had elapsed since the consultation began.

He also recalled a phone call he got from an elderly woman in the middle of the night.

"I failed," she told him in a barely audible voice, explaining she had tried to hang herself and asking him to bring a stronger rope the next day.

The woman had five children but lived alone. None of her children had visited her for five years. "I've been abandoned," she told the priest.

"Actually, she wanted to live but she felt driven to die in isolation," Shinohara said.

"We priests must serve as a compass so those suffering now can say they have lived through their lives," he said.

"Please visit temples while you are alive," he often says.



On a mission: Priest Eiichi Shinohara, who is working to combat suicides, speaks outside Chojuin Temple in Narita, Chiba Prefecture, in March. KYODO PHOTO

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