emergency support services to the wider community during crisis, such as food banks and debt-management support; family-befriending schemes; and the less tangible but important support for their Christian faith.

Aside from providing practical assistance, the churches create a platform for volunteering and capacity-building programmes which help communities such as the African refugees to become self-sufficient in the long run. They help revive hope, purpose and dignity for vulnerable members of the community. Unlike their secular counterparts, many churches both have the necessary physical and social assets and are often uniquely suited to bring people together to address pressing challenges and to empower people to improve their lives.

The actions of the Soka Gakkai members who got involved – many of whom lived in the affected areas – were grounded in their Buddhist belief that all people possess life of equal dignity and value; members generally pray and take action for “the happiness of both oneself and others”, including by volunteering. As a locally based and faith-based organisation (FBO), there were several aspects that enabled Soka Gakkai to contribute effectively to the relief effort, responding to both physical and psychological needs.

First and foremost, Soka Gakkai’s network of community centres provided evacuees with shelters and relief supplies. Some members’ homes were also used to accommodate local evacuees and as relay points for distributing relief supplies. Secondly, volunteers delivered relief supplies to general evacuation shelters and also, through our community-based network, to others not directly hit by the disaster but severely affected by the destruction of infrastructure. Because of their networks and knowledge of their local community, volunteer members knew the whereabouts of people in the affected areas and what supplies they might need. Thirdly, we provided memorial and prayer services for psychological support, with prayers dedicated to the swift recovery of affected areas. Finally, money was donated to various municipalities in the affected areas.

FBOs can play a unique role in providing both material and psychological support. However, FBOs based in Japan need to more effectively coordinate with public sector bodies such as the national government and local municipalities. Akihiko Morishima, then leader of Soka Gakkai in Miyagi Prefecture (which took the brunt of the tsunami), stated in an interview: “We have carried out our relief activities focusing first on the individual in need just in front of us. …The public administration, however, may not necessarily take the same approach. They usually prioritise efficiency and equal access to relief.” Both approaches have their own strengths that should complement each other. In emergency situations, FBOs need to work in solidarity beyond differences in their religious traditions. In this regard, it was significant that in April 2011 a network was launched (called the Japan Religion Coordinating Project for Disaster Relief) for the purpose of coordinating disaster relief by faith-based organisations.

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1. https://sites.google.com/site/syuenrenindex/ (Japanese only)