



# Issue Care, Connection, and Change:

## Jesuit Accompaniment of Migrants in Korea and Japan

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# DIRECTOR'S LETTER



We in JRS Asia Pacific operate in eight different countries, but we also know of the great work to assist migrants, refugees and other forcibly displaced groups that is done in other countries of the region. In this issue of Diakonia we focus on two countries marked with sometimes past violent and oppressive relations, Korea and Japan, but where there are inspired people who work tirelessly and with compassion to turn the tide of national hostility and incomprehension against migrants and refugees into a response of care, concern and welcome. We in turn welcome and acknowledge Yiutsari in Seoul, which represents a beacon of hope for migrant workers, legal or illegal, under the leadership of Fr Juchan Albert Kim SJ.

Arrupe Refugee Centre in Kamakura, Japan, is a place of welcome and respite for asylum seekers in a country where nominally there is a refugee determination process, but few — less than 1 percent — qualify for the status of refugee. Kenji Arikawa and Yukako Matsuura provide leadership, following the 3 Cs principles for the centre: care, connect, and change. We also hear of the work of Fr Jun Nakai SJ whose apostolate is with families of Korean immigrants, descendants of forced labourers captured during Japan's occupation of Korea.

In JRS we feel particularly connected to the work of these initiatives in Korea and Japan, not only because it is part of the Jesuit Social Apostolate targeting refugees and migrants, but also because they put into practice a deep desire for justice and peace, and they work on reconciliation initiatives between themselves, cementing a desire to fulfil a common mission, walking together with hope.

JRS is proud of the work and impact Yiutsari and Arrupe Refugee Centre have made in the lives of those from near and far seeking asylum and protection. We hope and pray that their work and influence can eventually spread to influence others in labouring for a more welcoming and caring society.



# How we can create the society to live with Refugees as friends

~From the Green Hill of the Arrupe Refugee Center~

Jun Nakai S.J. (JCAP Migrants & Refugees Network)



Mid-October, with summer's heat lingering and autumn's arrival eagerly awaited,

I visited the Arrupe Refugee Center once more.

The Arrupe Refugee Center holds a special place in my heart; its people are companions on my journey.

Returning here always brings a warm feeling, like coming home.

It was four years ago that I traveled five hours from a city where I live on the western edge to visit the Arrupe Refugee Center. I was appointed coordinator of JCAP (Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific) Migrants & Refugees Network and Arrupe Refugee Center came as a key partner for the network's relaunch. The predecessor of the Center was a Jesuit retreat house, but it was closed due to a lack of personnel within the Jesuits to maintain it, leaving the building unoccupied for some time. It was Kenji Arikawa who arrived there alone, determined to create a shelter for refugees. He had been the director of a center supporting refugees and migrants in the Tokyo Diocese, but even then, it pained him to tell foreigners in need of shelter, "I'm sorry, but we don't have a shelter to provide." Holding onto the dream of creating a shelter for undocumented migrants, he moved into the former retreat center alone and began exploring possibilities. One by one, people who wanted to work alongside him gathered, and the NPO Arrupe Refugee Center was launched.

Over the following five years, a total of 100 people from 33 different nationalities stayed here. Currently, 13 adults and 3 children from 11 nationalities live here. Every time I visit, I feel a positive energy flowing through the place. Fifty years ago, this was a Japanese language school for Jesuit seminarians sent from overseas, and later a retreat house. Prayer has always been present here. This building, also known as the Japanese Martyrs' Convent, now serves as a refuge for refugees. The martyrs themselves were people driven from their homes to protect their faith. Understanding that those martyrs were refugees in their own time, it seems providential that this building now serves refugees.

I myself live in a city on the western coast of Japan's main island and work at the Jesuit Social Apostolate Center. Ferries depart from the port city's terminal for Busan, South Korea. This location, deeply connected to the history of the Korean Peninsula, has led me to focus my efforts on peace and reconciliation between Japan and Korea.

I live alongside the children and grandchildren of Koreans brought to Japan during the colonial era. They, too, are descendants of refugees. I wish to share my reflections and reporting on refugees from this visit to ARC, incorporating perspectives gained from living alongside Zainichi Koreans (Korean Residents in Japan).



## The unchanging structure of colonialism and the refugees placed within it

Japan's large-scale immigration detention centers are located in Ushiku in the Kanto region and Omura in Nagasaki. The predecessor of the Omura Immigration Detention Center was a Korean internment camp. After Japan annexed Korea as a colony in 1910, many Koreans were brought to Japan as laborers. Many of these people boarded ships from Busan, arrived at the port of Shimonoseki where I work, were housed in zaibatsu warehouses, and then sent to various parts of Japan for forced labor.

They were liberated in 1945 when Japan lost the war, but eventually, foreign residents in Japan had their Japanese nationality revoked and were placed under the Immigration Control Act. This was intended to restrict the human rights of foreign residents in Japan. The prototype of the immigration control system that continues today was established at this time. Korean War which broke out in 1950 put Koreans in difficult situations. Koreans, without Alien Registration Card, who could not return to their homeland or had to come back from the Korean Peninsula were detained at the Ōmura Detention Center, where they had to endure harsh living conditions.

The Ōmura Detention Center functioned as a facility for detaining and repatriating such Koreans until 1980. After that, as the number of detained Koreans decreased, it began detaining foreigners from various countries and regions instead. In 1982, Japan ratified the International Refugee Convention.

However, in contrast to countries like South Korea that enacted new refugee laws, Japan continued to rely on its old Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, originally enacted in 1951, albeit with some modifications. As the name "Immigration Control Act" suggests, Japan's foreigner policy has historically prioritized control over acceptance. Viewing this history from the perspective of Zainichi Koreans, I cannot help but feel that the structures of Japan's colonial era have continued seamlessly into the government's current policies toward immigrants.

Indeed, while Japan ratified the International Refugee Convention, it remains a country with an extremely low refugee recognition rate.

This is evident in the fact that, despite over 12,000 refugee applicants each year, only around 1% are granted refugee status annually. Then, in 2023, the revised Immigration Control Act was passed and came into effect in June 2024.

Several problematic points have been pointed out regarding this law, with the greatest concern being that the government can now forcibly deport applicants who have applied for refugee status three or more times. It can be said that the law has become stricter for those applying for refugee recognition.



## Visiting the Arrupe Refugee Center

This time, I interviewed with Yukako Matsuura, a staff member at the Arrupe Refugee Center who also plays a vital role in the JCAP Refugee Migrant Network, about the current situation surrounding refugees and her own thoughts. Above all, the greatest concern for her is the government's moves toward stricter policies targeting migrants.

Last Friday, the Immigration Bureau announced its "Zero Illegal Residents Plan for the Safety and Security of the People" and began forced repatriations. The term "illegal residents" carries the potential to steer public sentiment in a specific direction. While it should properly be termed "irregular residents," the state's deliberate use of this term creates an effect of excluding irregular residents from society.

Since January, 203 people have been forcibly repatriated under escort. The main nationalities targeted are Turkish (Kurds), Sri Lankan (27 individuals), Filipino, Vietnamese, and Chinese. The Kurdish community living in places like Kawaguchi City is said to have fallen into an atmosphere of despair. Yukako raises concerns that this may violate the principle of non-refoulement. The Refugee Convention stipulates that individuals facing a risk of persecution must not be returned to that country. The current forced repatriations carry a very high risk of violating this principle, particularly for Kurds and some Sri Lankans.



## Motivation and Inspiration to work for Refugee

During high school, Yukako read Michiko Inukai's book "Human Land." She was deeply shocked by the account of a Japanese ship that sailed past a boat carrying Indonesian refugees. This experience, combined with concerns about issues like famine in Africa, led her to commit to addressing poverty and pursue a career in overseas development aid. A pivotal moment came when she met a young man who had fled Afghanistan to Japan.

"I was working at JICA (Japan International Cooperate Agency), and when I was assigned to Afghanistan, I met this Afghan boy, Ali. He asked me, 'If you're going to Kabul, please find my mother for me.' The note he gave me only listed name of his home town, not a small area in Kabul and just "near mosque" without address, and his mother's name. I tried searching during breaks in my work, going with local staff. Just as I was about to give up, I got a call saying, 'This might be her?' So I went to meet her. That moment has stayed with me as the biggest, most significant thing in my life. When she sent off her youngest son, she gathered every last penny she had... Her husband had been killed by the Taliban, and her older sons was missing.

Because Ali was the last boy left, she entrusted all her money to a broker to send him off. I went to meet the woman who might be that mother, and to confirm it was her, as I showed her a group photo. When I said, "Point to your son Ali in this photo," the mother, who had been looking so sad and depressed, started trembling drastically. The image of her son, whom she hadn't seen for years since sending him off, suddenly appeared before her eyes. And you know, I just knew instantly, "This is Ali's mother," in a split second. She stroked Ali in that group photo with such a look of deep, tender love. Then, using my phone, we made that long-awaited mother-child conversation happen. For me, that was an immense joy and a significant learning. Their reality—that they must survive even if it means being separated from each other—made me realize how shallow my understanding of "refugees" had been. A few years later Ali's refugee application was denied by the Immigration Bureau, then he also lost in district court.

He and his lawyers appealed to a high court. The ruling was groundbreaking even then as it stated that the decision of immigration bureau to deny his refugee application was not appropriate. However the court did not grant him a refugee status but instructed him to submit refugee application again from scratch. He spent his crucial teenage years in extreme difficulties spending some months in a detention and enduring a long trial several years in a foreign country where he fled after losing everything.

As if these things had never happened, the court demanded him a redo of the refugee application. Hearing that made me feel the sheer absurdity, the injustice, of the environment and system surrounding refugees in Japan."

Through meeting Ali, she keenly felt the absurdity and injustice of Japan's refugee system. This became the catalyst for her to shift her focus from overseas issues to domestic ones and start working at the Arrupe Refugee Center. Initially, her motivation was "to protect people deprived of their rights." Now, however, she often finds strength and inspiration in the resilience and strength they demonstrate in surviving their difficult circumstances. This has become the driving force behind her work.

## Misconceptions and Misunderstandings About Refugees

While working for refugees, Yukako has come to realize that Japan's definition of refugees is very narrow, and that the general public still lacks sufficient understanding about them. Unreasonably high standards are imposed on individual applicants to prove persecution and the risk of persecution, and the burden of proof rests entirely with the applicant. Japan defines refugees extremely strictly and narrowly. People displaced by conflicts do not qualify as Convention refugees. Following the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees, a new system called Supplementary Protection was established in 2023.

However, this complementary protection, as mentioned above, is fundamentally based on a "control" mindset. Japan lacks an independent legal framework for this; it falls under the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, meaning refugee recognition is placed under management, with a very strong emphasis on "control," which prevent fair human rights protection. Japan has not ratified the Individual Complaint Procedure and has not established a national independent human rights institution. This absence of a place to point out inadequacies, unlike in South Korea, further exacerbates the problem. The establishment of a system to ensure refugees are properly protected and accepted is long overdue, but for this to happen, public understanding of refugee protection and human rights protection is essential.

*Yukako believes that Japan's Refugee Convention, established in 1951, must be revised. That convention does not include climate refugees, nor does it comprehensively address people forced to flee. Isn't it time for a legal overhaul?*



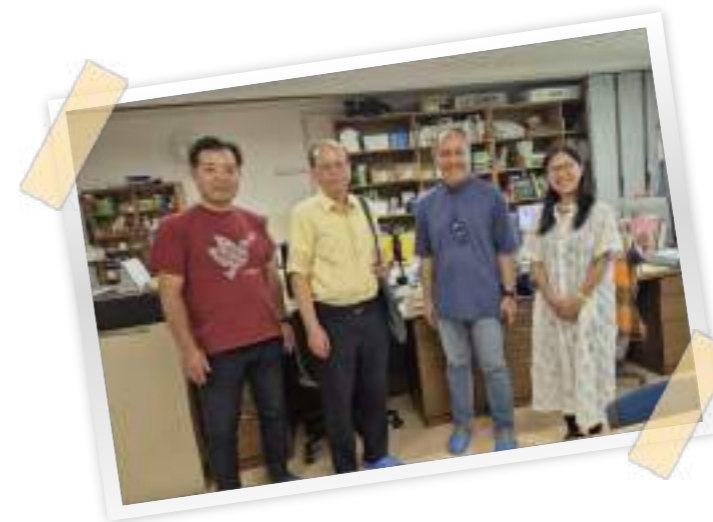
## To Become a Society That Supports Refugees

What is necessary for us to build a society where we live alongside refugees? Yukako emphasizes the importance of encountering and actually getting to know them, rather than understanding them solely through the term “refugee.” It is essential to meet each person individually and build relationships where we call each other by name. Each person has a life story. Yukako creates opportunities, through prayer meetings and other gatherings, to engage participants with the individual lives of refugees placed in this situation. She strives to help people understand each refugee and consider what they can do to help. From these gatherings, people who previously had no connection with refugees begin participating in volunteer activities and offering practical assistance such as accompanying refugees to hospitals and immigration. By creating spaces for connection, Yukako senses a tangible shift in those who step into these spaces.

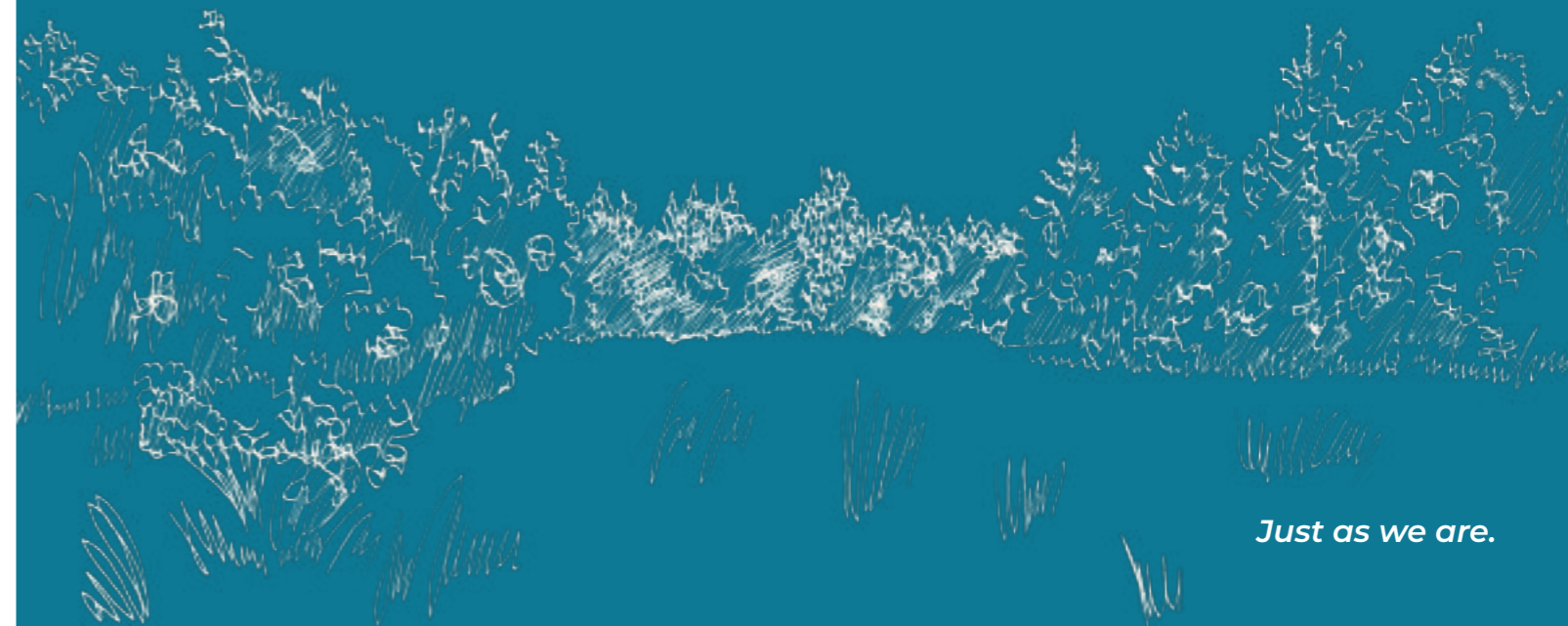
The three pillars cherished by the Arrupe Refugee Center are “Care”, “Connect”, and “Change.” To achieve this, the Arrupe Refugee Center values collaboration with Jesuits. Three staff members, including the director Kenji Arikawa and Yukako, are involved in courses at Sophia University run by the Jesuits. This opportunity to teach university students about refugees serves as an important advocacy platform.

Furthermore, JCAP Migrants & Refugees Network provides regular opportunities to meet with staffs from JRS and Jesuit migrant centers. It also serves as a source of spiritual support, offering inspiration and encouragement through training programs. Hearing firsthand accounts from the field in Myanmar through this network is invaluable. These insights are shared during prayer meetings and other gatherings to expand the circle of support.

*Through our interview with Yukako, I sensed the dynamism of the Arrupe Refugee Center opening itself to the public, involving more citizens to care for residents and refugees reached through outreach, striving to change society through engagement and advocacy.*



During my stay, when I stepped out into the expansive lawn garden, a woman from East Africa, pushing her twin boys in a stroller while basking in the sun, waved to me. She shared how giving birth had changed her for the better and that she thanked God every day. Living in this reassuring, green-surrounded environment, she radiated an energy of happiness and resilience. I recall Yukako saying that she learns resilience and the will to live from them. She said that watching them makes one realize the importance of being “just as you are.” Such a warm atmosphere exists at the Arrupe Refugee Center. A sense of being welcomed. If we are to build a society where we become friends with refugees and live together, we will move closer to a society where we can accept each other “just as we are.” They are a gift to us—I felt this deeply.



*Just as we are.*

## Becoming Neighbours: 20 Years of Yiutsari's Journey with Migrant Workers

*Fr Juchan Albert Kim SJ  
Vice Director, Yiutsari Jesuit Center for Migrant Workers  
Coordinator, JCAP Migrant & Refugee Network (Korea)*



*Fr. Jeong-ho Ahn  
with Migrant Workers*

### Motivation and Inspiration to Work with Migrant Workers.

In 2005, the Korean Province of the Society of Jesus recognised the pastoral care of migrant workers as a sign of the times and founded the Yiutsari Jesuit Center for Migrant Workers in Gimpo.

Its name, Yiutsari—meaning “being neighbours”—was inspired by the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). The vision was to cross boundaries of nationality, language, and religion, and to accompany those most marginalised, especially migrant labourers, not as clients but as neighbours and friends.

The ministry began humbly in a single rented office. Fr Ahn Jeong-ho (Isidore) SJ, the founder, had studied law before joining the Society of Jesus and was already helping workers with unpaid wages. When a group of Thai workers asked for a place to stay, he opened his community house to them. Later, those same migrants collected their savings to buy him a car, saying, “Father, please use this for your ministry.” That simple gesture revealed what this apostolate is truly about: not one-way charity but shared humanity—the mutual exchange of love and dignity that Jesus called “neighbour.”

## Migrant Workers in Korea — A Growing Reality

When Yiutsari was founded, South Korea hosted about 500,000 migrant workers. Today, there are over 1.6 million—1.2 million documented and around 400,000 undocumented.

The country entered the UN-defined “super-aged society” in 2024 with a birth rate of 0.75. Few Koreans are willing to work in 3D (Dirty, Difficult, Dangerous) jobs, and demand for foreign labour keeps increasing. Yet government policy focuses mainly on “multicultural families” and permanent settlers, while temporary migrant workers remain excluded. Their visas are limited to up to four years and ten months, job transfers are heavily restricted, and access to justice is constrained by language barriers and costs. The State views them as an economic resource; the Church, instead, sees them as persons of equal dignity. That difference in perspective defines our mission.

**1.6M** MIGRANT WORKERS



### Yiutsari Today — A Community of Shared Life

Today the Yiutsari Center is served by four Jesuits (Fr Ahn Jeong-ho, Fr Juchan Albert Kim, Fr Oh Hyun-chul, and Fr Yang Seung-hwan) and three staff members (Seo Hyo-jeong, Kim Hyun-ju, and Won Ka-hee, a Vietnamese-Korean woman). Its pastoral life revolves around six main ministries.



*Yiutsari 20th Anniversary  
Celebration —  
two decades of walking  
with migrant workers*

# 1

## Labour Counselling

“Wages are about dignity, not merely numbers.”

Unpaid wages in Korea exceeded 2 trillion KRW (≈ USD 1.5 billion) in 2024, affecting some 280,000 workers annually. According to the National Human Rights Commission, migrant workers experience wage theft at rates more than three times higher than Korean nationals due to language and systemic barriers.

Yiutsari accompanies victims through legal claims, petitions to the Labour Ministry, and direct advocacy. Since 2023 the center has produced **15 five-minute educational videos** explaining Korea’s labour standards in six native languages—Cambodian, Vietnamese, Thai, Myanmar, Filipino, and Nepali—so that workers can understand and claim their rights.

In the Parable of the Vineyard Workers (Matthew 20:1-16), the landowner insists on paying each labourer enough to live. Catholic Social Teaching echoes this: *Rerum Novarum* and *Laborem Exercens* affirm that just remuneration is a moral duty, for withholding wages wounds both justice and humanity.



Essential Korean labour law education for migrant workers at the Yiutsari Center



Migrant workers attending a Korean labour law lecture at the Yiutsari Center



Workplace Safety Education Session conducted for migrant workers at Yiutsari

이주노동자를 위한 모국어 노동법 YouTube

필리핀 Philippines, 네팔 Nepal, 미얀마 Myanmar, 태국 Thailand, 베트남 Vietnam, 캄보디아 Cambodia

Country-specific QR codes linking to Korean labour law educational videos in six native languages: Cambodian, Vietnamese, Thai, Myanmar, Filipino, and Nepali

An example of the video teaching about the labour law

연도	총액 (₩)	평균 (₩)
2023	9,629,784	2,016,500
2022	8,180,784	1,814,440
2021	8,720,784	1,822,480
2020	8,580,784	1,795,310
2019	8,350,784	1,745,150

# 2 Shelters

“A place like the inn of the Good Samaritan”

Yiutsari operates **two free shelters**—one above the center and another in a former Jesuit residence—to host about 50 men and women from Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Myanmar, Nepal, and even Azerbaijan, both documented and undocumented.

For those who lose their jobs or fall ill, securing housing in Korea is difficult, and rent becomes a heavy burden when they are unable to work. The shelter offers rest, safety, and companionship—a small “inn” where wounds can heal and hope can return. At night, voices in many languages blend into one shared humanity.



Visitor Registration – Migrant Worker Shelter



With shelter residents during shelter repair work



Fr Juchan Albert Kim SJ (left) with residents of the Yiutsari shelter, a home for migrant workers

# 3 Korean-Language Classes

“Learning, eating, and belonging together”

Every week about 150 students attend ten Korean-language classes taught by volunteers. Because space is limited, classes spill over into a nearby parish hall and a local library. After Sunday lessons, over **200 meals** are served in the “Rainbow Cafeteria,” symbolising diversity and unity. Sharing a meal becomes an act of communion—the Gospel lived around a table.



Sunday Korean Class at Yiutsari



2023 Korean Language Speech Contest for Migrant Workers

*Dishes prepared and shared at the Rainbow Cafeteria of the Yiutsari Center*



*Lunch time at the Yiutsari Center — a moment of sharing and community*

*Lunch time at the Yiutsari Center — a moment of sharing and community*



*Volunteer team at the Rainbow Cafeteria preparing meals with care and joy*

# 4 Medical Support

*Caring for the body of Christ*

For migrants without health insurance, medical costs are prohibitive. Yiutsari links them with Catholic hospitals and volunteer doctors, and hosts quarterly free medical check-ups at the center. For those who cannot work while ill, such accompaniment is often the difference between despair and survival.



*Free medical clinic for migrant workers at the Yiutsari Center, supported by volunteer doctors and nurses*



*Free medical clinic for migrant workers at the Yiutsari Center, supported by volunteer doctors and nurses*

# 5

## National Communities

“Faith in one’s mother tongue”

Every weekend the second-floor chapel hosts community Masses: Vietnamese on Saturday evenings; Filipino, Timorese, and Myanmar English-language Masses on Sundays; and cultural gatherings for Cambodians, Nepalis, and others on feast days.

Praying in one’s own language is not only devotion—it is a recovery of dignity.



Sunday English Mass with the Filipino community at the Yiutsari Center



Cambodian and Nepali migrant workers creating lotus flowers together



Cambodian community members celebrating the Pchum Ben festival at the Yiutsari Center

# 6

## Dream Space

“Education for Migrant-Background Children”

Though Yiutsari primarily serves workers, the growing number of multicultural families has created new needs.

In the nearby neighbourhoods many children from migrant families now gather in the Dream Space for music, art, and sports programs led by volunteers.

About 50 children participate. Their laughter reminds us that migrant ministry is also about the next generation.



A cultural outing to Seoul’s royal palaces with children from the Dream Space program

Children at the Dream Space participating in an art class



Dream Space children enjoying water play together (with Fr. Yang Cresanthus)



At the Snow Sledding Park

## Advocacy — Towards a Wage-Theft Criminalisation Act

On 29 September 2025, Yiutsari convened a Public Forum at the Korean National Assembly on “Countermeasures for the Eradication of Wage Theft.” Five Members of the National Assembly—including two from the Environment and Labour Committee—joined legal experts, migrant-centre directors, and officials from the Ministries of Labour and Justice and the National Human Rights Commission’s Migrant Human Rights Team.



Fr. Juchan Albert Kim SJ presented on the need to enact a Wage-Theft Criminalization Act. Under current law, wage delays are treated mainly through mediation, not punishment. But intentional or habitual non-payment is a form of systemic injustice.

Wage claims are not ordinary civil debts—they are the foundation of livelihood and dignity. We therefore proposed a step-by-step roadmap distinguishing “simple delay” from “wage theft,” with corresponding sentencing guidelines. In the long term, Korea could look to jurisdictions such as U.S. states including New York, California, and Minnesota, as well as Australia and Norway, where wage theft is explicitly criminalised.

***This forum showed how the Church, inspired by the Gospel, can engage in public policy discourse for justice.***

*“I have been volunteering at Kkumteo since 2016. Children of different nationalities, languages, cultures, and religions come together here, painting a beautiful watercolor of dreams, love, and joyful laughter.*

*The bright smiles in that picture remind me of the words, ‘Hope does not disappoint us’ (Romans 5:5), inspiring me to begin each day with joy and gratitude.”*

*— Mrs. Jeong-ok, Dream Space Volunteer*



*Policy Forum on the Eradication of Wage Theft held at the National Assembly, September 29, 2025*

## Walking Together — Korea, Japan, and the JCAP Network

As the Korean coordinator of the JCAP Migrant and Refugee Network (MRN), I experience how collaboration transforms old wounds into friendship. Historically, relations between Korea and Japan have been strained, yet Jesuits of both provinces now work hand-in-hand in migration ministry. Fr Nakai Jun once publicly expressed apology for the colonial past, reminding us that as Jesuits we belong to one body.

Every year our teams meet alternately in Korea and Japan for dialogue and joint reflection. I often joke, “Don’t fight – get along with each other!” But behind the humour lies a real spirituality of reconciliation and shared mission.



Fr. Jun Nakai SJ  
and Juchan Albert Kim SJ

During the 2024 JCAP Major Superiors’ Meeting in Seoul, the Major Superiors, proposed establishing a formation program similar to the Pedro Arrupe Summer Course in Oxford. This inspired our plan for the Asia-Pacific Summer Course for Migrant and Refugee Pastoral Formation, to be launched at EAPI in Manila in 2027.

The course will integrate Gospel, theology, international law, and field experience, forming pastoral leaders from across Asia to discern and act together.



## The Spirituality of Yiutsari — The Way of the Good Samaritan

The essence of this mission is not “helping the poor” but becoming neighbours. Sometimes it is slow, hidden work: binding wounds, sharing space, listening without judgement. Yet this is precisely the way of the Gospel. To accompany migrants is to walk beside Christ himself—wounded, displaced, and yet radiant with hope.



Thanksgiving Mass for Yiutsari Benefactors



# THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS

*“Becoming a neighbour means seeing and acting from the perspective of migrants and refugees. We are called not to work for them, but to work with them.*

*In walking with them, we encounter Christ who walks with us. Sharing in His mission, we do not lose heart in trials but journey on — together with Him and with our migrant brothers and sisters — as Pilgrims of Hope.”*

— Fr Juchan Albert Kim SJ

**JRS Asia Pacific is grateful to private individual and institutional donors who want to remain anonymous. Their selfless generosity is never forgotten.**



