

**Speech at “An Interfaith Prayer and Chant Ceremony for Japan”
on Saturday 9 April 2011**

*The Reverend Helen Summers, Founder and Director of the Interfaith Centre of
Melbourne,*

Ms Alex Butler, Chair of the Buddhist Council of Victoria,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Firstly I'd like to express my appreciation to the Reverend Helen Summers, Founder and Director of the Interfaith Centre of Melbourne, and Ms Alex Butler, Chair of the Buddhist Council of Victoria, for organizing this important event. I'd also like to express my sincere thanks to all of you here for expressing kind sympathy to Japan.

The earthquake that struck Japan on the 11th of March was the worst natural disaster in Japan's history. Earthquakes of its scale only occur once every thousand years and the destruction experienced in Japan has been made worse by the subsequent Tsunami, which affected 400km of beach side area and the ongoing trouble at the Fukushima nuclear power plant. At this stage the death toll is over 12,000 and over 18,000 people remain missing, meaning the eventual casualty list will likely exceed 30,000. In addition to those who have lost their lives or are still missing, over 200,000 people remain displaced making this tragedy the worst event Japan has had to cope with since World War Two.

The Japanese school year begins in April and ends in March. The end of March and the beginning of April is usually a happy time in Japanese schools, this period of the year is dedicated to graduation and entrance ceremonies, which are important events for students. Unfortunately some schools have been entirely destroyed by the tsunami and in other areas whole villages have had to be evacuated out of disaster zones. In areas where school buildings are still standing many children have lost their lives in the tsunami.

Let me briefly touch on one particularly tragic example. Ookawa Primary School in Miyagi Prefecture in Japan had a student population of 108 children before the Tsunami struck. Only 31 of these students have been found alive, the

remains of 21 students have also been found and 56 students remain missing nearly one month after the earthquake and tsunami struck. Sadly only 30% of the students at Ookawa Primary School survived the earthquake and Tsunami. The Principal of that school has searched the grounds of his school and he has found school bags, photo albums and essays written by his students, tragically he has also found the remains of some of his students.

I'd also like to share some of the thoughts of students who have survived this disaster. One student said that the tragedy had made him realise that human beings cannot survive on their own and that he has seen people helping each other through this tragedy and it has made him want to help others around him. Another student said he lost all his belonging but his family survived and he'd like to do his best in the future. A third student was humbled by the level of support his area had received from the international community and he wants to dedicate his life to helping the victims of natural disasters around the world. After seeing the work done by emergency service workers in the affected area one student decided he wanted to do this kind of job in the future.

In the wake of this tragedy, the Japanese people have been humbled by the level of support we have received from the international community. We have received kind offers of assistance from around 130 countries, 40 international organisations and 1,500 non-governmental organizations and Australia was one of the first countries to send a support team to the affected area. We are very appreciative of the level of support shown by the Australian Government, the Victorian Government and our many other friends in Australia. Both houses of the Victorian Parliament passed motions of support to the victims of this earthquake and the City of Melbourne has kindly placed a book of condolence in the Melbourne Town Hall and has also offered the local Japanese community free use of the Town Hall and the City of Melbourne's parks and gardens for fundraising events. A number of community and church groups have also held memorial services for the victims of this tragedy and the local Japanese community, the Australia Japan Society and the Jet Alumni Association have also shown significant support. A number of fund raising events have been organised across Victoria and tomorrow, for the second time volunteers will rattle tins across Melbourne to raise funds for the Japanese Red Cross. There are still a number of other events to occur in coming weeks.

Ladies and Gentleman, I'd like to touch on a message of support, which

was sent from Chile in South America by Mr Luis Urzúa, the leader of 33 supervisors who were trapped in a mine shaft for 69 days after an accident that occurred in August last year. Mr Urzúa said that he believed the key to overcoming tragedy was to keep hope and faith. After watching images of the recent Japanese tragedy unfolding on his TV screen in Chile, Mr Urzúa is confident that the Japanese are doing this. He urged the Japanese to unite, to not give up and to keep living their lives despite the difficult circumstances they find themselves in.

This is a big challenge for all of us but as a nation we have to overcome this tragedy and I am confident that we will. We should acknowledge and appreciate the kind support of the International community; in particular the Australian and Victorian communities and we should never forget the friendship that has been offered at this most tragic time.

I'd like to express once again my sincere thank to the Reverend Helen Summers, Founder and Director of the Interfaith Centre of Melbourne, and Ms Alex Butler, Chair of the Buddhist Council of Victoria, for organizing this important initiative.

Thank You.

