

The first National Parents Conference of the Unification Church of America

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The first National Parents Conference of the Unification Church of America was held in the newly purchased New Yorker Hotel on the holiday weekend which culminated in the Bicentennial God Bless America Festival at Yankee Stadium. Members had been encouraged to invite their parents to attend the three days of talks by Church leaders, question and answer sessions, entertainment, informal discussions, and the Bicentennial Festival itself.

Though the Conference was scheduled to begin with a reception Saturday night, May 29, parents began arriving as early as Friday, and the places they arrived from were as diverse as Brazil, Canada, Texas, Illinois, or Georgia. Church members had been working almost 'round the clock to prepare rooms for the parents, but by late Saturday afternoon it became necessary to place some parents in the neighboring Sattler Hilton Hotel one block away because response to the invitations had been so overwhelmingly successful. While some 450-500 parents had been anticipated, more than 600 turned out -- "Happy trouble" is an expression we sometimes use for such situations.

Whether their sons and daughters have been members of the Unification Church for several years or a few months, the parents shared a concern for finding out: "What has my child gotten into? What does it mean for his or her future? How does it affect us as a family?" In general, the attitude was, "I'd like to find out for myself." And this was the purpose of the conference. As conference organizer Mrs. Hillie Edwards told the parents, "The Unification Church is its members, your sons and daughters. So you are very concerned about the Unification Church.

"But," she added, "we also share another concern -- what is happening in America. We want you to understand us better and also to understand the relationship between the Unification Church and our country." Neil A. Salonen, president of the Church in America, addressed the parents on this subject in welcoming them Saturday night.

The perspectives, values, and beliefs of the Unification Church were presented to parents in a series of talks beginning on Sunday morning with Farley Jones, a member of the Festival planning committee, discussing the significance of the God Bless America Festival, and continuing that afternoon with talks on personal growth, education, and marriage and the family. On Monday morning, Dr. William Bergman, director of the church in Los Angeles, presented an overview of basic points of the Divine Principle.

In recognition of the importance of the Parents Conference, a number of Church leaders addressed the parents. Col. Bo Hi Pak came Sunday night to present Reverend Moon's greetings and to share the experiences that had led him to the Church. Mr. Kamiyama, director of the New York Church, and Mr. Ken Sudo, director of the Barrytown Training Center, spoke to the parents after the Monday night banquet. Neil Salonen met with the parents twice, in his welcoming talk and in a question and answer session on Tuesday morning. Dr. Thomas Boslooper, professor at Unification Theological Seminary, gave his views of the Church as a nonmember. The New Hope Singers International and Sunburst, a folk-rock musical group, performed for the parents as well. It was the first time that the parents of Sunburst vocalist Patsy Johnson had heard her sing.

During mealtimes and breaks between segments of the program, the hotel lobby and the lounges providing refreshments were thronged with clusters of parents talking together and opening their hearts to one another. While many of their sons and daughters were involved in the final activities of the Yankee Stadium campaign, whenever possible they joined their parents in the fellowship.

What most parents were anxious For an open question and answer session with panelists drawn from the speakers of the conference sparked a variety of reactions from parents. Many dealt with our theological

views, and these were usually fielded by Dr. Bergman. But the overwhelming number of questions were from parents wondering why they didn't see their sons and daughters more often. Church representatives explained that it is definitely not Church policy to separate members from their families, but that an individual member's intensity of commitment may lead him to limit his visits home to infrequent and brief ones. It was also mentioned that some members might be unwilling to face the possible rejection of their beliefs from those they love most. Other questions raised concerned the Church's fundraising activities and allegations of false or misleading statements on the part of the Church members about the use of funds for drug rehabilitation programs, etc. Again, it was pointed out by the panelists that such statements have been actively discouraged by church leaders and if such instances do occur they should be reported. It was also noted that whereas the Church does not operate a formal drug rehabilitation program, many of its members would now still be using drugs if it were not for the positive influence of the Church.



Dr. William Bergman lecturing on the Divine Principle

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, Farley Jones pointed out, he speaks of a new beginning, which by its very nature differs from the old law. The conflict between the old and new brings pain, Mr. Jones said, but when that pain contains the potential for a new blessing, then it becomes not painful but joyous. That explains to a great extent the attitude of members of the Church towards their work, no matter if it involves what might seem like unduly long hours to their parents. But the members feel that they are contributing directly to the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, which provides the incentive for hard work. "We are controversial," Mr. Jones said, "but we will eventually be seen as the benefactors of mankind. Your children will be seen as wise progenitors of a great and elevating creation," he assured the parents.

Certainly the Unification Church has been the center of considerable controversy in recent months, and many accusations have been leveled against us. The National Parents Conference met these questions and was intended to allay the anxieties of some parents. Not all were fully convinced, that's true. But the majority of the parents, I believe, could at least recognize our sincerity, if they could not accept all that we believe or do. And seeing us first-hand, many realized the need to speak out against the distortions and half-truths which appear in the media regularly. As Americans they see the responsibility of the media to be one of presenting the objective truth. One parent who was interviewed by a T.V. newsman at Yankee Stadium was asked how he felt about his son being in the Church. When the parent replied that he was proud of his son and supported his involvement in the Church,

the TV. crew walked away. "It wasn't the answer they wanted."

Hillie Edwards told parents, "We're not trying to convert you, only to help you understand. We need your vote of confidence, and we need your wisdom and experience to help us avoid some of the mistakes that we've made in the past."

At many times, the testimonies of the parents were so touching they brought tears to a number of eyes, including my own. Two mothers, for instance, spoke about conversations they had with members of the Church whose parents were opposed to their involvement. The fact that so many parents were present at the conference in support of their sons and daughters was an inspiration to those whose parents had declined to attend. One of these mothers said she had advised one such member, "Just keep assuring them that you love them."

The events at Yankee Stadium itself are another story, but the parent's support and courage were truly heartwarming to the members. To see parents burst into tears when the rain came and all advance preparations had to be taken down, to see many parents join us in the rain as we waved our American flags and sang "You Are My Sunshine" until the sun did begin to shine, to see their unity as we gathered together to wend our way back to the buses among throngs of jostling youngsters on the streets, were truly amazing sights. To each one present, I would like to pin a medal. I know each member would like to thank you.

Derald Blew, a research engineer and photographer from California, emerged as the leader of a movement among some of the parents to protest what they consider to be biased statements in the press. He had never heard of Reverend Moon when his son met the group, but later he spent a lot of time looking into it. In an extemporaneous statement, Mr. Blew stood up and told the gathering, "We're extremely happy with

the unified spirit in our home. We're communicating more. This country needs a revitalization of the spirit of the young people. Someone has to do it. We also need some truth in the news media. I've written several letters myself, and I'd like to hold a meeting to draft a statement to the press. We as Americans should seek the truth, and we want to see positive news in the papers."

When this meeting was held, other suggestions from parents came forth: to send a letter of condolence to the parents of a Japanese member who had been beaten on the streets of New York and later died in the hospital; to speak up at meetings in their local communities where the Unification Church is discussed; to have cassettes available from the Church for use on local radio stations; and a letter-writing campaign to the media to demand unbiased reporting of the Unification Church. A committee was formed of parents from representative parts of the country to draft a statement and Mr. Blew was elected chairman. The formation of parents' associations, similar to booster clubs and not necessarily composed of Church members, was also discussed. Parents who wish further information about any of these programs can contact Hillie Edwards at the Church's National Headquarters (4 West 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036).



What the conference meant to some of the parents was expressed in letters they sent to Mrs. Edwards, excerpts from some of which are below:

"We're still glowing inside and out from the wonderful Parents Weekend. We learned so much, experienced so much happiness, and just plain enjoyed everything. We are still amazed at everything! The entertainment, the food, and the learning."

"I just wanted to tell you that we feel as though we have been part of a miracle with the Parents Conference. All of the work you did, the organization, and then the accomplishment of all those plans make us feel it was truly a miracle. I will never cease to be amazed at what you accomplished. We loved every minute... and will look forward to being a part of another one. The Bicentennial Festival itself was truly spectacular, but almost an anticlimax after the wonderful experiences of the Parents Conference. I think the rains are really what made it an inspiration to us. I could have cried when it started raining, and then when you all took it with such spirit and made it fun, I did shed some tears. I think that is what God wanted to show us parents with that rain."

"It was a very inspiring and heartwarming experience to see so many young people working together in joy and happiness for a common cause in which they all so firmly believe. The entire Church organization deserves much credit for the success of such a gigantic undertaking.... There is no way anyone can tell us about the Church members being 'brainwashed' etc. The public is evidently being brainwashed by the press."

"For all those who came to see, hear, and be convinced, it had to be an overwhelming success story. Nearly all of the parents that we talked with were pleased." "I felt those four days were very inspiring and certainly the spirit of God could be felt there."

"If you will accept prayers from a real old-fashioned Catholic, you will all be remembered in mine, praying that your hard work will bear much fruit."