

Testimony of Gratitude for Maryland Youth Ministries and Church Community

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R. Taguchi is a young Unificationist from Silver Spring, Maryland, and is entering his first year in the European Special Task Force program. As a farewell to his community, he expressed his gratitude for youth ministries and the Maryland community with this testimony.

When I was in elementary school, you would always find me hunched over my Nintendo DS. Church to me was having 30 minutes in the car to play games, an hour to hang out with my friends and play more games, and then another 30 minutes on the ride back.

When third grade came around, I ended up in a class that taught True Father's life course. That class was so good for me. Our teacher was really good at drawing and would draw True Father's life on the board. He would give True Father a big head or a big nose, and that never failed to make me laugh. Every week I was laughing because of that class. Slowly but surely I put my Nintendo down just to have a little more fun in that class. It opened up my eyes to what church and youth ministry could provide for me.

In sixth grade, I was introduced to Dash, the youth ministry function for the Maryland community and the coolest way to spend your Saturday. Soon, Dash and church became my safe havens. It was somewhere I could be myself, have fun, see my friends, and connect deeply with them.

Now, I was stuck handling two different lifestyles – my school life and my church life. In school, I didn't

have many friends, and the ones I did have weren't too great. I went to a charter school where I fell below the academic average. Everyone there was richer than me, smarter than me and happier than me. I felt alone and distant from others, and I thought I deserved it.

My saving grace was youth group. Youth group was heaven. Every week I had friends that I genuinely loved and trusted who accepted me for me. And they felt the same towards me. My past, my intelligence as defined by society, the perception of me, none of that mattered here. Every week I had church, every month I had Dash, and every year I had a workshop to look forward to.

I remember one time where I was going to Dash, I felt a little uncomfortable to go that day. I walked up the concrete steps and was hesitant to knock, but I could hear voices and laughter inside. When I let myself in, my eyes met with Kaeleigh Moffit, the National Youth Ministry Coordinator for FFWPU. She greeted me with the warmest smile I had ever seen. In that moment I thought, "Someone is genuinely happy to see me. Someone wants me to be alive here right now." That joy I felt from youth group saved me. I knew this was something that brought me happiness. Life was simple, I just needed to be happy, and I found that here.

However, it wasn't long before I relapsed. I dismissed any dignity I had for myself. I felt worthless and I believed it. One day, I was so livid with God and said to Him, "How dare you show me heaven and put me in hell. Don't show me that church and then put me in that school. You don't exist if all you do is watch me suffer." I had difficulty connecting with God, and I had lost faith. Although I was lost, I still remembered the happiness I felt in the community. Deep down, I still wanted to find out who God was to me.

I went to Word Up, a program for Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C. high schooler kids to learn by challenging themselves. We stood in a circle and whoever entered the circle would say what their struggle was and the rest of us would put our hands on their shoulders and pray for them. When I stepped into the circle, I said, "I really want to believe in God, but I can't. I can't find him. And I'm holding onto my faith by a thread." Everyone then prayed for me, and I heard one voice say, "I feel God through R,." That made me realize that I felt God through these people, and it's the same God that they felt through me. I was surrounded by God. From this, I became eager to develop my relationship with God.

I went to youth group every Friday and became very involved. Toward my junior and senior year of high school, I took many leadership positions. I discovered a new kind of happiness; one where I invested because it felt good to help someone. I didn't expect happiness in return, but when it came, it felt great. All it took was to seek happiness for others.