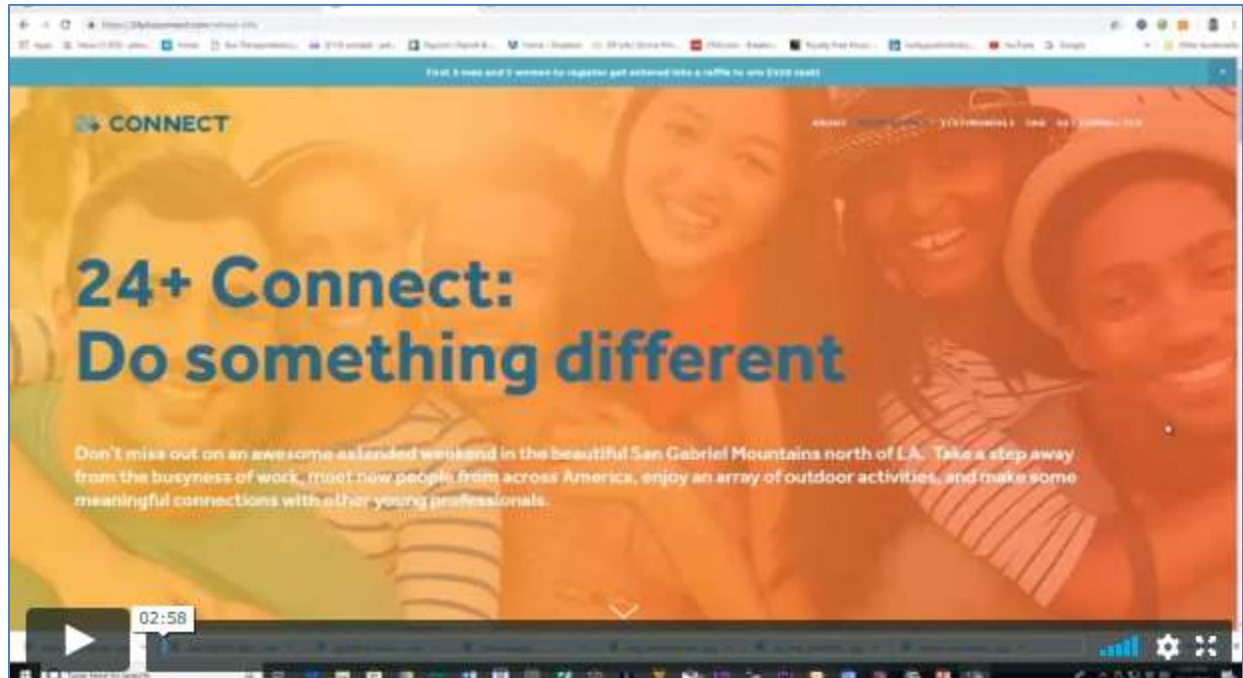


## 24+ Connect Retreat held virtually for 60 single Unificationists

Yun-A Johnson

April 17, 2020



It's been a month since a vast majority of the U.S. underwent social restrictions to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). While the nation practices self-isolation and social distancing, this has presented newfound challenges -- and solutions -- to finding love.

For many, finding "the one" or your "soulmate" can be complex enough. Throw in a global pandemic, and, well, it can be even trickier -- or not. A team of young Unificationist couples working with the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU) USA Blessing and Family Ministry (BFM) department spearheaded a new and innovative approach to connecting singles through its annual 24+ Connect Retreat. Typically held in a woodsy locale on the East or West coast, the recent 2020 retreat was held virtually using the online video conferencing website Zoom.

"It was very exciting; we were very intentional in making it an interactive experience that engaged all of the participants," said Yun-A Johnson, FFWPU-USA national director of BFM. Johnson was among five couples that comprised the retreat staff as she shared about her marriage journey with the participants. "When people showed up in the video gallery view on Zoom, there were so many new faces that we hadn't seen before and that really spoke to the potential of the retreat."

A group of 60 single Unificationists, over the age of 24 and evenly split between gender, participated in the virtual retreat, which was held for about two hours each day from April 3 to 5. Organizers were blown away by the turnout as well as the future possibilities. "It attracted people who might not have come because of the location, time, money, or their work schedule," said Johnson. However, the virtual retreat offered everyone the opportunity to socialize in an easy capacity. "Each person had time to talk with each other and there were small discussion groups as well," said Marjorie Buessing, a veteran BFM supporter.

The retreat centered on five themes to help individuals prepare themselves as a partner and for a relationship. "This wasn't about having lectures, it was about connecting people," said Buessing. "Our staff of couples who gave testimonies really inspired everyone." Participants were urged to create a plan and be accountable in their efforts toward finding a partner regardless of their circumstances. "We want everyone to be in the driver seat of this process," said Buessing. "No one can do more for you than you can for yourself when it comes to finding your partner."

Organizers emphasized having a support network of family, friends, mentors, and advisors while utilizing all of the BFM resources, including online articles and webinars ranging from preparing for a partner, to couple and family care. "Even though effort is important, we also encourage this theme of let go and let God work in your life," said Johnson. "That was a recurring theme in a lot of the couples' testimonies; the idea that God is there helping you, too."

In an era of digital connection, social media is another tool that single people have at their fingertips. A grassroots Facebook group, called UC Singles Network, has garnered more than 300 young Unificationist members since its creation in early 2019. "We've seen more and more people join the group organically, but also through other members inviting them," said group administrator Shizuka Pehling in a recent BFM webinar. "It's geared toward a young adult group of people in their 20s and 30s." Pehling also helped organize the virtual retreat and shared about her marriage journey with participants.

While social restrictions may put a temporary damper on in-person meetups, the possibilities online are endless. "This has really opened up a lot of options in terms of connecting internationally, and also with the frequency of doing these retreats," said Johnson. "The feedback we got from the virtual retreat was just amazing," added Buessing. "Everyone enjoyed it. We're collaborating with Europe now and hosting a virtual Matching convocation with their team, and there is also one coming up in Brazil."

For single Unificationists out there who are looking, your potential partner could be just a click away. "A lot of people really got to know each other during the virtual retreat," said Buessing. "Now we have some really lovely conversations that are continuing between some of them."