

An unforgettable seven-day workshop in Las Vegas

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Group discussion during the largest seven-day Divine Principle workshop in the US for many years

How often do you get the chance travel to a mountainous region to have a transformative experience with individuals that are excited about their journey of self-discovery? A hundred and thirty people shared just such an experience only half an hour away from that flashy city, Las Vegas, Nevada. Each morning, we rolled out of bed, looked out our windows and gawked, in awe of God's creation. We spent the days with a diverse group, surrounded by the largest national forest outside of Alaska, learning from each other and exploring our own hearts.

That a group including so many complete strangers could converge in a place they had never been before, bond and experience profound personal reassessment is remarkable.

Each personal investment of heart, mind and energy contributed to our overall growth; in just a day, we coalesced as if we were one family.

The first day began with morning exercises, a short service about God's heart and the formation of fifteen study teams. We dove into the first chapter of the Divine Principle, discussed it with one another and asked questions of the presenter.

That evening set the tone for the entire week. While staff members handed out ice cream floats, teams spent time reflecting on their "bucket list," a term from a 2007 movie that means "a list of anything you have not done but want to do before you die." As the teams discussed items on their lists, spontaneous laughter wafted throughout the room. Participants shared their lists with the whole group. People teased one another from across the main hall. Unificationists and guests alike shared openly, freely and felt safe doing so.

Our second morning began under beclouded skies. We worked off the chill with an invigorating and fun exercise routine. As we settled into the lectures, we were ready to dig deeper. "The motivation levels are high and the commitment levels are 100 percent, which is refreshing for a lecturer," was the assessment of Rev. Kevin Thompson, one of our Divine Principle teachers. "People are already engaged; they want to be here," he added.

Rev. Thompson delivered thought-provoking lessons on the Fall and on the need for the Messiah. The topics gave us all a chance to think deeply about our lives, to search our own hearts, and to communicate our discoveries.

The evening program was a gear switch: a high-spirited session of singing and a lesson on public speaking. Everyone practicing to give a speech was exciting. It is a useful skill to develop.

Personal worth, tolerance of others

Rev. Thompson's witty personality coupled with his deep understanding of the text kept energy levels high through lectures on the Divine Principle chapters on eschatology, resurrection and predestination. In the afternoon, Teresa Ferrete spoke of her personal struggles, self-discovery and self-value. She asked the group, "If you knew your value, how would life be different for you?" The session ended with the whole group praying, hand-in-hand, giving thanks to God, our Heavenly Parent, for the chance to be together.

In the evening, we sang, swayed and lifted our hands to the sounds of music. Participant Josh coordinated the program, using music to introduce the distinction between tolerating and truly loving one another as God's children. He played three clips of religious praise music from different genres including a Jewish prayer, a Catholic chant and a Pacific Island song. Participants took time to appreciate the variety of ways to express God. Groups reflected on aspects of religions we love.

Blessed are those who thirst

"No matter how long you've been studying it, we're all students of the Divine Principle," said workshop director and CARP president, Dr. Naokimi Ushiroda. As an indication of the caliber of students at the workshop, Rev. Thompson observed, "In all of my years of teaching I don't ever recall being asked for longer lectures before.... This highly motivated group is thirsty to study and digest what God's hope and expectation are for us in this age. The questions after the presentations were deep and insightful and the overall enthusiasm was refreshing."

In the evening of the fourth day, we engaged in a creative activity that was artistic and profound. Each team had to make a picture representing "God's ideal world," but with some type of limitation, such as not being able to talk or to see. As always, the activity was engaging and fun but had a deeper aspect. This put us in a position to recognize that though God is always trying to reach out to us and show us his dreams for the world, our own limitations prevent us from fully understanding them.

Coming alive via compassion

Day Five of the workshop was somewhere between warm and chilly, as if the radical desert weather were reflecting the transformations being experienced through the Divine Principle each day. Starting the morning right, we warmed up with martial arts and stretching.

Gerry Servito spoke about the "heart of restoration," explaining that the heart overrides thinking and that knowing God's heart is crucial in our spiritual journey. He asked participants, "Was there ever a time you felt so excited about something, so hopeful, and it didn't happen?" This provided us access to God's utter frustration and despair when the world he created did not become all he had hoped it would be.

Miilhan Stephens gave a lecture on Jesus in which he outlined the temptations Jesus had had to overcome. He asked participants to remember a time they were tempted, whether they overcame it or gave in, and what they learned. One participant described a very personal experience of someone from an old relationship tempting her.

She shared how close she had come to falling to this temptation, but that at the very last second, she felt God giving her strength. The man pursued her on four occasions. She stood her ground and became increasingly stronger. After lots of prayer, she was able to receive her wonderful husband and experience true love. The old boyfriend also began his search for a wife. The participant's strength helped both of them heal. Her personal account revealed that the Divine Principle is a set of core values that can guide us even in the darkest of times.

Lunchtime presented an opportunity for hiking, singing, snacking and relaxing. The afternoon included further lectures and discussions.

True life, legacy and vision

Day Six was different from all of the other days at the workshop. It began with a visit to the International Peace Education Center, the new building in Las Vegas that Father intended to be a place of study for people from many nations of the Divine Principle and of peace. An Unificationist crowd was on hand to celebrate the momentous day.

Many of the workshop participants saw True Mother for the first time, as she spoke to the crowd and sanctified the center. The beautiful, modern building was the perfect setting for a presentation on Father's life, by Dr.

Michael Balcomb, who gave his personal insights into Father's life, legacy and vision. He began by reading of his favorite excerpt of *As a Peace-Loving Global Citizen*: My encounter with Jesus changed my life completely. His sorrowful expression was etched into my heart as if it had been branded there, and I could not think of anything else.

From that day on, I immersed myself completely in the word of God.

At times, I was surrounded by endless darkness and filled with such pain that it was difficult to breathe. At other times, my heart was filled with joy, as though I were watching the morning sun rise above the horizon.

I experienced a series of days like these that led me into a deeper and deeper world of prayer. I embraced new words of truth that Jesus was giving me directly and let myself be completely captivated by God. I began to live an entirely different life.”

Rev. Balcomb, the FFWPU president in the US, called this the defining moment in Father’s life. Learning about Father’s calling and his deep heart toward Jesus was inspiring.

Those of us that had had an enlightening experience about Jesus during other lectures and discussions could relate to this. A man of great determination, Father persevered through many trials to ease God’s pain and to bring peace to the world. In that spirit, Father had called for the creation of the International Peace Education Center.

Carry the kingdom home

The Hoover Dam has always inspired awe. Father and Mother saw it as a symbol of America’s heart and spirit.

We had a wonderful time visiting the historic site. Many of us took tours or just walked along the dam. Many shared True Parents’ sentiments, and shared personal stories of past visits to the dam.

The final evening went late into the night, as participants spoke of their experiences over the seven days and exchanged cards of appreciation.

“People really didn’t want to leave,” Mr. Ushiroda said. “I feel that we were able to create a sample of the kingdom of heaven.”