

## Bay Area Family Church Women's Circle

Christine Froehlich and Myrna Lapres  
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*The first retreat goes explored True Mother's femininity and sought to bring God's feminine nature into their lives.*

Personal initiative and cooperative efforts to uplift the overall level of faith within a community characterize this testimony of the activities a group of veteran Unificationist women.

Just before Foundation Day in 2013, a group of twelve sisters at the Bay Area Family Church gathered to form the BAFC Women's Circle as a step forward in making a foundation to bond and to rebind our community of brothers and sisters. Our vision was to bridge the differences of nationality and culture, including East and West, and as women representing the larger whole, to create an environment of love and care for our Blessed Families and for outreach.

Initially, four of these sisters met to think prayerfully about how to bring the Holy Spirit to our community. We read True Mother's speech, "The Word Must Breathe within Us All" and we were impacted by the words, "You must love Mother more than you love anyone else. If you do so, you will receive double blessings. If you do so, you will meet Father."



With True Father's passing still fresh in our minds and hearts, we decided that this was the place to start -- to connect to True Mother in order to refresh our hope and inspiration through that vertical connection of heart. We felt that to grow a healthy church we need to recommit to our own spiritual growth. Thus, the Women's Circle meetings began on Sundays after service. We discussed a wide range of topics such as exploring our spiritual gifts, sharing how our Heavenly Parents are working in our lives, and sometimes

just sharing impressions about the sermon of the day. We created and experienced the environment we want to see among our larger community -- one where we can safely share our tears, our love for God and True Parents, our reflections, repentance, hopes and vision for a thriving church community of growing Blessed Families.

From these meetings came the inspiration to have a retreat where we could invite more women to connect deeply with one another in an environment supportive of spiritual health and growth. We felt a strong desire to rally around True Mother at the first retreat, to bring unity and harmony among sisters and move forward in rebinding a scattered community after the challenging events of 2012 and the loss of our True Father.

The first retreat was held in October, at Point Montara Lighthouse, on the beautiful northern California coast. The first presentation, given by Makiko Watanabe, reviewed True Mother's inner qualities and the feminine aspects that a mother embodies to bring God's feminine presence into our lives. We took some time to reflect on those qualities we seek to live by, and to set internal goals along those lines for the immediate future. We thought, What do Heavenly Mother and Father want us to do? In America, we have the rare situation of intercultural groups working together. This is our blessing and challenge in creating unity. We felt that what we could do as women was to rebuild our community, strengthen our faith and keep growing, moving forward with heart and character, while increasing our capacity to love through relationships, beyond walls and barriers that sometimes separate us.



*Retreats are a chance to bask in the beauty of nature; one was held at the Point Montara Fog Signal and Light Station, established nearly 140 years ago.*

### **The Value of Obstacles**

Another presentation was given by Christine Froehlich, called "Hitting the Wall," which addressed the gifts to be found in challenging situations, when we feel we have hit a wall in our lives of faith, such as disappointments, great loss, heartbreak, challenging relationships or just a dry spell in prayer. Experiencing God's guidance deep in our hearts even when going through dark times is one of the most profound ways to grow. The presentation was based on Emotionally Healthy Spirituality, a book and small group curriculum with helpful and wise insights, from a Christian pastor on breaking through in one's relationship with God during hard times. When such insights are integrated with internal guidance based on Divine Principle, we can find a powerful resource for changing and growing as we wish to do, and digest challenges with the true love that we have been given by True Parents and the examples of their courses.

Following these presentations and discussions, several sisters commented that from that small retreat of only five hours, they felt great hope for the first time in a long time, just from being together with an honest heart toward God and True Parents and coming out "on the other side of the wall." We were determined to hold another retreat.

### **Compassion and Mercy**

At the next retreat we continued with an internal theme, forgiveness. Sisters wanted deeper sharing and to really connect closely with the things that matter most to us -- our faith, True Parents, families and sharing what is most precious with others. We thought, as we seek to come closer as a community, that

forgiveness is essential. To strengthen our hearts to be wide enough to forgive, we need to connect with our True Parents. We need to both forgive and feel forgiven as we strengthen our lives of faith and prepare to welcome new brothers and sisters into our extended family.

Friday night opened with a sumptuous potluck dinner. When women gather with sincere hearts, they love to share a good meal and enjoy a bright family atmosphere. As we gathered to prepare, and check in with the hostel office, we discovered that Saturday was International Women's Day!

That night, our spiritual nourishment began with testimonies by two sisters of how our Heavenly Parents are working in their lives recently. Annie Calavan shared her experiences as a mother of a special needs child, and how the challenges bring her closer to our Heavenly Parents' hearts. We could gain lots of wisdom from her stories of intensifying her faith and deepening her respect and love for her husband through this special course as a family.

Lenka Golovlev then shared a profound testimony of her experiences with God in meeting the challenges of the blessing. Born and raised in the Czech Republic, Lenka found herself deeply challenged by being matched and blessed with a Russian husband. With humor and deep sincerity, she shared that this not only gave her historical walls to overcome but that God was teaching her all the ways she needed to grow and round out her character through their personality differences. Everyone was humbled by her wisdom and refreshed by her honesty and faith.



*Reiko Hankin won by raffle a quilt made by fellow retreat member Mary Gowey. Retreats helped forge relationships and strengthen the Unificationist sisterhood.*

### **Patchwork Stitched Together**

Mary Gowey, an American sister, came to the retreat with a beautiful traditional American quilt she had made and wanted to give away. When she drew a name by raffle, a Japanese sister, Reiko Hankins, was the lucky winner. Reiko was deeply moved and felt it was very significant. She told the group that her American husband had encouraged her strongly to come to the retreat because he noticed she was spending most of her time with Japanese women lately. He had told her he felt that it was a good time to reach out and connect more with Western sisters. She took that as a calling from our Heavenly Parents and came with an open heart and mind. Lo and behold, she experienced God through Mary's offering. She added that her mother-in-law, who had recently passed away, had made many traditional quilts, so she felt her mother-in-law's spirit there with us at the retreat.

### **Surrounded by Beauty**

Gerrie Linek prepared a service project supporting Every Child Ministries, which she introduced that evening. All were invited to create Sunday school awards for children in Africa by tracing simple shapes on recycled Christmas cards, complete with Bible verses.

That night we closed the evening while watching the sunset. Watching the sun go down into the Pacific, sinking slowly into the water, was amazing. Some sisters chose to stay up late and talk, create cards for our service project or take a walk and look at the moon and stars over the ocean and the beach.

On Saturday morning, we woke up to the sound of the waves right outside our windows and gathered to begin with Hoon Dok Hae led by Gundala Sasaki and then a yoga session led by Elizabeth Buergi. After speaking about True Mother's seriousness for the times we are living in and the importance of fulfilling our responsibilities, sisters shared about what these concepts mean to them.

After breakfast, all the women came together for the morning session. Our Bay Area Family Church assistant pastor, Myrna Lapres, gave a moving testimony of how she has been working on deepening her connection with True Mother. She opened with a quote from *Only the Heart Knows How to Find Them: Precious Memories for a Faithless Time* by Christopher De Vinck, "To love our husbands, to love our children, to care for our friends and neighbors, to do good work, to endure loneliness, we must have memories of what it is like to be loved and those memories will protect us."

Myrna emphasized the point that to truly love others, we need to experience being loved ourselves -- among our friends and within our families and communities. For her, watching the series of testimonies of American sisters that had the opportunity to interact with True Mother was instrumental in this process. Together, we watched the video recording of Sandra Lowen's testimony relating experiences with True Mother in the early days of the American church. Her unique and striking stories set the tone for the day -- reminding our members of how we have been loved by True Parents. With a heart of gratitude we can be more in tune with True Mother and our Heavenly Parents and increase our commitment and determination to give joy back to them by sharing these precious experiences with others. Following the video, Myrna spoke about the power of forgiveness that she experienced recently toward her own mother, on the foundation of deepening her connection with True Mother.



*Women from the second retreat, which explored forgiveness, photographed in front of the swelling seas of northern California*

### **Sisterhood in Practice**

Many sisters had commented that recently they felt our church members need to connect on a deeper level as a community and create closer relationships of trust as part of our church growth foundation. Following Myrna's presentation, we gathered in small groups to share more deeply about how our Heavenly Parents are working in our lives recently. In the smaller groups we had the opportunity to get to know sisters we had never shared deeply with before. During this hour, we shared many tears and lots of laughter as well. One of our participants was a new member that had never experienced this kind of family feeling among women of so many different nationalities. She was deeply impressed by the sense of God's presence among us and became more determined to grow in her newfound faith.

Following the small group exercise, we listened to a presentation by Poppy Richie. Poppy personally has a hundred spiritual children through her witnessing efforts. She is the Blessed Family Ministry chairperson for the Bay Area Family Church. She gave us a lot to think about along the theme of forgiveness in community building and family relationships. She shared about our common memories of close relationships while living and working together in centers and even in vans. She spoke of how our community-building efforts today could use some energizing. So where to start? Of course, the work of changing our community begins with me, recognizing my own need for growth and working on it. Poppy made a great point: "When I'm more grateful and inspired about my own life, feeling connected to God and the people in my life, I'm friendlier and happier, and I want to share that with others."

How can we build trust and become closer as brothers and sisters without practicing forgiveness of both ourselves and others? We have the model of True Parents' course and of our True Mother forgiving and encouraging us now as great reservoirs of strength to draw upon. Poppy shared how her life of prayer and meditation gives her greater strength and gave out a list of resources for sisters to explore further on their own.

After lunch, sisters chose between hiking trails along the beach and sharing in the gorgeous natural surroundings. At 2:00 pm, we gathered for a closing prayer and wrap-up session. Before prayer, we watched a beautiful slideshow created by Pat Detlefsen for personal meditation. Each sister shared highlights of the weekend. Looking forward, sisters had the option of signing up for a witnessing small group, a marriage and family relationships seminar or a planning team to create another retreat geared more specifically for our guests. Just as we began our closing prayer, we received word that True Mother had arrived in Las Vegas. We sent our love and prayers toward Las Vegas and left the retreat refreshed and recommitted to bringing joy to our Heavenly Parents and True Parents.