

National Ocean Challenge 2017 held in Kodiak, Alaska

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A love for creation and a spirit of determination blossomed and grew at this year's National Ocean Challenge Program. Created by True Father, Ocean Challenge is a fishing program that aims to teach young people about the beauty of the ocean and the importance of protecting the environment. Co-directors Branch Gaarder and Naria McGee reorganized the program with a new structure and schedule, giving participants the option to join in the fun for 10 or 24 days in Kodiak, Alaska.

On July 2, Captains in Training (CIT) from three continents gathered for an intensive boot camp, where they learned boat maintenance, chart reading, navigation and driving, terminology, and, of course, fishing. When participants arrived on July 6, they wasted no time getting down to business on the fishing boats.

Out on the Alaskan seas, the novice fishermen and fisherwomen experienced all kinds of weather, both good and bad. "The ocean is unpredictable but being able to flow with the waves, just like the fish, and opening your mind to what nature has to teach us is important," said participant S. Borneman. Many of the young people struggled to adjust to the challenges, but they were encouraged to persevere. "I grew spiritually stronger in Kodiak, more than at any workshop I've ever been to," said participant Y. Takeshima.

One beautiful day, everyone gathered on a beach in Chiniak to hear lectures about the Alaskan Spirit. The Alaskan spirit, participants learned, means that you go out when God calls you, no matter the circumstances. The next morning, they rose at 4:00 a.m. for an all-day fishing tournament, where they caught an assortment of rockfish, lingcod, yelloweye, halibut, and salmon.

At the end of the 10-day session, participants were called to join True Mother in New York City for her July 15th speech. Armed with their newfound Alaskan Spirit, participants danced for a crowd of 20,000 people. Later, they met with True Mother in her home. "It was such an inspiring time," explained co-directors Branch and Naria. "Seeing and hearing the huge choir, being able to dance the MuJo Geun and hear True Mother's words and love for Christianity and the world was overwhelming."

During the second half of the workshop, participants took a break from fishing to hear testimonies from others who had gone before them to become masters of the sea and protectors of creation. Then, they got right back to their boats. On one particularly exciting day, the group ran into a school of king salmon larger than the local captain had ever seen. Every participant had the chance to catch a king salmon, and the victory of the group was palpable.

Ocean Challenge concluded at the end of July with another fishing tournament and graduation ceremony. There, the captains gave a special sendoff to the newly trained fishermen and fisherwomen.