

Launch of Small-Group Ministry Energizes Congregations across America

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Members take a look at the "Connect" table at the Launch Party held at the Manhattan Center on April 10.

As Lovin' Life Ministries rolls into its third year, a raft of interest groups have formed in congregations across the United States during the so-called "Launch" weeks of April. Pastors in several -states are reporting that church-goers are welcoming the small-group approach to religious involvement.

The first Lovin' Life "Launch Parties" were held around the nation after Lovin' Life Ministries Sunday services on Sunday, April 10, 2010, and at each party members mingled at their local churches after the service and signed up for affinity groups and for volunteer projects. The idea is to have Launch parties every three months to welcome upcoming 10-week discussion groups, according to Heather Thalheimer, director of the Ministry Department of the Unification Church. The complete package of ministry materials and guidance for nurturing small groups goes under the rubric of "Launch Pad." The Launch-Pad concepts are informed by the successful small-group ministries of many large Protestant churches and have been months in the making.



Members from the Columbus Satellite Church congregation explore and sign up for Small Groups that spark their interest.

Unificationist pastors are looking at Launch Pad as a resource for strengthening a sense of national community. "Lovin' Life Ministries services across the country could [help members] feel united, not only in Sunday service, but also in their weekly ministry," Rev. Andrew Compton, Lovin' Life Ministries' small-group coordinator, tells Familyfed.org. Members are encouraged to

choose, or to start their own group in an area that interests them. Set to last at 10 weeks at a time, "Growth" groups are designed around a curriculum teaching something new, and "Affinity" groups are interest-based and more focused on building relationships.

At the Manhattan Center in New York City, tables labeled for four different categories were set up for the Launch Party: "Inspire, Empower, Connect, and Contribute." The "Connect" table featured a booklet that described each of the 40 new small groups registered for the Spring quarter in the New York and New Jersey metro area. "The Small Groups have definitely been creating a buzz, and it allows all ages to participate," said Rev. Compton.

Members Voice Approval for Launch Parties



A kick-off performance for the Launch Party in Chicago is made by a dynamic youth dance team.

Launch Parties around the country both on April 10th and April 17th got rave reviews from members. In Seattle, Washington, members in the congregation got excited and did a spring cleaning in their church before the big day. "Before Sunday, I had breakfast together with five local young adult blessed children," wrote District Pastor Larry Krishneck in a report. "We looked over the plan and creative juices began to flow. It was obvious that the material created for Launch Pad was having an impact." By Launch Sunday, the Seattle church had an entirely new and fresh look. "We had the place festooned with bouquets of balloons and crepe garlands," wrote Rev. Krishneck. He noted that 15 new groups were offered for families to join, including "Dancing into Cheon Il Guk," "Young Couple Happiness," and the "Autobiography book club."



Activities including puppet shows were offered to youth at Columbus Satellite Church's Launch Party.

In Columbus, Ohio, members created a Launch party with the theme, "Plant a Seed this Spring." Church members, as well as new guests, came to enjoy music and food, and to participate in activities ranging from face painting, seed planting, puppet shows, and ballroom dancing. Some members joined existing small groups, but eight new small groups were formed for the Spring Quarter 2011. "By placing groups on a quarter system, members can feel that they can

accomplish and complete something versus feeling that they will make an indefinite commitment with no end result or gratification,” wrote Pastor Mike Lamson from Columbus, Ohio. “As a satellite church community, our goal is to ensure that new guests and members can experience the same great inspiration from Lovin’ Life Ministries, whether it is here in Columbus or in New York City.”

In Chicago, 248 members attended the local Launch celebration in a room beautifully set up by youth members. Talented youth members performed during the party, and each sign-up table gave passionate invitations to sign up to the congregation. By the end, people had signed up for more than 30 groups. “This never happened before in Unification Church history,” said one mother in Chicago. “It was a good idea to give us motivation to contribute our time and heart to do something for the church. I am so grateful to Rev. In Jin Moon for this idea.” One young adult from Chicago commented, “This was a really great program; I think I’ve been waiting for this for a long time.”



Rooms were beautifully arranged by volunteers for the Lovin' Life Ministries Launch Party in Chicago.

Launch Parties took place in smaller churches around the country on April 17, 2011. In the Durham Triangle area of North Carolina, for example, the congregation of 50 people met after church and formed seven new, weekly discussion groups (there were two previously). That wasn't surprising given the incentive: Mrs Stephanie Nishida provided ice cream and smoothies to all who signed up for a group. “The launch party really was a lot of fun,” according to Mrs. Nishida. One first-time guest felt inspired even to join the volunteer group responsible for cleaning up the church meeting hall.

In Winston-Salem the congregation of 20 formed four new groups: Movie-night group drew a lot of excitement from the young generation followed by the “game” group, and two groups were formed to explore spiritual growth, according to Pastor Burgi Hutcherson, head of all congregations in North Carolina.