

Texas Couple John and Joy Theriot Take the Helm of Lovin' Life Congregation in the Big Apple

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October 7, 2011



John and Joy Theriot of Houston, at the invitation of Rev. In Jin Moon, recently moved to New York City to serve as local pastors of the Lovin' Life communities in the New York metropolitan area. John joined the Unification Church in San Francisco in 1985 at the end of a long search for a spiritual home. Joy was preparing to join a Roman Catholic religious order when she joined the church in 1980 in the Philippines. Familyfed.org interviewed the Theriot's to get their vision for community building and the way ahead for church growth in Gotham City.

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Joy: Before In Jin nim made Lovin' Life, the Sunday Service in Texas, where John and I and our children attended, was so dry. I brought people to the church, and the members were all beat-up, older, and very negative. My guests said that my church was "depressing." We were really trying to figure out how to build a church that inspires people, but we couldn't do much, since we weren't in leadership positions. Since Lovin' Life Ministries came in, our church in Houston is flooded all the time. I was reborn through Lovin' Life, because I love music – I play the guitar and drums – and music is a powerful, universal language. It speaks to everyone. My uncle was a politician, and in the Philippines we used music to campaign and attract people, singing and drumming.



Theriot family with Rev. In Jin Moon. From left, John, Joy, In Jin nim, Collin, John Jr., Christal, and Jennifer.

We came to New York City during the summers to attend Lovin' Life, and my daughters wanted to bring

some of the spirit here back to Texas. It was our prayer to support In Jin nim, and suddenly we got called, as if God answered our prayers. We are now Lovin' Life Pastors of New York, and our job is to concentrate on the growth and development of the Lovin' Life Ministries community here. In Jin nim's message is powerful, and we can bring it to a whole new level all over the nation.

John: We were in Texas for six years and it was a good experience for us. It was humbling. You go back in time when you go to Texas – it's like 1950s America. It's a little more morally clean, but they have the remnants of racism that's a little more overt than in other parts of the country. Still, you'll find people who will greet you or send you off with "God bless you." It's very common to bring God into the conversation, and I found it very wonderful to live in Texas, to feel that kind of grassroots, beautiful American spirit, and I can never go back to being in the box, greeting people with "Have a nice day." I have to say, "God bless you." I feel a changed and better man for my experiences in Texas and the warmhearted, open discussions people have about God and their faith.

John and Joy's Training at Lovin' Life New York

Joy: In terms of the training we've been through we've learned about how the ministry develops through different teams such as the Care Team and the Life Ministry. Our focus is to develop the Lovin' Life Learning Center.

John: The training was set up by Heather Thalheimer, and it's fantastic. It's really interesting how every member wants to improve the community. Every Unification member will have some sort of complaint about the community in a sense, and inside that complaint is a desire to improve our community. Joy and I were totally on fire for In Jin nim, but when we came here, I realized that I didn't have any idea of what's actually going on in terms of the systematic follow-up procedures, the educational curriculum, and the methodology of building the community first. We're so used to going out there and just dumping our faith onto people without any substance, without backing it up, without showing them the way we live our life, or how we raised our children. Deep down inside, we all want an ideal community, but we can get stuck in our old ways. Even though all the old religions I followed and learned hadn't really helped me, when I first came to the workshop, I didn't want to let go of them because I thought that was me. But when I let go, I discovered a much better world, a world where we have a role. Likewise, when I underwent Lovin' Life training sessions, even though I wanted to help improve things, I was still hanging onto my old view of what our church was, of how community is established, and I realized I just needed to let go. When you let go of your old concepts, you can let God enter. So this new system is focused on building that community first. We can turn our centers and communities into an ideal world that everyone's looking for. And I truly believe that if we let go and let God and In Jin nim speak to us and help us re-develop our game plan, we will see incredible growth in the community.

Joy: We received direction from Rev. Cotter. When he speaks, he's completely one in heart with In Jin nim. He's the one who brings in the vision. Heather has a team that made technical support and educational materials. We wanted to be involved more immediately, but it's not like that. We have to be marinated, and we have a lot to learn. We realize that In Jin nim's vision is to empower the community so we can be part of the growth of Lovin' Life. New York City is very special – there are different boroughs that are attached to their own centers. What we did so far is that we met with the borough leaders and shared In Jin nim's vision, because the goal is for everyone to inherit the vision, and after that, they can express it and be the natural testament of what Lovin' Life Ministries is.

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John: We're commissioned as community builders, and in a very active way, we serve our community. We are beached at 4 West 43rd street in Manhattan, and whoever comes our way, we involve ourselves with them through counseling and listening. Ultimately, our plan is to reach out to the boroughs and work with the second-generation. Building a community means building families, finding out what people need to be successful. Our job is to remove the roadblocks in the way, whether we're talking about the Blessed Child, a first-generation, a new guest. We're one Lovin' Life family, and our job is to create a family that we all want to live in.



Seeing New York by tour boat. First row from left, Tiff, Gaines, Rev. Cliff Gaines (new pastors in Atlanta). Second row: Heather Thalheimer, Joy Theriot, John Theriot, Collin, and Loretta Schauffler.

Our goal is to create a successful model, to create a community which can be duplicated in other Lovin' Life communities in New York and ultimately in the country. A good culture may be substantiated in different ways in different cities – there's no magic formula – but the educational materials create a process through which people can come to a deeper understanding of our faith, while being supported by our culture. So instead of teaching someone about our community without the support of our community, or handing them a book and having them learn our beliefs on their own, we're putting forward what is really important. The goal of every religion is to have a deeper relationship with God, to experience more love in your life, that is, true love in your life. Without showing them a living example of how a community can be, it's hard for people to believe in it.

Until now, there hasn't been a concentrated focus to achieve results in this community. We talked about creating model programs, a model curriculum, but there is no substantial culture to back that curriculum, so right now it's just a series of implementations. It's about getting in tune with the ideal culture, a place where you're comfortable to bring a guest, where you can feel comfortable yourself, where your love is given and received fully. That beautiful place has yet to be built but I have 100 percent confidence that we can build it.

Joy: We have four kids, Crystal, 18, Jennifer, 17, John Jr. 12, and Collin, 9. In the beginning, the kids were so reluctant to move, but when we arrived at the airport, there was a stretch limo waiting to pick us up! We weren't expecting anything, but Susan Bouachri from Headquarters had arranged transportation for us. The kids were so excited and said, "This is worth it!" So we realized, thanks to In Jin nim, that there's a new standard. My kids were jumping around, saying that they loved New York.

John: If we have a guest, we want them to get to know us. The first thing to do is to sit down and talk with them and find out what they're really interested in. Then the pastor, or any person on the Care Team, would try to find a good fit for them with any of their existing Small Groups. If there's room in a Small Group, we would plug them into what's called an Affinity Group, whether it's a book review club, movie club, ballroom dance club, or a club on how to improve your relationship with your spouse. There's a

wide variety of clubs and the goal is to create a connection. The first thing is that our guests have to feel comfortable around us. And of course, attending Sunday Service is a beautiful thing – they get an inspired message that can carry them through the week, and the message hopefully can improve something they're struggling with.

We currently have a Creative Team that is trying to create a local band to spotlight local talent, and we have a Cultural Team that reaches out to different ethnic groups.

Joy: I'm the Care Team leader. John is in charge of the Life Team. He's much more youthful, and second-generation love him, because he has so much energy. I focus on caring for the new members and encourage volunteers to create small groups, like yoga, ballroom dancing, zumba, etc.

John: There are the Affinity Groups, then there are the Life Groups which have a bit more purpose, whether it be the Women's Circle, the Men's Circle, etc. Affinity Groups have a more religious purpose, but are still part of the Life Team. The Cultural Teams are separate – they are part of the Care Team outreach. I run the Life Groups. The Creative Arts Team leader is a position that has yet to be filled. We still have to create a community in New York that showcases the local talent. A lot of these positions are filled by [National Youth Pastor] Jaga Gavin's team, which has been developing the shape, structure, look, touch, feel, smell, if you will, of the ministry. But we're coming in the beginning stages of the community-building process in New York City. Here everything's been organized in a borough level. The brothers and sisters have been working so hard to create nice, individual communities, but now it's time for them to unite, centered on Lovin' Life Ministries. There are five boroughs, and their community leaders will maintain their positions – we're just coming to help bring the boroughs together, to create a community in NYC where God and his children can feel at home.

There are two definitions of community. One is in a period we call restoration, where it exists in the satanic world, or exists in a world where things are not perfect. That would involve things like security issues, things concerning physical safety, like a place for children to play. That terminology might not be used a 100 years from now. What we're looking to create is an ideal community in a non-ideal environment. So we have to protect our families and provide a place that's safe to be you, to express yourself in whatever form that comes out, which in my case is playing the trumpet, which is loud and obnoxious to most people's ears.

And when you talk about yourself, there's a definition involved there too. We have a lot of people who've experience a lot of suffering in life. My mother's own mother died in childbirth to her younger sister, so she's experience tremendous pain through that process. She was a real Cinderella, raised by a step-mom. But she never gave me any of that pain. The question is, are we here to talk about our pain and dwell in it or work out our feelings and be liberated from them?

Welcoming Members of All Ages



Joy Theriot stands with guests at the Junction service at 4 West 43rd St, New York City on Oct. 5, 2011.

Joy: There was a 55-year-old man who came in during Junction [a weekly evening service pitched to young adults at New York City’s Learning Center]. The Junction band was playing, and young people were everywhere. He works in the area and saw a lot of changes in our building and was just curious to see what was going on. He’s a retired lawyer, and he said, “Wow, there are so many young people, and I’m kind of old.” He was wearing tie, and all the kids were so casual, and he said, “I’m going to evaluate whether I fit in.”

John: At that Junction service we were in the middle of “This I Believe,” an interactive activity led by Victoria Roomet, a CARP leader. The retired lawyer participated in the mural event. Each person wrote a page of what he or she believes, and then helped us decorate a mural on the same theme. Afterwards he said, “You know, I’ve been to a lot of different places, a lot of different religions, but this is really something fresh, something new, and I’m really enjoying myself.” I introduced him to one of the younger sisters who had studied law, and they had a talk for a little while, and he was invited to the Lovin’ Life Ministries service. We’re following Jaga’s model of meeting people and then introducing them to other people, just in case that he’s not there when they come back, they know other people. So, I introduced him to as many people as I could, and it just so happened that by the grace of God this person felt at home. He’s coming back to Junction, and he’s coming to Sunday service.

Honestly speaking, the impetus for growth is the culture itself. If you drill this down to individual people taking responsibility, it’s going to be a hard organization to maintain. The goal is just to create a culture in which everyone cares, everyone’s sensitive, and so when someone is hurting, they naturally reach out. In the Divine Principle it talks about the ideal world structured based upon the human body. When a part of you is hurting, your entire body gets involved. If you’re stuck by a pin, even your mouth is involved, shouting, crying. But every part of you attempts to remove the danger from that injured part of your body, no matter how small the injury. So if we’re sensitive, and we’re functioning as one body, then it’s in our DNA to care.

Joy: That’s why we’re always there. It’s our role as a Lovin’ Life Pastors to be at every event at the Learning Center. We’re here to show people that the older generation is welcome too!

John: In terms of schedule, we’re on a Launch Pad cycle. So, this quarter is playing out and we’re preparing for the new quarter, in the process of developing new programs.

Joy: We have a Lovin’ Life Learning Center staff meeting every week with about ten people, including our event coordinator and the building manager of the Learning Center.

John: The meetings are helpful and get everyone to refocus, letting people know of problems. For

example, even though Lovin' Life is a national broadcast, I still have some input on how things are happening. Think about it, 90 percent of all Americans believe in God and a whole bunch of them go to church on Sunday, and that's about it. They go, they feel great, it's their tradition, and that's a beautiful model on which to build. Some people are too busy to join small groups, and maybe the only interaction they have with our church is on Sunday, so we've got to make that event special and wonderful. Making sure that the guest experience of Sunday service is as good as it can possibly be is a fundamental priority of ours.

What I believe In Jin nim wants us to do is to build something that will last. I think In Jin nim wants to be able to say to True Father, "Look, your legacy will remain, and don't worry, we're going to take care of America; we're going to take care of your children."

I saw seven guests come last week. The numbers of our membership are real, and they are growing, because we're getting it right. Obviously everyone is subject to human error – we make mistakes and we try to improve – but generally as a whole we are taking better care of guests than ever. We've got a great facility at 43rd, we have an excellent Sunday Service, we have programs like ballroom dancing – it's just a formula for success. We are growing, and we will continue to grow. When it comes to bringing in new members, it's not about quantity, it's about quality. And I learned that if we focus on quality, quantity will happen.