



Church finds 'Holy Ground' in Sin City - Michael Balcomb

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Yoko Lincoln, front left, of Omaha, Nebraska, sings during a gathering of a Unification Church tour group and community members outside Grant Sawyer Building Wednesday, June 25, 2014, in Las Vegas. The church group is part of God's Hope for America, a group of Reverend Sun Myung Moon followers who are on a 43-day tour of 55 holy grounds throughout the US where Reverend Moon visited in 1965. Reverend Moon buried sacred dirt from Korea on the grounds where Grant Sawyer Building was built, which was originally the location of a community park. (Ronda Churchill/Las Vegas Review-Journal)

Unification Church members made a pilgrimage to Las Vegas Wednesday.

The holy site that brought them here just happens to also lie beneath a government building.

The Rev. Sun Myung Moon visited every state in the contiguous United States in 1965. He buried dirt and stones from his native Korea in each state, creating places for meditation and prayers for peace that he called "holy ground."

In Nevada, he placed that ground in a quiet, downtown park. About 20 years ago, that park was razed to make room for the state's Sawyer Building, the site of, among other things, the governor's Las Vegas office.

After his tour, Moon decided to move his base of operations to the U.S. The Unification Church grew from 500 members in 1971 to several thousand across 50 states in 1973. Today's membership is about 500,000.

Moon's followers believe that at age 15 he was visited by Jesus, who tasked him with continuing and improving upon Christ's work. He then established his church.



World War II, Viet Nam War and Korean War veteran Arby L. Hambric, 87, right, speaks during a gathering of a Unification Church tour group and community members outside Grant Sawyer Building Wednesday, June 25, 2014, in Las Vegas. The church group is part of God's Hope for America, a group of Reverend Sun Myung Moon followers who are on a 43-day tour of 55 holy grounds throughout the US where Reverend Moon visited in 1965. Reverend Moon buried sacred dirt from Korea on the grounds where Grant Sawyer Building was built, which was originally the location of a community park. (Ronda Churchill/Las Vegas Review-Journal)

He was known for conducting massive weddings of identically dressed brides and grooms at large venues, such as a 1982 ceremony at Madison Square Garden, where more than 2,000 couples were wed simultaneously.

Often the couples were strangers before the wedding.

Despite being derided as a cult, the pejorative term "Moonies" being applied to Moon's followers, and Moon's a conviction and imprisonment for filing false federal income tax returns, the church continued to grow. The church today has large real estate holdings, as well as several media outlets.

The Sawyer Building's holy status has been well known among local members of the church, but the visit Wednesday by a busload of Moon's devotees retracing the route taken by the man they call "The True Father" marked the first time many of the people who work in the building had heard of it.

"We had some members who lived here who used to come to the building to pray," said Michael Balcomb, president of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, a Unification Church affiliate. "They aren't here anymore, so this is probably the first time we've had anyone here in a while."

With their casual dress and abundance of cameras, the crowd looked more like tourists than pilgrims, but they hung onto every word from the dignitaries and singers outside the building. The event was a mix of religious speeches, calls for social action, honoring U.S. veterans and patriotic songs.

Balcomb, who is among those taking the 43-day, 50-state God's Hope for America bus tour, was one of several speakers.



The 64th anniversary of the onset of the Korean War also was recognized Wednesday and included a color guard ceremony by American Legion Post 8. Moon credited the United States with his escape from a North Korean gulag.

The local Unification Church is at 98 E. Windmill Lane. It was the home of Moon and his wife from 2008 until his death in 2012 at the age of 92 while visiting Korea.

Moon was working on building an education center, convention facility and dormitory on nearly 6 acres of land near McCarran International Airport at 6590 Bermuda Road. The church still owns the property and is continuing with the project.

An inspection of the site that Moon intended to call The Peace Palace was on Balcomb's schedule Wednesday. Many of the other tour participants planned to go sightseeing in town before the

moving on to Phoenix today.

This was the fifth stop on the tour. The group plans to visit 50 more holy sites before the tour wraps up in Eugene, Ore., on Aug. 3.