

## Pastor Hyung Jin Moon's Rod of Iron Freedom Festival in rural Pennsylvania

Tess Owen  
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GREELEY, Pa. -- Pastor Hyung Jin "Sean" Moon took the stage in rural Pennsylvania wearing his trademark green camo blazer, a crown made of empty bullet casings, and a gold AR-15 slung over his shoulder.

"Good morning, patriots and freedom-loving people made in the image of God," Moon told his enthralled crowd.

The occasion was the first-ever "Rod of Iron" Freedom Festival, a two-day celebration of guns and God, hosted by Moon's church.



*An attendee in a Trump mask listening to speeches at the Rod Of Iron Freedom Festival. (Photo by Tess Owen)*

But Moon, 40, isn't any ordinary pastor. He's the son of the late Rev. Sun Myung Moon, a Korean self-

proclaimed messiah, accused cult leader, and founder of an international religious movement whose followers became known as "Moonies." Last year, Pastor Sean Moon started his own church in Newfoundland, Pennsylvania. It has some of the same philosophies as his father's, but with a pretty significant twist:

"In John, Chapter 2, we see that Jesus is an assault weapons manufacturer," Moon, who studied theology at Harvard, told the audience.



Through the festival, an open-carry, pro-MAGA [Make America Great Again] affair, Pastor Moon was able to draw in scores of local conservatives who 10 years ago probably wanted nothing to do with the Moonies.

"The radical leftists are treasonously indoctrinating our children into Communism!" Moon told the crowd at an opening address that recalled themes from President Trump's Twitter feed. "They are trying to impeach a duly elected president for crimes they committed. And are trying to ... place us under the rule of global governance, ruled by the elites of the world, the U.N., radical Islam, Communist China -- you name it."

Other speakers included gun-rights celebrities and right-wing provocateurs who railed against socialism, political correctness, and Hillary Clinton, prompting a faint, fleeting chant of "Lock her up!"



Meanwhile, the hundreds who'd traveled from abroad to attend the festival over Columbus Day weekend outnumbered the locals. They listened to live translations of speeches via audio devices, and were easily recognizable through their matching blue camo hoodies sold by Moon's church.

Rod of Iron Ministries was born out of a "Succession"-like family power struggle for control of the church after Rev. Sun Myung Moon's death in 2012.

Pastor Sean Moon believes he was the rightful heir to his father's Unification Church, but he lost the battle to his mother. So he founded the Rod of Iron Ministries -- formally, the World Peace and Unification Sanctuary Church -- which put a more extreme, pro-gun spin on his father's teachings, and successfully siphoned off hundreds of his members.

Rod of Iron Ministries first made headlines in February 2018, when images from its inaugural marriage-blessing ceremony showing hundreds of couples in crowns and clutching AR-15s were received [with a collective "WTF" across the country.](#)

Moon says he was inspired to start Rod of Iron Ministries after he came across a passage in Revelations that talked about Jesus using a "Rod of Iron" to protect himself and others. He concluded that the "Rod of Iron" could well be the AR-15 -- and that everyone should have one to defend God's kingdom.

"This is the Jesus of the Founding Fathers, and this is the key to a safe and secure America from tyranny," he said.

Moon's older brother, Kook-jin "Justin" Moon, the owner of gun manufacturing company Kahr Arms, has taken his brother's side. The freedom festival was held at the 620-acre Kahr Arms property in Greeley, and attendees were invited to shoot an AR-15 at the firing range, purchase gun-shaped chocolates, and participate in a "Concealed Carry Fashion Show."



*The Freedom Festival's "Safe Space." (Photo by Tess Owen)*

### **Culture war pastor**

The original Moon founded the Unification Church in Korea in the 1950s, years after he'd escaped from a labor camp in North Korea, where he'd been imprisoned for preaching a "messianic message." He claimed he was the returning messiah, on a mission to fulfill Jesus Christ's original mission of restoring Earth to the Garden of Eden.

Rev. Moon and his wife Hak Ja Han were known as the "True Parents," and they believed that world peace could be achieved through marrying individuals from historically enemy countries, who had been matched through the church, and who would go on to have children who are free of sin. This was the idea behind the famous Moonie mass wedding ceremonies; 2,075 couples were married in one such ceremony in Madison Square Garden in 1982.

But the Rev. Moon's church ballooned into a multimillion-dollar business empire over the years. While on the one hand, he and his wife were accused of being cult leaders and even barred from entering Germany,

the U.K., and other Western European countries for a 10-year period, Rev. Moon also dabbled in conservative politics and rubbed shoulders with Nixon.

He even founded the Washington Times, a conservative newspaper, with the hopes of influencing D.C. And in 2004, a group of Republican and Democratic lawmakers held a [coronation ceremony](#) for Rev. Moon at the U.S. Senate Offices, where he was "crowned" and declared the messiah.

Like his father, Pastor Sean Moon ardently embraces conservatism, but his brand is distinctly Trumpian. The festival had a "Safe Space" play area for kids with signs reading "Gun-Free Zone" and "Trigger Warning." Parents laughed and snapped pictures as their kids strangled pink unicorns and pummeled rag dolls. The emcee of the event was Joey Gibson, the leader of the far-right Patriot Prayer, who is currently facing felony charges for his involvement in a violent street brawl with antifa in Portland, Oregon. There was even a seminar about the "Sissification of American Men."



*Guests at the festival were invited to dress up in Kimonos and Samurai clothing and pose for photos. (Photo by Tess Owen)*

Moon himself believes that God is "working through" Trump to help establish God's kingdom.

"We think that God is using him [Trump], doing a job that's taking on the deep state, swamp, whatever you want to call it, the bureaucracy of the federal government," Moon told VICE News. His church even hosted a "President Trump Thank You Dinner" in February 2018 featuring the executive director of Gun Owners of America, a popular Second Amendment advocacy group.

When Pastor Sean Moon isn't at church, practicing martial arts, or holding tea ceremonies with his wife, he's preaching the gospel of the AR-15 to his nearly 3,000 subscribers via YouTube. His broadcast, "The King's Report," often ventures well beyond the Bible to touch on the cultural issues du jour. For example, a recent broadcast was titled "Harlot Mother Behind 'Joker' Story." He also describes public schools as "synagogues of Satan" -- places where they're "indoctrinated into the homosexual political agenda."

In his spare time, he catches up on the news. "We like Breitbart, Daily Caller -- Drudge is a great news hub, Infowars," Moon said. "Project Veritas does incredible undercover work," he added, name-checking a right-wing activist group that's best known for carrying out "stings" aimed at exposing media bias.

Moon's Trump-era dogma and gun-centric focus seems to have helped him shake off the stigma associated with the "Moonies" and appeal to a wider American demographic.

One festival attendee, Bill Russell, 66, acknowledged that two decades ago he probably wouldn't have wanted anything to do with the Moonies. "It was generally viewed as unsavory or off-putting," said Russell, who was toting a Civil War-style rifle. But he was pleasantly surprised by the freedom festival.

"I found nothing like that in my brief time visiting here," he added. "I do like the message about empowering the individual. Any organization that makes that its message and means it, I think is worth

listening to."

Moon has also won the affections of local renegade pastor George Cook. "A year and a half ago, I didn't know him," Cook told the audience before introducing Pastor Moon. "Now, apparently, I'm a Moonie."

Cook's speech was fiery and vaguely threatening. "I just want to say one thing to Joe Biden, to Beto O'Rourke, Elizabeth Warren -- Pocahontas -- and all the rest of them who have come out proudly to say that I'm gonna have to give up my AR-15, and my AK-47, and my other AR-15," he bellowed. "The bad news is, when you come to get that rifle, the barrel is going to be damned hot!"



*Pastor Moon's supporters from Japan and Korea soaked up the MAGA-friendly atmosphere. Many wore camo hoodies sold through the church. (Photo by Tess Owen)*

### **'Succession' meets 'Righteous Gemstones'**

When Rev. Moon died in 2012, he left behind his widow, Hak Ja Han, and 10 children. Sean Moon, the youngest son, claims his father crowned him three times as his heir and successor. But Hak Ja Han was under the impression that she was expected to take the reins.

So the younger Moon and his mother met at the family-owned Cheong Jeong Peace Palace about an hour from Seoul, South Korea, to iron out their dispute. What happened next isn't entirely clear, but it definitely didn't go well.

Moon claims that his mother "declared herself as God" and essentially banished him from the church. Years later he'd accuse her of rewriting his father's theology with satanic overtones.

"She was taking the position of what's described in the Bible as the 'Harlot of Babylon' position," Moon said of his mother, before adding, "That doesn't mean I see her as a prostitute."

(A representative of the Unification Church says that Hak Ja Han continues "the legacy work" of "bringing people of different cultures, religions, and nations together through interfaith and intercultural dialogue.)

Sean and his family moved from New York to Pennsylvania, where, with the support of his brother Justin of Kahr Arms, he eventually formed the Rod of Iron Ministries.

Moonies were left with two choices: Stay with the church that many of them had belonged to for decades and that some were even born into, or defect. Hundreds, if not thousands, agreed that the younger Moon was his father's rightful heir and took a big leap of faith. Following Pastor Moon also meant welcoming guns into their spiritual life.

One man in the midst of that transition was Johann Hobl, 69, who traveled from Vienna to attend the festival. Last year, heeding Moon's call to take up arms, Hobl underwent Austria's lengthy process to

obtain a semi-automatic rifle.

Dressed in traditional Austrian garb of suede britches and a jaunty green Alpine hat, Hobl said, "It was new for me to think about guns. Now I see it's something that has much to do -- actually, much, much to do with the Bible."

And Chad Johnson, a 30-year-old from New Jersey, shot his very first gun during the Freedom Festival: an AR-15. His parents were married by the Unification Church, and he was one of the couples married at the Rod of Iron Ministries' first mass wedding last year.

"It was interesting with all those guns there," Johnson recalled of his wedding day. "But really it's the love, a loving atmosphere.... I think the thing with the guns is more about freedom and rights."



Thousands of couples at a mass wedding held by the Unification Church on August 27, 2018 in South Korea. (Photo by Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images)

### **Rewriting history**

Pastor Sean Moon and his brother Justin claim that their father was an avid hunter and a passionate supporter of Second Amendment rights. Sean Moon told VICE News that the children received lessons in gun safety when they were as young as 5 or 6. They also point to the fact that their father owned a company that manufactured weapons for the Korean military to argue that guns have always been a part of the church -- even if people didn't know it at the time.

But representatives from the Unification Church say that the brothers are rewriting history.

"It is blatantly untrue to say that firearms were an important part of Rev. Sun Myung Moon's life," said Nancy Jubb, who runs communications for the church. She also said she was unable to confirm that the children received formal firearms training, but added that their early exposure to guns may have stemmed from the fact that Rev. Moon's security detail were armed.

"Firearms have never been a part of our religious practices or beliefs. Sean suddenly involving them in his ministry, which he started on his own, doesn't reflect the Unification Church at all," said Jubb. "It also begs the question -- the fact that his organization is financed by his brother, who has a gun company just up the road, conveniently."

She added, "I think the most concerning thing is that it's such an angry ministry. That, combined with the firearms, is alarming."

The Moon family feud triggered a rift within the wider Moonie community, one that continues to play out on social media. The Facebook page for Pastor Moon's church is full of his followers squabbling with his mother's loyalists. One person from the original church at the freedom festival likened Pastor Moon's teachings to those espoused by the Branch Davidians, the religious sect at the center of the Waco Siege in

1993 that left dozens dead. "It will all end up very badly with blood on the floor, like a Tarantino-type movie ending."

Much like his father's business empire, the financial inner workings of Pastor Moon's church are opaque. Entry to the Freedom Festival was free, and Moon said the event was bankrolled by donations from Moon's "supporters."

Both the church and Kahr Arms are associated with the Young Jin Moon Charitable Foundation, named for their oldest brother, who died from a heart attack in 2008. The most recently available tax records, from 2016, show that the foundation had nearly \$10 million in the bank.

But Pastor Moon shrugged off the notion that his church's embrace of guns was a ruse to financially benefit his brother's firearms manufacturing company.

"My brother was already top 10 in the industry long before I was preaching about the rod of iron," said Moon, "so me talking about it doesn't really increase his sales."



*Pastor Moon held an intimate gathering in the woods for his loyal followers. (Photo by Tess Owen)*

### **'They call us Moonies'**

On Sunday morning, the second day of the festival, festival-goers held a brief rally where they learned to sing "God Bless the USA," waving Trump flags, Japanese flags, and Korean flags. They then left the main festival arena, headed across a field and up a hill into the forest, where Pastor Moon had organized an intimate gathering with his supporters -- away from the outsiders of the church.

With a Japanese translator by his side and with a Kahr Arms baseball cap perched on his bald head, Pastor Moon talked and joked in Korean for an hour. The meeting was part sermon, part reassurance that church members needn't be concerned about the local gun lovers who were at the festival.

"So... you see the American citizens holding guns," said Moon, pretending to point a gun around. "But it's not like they'll shoot at you saying, 'You Asian guys!'"

"In America, they call us Moonies. They think Moonies are crazy," Moon continued. "But they came here to see we hate Communism, we want to protect our families, we want to protect our marriage, and we want to protect babies from abortion. And we want everyone in the world to have a rod of iron."

Seeing and hearing Pastor Moon speak in Korean seemed to soothe many in the audience who may have been feeling uneasy about the unfamiliar environment. "When he speaks Korean, it's uncanny: his mannerisms, his voice, how much he's like his father," one onlooker remarked. "Much more so than when he speaks English, it's as if his father was here."

By Monday morning it was business as usual for the church, which had organized a mass wedding-

blessing ceremony to commemorate the date that Rev. Moon escaped a labor camp in North Korea.

Six white buses rumbled through the small town of Newfoundland, and pulled around the white clapboard side of the Sanctuary church. Hundreds of visitors got out, the men in dark suits, the women in shades of white. At the entrance of the church, volunteers were zip-tying worshippers' AR-15s to secure them. A marquee was set up outside, with televisions, to accommodate the additional guests who'd flown in.



Seven young couples to be married that day were sitting inside the church as family members fussed over them. Most of the audience members -- those who'd been blessed by Rev. Moon or Pastor Moon's church -- wore crowns. They ranged from cheap plastic to intricately designed tiaras with pearl inlay, some of which were sold at the Freedom Festival.

After a prayer in English and Korean, "Agnus Dei" blared from speakers. Twenty men and women wearing pink silk tunics over white robes, and holding AR-15's, formed an aisle. The color guard walked through, followed by Pastor Moon and his wife, both in robes, capes and ornate crowns. Behind them walked his brother Justin, wearing white gloves, a black suit, and his Kahr Arms baseball cap. His wife, in a cream-colored suit and gloves, carried the gold AR-15, and set it down by the altar.

Pastor Moon invited attendees to remove their "rods of iron" from their cases. The whole ceremony lasted an hour, and after a brief mix-up with the wedding rings, the seven couples were sprinkled with holy water and declared married.

Outside the church after the ceremony, kids in their Sunday best played on the lawn, elderly women gossiped in Korean, and newly-weds walked around holding hands while volunteers got lunch ready. For a moment, it was easy to forget about the pageantry of the event, the sea of crowns -- and all those AR-15s.

*Cover: Pastor Sean Moon in his office. (Photo by Roberto Daza)*

*Video and additional reporting by Robert Daza and Jika Gonzalez. Edited by Michael Shade.*