

Hyung Jin Moon's Rod of Iron Ministries building global retreat center in East Tennessee

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October 20, 2021
Nashville Tennessean

Tennessean.

A religious organization that has received attention in recent years for its conspiracy theorist, gun-supporting theology bought hundreds of acres in East Tennessee to build a retreat center.

[Rod of Iron Ministries](#) bought the 225 acres in August in Grainger County, where it will build a retreat center, shooting range, and trails for meditation, said Greg Noll, a Rod of Iron administrator.

Noll described the ministry's plans for the property as a peaceful getaway for ministry adherents and other likeminded individuals.

Rod of Iron Ministries is an offshoot of the [World Peace and Unification Sanctuary](#), a church based in Newfoundland, Pennsylvania and led by Pastor Hyung Jin "Sean" Moon.

Moon took over the church from his father, the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, who started the family's conservative ministry in South Korea before taking it to the United States in the 1980s, [according to the Washington Post](#). The elder Moon also founded the Washington Times newspaper.

The group's beliefs are rooted in Christianity and the Bible, but it has also created its own supplemental scripture. The Southern Poverty Law Center called the group a "cult" and has criticized it for "racist, homophobic and antisemitic" ideologies.

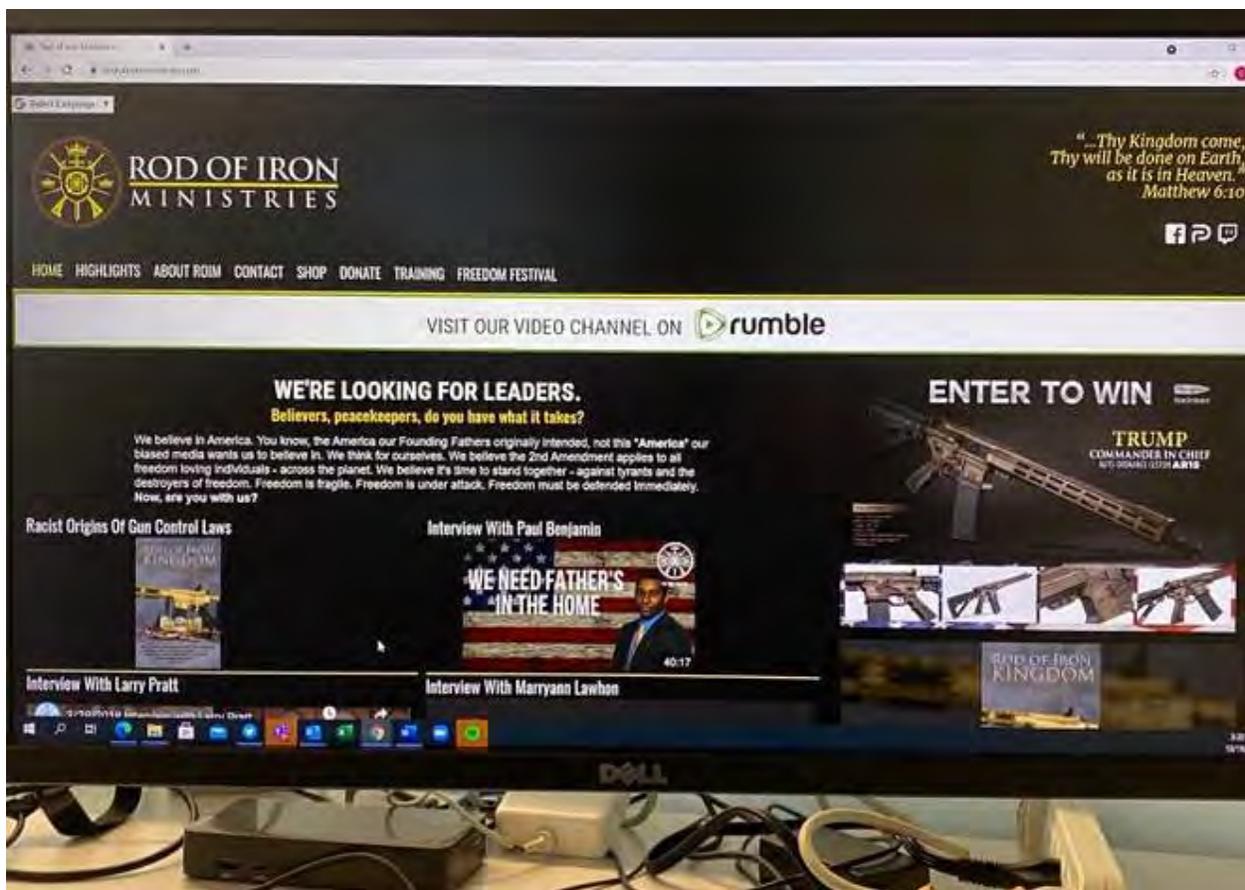
Though previously lesser-known, more people began paying attention to the group after media outlets wrote about its religious ceremony that [included leaders blessing AR-15 semiautomatic rifles](#). Also, the group has become a fierce promoter of right-wing conspiracy theories and media outlets.



The group's website includes a first-person article by a Rod of Iron adherent who participated in the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, which Moon and his brother, Justin Moon, also were at, according to Vice News. Justin Moon founded Kahr Arms, a gun manufacturing company that the family's church incorporated.

"Rod of Iron Ministries is kind of a patriot movement. It has a slightly different purpose than sanctuary church which is more religious in nature. Rod of Iron Ministries is a little more political/religious in nature," Noll told The Tennessean in a phone call Tuesday.

Rod of Iron is in the early stages of building the Tennessee retreat center, Noll said. When it's done, there will be a place for people to park RVs, an events center for church services and other gatherings and a shooting range.



It will also have three trails for meditation - with each one following after the other in a successive manner - that conclude at Clinch Mountain and trace different stages of the end of Jesus's life. The first is the "trail of tears," to trace Jesus's walk to the cross, the "trail of victory," to recognize Jesus's death on the cross, and the "trail of ascension," to recognize Jesus going to heaven, Noll said.

Rod of Iron also anticipates taking advantage of the area's quiet roads for its motorcycle ministry.

The group will plan to welcome supporters from across the world, especially Korea and Japan, but it will also allow non-members who are likeminded to use the events center. A similar example Noll mentioned is the "Freedom Festival" that Kahr Arms recently hosted in Pennsylvania that featured Steve Bannon and other right-wing celebrities.

Noll said Tennessee appealed to Rod of Iron because "it's a red state, it's conservative, it's Christian."

"So that's a very nice fit," he said. "It has a strong stance against abortion and it's not into gun restrictions, firearms restrictions. It has a political base that is conservative."

Noll's point is exactly what is concerning Cheryl Bridges Johns, chair of the spiritual renewal studies department at Pentecostal Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee, is concerned about.

"That's what is disturbing is, 'is Tennessee presenting itself as welcoming towards this?' And if so, that's not a good thing," she said.

Bridges Johns said she is aware of similar groups in Tennessee, some of which are in her area, but only recently learned of Rod of Iron. Compared to the other groups, her impression of Rod of Iron was "very bizarre and scary."

"This was a pretty new level, to be honest," Bridges Johns said. "Especially in terms of the mixing of religion, politics, violence, guns and all of these imagery that goes along with that."

In a video that Moon recorded of himself at the Tennessee property in September, the pastor compared the site to the church's spiritual retreat center in South Korea, Chung Pyung. Through a company named CIG Properties Inc., Rod of Iron purchased the Grainger County property for \$460,000, according to state records. Vice News [first reported the story](#) about Rod of Iron's land purchase last week.

Noll said the group is misunderstood as a result of "fake news."

"Maybe they heard something on Vice or something where they get alarmed that we are a bunch of armed militia people in the woods or something. People tend to take the gun thing a little bit too far," Noll said. "Really, we're just about the Second Amendment and believe we should be trained and well verse for their own safety and for the safety of their community and country."

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