

## **Sun Myung Moon dies at 92; Washington Times owner led the Unification Church**

Emma Brown

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Sun Myung Moon, a self-professed messiah who claimed millions of religious followers in his Unification Church and sought to become a powerful voice in the American conservative movement through business interests that included the Washington Times, has died. He was 92.

The Washington Times reported that Mr. Moon died in South Korea early Monday morning (Sunday afternoon in Washington). Unification Church spokesman Ahn Ho-yeul told the Associated Press that Mr. Moon died at a church-owned hospital near his home in Gapyeong, northeast of Seoul. He had been under treatment for pneumonia.

Officials say the religious leader who founded the Unification Church and built it into a multibillion-dollar business empire has died in South Korea at age 92.

Mr. Moon, the son of Korean farmers, created a sprawling empire at the intersection of religion and business and became one of the world's most enigmatic and polarizing public figures.

His stated ambition was to rule the world and replace Christianity with his own faith, which blended elements of Christianity, Confucianism and Korean folk religions. A leading symbol of the 1970s cult wars in America, he attracted a great deal of attention and ridicule for holding mass weddings for Unificationist couples whom he had paired, often without the prospective partners ever having met.

But his success in business and involvement in American politics “demanded that people who could care less about his peculiar doctrinal views pay attention to him,” said James Beverley, a professor at Tyndale University College and Seminary in Toronto who has studied Mr. Moon’s church since the late 1970s.

As a young man, Mr. Moon was twice jailed in the 1940s when his sermonizing attracted the attention of authorities in what is now North Korea. Emerging as a staunch anti-communist, he built the foundations of what became a global business network with labor provided by his devotees.

He made his most strident inroads into American culture in the 1970s. The Vietnam War-era counterculture was beginning to fade, but college students were still looking for an alternative to the conventional lives of their parents. Drawn by the promise of salvation through clean-living self-discipline, they flocked to the Unification Church despite the fact that Mr. Moon was known more for his sermons’ longwindedness than for public displays of charisma.

His critics described him as a frustrated megalomaniac who donated millions of dollars to political causes in exchange for the mainstream recognition and acceptance that he never enjoyed as a spiritual leader. Meanwhile, his supporters saw Mr. Moon as a prophet unfairly persecuted by xenophobic journalists and politicians.



To much of the outside world, Mr. Moon undercut his credibility with grandiose statements. “God is living in me and I am the incarnation of himself,” he said, according to sermon excerpts printed in Time magazine in 1976. “The whole world is in my hand, and I will conquer and subjugate the world.”

Such comments helped spur a panic among parents of young Unificationists, who accused Mr. Moon of running a cult and brainwashing their children. Unificationists often lived communally and were forced to sever ties with their families, trading biological mothers and fathers for their “True Parents,” Mr. Moon and his wife. They staked out street corners and airports and worked long hours selling flowers, peanuts and candles to raise money for the church. Alarmed parents hired professional deprogrammers to bring their children home.

In 1982, Mr. Moon was convicted of tax evasion and later sentenced to 18 months in federal prison in Danbury, Conn. In addition, his \$46 million foray into movie production — “Inchon,” a 1981 film about the Korean War featuring Laurence Olivier as Gen. Douglas MacArthur — was unanimously deemed an epic failure.

By the mid-1980s, Mr. Moon’s recruitment efforts in America had begun to flag. The National Council of Churches had rejected Unificationism, calling it “incompatible with Christian teaching and belief.” Congress had investigated Mr. Moon’s connections with the South Korean CIA and issued a report damning his businesses as a global network designed to further the growth of a religious cult.

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Despite those setbacks, Mr. Moon remained at the helm of a dizzying web of hundreds of businesses and nonprofit organizations that reached into the lives of millions of people around the world and exerted a powerful influence on American politics.

In addition to South Korean businesses that ran the gamut from ginseng tea to machine guns, his sprawling empire included an automobile plant and hotel in North Korea and banks and vast tracts of real estate in South America. In Japan, an army of salespeople sold ornamental pagodas and other religious trinkets.

In the Washington area, the church and its affiliates owned more than \$300 million in commercial, political and cultural enterprises, including the Kirov Academy of Ballet in the District, an Alexandria video production firm called Atlantic Video and the mall jewelry store chain Christian Bernard.

Mr. Moon’s groups owned a university in Bridgeport, Conn., a recording studio and travel agency in Manhattan, a horse farm in Texas and a golf course in California.

The preacher also built a vast seafood enterprise that includes fishing boats, processors and distributors

from Alaska to Gloucester, Mass. According to a 2006 Chicago Tribune investigation, Mr. Moon's True World Foods provided most of the raw fish consumed at sushi restaurants in the United States.



### **Starting the Times**

His most prominent investment was the Washington Times, founded in 1982 as a conservative counterbalance to what Mr. Moon perceived as The Washington Post's liberal bias.

The broadsheet, whose circulation reached 100,000 at its peak, was a financial drain — it never climbed out of the red and soaked up about \$1.7 billion in church subsidies during its first 20 years in business. But it quickly became an important national voice for the conservative right. President Ronald Reagan reportedly read it daily, and its reporters earned respect for scooping other media outlets, including The Post.

“Many comfortable Washington political bureaucrats who have had their beautiful offices inside big marble buildings considered Reverend Moon and the Unification Church as insignificant as peanuts,” Mr. Moon reportedly said soon after launching the paper. “However, now they have found themselves having to respond to the Washington Times. They are reading it and trembling at some of the stories.”

The Times earned praise and attention from conservative political leaders but battled a public perception that it was a mouthpiece for the Unification Church, particularly when top editors resigned, citing church interference with editorial decisions.

Mr. Moon and other church leaders were unabashed about their ambitions for the newspaper. “We are going to make it so that no one can run for office in the United States without our permission,” Col. Bo Hi Pak, Mr. Moon's top aide and the founding president of the Times, reportedly told conservative activist David Finzer in 1988.

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Mr. Moon's long involvement with American politics began in the 1970s during the administration of President Richard Nixon, when the church leader said God had proclaimed that “Americans must love Nixon.” Unificationists prayed and fasted outside the U.S. Capitol during the Watergate hearings, earning the fallen president's gratitude and a White House invitation for Mr. Moon.

He spent liberally to fight communism and champion traditional family values. In the 1980s, he and his followers founded Causa, an anti-communist group that promoted “Godism” as an alternative to Marxism and was active in more than 20 countries, including Uruguay, where it bought a newspaper, banks and a luxury hotel.

During the height of the Nicaraguan civil war in the 1980s, the Washington Times led a fundraising drive on behalf of the contras, a rebel group that sought to overthrow the country's leftist government. Another church-linked organization, the American Freedom Coalition, paid for a direct mailing to 25 million households that criticized 1988 Democratic presidential candidate Michael S. Dukakis.

Mr. Moon cultivated often-uneasy relationships with American political, cultural and religious leaders, who undoubtedly appreciated his largess but were often hesitant to publicly embrace the controversial preacher.



Former president George H.W. Bush spoke frequently at Moon events. He received an undisclosed amount from the church in speaking fees and a \$1 million donation from the Times foundation to build a library for his papers. In Tokyo, before an audience of 50,000, he and wife Barbara appeared alongside Mr. Moon's wife as she credited Mr. Moon with bringing about the fall of communism.

Comedian Bill Cosby tried to back out of a contract to perform at a 1996 convention in Washington when he learned that it had been organized by Mr. Moon's Family Federation for World Peace; Moon's lawyers convinced Cosby otherwise, and he appeared on a slate including former president Gerald R. Ford, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and the civil rights activist Coretta Scott King.

Christian evangelist Jerry Falwell, who once likened Mr. Moon to "the plague," appeared at Unificationist events as a supporter after a Moon-sponsored organization donated \$3.5 million to rescue Falwell's Liberty University from the brink of bankruptcy.

Some luminaries who agreed to appear at Moon-sponsored events said they had been duped. When President George W. Bush was sworn into office in 2001, the Washington Times Foundation hosted an interfaith prayer luncheon for 1,700 political and religious leaders, among them soon-to-be U.S. attorney general John D. Ashcroft and Southern Baptist Convention President James Merritt. Mr. Moon was honored at the event. "We had no idea the luncheon was hosted by Moonies," Merritt told a reporter at the time.

Critics said Mr. Moon used such events to engineer photo opportunities that he later used to establish legitimacy with potential church recruits. He secured photographs of himself with Nixon, Gorbachev and North Korean leader Kim Il Sung.

In 2004, he was photographed in the Dirksen Senate Office Building, wearing regal robes and a gold crown and flanked by members of Congress. The picture was taken after a ceremony in which Mr. Moon proclaimed before U.S. senators and representatives that he was "none other than humanity's savior, messiah, returning lord and true parent." That was a truth, he told the gathered crowd, that Stalin and Hitler had recognized in conversations from beyond the grave.

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In fact, according to Mr. Moon's sermons, Jesus also had spoken from the spirit realm and recognized Mr. Moon as the savior of humankind. So had Buddha, Muhammad and Satan, among others. Mr. Moon claimed he had found a wife for Jesus and blessed the couple's marriage.

Mr. Moon's supporters saw him as the victor in a long fight against injustice. He was jailed six times in four countries. His 1982 arrest for tax evasion in the United States elicited a cry of support from mainstream preachers, who said the government was meddling dangerously with religious affairs. Others said he was the victim of a racist witch hunt by the press and public. The tax bill he had failed to pay was less than \$8,000.

Carlton Sherwood, a CNN reporter who took a job at the Washington Times to write an expose about Mr. Moon, instead wrote a 1991 book saying that nothing was amiss in the church.

“Congress, the courts, law enforcement agencies, the press, even the U.S. Constitution itself,” Sherwood wrote, were “prostituted in a malicious, oftentimes brutal manner, as part of a determined effort to wipe out this small but expanding religious movement.”



### **A young preacher**

Sun Myung Moon was born in 1920 — Jan. 6, according to an official biography — in a rural part of what is now North Korea. When he was young, his parents converted to Presbyterianism, and Mr. Moon grew up as a Christian believer.

On Easter Sunday in 1935, according to Unification Church lore, he had a vision of Jesus, who asked Mr. Moon to create God’s Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. Mr. Moon agreed.

He wrote a 411-page gospel, the Divine Principle, in which he said he could save the world from Satanic forces by creating a sinless family. Unificationist followers could be saved by creating their own perfect marriages in ceremonies blessed by Mr. Moon.

In the early 1940s, Mr. Moon studied electrical engineering at Japan’s Waseda University. He returned to Korea in 1943, married Sang Il Choi and began his public ministry in what became North Korea after the country was partitioned in the aftermath of World War II. He was jailed twice there, the second time in a Soviet-style gulag, where he remained until advancing U.N. and U.S. troops freed him and his fellow prisoners in 1950, the first year of the Korean War.

He built his first church out of discarded cardboard boxes in the South Korean port city of Pusan. In 1954, he officially established his church, the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, in Seoul. Three years later, Mr. Moon’s young South Korean businesses were taking off and he had spread his message about creating a peaceful new world to 30 Korean cities.

Meanwhile, his first marriage ended in divorce. A relationship with another woman resulted in a child but no wedding. In 1960, he married Hak Ja Han, who bore 14 of Mr. Moon’s children and came to be known as True Mother.

Declaring that he was urged by God to spread his gospel to America, he moved to an estate in Tarrytown, N.Y., in the early 1970s. On multi-city speaking tours, he preached that the United States was a great nation that had lost its way and had descended into a crime-ridden godlessness. He could restore God’s presence, he said in hours-long sermons delivered in Korean and translated by an interpreter. Officials say the religious leader who founded the Unification Church and built it into a multibillion-dollar business empire has died in South Korea at age 92.

Mr. Moon made national headlines in 1974 when he drew an overflow crowd for a sermon at New York’s Madison Square Garden. In September 1976, two months after the United States celebrated its bicentennial, he sponsored a “God Bless America” rally at the Washington Monument that drew 50,000 people, most of whom, the New York Times reported, “seemed to be there for the music and fireworks display.”

“This is a time for awakening,” Mr. Moon said. “America must accept her global responsibility. Armed

with Godism, she must free the Communist world and, at last, build the Kingdom of God on Earth.” He railed against communism until the Soviet Union fell, then refocused his attention on moral decay. America, where he had become a permanent resident, was rife with it, he said. It was full of free sex, extreme individuality and homosexuals, which he condemned as “dung-eating dogs.”



### **An empire struggles**

In 1998, a steady drip of stories about the dysfunctionality of the supposedly perfect Moon family reached a climax when Nansook Hong, the ex-wife of Mr. Moon’s son Hyo Jin Moon, published a tell-all memoir. “In the Shadow of the Moons” accused Hyo Jin of cocaine addiction and domestic abuse and alleged that Mr. Moon was himself guilty of adultery and money laundering.

In 1999, another son, Young Jin Moon, fell from the 17th floor of a Reno, Nev., hotel. His death was ruled a suicide by the local coroner. A third son, Heung Jin Moon, was killed in a 1984 car crash; four years later, Mr. Moon announced that Heung Jin had been reincarnated in the body of a Zimbabwean church member.

Survivors include his wife; one child from his first marriage; and 10 children from his second marriage, including daughter In Jin Moon, who is trying to reinvigorate the American branch of the Unification movement, and three U.S.-educated sons who have led the Moon organization’s day-to-day operations since late 2009: Kook Jin “Justin” Moon, who founded a gun-manufacturing business in New York and now is chairman of Tong-il, the Moon family’s Korean business conglomerate; Hyung Jin “Sean” Moon, who once honored his parents with 21,000 bows and now leads the church’s international ministry; and Hyun Jin “Preston” Moon, whose estrangement from his family has contributed to upheaval and near-insolvency at the Washington Times.

Preston Moon took over the newspaper around 2006. But he feuded with his brothers and drew criticism from church insiders for his perceived lack of commitment to the Times’ conservative bent. The Moon family cut off the Times’ \$35 million subsidy, sending the newspaper into a tailspin.

Its circulation dwindled and more than half its newsroom was laid off. The metro and sports sections were discontinued and top executives were fired, sparking questions about whether the paper would survive.

Mr. Moon and a team of former Times executives paid \$1 to buy the paper back in November 2010, assuming its millions of dollars in debt.

Other parts of the Moon empire, always shrouded in secrecy, also seemed to teeter as Mr. Moon aged. In the 1980s, the church settled hundreds of lawsuits in Japan alleging that Unificationists persuaded people to buy religious icons by promising them spiritual powers; the lawsuits gutted what many believed to be the revenue engine of the global Moon network, which had brought in more than \$400 million a year.

A church-related automobile manufacturing enterprise in China failed in the 1990s, and the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s ravaged Mr. Moon's South Korean businesses, forcing five of 17 into receivership.



Some Moon-related businesses, such as True World Foods, have remained profitable, according to news reports. But the organization's financial troubles have rippled into the Washington area, where the Christian Bernard jewelry chain filed for bankruptcy in 2008. Church subsidies for the District's Kirov ballet academy dropped by half in 2009.

The Unification Church itself has reportedly struggled as well. In an effort to boost membership, it loosened stringent rules about marriage, allowing biological parents to choose their children's spouses and inviting nonbelievers to participate in mass weddings.

Church leaders claim millions of followers worldwide, but a 2009 Washington Times article reported that the church had 110,000 "adherents" worldwide. Scholars' estimates of U.S. church membership range from fewer than 6,000 people to as many as 50,000, according to the 2009 edition of the Encyclopedia of American Religious History.

Frederick Sontag, a professor of religion who studied Unificationism for decades, once asked Mr. Moon whether his kingdom — so dependent on his own vision and force of personality — would crumble after his death.

"I will continue to lead the church," Mr. Moon answered, "from the spirit world."