

Thousands in S. Korea attend funeral for Rev. Moon; local seminary in Barrytown

September 15, 2012



GAPYEONG, South Korea — Tens of thousands of mourners sobbed, sang, prayed and vowed to cherish the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's teachings Saturday as they said goodbye to their self-proclaimed messiah and "True Father," whose death earlier this month shed light again on his controversial religious and business empire.

Moon, founder of the Unification Church that has a local seminary in Barrytown, best known for conducting mass weddings meant to build a harmonious, multicultural world, died Sept. 3 at age 92. He was friend to U.S. presidents and leaders of North Korea. His church has been accused of brainwashing recruits and duping them out of money, but followers believe Moon's claim that he was put on Earth to complete Jesus Christ's works.

The church established the Unification Theological Seminary in Red Hook in 1975 on the site of the former Christian Brothers monastery in the Town of Red Hook hamlet of Barrytown. The Hudson Valley has a concentration of Unificationists, many attracted here by the Church's seminary.

"His will is a divine will, different from normal people," said 69-year-old office worker Jeong Hye-ok. "I believe he will establish a foundation to build a heavenly world that unifies peace on earth."

Moon's funeral, which followed a 13-day mourning period, was held in Gapyeong County, northeast of Seoul, where he spent his last days at a church-affiliated hospital. About 35,000 people — men clad in black suits and women in white dresses — attended the funeral.

"He will be in our minds permanently," said Lee Ok-su, a church choir member, her face flushed with emotion. "He is our benevolent yet strict father."

The funeral, which lasted more than two hours, began when men wearing military honor guard-style uniforms carried Moon's coffin into a multipurpose gymnasium. They slowly carried it up red-carpeted steps decked with flowers and placed it in front of a large portrait of Moon.

Many mourners wept as a top church official said in a speech that Moon was moving into a spiritual world after completing the messianic role that God had asked of him.

"God, why ... why did you call back our True Father so hurriedly?" Bo Hi Pak, chairman of the Unification Church-supported Korean Cultural Foundation, told the crowd.

Family members, senior church officials and prominent politicians placed flowers at an altar. A flower-decorated van carrying the hearse left the gym and drove through streets lined with people waving flags. Thousands of church members filled the grounds near the gym and watched the funeral on giant TV screens. Moon's body was buried on a nearby mountain.

"I'm so sad, and I just want to listen to his voice again," said Jeon Myung-hu, a 43-year-old man who said he fasted for four days after hearing the news of Moon's death. "His teachings about peace will remain forever."

About 180,000 people visited Gapyeong during the mourning period before the funeral, according to church officials. An estimated 7 million people paid homage at mourning sites around the world, they said.

The Unification Church claims to have 3 million followers around the world, though critics say the figure is no more than 100,000.

After founding the church in 1954 in Seoul, Moon quickly found followers willing to support his conservative, family-oriented value systems and unusual interpretation of the Bible. Moon conducted his first mass wedding in Seoul in the early 1960s.

"We all thankfully accepted our spouses (given to us by Moon). ... We thought it was a blessing," said Kim Yeung-mo, a 78-year-old former Unification Church pastor who was paired off with his wife in a 1962 mass wedding presided over by Moon. "We have lived together happily."

Moon, a staunch anti-communist, maintained good relations with North Korea after visiting the country in 1991 and meeting leader Kim Il Sung, the country's founder and grandfather of current leader Kim Jong Un. Moon urged Kim to abandon his nuclear ambitions and the two also discussed a joint tourism project in the North, according to Moon's biography.

Moon sent a condolence delegation when Kim Il Sung died in 1994 despite conservative criticism at home. Moon's church also sent a delegation to Pyongyang when Kim Jong Il died late last year. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un sent a condolence message after Moon's death.

Moon also developed good relations with conservative American leaders, including former presidents Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

Moon, however, served 13 months in a U.S. federal prison in the mid-1980s over tax charges.

In the years before his death, Moon handed over key responsibilities of his empire to his children, with his youngest son appointed the church's top religious director in 2008 and another son in charge of business operations in South Korea and Japan