

Couples clutching AR-15 rifles renew wedding vows at Pastor Hyung Jin Moon's controversial Sanctuary Church in Newfoundland, Pennsylvania

Amir Vera, CNN
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(CNN) This wasn't your average marriage rededication ceremony.

Hundreds of parishioners gathered at a Pennsylvania church Wednesday to exchange or renew their wedding vows -- some clutching unloaded AR-15 rifles, according to [CNN affiliate WFMZ-TV](#).

The event was led by Pastor Hyung Jin Moon at the controversial Sanctuary Church in Newfoundland.

Guns were zip-tied at the door and ammunition was not allowed in the church, [WFMZ](#) reported. It said the Wallenpaupack Area School District moved students of a nearby elementary school to other campuses

'Not in our town'



AR-15 semiautomatic rifles are similar to the weapons used [in a massacre that left 17 people dead](#) at a Florida high school two weeks ago.

Church members say the ceremony was scheduled months before the Parkland shooting, and they were following God's will to honor the Second Amendment, according to the affiliate.



Protesters angered by what they described as the insensitivity and timing of the ceremony gathered in front of the church.

"We do not believe in guns in church. Not in our town," Esther Clayton told WFMZ.

After the ceremony, residents held a vigil at the Pike County Courthouse to honor the victims of the mass shooting at [Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School](#).

They carried signs with the words "Remember Parkland" as they read the names of the 17 victims, [CNN affiliate WBRE reported](#).

Church member John Gidney, who traveled from West Virginia for the ceremony, said Christians need to arm themselves.

"The way the world is going today, it's just a form of protection for us. We're not out to harm anyone or cause any chaos or anything," he told WFMZ.

Couples hold AR-15 rifles and other guns during a ceremony at the Sanctuary Church on Wednesday in Newfoundland, Pennsylvania.

In a message [on the church's Facebook page](#), Moon said the event was not to "bless guns."

He said the book of Revelations discussed Jesus Christ "ruling with a rod of iron." The Bible "tells us that God will shepherd His children with the rod of iron, guarding the flock not as a dictator, but as a loving father," he said. In the same sense, Moon said, God calls on his people to use the "rod of iron" to protect themselves.

Mass weddings

Moon is the son of Rev. Sun Myung Moon, who founded the Unification Church in the 1950s.

[Rev. Moon, religious and political figure, dies in South Korea at 92](#)

Before he died in 2012 at age 92, the elder Moon was a high-profile international evangelist for decades. He was famous for conducting mass weddings, including at New York City's Madison Square Garden and another one uniting 360,000 couples in South Korea.

The Sanctuary Church calls itself Rod of Iron Ministries, and is a breakaway faction of the Unification Church, [according to the Southern Poverty Law Center](#).

The Unification Church distanced itself from Wednesday's event, saying its ceremonies and teachings do not involve weapons.