



## Unification Church founder Sun Myung Moon dies aged 92

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*Leaves vast religious organisation, business empire*

*Funeral set for Sept. 15*

GAPYEONG, South Korea, Sept 3 (Reuters) - Sun Myung Moon, a self-declared messiah who founded the controversial Unification Church which has millions of followers around the globe, died on Monday leaving a vast business empire and a legacy of mass weddings.

Church officials said Moon, 92, who had suffered complications from pneumonia, was taken to hospital in Seoul in mid-August and was moved to a hospital in a rural retreat last week when his family believed there was little chance of recovery.

His body was lying in a vast building resembling the White House at the retreat in rugged hills about an hour outside the South Korean capital of Seoul. The funeral will be on Sept. 15, after which he will be buried at the retreat.

Moon had led an active public life until recently, officiating a mass wedding for 2,500 in March and leading a service of more than 15,000 followers in July.

Critics have for years vilified the church as a heretical and dangerous cult and questioned its murky finances and how it indoctrinates followers, described in derogatory terms as "Moonies."

Moon is survived by his wife - the pair are called "true parents" by followers - and 10 of their 13 children.

Religious experts say Moon will remain at the centre of the church, keeping it together despite signs of previously unimaginable fissure among his sons, according to a creed that had been prepared since a helicopter crash four years ago that nearly killed Moon and his wife.

Born in what is now North Korea in 1920, Moon founded the church soon after the Korean War that ended in 1953, rapidly expanding the ministry internationally and building a business at the same time that served as the backbone of the empire.

The Unification Church runs the Segye Times newspaper in South Korea and more than a dozen other firms along with overseas businesses, including the conservative Washington Times.

"The Unification Church will continue to be in good shape even after Sun Myung Moon's death," said Tark Ji-il, who teaches church history at the Busan Presbyterian University.

"The Unification Church is not simply a religious organisation, but is a commercial organisation built on religious conviction."

### **Moon "Met Jesus"**

Moon's farming parents followed the Presbyterian Church, a branch of Protestant Christianity. When he was 15, he said, he met Jesus, who appeared to him as he prayed in the hills and asked him to take on the work of building God's kingdom on Earth.

Moon refused twice, according to a biography by Mike Breen, former journalist for the Washington Times.

"Jesus asked him a third time. 'There is no one else who can do this work.' ... From the comfort of his youthful ideals, he peered over the abyss of the difficulties that would lie ahead and decided. 'I will do it,' he promised."

Moon had handed over day-to-day operations of the church, which has its headquarters in Seoul, to one of his sons and the management of the Tongil Group with interests in construction, resorts, travel agencies and the newspaper to another son.

Church officials and followers alike rejected the idea that the man who proclaimed himself a messiah would be reincarnated.

"The church teaches us, dust to dust, and it's the soul that goes to heaven, and so is the law, the truth and order of things, which is why all humans come and go," said Lee Sang-bo, a life-long follower of the church who said he was married at a mass wedding in 1982.

"And a messiah is no exception."

Moon was known as a strident anti-communist and visited North Korea in 1991 to meet the reclusive state's founder, Kim Il-sung, to discuss business ventures and unification, a visit condemned by South Korea which remains technically at war with the North.

He also courted controversy in his business life and served prison term in New York after a 1982 conviction on tax evasion charges.