

Funeral for Rev. Moon a time of reflection for church

David R. Sands and Cheryl Wetzstein
September 16, 2012



SEOUL — Unification Church members will hear an outline of their church’s future direction Monday even as the tens of thousands of believers gathered here assess the impact of the emotion-laden funeral Saturday of founder the Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

Rev. Moon’s widow, Hak Jan Han, and his youngest son and designated spiritual heir the Rev. Hyung Jin Moon, are expected to address leaders of the Unification Church’s 12 regions and representatives from many of the more than 190 countries in which the church operates at a gathering Monday at the church-owned complex at Gapyeong, a rural retreat about an hour northeast of Seoul. The church faces both opportunities and challenges in the wake of the loss of the peripatetic and indefatigable religious figure who has been the church’s driving force since its founding here in the mid-1950s.

Church sources say Mrs. Moon, a constant presence at her husband’s side during his long and at time controversy-filled ministry, could be planning a global tour along the lines of many undertaken by her husband. The younger Rev. Moon, 33, made clear in his own emotional eulogy for his father Saturday that he planned to fulfill the mission that consumed his father in the last months before he died Sept. 2 of complications from pneumonia — the quest for a global “Nation of Cosmic Peace and Unity,” with a “Foundation Day” for the new movement set for Jan. 13.

While Mrs. Moon assumes the overall direction of the Unification Church, Hyung Jin Moon is poised to take up his father’s religious role while older brother Kook Jin Moon will oversee the church’s extensive global commercial interests.

Solemn ceremony

Top church officials Sunday were expressing both relief and satisfaction at the funeral ceremonies for Rev. Moon, as tens of thousands of mourners from around the globe descended on the remote Gapyeong complex to pay their final respects to Rev. Sun Myung Moon in a solemn but dignified two-and-a-half-hour ceremony Saturday.

The red casket with intricate gold trim containing Rev. Moon’s body made the long, slow passage to the raised altar just after 10 a.m. for the “seonghwa” — memorial and ascension — ceremony, borne by eight pallbearers in white military tunics with orange and gold trim. Mrs. Moon, Rev. Moon’s wife of 52 years, walked stoically immediately behind the casket, dressed like other family members in a flowing white robe.

At the ceremony’s close, as those who packed the indoor stadium sang a hymn, the casket was carried back down the middle aisle to be transported to a smaller burial service on a nearby mountainside.

The emotional highlight of the burial came when Rev. Moon's son Hyung Jin and Kook Jin led immediate family members in a silent prayer as they held hands and knelt over the polished granite slab covering the burial vault.

Mrs. Moon then placed the first shovelful of dirt on the coffin as a small group of top church officials and colleagues of the spiritual leader looked on.

Outsiders have been sharply divided over the size and scope of the Unification Church in recent years, but there was no denying the outpouring of emotion or the large crowds of people who trekked to the out-of-the-way complex in the days leading up to the final farewell.

The two upper levels of the of the Cheongshim Peace World Center indoor stadium were completely filled two hours before the funeral, the men in black suits with white ties and the women almost uniformly dressed in cream- or white-colored gowns.

Church officials estimated that some 35,000 people made the journey to Gapyeong on Saturday. Cars and scores of chartered buses already were backed up on the two-lane road that leads to the center as dawn broke four hours before the ceremony was to begin.



Also in attendance was a large international delegation of political, diplomatic and religious figures who worked with Rev. Moon's ministry, which grew from a tiny, embattled church in his native South Korea to a global spiritual movement and an affiliated commercial empire comprising real estate, manufacturing and agricultural operations, and media properties including The Washington Times.

Clergy, political leaders and members of the church's Universal Peace Federation recalled before the ceremony Rev. Moon's ministry and lifelong drive to bridge the differences and end the divisions between the world's great faith traditions.

"What stands out for me was his determination and courage to end the infightings in the world," said Tarsem Singh King, who broke a barrier himself when he became the first politician of Asian ancestry to join Britain's House of Lords.

Mr. King was one of several dignitaries who spoke at the funeral, praising Rev. Moon's lifelong work to break down denominational walls between religions. Rev. Moon, he said, had proved time and again "his willingness to risk his life for the sake of God's will."

"Father Moon's legacy is still alive and well," he said.

Peter Lokeris, a Ugandan Cabinet minister, said: "I heard about Rev. Moon in the 1990s and learned that he was answering the call of God to love one another and become one family under God. We think the people of Africa and the world should enjoy peace as proud people of God."

Overflow crowd

The arena where the funeral service was held seated only 14,000, so many visitors had to watch the ceremony from live broadcasts around the church campus, which includes schools, a hospital and training center.

Thousands of mourners gathered outside the stadium to view the proceedings, including at least 5,000 who gathered on one deck of the stadium in front of a large video screen. Countless more lined the road leading up to the church's holy estate and the mountainside site where Rev. Moon was laid to rest

Dozens of flags flanked the flower-decked altar topped by a large oil painting of Rev. Moon. Floral tributes from Korean and international dignitaries, including some from South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, ringed the lower bowl of the stadium.

The ascension also was broadcast live to hundreds of locations worldwide, church officials said.



Looking ahead

Church officials have expressed quiet optimism that the religious movement built by Rev. Moon will survive the passing of its charismatic founder. They said in interviews last week that the founder's extended illness, and the anointing of his two sons to carry on his work, will ease a difficult transition period.

Bo Hi Pak, who worked beside and translated for Rev. Moon for more than a half-century, expressed optimism in an interview that the church could handle the difficult transition period.

"Rev. Moon's teachings were completely recorded. We know what he left us as a spiritual will," said Mr. Pak, who was the first president and chairman of The Washington Times when it was founded in 1982.

"Mrs. Moon will be our leader from now on and she has essentially been in training for this mission by Rev. Moon for 50 years. I really believe the church is going to grow in leaps and bounds after this."

But one discordant note from the ceremony was the glaring absence of Hyun Jin "Preston" Moon, Rev. Moon's oldest surviving son, who has been involved in a protracted feud with other members of the family over control of the church and the disposition of its commercial assets.

In a statement released through his Global Peace Foundation last week, Preston Moon, 43, laid the blame for divisions in the family over the future of the church on his brothers, announcing he would hold a separate memorial service for his father at a later date in the United States.

"I am now walking a separate path and have no part in any 'succession struggle' within the Unification movement," he added. "I shall continue to use the resources available to me to further that work."

A chance to celebrate

Mourners here seemed solemn but not downcast in the week of observances and preparation culminating in Saturday's ceremony. While the church founded by Rev. Moon in 1954 now faces a time of unprecedented transition, many said they believed Saturday's ceremony marked an opportunity to celebrate a long life of accomplishment.

Kenneth Read and Jeff Bateman, both from Britain, stood quietly, collecting their thoughts.

"So many people, and everyone coming from all over the world, from different faiths, different walks of life. It was really beautiful," Mr. Read said.

"For me, it's a gathering of those who loved him," said Mr. Bateman, who met Rev. Moon 37 years ago and had difficulty quelling his tears. "This was like a royal occasion and a deserving one."

"I feel an era has passed, and I missed an opportunity to do even more," said Edmond Young, a Canadian who came to the Unification Church in the late 1970s and later had chances to go fishing with Rev. Moon. "I think many people will have many tears when they hear and understand his life."

"There's really no reason to be downcast, when you take in the entire scope of his life," said Elder Hudson W. Griffith, who worked with Rev. Moon and the Unification Church on ecumenical outreach through his HWG Ministry for Change in Henderson, Nev.

"While he is gone, it is the time to step back and mark the significant contributions he made, sometimes in the face of real adversity and scorn, in a very long life," he said.

"Here was a man highly criticized many times, but who was still willing to devote his entire life and millions of dollars all for the sake of bringing the body of Christ together in the world."