

Unification Church poised for new era, officials say

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GAPYEONG, South Korea — The Unification Church is strongly positioned to preserve and expand both its global spiritual outreach and its commercial holdings as tens of thousands of believers gather to say a final goodbye to founder Rev. Sun Myung Moon, two top church officials said in interviews here this week.

Acknowledging the religious movement founded in 1954 faces an unprecedented time of transition, the officials said Rev. Moon left clear lines of authority, both on the theological and business side, well before his death at a church-run complex here Sept. 2 of complications from pneumonia.

After an extended 13-day mourning period, the reverend's funeral will be held Saturday at the full-sized sports and cultural center recently constructed on the church's Cheongpyeong Holy Ground campus in the hills northeast of the capital of Seoul.

Representatives from the church's 12 regions and the 194 countries in which it operates are set to attend a Sept. 17 gathering two days after the ceremony in Gapyeong to hear from Hak Ja Han, Rev. Moon's wife of 52 years and possibly from Rev. Hyung-jin Moon, the founder's 33-year-old youngest son and spiritual successor, who has been the church's top religious director since 2008.

Another of the Rev. Moon's sons, 42-year-old Rev. Kook Jin Moon, has been tapped to head the Tongil Group, the South Korean business collective that oversees the church's commercial interests in North and South Korea, the United States and around the world, including hotels, carmakers, real estate and the media group that includes The Washington Times.

In-jin Moon, one of Rev. Moon's daughters, will be the lead pastor for the church's American flock.

The main legacy of Rev. Moon's work "has been inherited by his wife," Ho-yeul Ahn, general manager for the Tongil Group and the designated spokesman for Hyung-jin Moon, said through a translator. "Mrs. Moon will now be fully filling Rev. Moon's shoes."

Unification Church adherents have "almost entirely agreed to this type of structure and personnel," he added.

Mr. Ahn said the church's new spiritual leader, who was born in the United States and has earned degrees from Harvard and Harvard Divinity School, shares his father's work ethic and devotional discipline, church insiders say.

Discord and infighting have not been unknown among Rev. Moon's 10 children, in large part over the disposition of the Unification Church's many business ventures.

Press accounts here reported that members of the mourning party of Hyun Jin "Preston" Moon, the founder's third eldest son who has clashed with other family members about the church's financial interests, were blocked from attending the wake earlier this week to pay their respects to Rev. Moon.

The group sang and prayed outside the site before leaving without incident.

A new era

Of the church's transitional period, Mr. Ahn noted that the real growth of Christianity in its earliest days came after the death of Jesus on the cross, when a new generation of followers rose to spread his teachings.

"It grew as a faith much more quickly than when he was on the earth teaching and praying. Jesus' ministry became a spiritual phenomenon only after his teaching mission was fully completed," Mr. Ahn said.

The fact that Rev. Moon was able to pursue his own ministry over the course of decades and prepare his followers for the way forward after he died means "that his teaching will be that much better understood by believers even when he is gone," Mr. Ahn said.

Bo Hi Pak, who worked beside and translated for Rev. Moon for more than a half-century, said he shared Mr. Ahn's optimism.

"Reverend 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."

Overflow crowd

Men in black suits and women in cream-white dresses passed steadily throughout the day Wednesday to pay their last respects to Rev. Moon. Church officials say that more than 30,000 believers are expected to watch Saturday's "Seonghwa," or ascension, ceremony from inside the cultural center and from other locations on the campus, and all hotels within an hour's drive of the Gapyeong site have quickly been filled. Flowers had to be imported from Japan after local suppliers ran short, officials said.

Streams of pilgrims, most from Korea and Japan, but with sizable numbers from Western countries and Africa, climbed flights of white stone steps under overcast skies to enter the complex, signing in to an electronic visitors' book. The mood was somber but understated, with many arriving in couples or in family groups to spend the day.

Senior church members and specially invited guests were able to view the robe-draped reverend's body, placed in a glass-topped bier surrounded by flowers at the imposing white domed palace on Mount Cheonseong on a hillside overlooking the indoor stadium. The site includes a church training center, the hospital where Rev. Moon was treated in his final days, schools and meditation sites beside a lake.

After viewing a film of Rev. Moon's life and works, mourners were brought in groups of eight to a large portrait of the founder on a stage erected at the sports complex. As soft piano music played in the background, mourners placed a single rose or lily at the foot of the large oil portrait before moving to the side of an elevated incense altar where members of the Moon family were lined up throughout the 14-hour daily viewing sessions to exchange with the visitors a traditional bow.

Ribbon-draped bouquets from South Korean President Lee Myung-bak and other national and international figures ringed the entire bowl of the arena. As mourners departed, many weeping or wiping their eyes, they could record their thoughts with marking pens on giant walls set up just outside.

"I will love you forever. I will fulfill your dream for my country, the Philippines!" one follower wrote.

Although his voice cracked from emotion several times during the interview, Mr. Pak also noted that some church members were also joking that the funeral could provide a reason for the reverend's followers to redouble their efforts to amplify his message and his mission.

"People are saying: 'Now Reverend Moon is looking down on us from the sky every moment of the day. I must do my job as well as I can. This is no time for delinquency.'"