

Unification Church leaders vow to complete Rev. Moon's mission

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September 3, 2012
The Washington Post



(Matt McClain/For The Washington Post) - Mimiko Liba adds to a card following a gathering Monday in honor of Rev. Sun Myung Moon at the Unification Church of Washington, D.C.

Bright new banners stretched across the front gate and doorway of the Unification Church's Washington headquarters Monday, hailing the Rev. Sun Myung Moon as a "True Peace-Loving Global Citizen."

Inside, 45 followers sat in silence as a pastor described Moon, who died Sunday at age 92, as a messiah whose passing in no way changes his status as the spiritual leader whom Jesus asked to complete his mission on Earth.

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"He'll always be the messiah to us, and messiahs do not die," said the Rev. Zagery Oliver, 56, who was recruited into Moon's movement when "a beautiful young Japanese woman engaged me on the campus" of Queens College in New York City 35 years ago.

The faithful insisted Monday that the religion Moon founded 58 years ago and brought to America in the 1970s would continue without him. But former members and researchers who monitor the Unification movement's worldwide business ventures say key aspects of Moon's empire remain very much in flux.

From the Washington Times, Moon's conservative daily newspaper, which has been the subject of an intra-family power struggle in recent years, to United Press International, the news wire service controlled by Moon's son Preston, the future of some of the Unification movement's prime properties is uncertain.

Last year, a church-linked company, National Hospitality Corp., sold the Sheraton Pentagon City Hotel on South Orme Street in Arlington, which had rooms permanently reserved for Moon and his wife, to Connecticut-based HEI Hotels and Resorts. Moon's estate in McLean, known as Jefferson House, was also sold, as was the Atlantic Video Center, a downtown D.C. video-production facility, according to church documents on a Moon-affiliated Web site.

The Washington Times, which reached its zenith in influence and circulation in the 1980s, shuttered its sports and local news sections and laid off more than half its news staff two years ago after a fraternal face-off over succession within the Moon clan led to a cutoff of church subsidies to the paper.

Three former Times executives, speaking on the condition of anonymity because they fear reprisal from church leaders, said the paper has lost more than \$2 billion since its founding in 1981 and never made a profit in a quarter or month.

Three other executives who remained loyal to Moon bought the Times back from Preston Moon, the Seattle-based son who has been at odds with his siblings, for \$1 in 2010 and have sought to revive it as a conservative voice focused on political coverage. But editors at the Times said the paper has not been able to regain circulation lost in the years since the Washington Examiner entered the market as a daily with a conservative editorial stance and since Politico launched as a news service aimed at political junkies.

Still, Moon's children are expected to try to keep the Times alive because "they recognize the value and prestige the paper brings them, especially in Korea and Japan," said Larry Zilliox, an Arlington-based researcher who has tracked the Unification movement for more than 25 years.

Moon-affiliated companies in the United States and around the world, however, continue to be among the largest players in the fishing industry, supplying much of the sushi served in U.S. restaurants, and are profitably engaged in producing cars in North Korea, helicopters in South Korea and religious icons in Japan, along with Moon's resorts and real estate operations throughout Asia and South America.

"Overall, they're in a much better position, especially in their Asian businesses, than they were five years ago," Zilliox said.

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Relations between Preston Moon and his siblings remain fractious. "Put it this way: They're going to move on separate paths," said Michael Marshall, spokesman for Preston's Global Peace Festival Foundation. Nonetheless, a concerted effort to discard unprofitable operations over the past few years has improved the overall financial picture, according to several analysts who watch the Moon empire closely.

Prospects for the Unification religion, however, are less clear. (Many Catholic and Protestant denominations have long rejected Unificationism's claim to be a Christian faith because it has added text to the Bible and rejects the idea of a second coming of Christ.)

"We're confident we're going to grow and expand," said Randall Francis, the Unification Church's district pastor for the Mid-Atlantic states. He said the church has about 1,500 members in the District, Virginia and Maryland and is expanding beyond its marble cathedral at 16th Street and Columbia Road NW, which it bought from the Mormon Church in 1977, to hold services at Bladensburg High School in Prince George's County and at rented halls in Northern Virginia.

Francis, who was introduced to the Unification Church at a rally Moon held at the Washington Monument in 1976 and has been married for 30 years to a Japanese woman to whom he was assigned by Moon, said that despite the battle among Moon's children ("a very painful situation for our whole church family") and "the natural downsizing of some of the business entities," the religion "has become a little more accepted in society as we became families and seemed less radical."

But outside observers say that the church's appeal has been drastically diminished in recent years and that an increasing number of children of Moon followers are breaking with the faith.

"They are not street-recruiting anymore, though they have increased their Internet presence," said Steve Hassan, a former Moon follower who considers Unification to be a cult and has worked for three decades to help members leave the fold. He estimates the church's U.S. membership to be 10,000 or fewer.

Church spokeswoman Heather Thalheimer said that although some second-generation members have left, most remain in the faith, "and as first-generation parents, that's what really excites us about the future of the movement." Church officials have put membership numbers at about 100,000 in the United States and 3 million worldwide, but former members say those figures are inflated at least tenfold.

"This is an organization that has vast wealth and political involvement," Hassan said. "The key to their future is going to be how greedy Moon's children are and whether they will realize that they can't keep the religion growing if they are fighting among themselves."

Moon, who had his largest operations in Korea and Japan, spent a lot of time in Washington, especially in the 1980s and '90s.

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"I consider Washington to be the city with the blessing," he told followers in McLean in 1999. "If it had not been for President Carter persecuting the Unification Church in the late 1970s, I would have established the Unification Church HQ in Washington, D.C."

Church leaders said Moon's spiritual role will be taken on by his wife, Hak Ja Han, known in the church as True Mother, and in the United States by his daughter In Jin Moon.

"For us, 'messiah' means True Parents, who take responsibility for what Adam and Eve could not accomplish in their lifetimes and what Jesus could not do because he did not marry," Thalheimer said.

She said that under Unification theology, Moon and his wife “continue in the role of True Parents in the future, and there is no return of the messiah.”

In recent years, as Moon fell ill and became less involved in daily operations, the church shifted some traditional rites.

In place of the marriages Moon arranged for members, often pairing Americans with Korean or Japanese spouses who were strangers until Moon chose them for a mass wedding ceremony, the church has moved toward “an approach not dissimilar to eHarmony, where we match people together according to their interests,” Francis said. He said matches are still made mainly “across cultures; we encourage that because it breaks down barriers.”

Although church members said they are not worried about their future, Hassan said he has heard from longtime members whose view of Moon’s family as the perfect model has been shattered by infighting among his children.

“I’m very worried about hard-core devotees who have been in the church for 35 years and they’re unemployable outside Moon’s world,” he said. “I was there when Moon said, ‘Follow me and we’ll take care of you for the rest of your life.’ Now some of those people are waking up and realizing there’s no one to take care of them.”