

## A Church That Encourages Mixed-Race Marriages for World Peace

Tebogo Monama  
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*The Unification Church was started by Reverend Sun Myung Moon and his wife, pictured, Dr Ha Ja Kan Moon in the 1950s*

Ami Smart has always known that she would share her wedding day with hundreds of other people in her church.

But she thought, unlike other members of the Unification Church, she would choose her own husband. That is until her mother introduced her to her Congolese husband Hyo-Isak Ngama.

Smart, whose father is Nigerian and mother is Japanese and were married through the church, is a second generation member of the Unification Church, which hosts mass weddings called "blessing ceremonies" for church members.

Ngama, who Smart met only four times before their wedding in February, is Congolese and lives in the UK. He moved to England when he was 9-years-old.

The Unification Church was started by Reverend Sun Myung Moon and his wife Dr Ha Ja Kan Moon in the 1950s.

Members believe the Moons are their true parents, and they came to earth to complete Jesus Christ's mission to unify the world as he died before getting married and having children. The Moonies, as the church members are called, believe Ha Ja Kan Moon is God's only begotten daughter, and her husband, the begotten son. Reverend Moon died in 2012.

When the Moons started the blessing ceremonies, three couples took part. In February, in celebration of

the Moon's 60th wedding anniversary, 6000 couples - including Smart and Ngama - married and 9000 others renewed their vows in Seoul, South Korea. The ceremonies include marrying couples from different cultures as a means of unifying the world. The marriage ceremony was beamed live to churches across the continent.



*Some of the couples who got married at the wedding*

Smart said: "I actually met my husband through my mom, and I have only met him four times. The first time was the summer of 2018 and the last time we met was last September when we had our engagement ceremony. The engagement ceremony is basically that, before you get blessed, you make a commitment ceremony. I know that I am with the right man because I trust my mom's decision."

Smart said marriage wasn't a top priority in her life. "I'm not really like the other second-generation children. I was basically waiting to finish university before I got married. My mom introduced him to me at the time I needed him the most.

"I was going through a lot with my academics, socially and emotionally. Meeting him was what helped me go through a difficult time," she said, adding that at some point she thought she would find a husband herself.

She wanted to complete her studies in physical therapy at the Sun Moon University before finding a husband. She, like most church members, received a scholarship to study at the institution.

Abdoulaye Wone, the head of the family department for the Universal Peace Federation in Africa, said the church believed strengthening families would improve world problems.

"Money is not everything. We need to develop a global culture of service. The beginning for us is strengthening the family, and marriage and this will, in turn, reduce crime and HIV/Aids.

"The mass weddings are like a demonstration. When you demonstrate, you don't do it alone. It is young people proclaiming that marriage works. We are saying, we support traditional marriage," Wone said.

He said couples choose how they get married. Others, like Smart, have their marriages arranged by their parents. Some find their own partners. And others, like Bosco Dannon from Benin, ask the church to find them partners. Dannon said he asked the church to find him an international bride, and they matched him with Cameroonian Miranda Nkamgoh. The couple has not met yet, but they talk everyday on video calls and social media.

"I have not met her, but I know that I love her. I believe the most common way to bring peace is to build families with prayer and meeting people who are different from you. This is our way of life."

While Dannon was in South Korea, Nkamgoh was watching the blessing ceremony at 3am in Cameroon wearing a wedding dress. While Dannon could not join the other couples in the gallery, after the ceremony, he sported a gold wedding ring. Nkamgoh did the same back home.

Dannon plans to go and meet his bride in March, and they will travel together to Seoul in August to get blessed there.

Wone said the marriages are not a quick fix.

"Thirty percent of marriages end in divorce. It all has to do with personal responsibility. People need to make an effort. You cannot have things on a silver platter, and not make an effort," he said.

Smart believes the church's teachings on love and peace have improved a lot of people's lives.

"The main thing that brings the world together is love. Without love, friends can't come together, families can't come together.

"I think Reverend Moon's idea of bringing the world together through marriage has really worked. If you are mixed, you can't hate one part of yourself. You have to love all parts of you. It works 100%," she beamed.

On whether the church was a cult, Smart said: "People say a lot of things if it doesn't match with what they believe. A lot of people say Muslims are terrorists. It doesn't mean they are. A lot of people say our church is a cult. It doesn't mean we are a cult.

"The reason people call it a cult might be because people don't believe Reverend Moon is the messiah. Think about it. What does a messiah mean? A messiah means someone who comes to save the earth. Anyone can be a messiah; you can be a messiah. I can be a messiah for my family, my nation. A president can be a messiah.

"The stereotype that people have is that a messiah must be one person. The messiah must be Jesus Christ or Muhammad. Those people are guiding their people, and so why not Reverend Moon? Why not Dr Hak Ja Han?" she said.