

Sanctuary Church of Newfoundland, Wayne County, Pennsylvania Blesses AR15s

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Amid an intense national debate over gun control after last week's mass shooting at a Florida high school, a controversial Wayne County church is co-sponsoring a pro-gun rights dinner Saturday, four days before it wants couples to bring semi-automatic rifles to a blessing ceremony.

World Peace and Unification Sanctuary in Newfoundland, Wayne County, also known as Sanctuary Church, said couples who can't purchase an AR-15 rifle or similar weapon before the Feb. 28 service should buy a \$700 gift certificate from a gun store to show they intend to purchase one.

"All of the weapons in the ceremony will be checked to make sure they are unloaded, with a zip tie so that no bullets can be inserted," Richard A. Panzer, Sanctuary Church president, said in an email. "We are inviting local and state police to be on the premises, so that everything goes safely."

Sanctuary Church is led by the Rev. Hyung Jin Moon, whose late father, Sun Myung Moon, founded the Unification Church in the 1950s. The church espouses a social conservatism, including a division of the sexes and opposition to alternative lifestyles.

Moon, who refers to himself as the "Second King" and anointed heir to the "True Father," also called on his followers to arm themselves to defend their families, their communities and "the nation of Cheon Il Guk," the kingdom of God the church believes is prophesied in biblical Scripture.

The church's activities come as the killing of 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, by a former student armed with an AR-15 rifle renewed calls for stricter gun laws.

In an email, Panzer said he did not see a connection "since we have no ill intent and since these firearms are for self-defense."

"Regarding the school shootings, if any of the teachers had been allowed to carry a firearm, many lives could have been saved. Several states have passed legislation to allow exactly that," he said.

Through its Rod of Iron Ministries affiliate, the church is among the sponsors for a "President Trump Thank You Dinner" scheduled Saturday evening at Best Western Inn at Hunt's Landing in Matamoras,

Pike County. Kahr Arms, a gun manufacturing company based in Greeley owned by Moon's brother, is also one of the sponsors.

The dinner will benefit the Gun Owners Foundation and specifically efforts to enact the Reciprocity Act, which would require states to honor another state's concealed carry permits.



Larry Pratt, executive director emeritus of Gun Owners of America, a Washington lobbying organization, will deliver the keynote address, but Moon will speak "on the sovereign rights of citizens to 'keep and bear arms,'" according to a post on the Rod of Iron Ministries Facebook page.

"He will also speak on the responsibility of members of the Body of Christ to build and defend God's Kingdom on earth," the post said.

In an announcement on its website of the Feb. 28 blessed marriage ceremony in Newfoundland, the church called on couples to bring the accouterments of the nation of Cheon Il Guk, including crowns representing the sovereignty of kings and queens and a "rod of iron." The latter was identified "as an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle or equivalents such as an AK semiautomatic rifle."

"If unable to purchase and legally transport such a 'rod of iron' because of laws barring the purchase of such weapons, or other reasons, couples are invited to purchase a \$700 gift certificate from a gun store, as evidence of their intent to purchase a 'rod of iron' in the future," the church said.

In his email, Panzer said several hundred couples from around the world are expected for the ceremony. In line with the church's teaching that all of us as God's sons and daughters have the blessing of sovereignty over the earth, the couples are asked to bring firearms "to show their willingness to defend their families, communities and nation."

The Southern Poverty Law Center, an advocacy organization based in Montgomery, Alabama, that monitors extremist and hate groups, branded the church a cult with an anti-LGBT agenda.

Panzer said the SPLC should stop using smear tactics against organizations that hold Judeo-Christian beliefs. Just as Sanctuary Church does not endorse adultery, lying or other sins the Bible says to avoid, it does not support or endorse same-sex intimate relationships, he said.

"There is a big difference between homosexuals and the gay political agenda," Panzer said. "We disagree with their lifestyle, but have no problem talking with them and respecting their freedoms."

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