

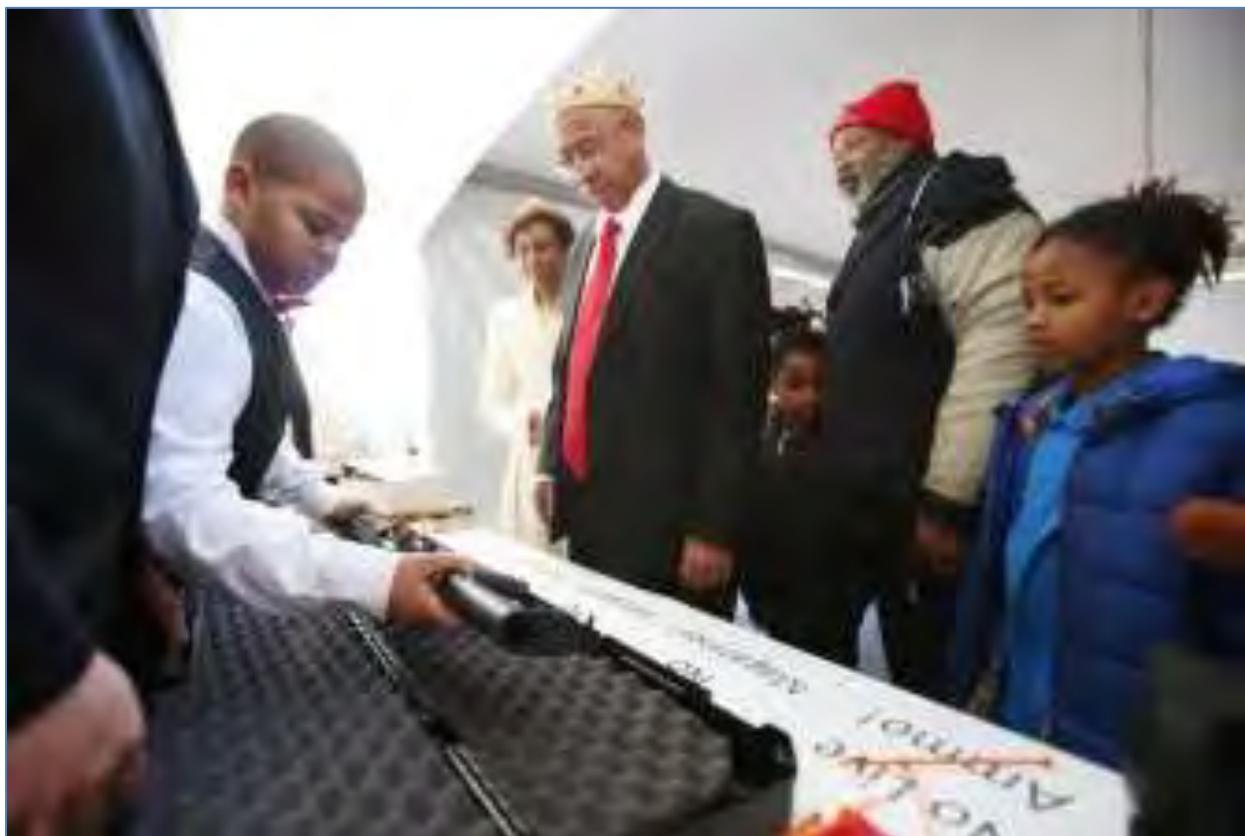
Hyung Jin Moon's Sanctuary Church: Faith and firearms - Commitment ceremony

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THE CITIZENS' VOICE



JAKE DANNA STEVENS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER A flower is placed into a rifle as prayers are conducted at the World Peace and Unification Sanctuary in Newfoundland on Wednesday.



A AR-15 rifle is rendered inoperable with zip-ties before a family warships at the World Peace and Unification Sanctuary in Newfoundland, Pa, Wednesday Feb. 28, 2018. Attendees who are followers of Christ brought their AR-15 rifles, drank holy wine and exchanged wedding vows in a commitment ceremony. Jake Danna Stevens / Staff Photographer

DREHER TWP. — Proclaiming a God-given right to self-defense, several hundred members of a church in Wayne County attended a marriage blessing ceremony Wednesday featuring semi-automatic rifles symbolically as the “rod of iron” referenced in the Bible.

World Peace and Unification Sanctuary in Newfoundland, Dreher Twp., which believes the AR-15 rifle symbolizes the “rod of iron” in the Biblical book of Revelation, encouraged couples to bring the weapons to the commitment ceremony.



Coming amid intense national debate over gun control after the Florida high school massacre two weeks ago by a gunman toting an AR-15, the event at the church drew a few dozen members of the media and about a dozen protesters.

Several congregants brought weapons to the ceremony, unloaded with magazines removed, and zip ties through and around the open chambers. Congregants also wore gold and silver crowns during the service, a few of which were adorned with ammunition rounds.

“Today’s ceremony is a marriage blessing for couples having asked to attend with crowns and AR-15 rifles as religious accoutrements. It is not a blessing of inanimate firearms,” said Tim Elder, the church’s director of world missions.

The ceremony had been scheduled long before the Florida school shooting, and the church did not consider canceling or delaying it, congregants said.

Also known as Sanctuary Church, the congregation is led by the Rev. Hyung Jin Sean 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,” urges 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.

Through its Rod of Iron Ministries affiliate, the church also was among the sponsors for a pro-gun-rights “President Trump Thank You Dinner” this past Saturday in Matamoras, Pike County. Kahr Arms, a gun manufacturing company based in Greeley, Pike County, and owned by Moon’s brother, also was a sponsor of that event.

During the ceremony, as Moon and his wife knelt on an altar and she handed him an AR-15 type rifle, Elder said, “This rod of iron, spoken of in the Bible, as the means by which Christ returning will rule his kingdom.”

In giving the blessing, Moon said, “Father, we come to celebrate the gifts of family, the marriage, the gift of royalty that you bestow upon us, as you state in scripture ... let no man take thy crown.”

Outside, protesters holding handmade cardboard posters and signs gathered in the berm of Route 507 along a fence of the church property. Some signs said, “Worship God, Not Guns,” “This Is Not A Sanctuary,” “God Loves Everyone! She Really Does ...” above a rainbow, “Father Forgive Them,” and “God Doesn’t Bless Guns.”

Ingrid Woerner of Lords Valley held a fluorescent pink sign emblazoned with “Shame.”

“I come (here today to protest) because I am opposed to guns being blessed and being revered by a family who owns a gun factory in my neighborhood,” Woerner said. “I am opposed to the use of guns, not for hunting, but for killing people.”

Numerous congregants giving interviews to media members after the service spoke of the ceremony being about their right to keep and bear arms for self-defense.

“There’s two sides to the issue in the country, as we well know. There’s some people in the country that say we should not carry arms, and there’s some people (saying) that we have the right to bear arms,” said Lewis Pearlman of Philadelphia, a 44-year member of the church who brought a gun to the service. “I’m of ... the opinion that we do have the right to bear arms, and only for the purpose of protecting and defending our families, not to make war. It’s a weapon of defense, to keep the peace. Amen.”

Jim Stephens of Maryland agreed, calling law-abiding gun owners “the good guys” in a battle against evil.

“If someone, like in Texas, they come into a church and start shooting people, the neighborly thing to do is get your gun and go kill that guy,” Stephens said. “Unfortunately, there’s evil and we have to be able to protect ourselves in our community.”

Susan Brunhofer, who moved from Colorado to Newfoundland in 2016 to be near the church, views the gun issue as scriptural fulfillment.

“This is a time when we really need to honor the God gift of life that we’re given, and the way to honor that is to protect it, and even at the cost of our life if it’s necessary,” Brunhofer said.

“Hopefully, I will never have to use this gun. No one wants to use the gun, but we can and that’s the point — we can.”

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