

Feuds a concern as children inherit Sun Myung Moon's empire

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In this July 22 photo, Rev. Sun Myung Moon, second from left, poses with his wife, Hak Ja Han Moon, second from right; his sons Hyung-jin Moon, left, and Kook Jin Moon; during the closing ceremony of the 2012 Peace Cup Suwon in Suwon, South Korea. / By Ahn Young-joon, AP

GAPYEONG, South Korea (AP) — Unification Church patriarch Sun Myung Moon leaves behind children who have been groomed to lead a religious movement famous for its mass weddings and business interests — if family feuds don't bring down the empire.

Moon, the charismatic and controversial founder of the church, died Monday at age 92 at a church-owned hospital near his home in Gapyeong County, northeast of Seoul, two weeks after being hospitalized with pneumonia, church officials said.

Flags flew at half-staff at a Unification Church in Seoul as followers trickled in, some wiping away tears as they wondered what would happen to a movement defined for decades by the man who founded it in 1954.

The Rev. Moon and wife Hak Ja Han have 10 surviving children and in recent years, the aging Moon had been handing power on the church's religious, charitable and business entities to them.

But there have been reports of family rifts. One son sued his mother's missionary group in 2011, demanding the return of more than \$22 million he claimed was sent without his consent from a company he runs to her charity. His mother's group eventually returned the money after court mediation.

Church officials said the son, known as Preston, is no longer in charge of any church operations.

Moon's death could expose further rifts within the church, said Kim Heung-soo, who teaches the history of Christianity at Mokwon University in the central city of Daejeon.

"There is a high possibility that internal discord will deepen," Kim said.

The church has amassed dozens of businesses in the United States, South Korea and even North Korea, including hotels, a ski resort, sports teams, schools, universities and hospitals.

One expert said the church's business prospects appear brighter than its religious future. Tark Ji-il, a professor of religion at Busan Presbyterian University, described the church not as a religious organization but as a corporation made up of people with similar religious beliefs.

The church won't give details about how much its businesses are worth, other than to describe them as part of a "multibillion-dollar" empire.

Many new religious movements collapse after their founders die, but Tark said the Unification Church would likely survive. But its success as a religious entity will depend on how it smoothly it resolves any family feuds and how well Moon's offspring rise to fill their father's charismatic role, he said.

Moon himself served 13 months at a U.S. federal prison in the mid-1980s after a New York City jury convicted him of filing false tax returns.

And there has been tragedy in the family. One son committed suicide in 1999, jumping from the 17th floor of a Reno, Nevada, hotel, officials said. Two other sons reportedly also died early, one in a train wreck and another in a car accident.

Key to the church's religious future is the Rev. Hyung-jin Moon, the U.S.-born 33-year-old who was tapped to succeed his father several years ago to serve as head of the church.

Known as "Sean" back at Harvard, where he studied, he is more fluent in English than Korean and has signs of his father's charisma but with an American sensibility. His sermons, delivered in English, are designed to appeal to the next generation of "Unificationists," the name followers prefer over the moniker "Moonies."

He told the Associated Press in 2009 that he questioned Christianity when he was younger. But his father stood by him throughout the phase, and asked followers not to criticize him when he turned to Buddhism briefly after his brother's death in Nevada.

An older brother, Kook-jin Moon, a 42-year-old also known as Justin, runs the Tongil Group, the church's business arm.

The church has amassed dozens of business ventures over the years, including the New Yorker Hotel, a midtown Manhattan art deco landmark and the Yongpyong ski resort in South Korea. It gave the University of Bridgeport \$110 million over more than a decade to keep the Connecticut school operating. Moon also founded the Washington Times newspaper in 1982.

The church also owns a professional soccer team, schools and hospitals. It also operates the Potonggang Hotel in Pyongyang and jointly operates the Pyeonghwa Motors automaker in North Korea.

"Unification of South Korea and North Korea was a long-cherished ambition of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon," church official Kim Kab-yong said in Seoul. "He invested a lot in this. We are so heartbroken that he could not accomplish this."

Sun Myung Moon, who was born in a rural part of what is now North Korea, founded the movement after migrating south during the Korean War. He wrote in his autobiography that he received a personal calling from Jesus Christ to carry out his work on Earth.

The church's doctrine is a mixture of Christian, Confucian and traditional Korean values, emphasizing the importance of the family unit but also encouraging multicultural unions.

Moon conducted his first mass wedding in Seoul in the early 1960s, and the "blessing ceremonies" grew in scale over the years. He encouraged his followers to call him and his wife their "True Parents," and often paired up the newlyweds himself before the mass ceremonies.

Richard Panzer, president of the Unification Theological Seminary in Barrytown, New York, called Moon "a historical figure in the history of religion." He said Moon made an "enormous contribution to understanding of the suffering heart of God and a lot of contributions toward world peace."

The seminary, established by Moon in 1975, is an interfaith institution with Buddhist, Christian and Muslim professors, Panzer said.

The Unification Church claims 3 million followers, though ex-members and critics put the number at no more than 100,000.

Joo Seung-ja, 64, said news of Moon's death was hard to accept.

"I don't know how to express this feeling," she said. "Since he taught us true love, we will live our lives by preaching true love throughout the whole world till the end," she said at

Church officials said Moon's funeral will take place Sept. 15 after a 13-day mourning period, with a massive new sports and cultural center built recently on the church's sprawling campus accepting mourners starting Thursday.

Associated Press writers Kim Hyun-ah in Gapyeong and Hyung-jin Kim and Foster Klug in Seoul contributed to this report.