



Thousands mourn 'messiah' at elaborate Moon funeral

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GAPYEONG, South Korea — More than 30,000 tearful mourners attended the elaborate, flower-strewn funeral in South Korea of their "messiah" and controversial Unification Church founder Sun Myung Moon.

Moon died of complications from pneumonia on September 3 aged 92.

His church, whose members were mocked as "Moonies" by the media, was renowned for its mass weddings of thousands -- sometimes tens of thousands -- of couples and for its multi-billion-dollar business interests.

In Saturday's ceremony that bore the trappings of a state funeral, Moon's carved, red-lacquer coffin was carried by men in military-style uniforms into a stadium at the church headquarters in Gapyeong, 60 kilometres (35 miles) east of Seoul.

The vast, covered arena, dominated by an altar where a giant portrait of Moon stood on a landscaped bank of floral tributes, was packed to capacity with church members -- thousands of whom had flown in from overseas.

Many sobbed quietly as the honour guard, accompanied by members of Moon's immediate family, moved through the stadium and placed the coffin at the foot of the portrait.

Over the past 10 days, more than 150,000 mourners had paid their last respects at Moon's portrait before his burial Saturday on a hillside overlooking the sprawling Gapyeong complex.

Eulogies were led by the youngest of Moon's seven sons and his spiritual successor, Hyung Jin Moon, who vowed to continue the work of the "true father, saviour and messiah" following his "transition into the spirit world".

Revered by his followers but denounced by critics as a cult-building charlatan who brainwashed church members, Moon was a deeply divisive figure whose shadowy business dealings saw him jailed in the United States.

The teachings of the Unification Church are based on the Bible but with new interpretations, and Moon saw his role as completing the unfulfilled mission of Jesus to restore humanity to a state of "sinless" purity.

While it claims a worldwide following of three million, experts suggest the core membership is far smaller although it still carries a commercial clout that allows the church to punch way above its doctrinal weight.

"I'm very sad. As I had been praying a lot for him, I thought he would live longer. But he passed away so suddenly," said Anja Brina, a mourner from Germany.

"He was not a god. I think he was like a messiah, through whom you can reach God," Brina said.

"He was the reason for my existence as he coupled my father and mother," said Hur Yuna, 18, whose Japanese and Korean parents married after being personally paired off by Moon.

He often matched couples from different nationalities with no common culture or language, in the belief that it promoted the universality of mankind.

The sobbing in the stadium rose to a wail at one point as Moon's close aide, Bo Hi Pak, broke down while speaking of his desire to see Moon's face "one last time".

The funeral was webcast live on the church website (<http://sunghwa.tongilgyo.org>) and shown on giant screens around the Gapyeong compound.

After the ceremony, Moon's coffin was driven in a funeral cortege, headed by a black sedan bearing another giant portrait, to the burial site along a road lined with flag-waving mourners.

It was finally lowered into a marble-lined grave watched by Moon's widow and children.

Born to a farming family in 1920 in what is now North Korea, Moon said he had a vision aged 15 in which Jesus asked him to complete his work on Earth.

Rejected by Korean Protestant churches, he founded the Unification Church in 1954 -- a year after the Korean War.

As the church rose to prominence in the 1970s and 80s, spreading to the United States, it spawned a business empire encompassing construction, food, education, the media and even a professional football club.

Media holdings include the Washington Times newspaper and United Press International news agency.

Throughout his life, Moon assiduously courted political leaders in what critics said was a bid to lend legitimacy to his church which has been condemned as heretical by some Christian organisations.

Without Moon's unifying presence, some experts see potential for conflict between his sons who control the church's religious and business arms and who do not command the same loyalty as their father from overseas chapters.