

'Prosperity Gospel' of Singapore Megachurch Subject of Reuters Article

Editor's Note: *Charisma News does not agree with some of the points in this article, but thought it was noteworthy to see how the world views the Pentecostal church.*

"God is here, God is here," croons Singapore church official Sun Ho as she struts across a neon-lit stage and thousands of people in the congregation pump their hands and sing along.

Kong Hee, the church's founding pastor and Sun Ho's husband, then takes the stage. In keeping with the electrifying mood, he invites his followers to speak "in tongues" and a pulsing murmur echoes through the auditorium of 8,000 people.

During the service, ushers hand out envelopes for donations, which consume at least a tenth of the salaries of most church members, going to fund different ministries, mission trips and special events.

Welcome to one of Asia's most profitable churches: Singapore's City Harvest.

With a "prosperity gospel" that blends the spiritual and the material, City Harvest and other Pentecostal megachurches in the wealthy Asian city-state have perfected a popular and lucrative model.

Now they are working to export it to the world and turn Singapore into a hub for evangelical Christianity.

"We want to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth," said pastor Bobby Chaw, City Harvest's missions director.

Evangelizing missions by City Harvest, including pop concerts

by Sun Ho in China, Taiwan and the United States, have helped it gather followers across Asia and set up 49 affiliate churches in Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan and India.

City Harvest—whose founder faces trial, along with five others, on charges of criminal breach of trust and falsifying accounts over the use of nearly S\$51 million (\$40.2 million) in church funds—also has a bible college that trains church leaders from countries such as Norway, Kazakhstan and Zimbabwe.

Last year the founding pastor of another Singapore megachurch, New Creation's Joseph Prince, toured the United States, preaching to a sell-out crowd at Long Beach Arena in Los Angeles and filling the country's largest church, Lakewood in Texas.

Prince's book "The Power of Right Believing" made it to number two on *The New York Times'* best-seller list in the advice and "how to" category.

Success, Scandal and Controversies

Asia is a growth market for Christianity, with the religion estimated to be growing 10 times faster than in Europe, according to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts.

While the idea of megachurches originated in the United States, some of the largest are in Asia, notably South Korea's Yoido Full Gospel Church, with about 1 million members.

Packaging the traditional biblical message into a more dynamic format of pop-rock music, lively services and social media has lured a new generation of followers and turned the churches into major enterprises.

New Creation, which says it has a congregation of 30,000, collected S\$75.5 million in tithes in 2012, while City Harvest

took in S\$38.6 million in 2009, accounts filed with Singapore's Commissioner of Charities show.

"Whatever method that can most effectively convey the message to our generation, we will do it," said Chaw, who is also the vice chairman of City Harvest's management board.

City Harvest, which says its congregation numbered nearly 20,000 in 2012, with about 62 percent single, ventured into the entertainment industry after seeing how enthusiastically Chinese-speaking youth in Asia responded to Mandarin pop music from Taiwan.

The church's Crossover Project led Sun Ho to collaborate with Asian stars such as Jay Chou and she broke into the U.S. market under the guidance of producer David Foster, producer-songwriter Wyclef Jean and other veterans.

With a wealth-affirming model and efforts to engage the young, fast-growing Pentecostal megachurches have helped to dilute Buddhism as Singapore's traditionally dominant religion.

The most recent census showed the proportion of Christians rose 18.3 percent in 2010 from 14.6 percent in 2000, while the number of Buddhists fell to 33.3 percent from 42.5 percent.

Rolland Teo, 25, whose family is Buddhist, said his view of religion as "very static" changed when he joined City Harvest.

"It was something more dynamic, more relational," Teo said. "This was something I couldn't find in my parents' beliefs."

But allegations of corruption have accompanied success.

City Harvest's Crossover Project is at the centre of charges that Kong and five other officials financed his wife's singing career by funneling church funds of S\$24 million into sham investments and then used S\$26.6 million more to cover up the deals.

Kong and the others deny the charges. Kong's wife is not on trial and has resumed her executive duties at the church.

In South Korea, David Yonggi Cho, Kong's spiritual mentor and founder of Yoido Full Gospel Church, was recently found guilty of embezzling \$14 million in church donations to buy stocks owned by his son, at four times their market value.

Prosperity Gospel

Megachurches dismiss accusations of being wealth-obsessed, although Chaw has said that "prosperity is a byproduct of obeying God's commandments."

Critics say wealth is not necessarily a bad thing but they decry selfish enrichment at the expense of helping others.

"The prosperity gospel is a very big movement, a very visible movement, that doesn't represent what I believe to be biblical Christianity," said Paul Choo, founding pastor at Gospel Light Christian Church.

But a growing number of people in Singapore have found an affinity with the megachurch doctrine of faith entwined with wealth and personal well-being.

"That's quite attractive to many socially mobile Singaporeans who, in going up the class strata, do look for some moral bearings," said Terence Chong, a researcher at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Tithing—the donation of 10 percent of income to the church—is assumed by some to be a way of "buying" God's love. But New Creation member Jared Asalli and others say it is a way of thanking God.

Either way, the practice helps swell megachurch coffers.

City Harvest raised S\$22.7 million with its Building Fund Campaign, helping it to buy a stake of 39.2 percent in the

venue for its services, Suntec Singapore Convention and Exhibition Centre, for S\$97.8 million in 2012.

New Creation's Miracle Seed event raised S\$21 million in one day, contributing to the S\$348 million it spent on building the 5,000-seat Star Performing Arts Centre, one of four venues where it holds services.

"I don't think there's been any era as materialistic as this one," said Choo of Gospel Light Christian Church. "If it promises wealth, it will have some ready audience."

Editing by Jason Szep, John O'Callaghan and Clarence Fernandez

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