

# 6 Ways to Prevent an Embarrassing Ministry Scandal

The recent sentencing of **Dr. Yonggi Cho** of South Korea is a reminder that we need a fresh commitment to integrity.

I was devastated to learn last week that South Korean megachurch pastor David Yonggi Cho was found guilty of embezzling \$12 million in church funds. I was aware that the famous hero of faith was struggling with problems at his massive congregation, Yoido Full Gospel Church, which is in Seoul. Cho's 56-year effort to build what is now the world's largest church made him one of the most respected spiritual fathers in the **Pentecostal movement**.

Some American leaders knew that Cho's problems were linked to his son Cho Hee-jun, who was also convicted and sentenced to three years in prison for his role in an elaborate stock scheme that involved millions of dollars of church money. Hee-jun was immediately jailed. Thankfully, the elder Cho will not have to serve his prison sentence (it was suspended), but he will have to pay a \$4.7 million fine.

I still respect Dr. Cho. A former Buddhist, he had a dramatic conversion to Jesus and was used by the Holy Spirit to bring the gospel to a nation that for centuries was closed to Christianity. Cho remains a legend. But the events of last week serve to remind us that even the greatest spiritual giants have feet of clay, and even the biggest ministries can fall into scandal if principles of integrity are not practiced.

This seems the best time to offer the simple reminders below. Today a new generation of megachurch pastors and ministry leaders has emerged, and this generation may not be aware that a few wrong moves could put them in the middle of the next big

ministry scandal. If you are a leader, please post these rules in your board room, in your CEO's office and in your ministry's employee manual. If you are not in leadership, please pray that these rules are followed at your church, no matter how big it is:

**1. Never build a cult of personality.** The top reason ministries fail is that the organization starts revolving around a person instead of Christ. I don't care how gifted or anointed the leader is—if he (or she) allows others to put him on a pedestal or if he climbs there himself, a fall is coming. Paul told the Corinthians, “For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11, NASB). Paul didn't build his ministry on himself. In addition, he shared the spotlight with his successor, Timothy, and his other team members. If a leader can't share power, he is headed toward disaster.

**2. Develop a culture of openness.** Healthy ministries encourage staff members and church members to give input. I've found that in ministries that experienced scandal, employees constantly felt intimidated, controlled or even threatened. Did you know that the word *occult* comes from a Latin word that means “secret” or “covered up”? Ministries that engage in cover-up or secrecy are not managing their work in a Christian manner.

**3. Insist on financial transparency.** Churches and ministries are funded by donors, and donors have a God-given right to know that their funds are being used properly. Ministry leaders also have a God-given stewardship, and they must acknowledge that the funds given to them are not for personal gain. All financial transactions of a ministry should be scrutinized by designated leaders (including an outside accountant) to prevent corruption.

**4. Don't build a family dynasty.** There is nothing in the Bible that says a Christian leader is supposed to turn his ministry

over to his family. And nepotism is often the cause of financial scandal. If a leader stacks his board or church staff with family members, they will be tempted to make financial decisions that benefit themselves. And in many cases, parents who employ their children find it difficult to bring correction when there are serious offenses.

**5. Beware of creating a greed monster.** In today's megachurches, huge amounts of money begin to roll in on Sundays—and if leaders are not careful, this kind of success can eventually destroy them. We must remember that God entrusts us with these funds in order to engage in the work of ministry, not to provide leaders with mansions, luxury vehicles, bodyguards, private jets, shopping allowances and second or third homes. When you feed greed, it will always come back to bite you. I personally believe that pastors and ministry leaders should voluntarily put a cap on their salaries instead of insisting on being treated like corporate bigshots.

**6. Never tolerate a spirit of entitlement.** Financial blessing can affect people in dramatically different ways. One person can humbly receive it, thank God for it and live in constant gratefulness and humility. The next person can accept the blessing and then begin to think they deserve royal treatment. This spirit of entitlement can invade a church or ministry subtly at first, until leaders begin to make demands. I once knew a preacher who asked to be driven from her hotel to the conference in a limousine—yet the distance was less than one block! This insane behavior should be confronted, not coddled.

Paul told his spiritual son Timothy that church leaders must be “free from the love of money” (1 Tim. 3:3) in order to assume that responsibility. We would do well to revisit that mandate today. Instead of tarnishing ourselves with another scandal, let's show the world that we can handle money properly.

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