

Singapore Mega-Church Faithful Invest in Malls: Southeast Asia

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At "Miracle-Seed Sunday" in Singapore's New Creation Church last month, the pastor's sermon was preceded by PowerPoint and video presentations, and donations were overseen by Deloitte & Touche LLP auditors.

Centuries after Catholics established missions in Asia, Singaporeans are flocking to a new species of churches making appeals more in common with "Material Girl" pop-singer Madonna than the Jesuits. Wearing a white leather jacket and jeans, Senior Pastor Joseph Prince asked God to reward a crowd of about 1,200 with houses, cars, jobs, pay raises and holidays if they contributed to New Creation's multimillion-dollar funding drive.

Prince's 24,000-strong flock belongs to a flourishing breed of churches from Houston to Sydney winning followers with a focus on personal well-being. As the rise of so-called mega churches helps make Christians the fastest-growing religious group in majority-Buddhist Singapore, their fundraising prowess is also making its mark, allowing groups including New Creation and City Harvest Church to invest in some of the island's biggest commercial properties.

"Mega churches have been able to articulate Christianity in a very contemporary manner," said Terence Chong, a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies who has researched such groups. "Being able to adopt the language of pop culture, mass consumption -- we think this appeals to the new middle class, people who are aspiring middle class."

Security Guards

In a city state of 5.2 million people occupying a quarter of the area of Rhode Island, the mega churches stand out with their gatherings of thousands, near-celebrity leaders and outreach methods that range from magic shows and concerts to musical worship backed by electric guitars.

At the New Creation service, PowerPoint slides showed attendees how to write checks to the church, while armed security guards watched the cash. Worship and Holy Communion were followed by a video about a woman who donated on Miracle Seed Sundays even when her husband's cancer treatments saddled the couple with debt. Images of a Volkswagen and a condominium showed the rewards that came to them for giving.

"As they come forth Lord to sow, release upon them Father the power to get, to create, to receive wealth in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ," Prince said in the rented Rock Auditorium at the Suntec City Mall. "Prosperity is right. Amen. We prosper to prosper others. We prosper to prosper God's kingdom, so come believing." The special session sought to raise funds for the church's half of a S\$976 million (\$783 million) retail and entertainment complex, which includes a 5,000-seat auditorium. The venue, which will double as New Creation's meeting place, is set to open in November with concerts by musician and producer David Foster and friends including Chaka Khan and Babyface, according to a statement from the theater.

Convention Center

The joint venture with CapitaLand Ltd. (CAPL), Southeast Asia's biggest developer, would be among the 10 largest commercial properties by value and the biggest investment by any religious organization in Singapore, according to Nicholas Mak, executive director at SLP International Property Consultants.

The Miracle Seed event in 2010 raised S\$21 million in a single day from 22,272 attendees, according to New Creation's website, and the church planned three such sessions this year. It had raised S\$348 million for the property project as of July 2012, the website said.

It's not alone. City Harvest Church, a non-denominational church founded by senior pastor Kong Hee, 48, has attracted a reported 20,619 members as of last year. It proposed in 2010 to spend S\$310 million for a stake in the Suntec International Convention & Exhibition Centre as well as related rents and renovation costs. The building was the venue for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in 2009.

Record Funds

At a July 21 church service, Executive Pastor Aries Zulkarnain told followers the group raised a record S\$22 million for its building fund last year, and had doubled its stake in the property to 39.2 percent for an additional S\$54 million. He used PowerPoint slides to instruct churchgoers how to give offerings via cash, check and credit card, and highlighted the online donation system.

These churches are "beyond any doubt" the fastest fundraising bloc among religious organizations in the city state, said Gerard Ee, former President of the National Council of Social Service who was previously a partner with Ernst & Young. "The message here is: The more you give, the more you get back from God. It's like an investment."

Video Feed

New Creation, whose website reports 24,000 church members, convenes at several locations in the city every week because it's outgrown the Rock Auditorium. At the Suntec City Mall, which houses retailers including Carrefour SA (CA), restaurants and a "Fountain of Wealth," tickets are given out starting at 6:45 a.m. on Sundays for those wishing to see Prince speak in person.

Those who don't have tickets watch him remotely via video feeds from other venues, such as the Marina Bay Sands casino resort and convention center or a nearby movie theater.

Prince, who sports a black leather jacket and bronze highlights in his hair on the church's website, speaks at four sessions throughout the day, and recordings of his sermons reach millions across North America, Europe, Africa, Australia and Israel, according to his podcast's iTunes page. Websites unaffiliated to the church put his age at 49, though New Creation declined to confirm the information.

Singapore's 2010 census showed that Christians make up the largest share of university graduates, and the proportion of citizens who defined themselves as Christians increased the most in 10 years compared to all other religions.

Embracing Prosperity

By making their services enjoyable and embracing prosperity, groups such as New Creation, City Harvest and Hillsong in Australia are able to attract followers, said

Jeaney Yip, a lecturer at the University of Sydney Business School who has studied the marketing practices of mega churches.

“Market-friendly ideologies associated with individualism and self-empowerment are often blended with selective Christian theologies to emphasize positive living and blessings, while deflecting overtly negative Christian doctrines such as suffering, judgment, sacrifice, hell or death from sin,” Yip said. “Their church services are scripted and ‘produced’ with deliberate use of contemporary music, sound and lighting.”

Axel Ng, 20, a recruit serving his mandatory National Service with the Singapore Army, attends Prince’s 8:30 a.m. Sunday services, after waking up before 6 a.m. to get in line for tickets. At New Creation’s Miracle Seed service on Aug. 19, he gave \$50 to the building fund from his \$510 monthly pay.

God’s Messenger

“Pastor Prince is one of the reasons why I come to church, but we believe he is just a messenger,” said Ng, who was introduced to New Creation by his mother in 2005. “The music is liberating, it speaks to me.”

Faith Community Baptist Church, founded in 1986 by Senior Pastor Apostle Lawrence Khong, provides “celebration services” for its 10,000 members, according to its website. Khong, born in 1952, is pictured on the site with gelled hair and a black leather jacket and matching bracelet. He also fronts the group’s entertainment arm, staging shows that “combine magic, music, drama and dance to establish God’s Kingdom in the marketplace.”

Faith Community’s attendance compares with a weekly congregation of more than 38,000 at the Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, according to the U.S. church’s website.

The communications divisions of City Harvest, New Creation and Faith Community all rejected interview requests from Bloomberg News with their leaders.

Business Awards

Mega churches thrive in urban, newly-developed countries where they create networking opportunities and a sense of identity, according to Hoon Chang Yau, an Assistant Professor of Asian Studies at Singapore Management University who researches Christianity in Indonesia.

City Harvest, which says the average age of its congregation in 2010 was 29, has affiliate churches in Malaysia, India, Indonesia, Taiwan and Brunei. It lists business awards won by its members as well as statistics measuring their academic performance against the national average on its website.

At the July 21 City Harvest service, singers led the congregation in song during the worship session, featuring contemporary-styled music backed by a band with drums, electric guitar and bass. The founder, Kong, read Bible verses from an iPad and then invited the crowd to talk to God “in tongues,” leading almost a minute of unrecognizable spoken sounds.

The boom in fundraising has been accompanied by concern over how the money is used. Kong and five other City Harvest officers were charged this year with conspiracy to misuse S\$50.6 million of the church’s funds, including using a portion

of the money to finance the music career of Ho Yeow Sun, Kong's wife. Kong denied the charges. The church has said it stands by the accused leaders.

Giving Back

In contrast to the U.S., where churches often champion political and sometimes anti-government views, religious groups in Singapore refrain from criticizing those in power. The laws "provide a broad framework to ensure that these pastors stay clear from discussing the politics of the day," said Mathew Mathews, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore who has written about mega churches.

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act allows authorities to stop religious leaders from addressing or advising groups, to prevent them from inciting hostility between different religions and disaffection against the government, among other offenses.

Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said in a June statement the City Harvest case involved charges against the individuals, not the church or Christians, adding that the group was free to continue its services and activities.

Irene Hii, a former atheist, became a believer after hearing Prince speak at a conference organized by Hillsong, a mega church in Sydney, and has been a New Creation follower since she was a university student in 2000. She gives 10 percent of her income to the church every month, known as a tithe.

"It's my way of telling my God: You've given me my blessings, so this is the portion that I'm giving back to you, but I'm keeping the 90 percent," Hii, a 34-year-old doctor, said after one of New Creation's services.