

## Fraud Trial Puts Singapore Megachurch In Unholy Spotlight

**Jeremy Grant**

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It is the perfect scandal for a part of the world better known for its worship of money and malls than spirituality: a pastor who allegedly siphoned off almost \$40m from the Singapore megachurch that he founded with his wife to fund her pop-singing career in the US.

The case, back in court on Monday, has not only swung an unusual spotlight on Singapore, a normally staid corner of Asia, but carries echoes of how faith and fraud bedevil the church in other parts of the world.

Three months ago Pope Francis was forced to intervene after reports surfaced in Germany of “the bishop of bling” who spent €15,000 on a bathtub at a palatial new residence.

In Singapore, Kong Hee, 49, co-founder with his wife of the City Harvest church, has been accused along with five other church members by the commercial affairs department of embezzling more than S\$50m (\$39m) of church funds to finance his wife’s singing career.

Funds that were earmarked for a new church building were instead allegedly siphoned off into a fake bond scheme. Church accounts were then falsified to reflect that the bonds had been redeemed, it is alleged.

The government brought the case last year after an investigation starting in 2011, itself prompted by tip-offs the previous year from congregation members who suspected that funds had gone missing in 2007 and 2008.

Ho Yeow Sun, 43, Mr Kong’s wife, is a Mandarin-language singer who has achieved minor celebrity status in Singapore through chart-topping dance singles issued in the US. She is not charged with any offence.

Her eye-catching appearances in dance videos, including one called China Wine in which she gyrates semi-clad with Haitian-American rapper Wyclef Jean, have added spice to the case.

City Harvest says her singing work is part of a “crossover project” started by the church that aims to use music to spread the gospel. Ms Ho has sung at “high-octane concerts” in Taiwan, Malaysia and Australia, the church’s website says, where “close to 140,000 salvation decisions were recorded”.

The singer until recently owned three clothing boutiques in Singapore, including on Orchard Road, the city-state’s most fashionable thoroughfare with luxury outlets such as Mulberry and Tory Burch.

On Monday, a trial that began last year resumed amid intense public interest, with people queueing from the early hours to gain limited passes to sit in the court’s public gallery.

Mr Kong, who has pleaded not guilty, has told his congregation that “I maintain my integrity”, and continues to preach at City Harvest. The trial is expected to last until September.

City Harvest, with nearly 20,000 registered members, is one of a handful of megachurches in Singapore, where the dominant religion of Christianity is embraced largely by ethnic Chinese. The country is home to Malay Muslims and Hindu-worshipping South Asians.

The average age of City Harvest's members is 31 years, and consists of a mix of middle-class professionals such as bankers and architects, the church says.

Mathew Mathews, research fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, said that middle class Singaporeans were attracted to megachurches because they could host large events involving well-known Christian celebrity speakers.

"The growth in Christianity has been greater among younger, better educated and English-speaking Singaporeans. Among this group the idea of being part of something big and which operates very professionally is appealing," he said.

The phenomenon in Singapore is part of a wide Asian trend as ministries have expanded their followers – and fundraising – across borders. Mr Kong's website describes him as founder of Kong Hee Ministries, which lists a mailing address at a post box in Dallas, Texas.

"As a church we believe that God's doing something in Asia, and Singapore is pivotal as a location," said Theresa Tan, City Harvest spokeswoman. "We are at a crossroads to various parts of Asia so we feel that God's using Singapore in such a way."

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