

The Future of Megachurches

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After a 140-day trial and numerous news headlines, the court has delivered its verdict on the City Harvest trial.

All six church leaders involved in the case have been found guilty of all charges, which include misappropriating \$24 million to fund the music career of Sun Ho and misappropriating an additional \$26 million to cover their tracks.

The judge said the "round-tripping of funds" was used to "create an appearance of genuine transactions" and the "accused persons controlled these transactions every step of the way."

The City Harvest trial concerns one megachurch's alleged misappropriation of funds. Is our legal system robust enough to tackle similar cases in the future?

Alfred Dodwell, Managing Director of Dodwell & Co LLC says the trial was long and the accused had Senior Counsel and every opportunity to mount a defence. "So, if they are convicted, it means the prosecution has proven its case."

On the issue of round-tripping, Dodwell says it is not clearly defined and is "embedded in confusion".

He thinks our laws are inadequate in dealing with mega religious organisations. "There should be clear rules and regulations to avoid such issues [financial misappropriation] cropping up. Was it legitimate use? The sky's the limit as to what is legitimate and what is not, it is so subjective."

The sheer amount of money involved in the case puts a spotlight not just not on City Harvest but megachurches in general.

Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies Dr Mathew Mathews reckons people will not avoid megachurches "just because there were problems with one of them".

"At least among some Christians, the extent of the growth of a church is laid up in divine providence. However, I do think church goers will be more discerning and will ask for greater accountability when the churches they are in reach for grand plans."

Dr Mathews thinks the general public has the same expectations for both corporations and religious organisations, when it comes to financial accountability. Small churches have generally abided by such principles, he says.

"However with very large structures and the complexities that are intrinsic in them, it becomes harder for most lay people to adequately scrutinise financial statements."

Dr Mathews thinks the City Harvest trial will not deter Christians from setting up their operations here. "In fact," he says, "there might be renewed interest, especially among some who become disillusioned with megachurches to want to start smaller communities of Christians."

By doing so, they would be able to circumvent the issues faced by megachurches and “there can be much more accountability in financial undertakings,” he says.

While the verdict for the City Harvest trial has been announced, the six leaders involved in the case could very well make an appeal, possibly adding more drama to a trial which saw 130 members of the church turning up at the State Courts by 5:30am, according to *The Straits Times*.

“Now it's time to study the decision carefully and see if there are grounds for appeal,” says Dodwell, pointing out that the sentencing, which has yet to be announced, could have further consequences.

“How will this shake the confidence of its leadership at CHC (City Harvest Church) would be the next issue.”