

City Harvest: Business as usual

Lee Siew Hua

The Straits Times, 02 April 2011

Under a probe for alleged misuse of funds, the church is presenting a positive face to its congregation

CITY Harvest Church is under a cloud, but it is forging ahead with sunny new plans.

Ten months after the Commercial Affairs Department (CAD) began a probe into alleged misuse of church funds, the megachurch is managing its way through the crisis with corporate savvy and a new narrative.

Rallying worshippers, founder Kong Hee, 46, billed the relocation to Suntec Convention Centre two weeks ago as 'A New Day'.

The move on March 19 after a six-year property quest signifies 'God's continual blessing and goodness upon City Harvest', declared the senior pastor, who is being investigated along with a dozen or so church leaders.

He framed the big move to the financial district - from twin suburban venues Singapore Expo in the east and Jurong in the west - as the church's desire to connect with the marketplace.

That inaugural weekend, he preached on love, while his pop star wife Ho Yeow Sun, in a muted black dress and untinted hair, led the rapturous worship.

Church insiders say both Mr Kong and his wife, popularly known as Sun Ho, and their son Dayan have relocated back here. They no longer commute to and from the United States, where she was based for her pop career and used to rent a \$28,000-a-month Hollywood home.

Mr Kong has given up many of his speaking engagements worldwide to spend more time tending to the beleaguered church. Meanwhile, Ms Ho has been advising on the design of the new Suntec auditorium and vetting Easter drama scripts as the creative brains of the church.

But some things have not changed. Two weekends ago, spirituality fused with spectacle inside the new 7,500-seat auditorium flanked by mighty wings that emit an electronic glow.

It was fitted with a new 52m LED video wall stretching the dramatic length of the stage, reportedly Singapore's biggest and crafted by Taiwanese designer Feng Jian Zhang, who has created stages for entertainers A-Mei and Aaron

Kwok.

The worship, more than usual, was pumping. Church-goers whipped on 3-D glasses to view multimedia clips heralding 'the Suntec era'.

It was a celebration designed to resonate with 'teenyboppers and tycoons' alike - as City News Weekly, a newspaper distributed in the church, portrayed the broad demographics of the church, which had an audited attendance of 30,878 last year.

Mr Kong announced to cheers that the service was being recorded for broadcast on the Daystar television network. Its Christian shows starring American evangelists such as Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer reach 80 million households in the US, and are beamed from international satellites covering 200 countries.

But some things have changed. Observers say there is less of Mr Kong and more hands brought on deck, to broaden the leadership base.

While Mr Kong is still president and chairman of the church's management board, he has been replaced as head of the church ministry by two senior pastors, American Derek Dunn and Indonesian Aries Zulkarnain, both in their late 30s, who are more visibly running the show these days.

Also much more conspicuous is the No. 2 at City Harvest, deputy senior pastor Tan Ye Peng, 39, who like Mr Kong has a degree in computer science from the National University of Singapore. He pastors the Chinese church and has been the capable deputy in the past few years when Mr Kong was travelling intensively.

They are among the many that Mr Kong, known to be a meticulous succession planner, has actively disciplined over the years.

Dr Roland Chia, dean of postgraduate studies at Trinity Theological College, notes that it is a prudent move to give other leaders more prominence, and elaborates: 'The continued visibility and prominence of Kong Hee can be easily politicised, given that the church is still under the cloud of investigation.'

But he adds that the fact that Mr Kong has 'stepped into the shadows' does not indicate any 'substantial and radical change in the leadership or philosophy of City Harvest Church'.

In the same vein, Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Mathew Mathews, who has written on Singapore Christianity, notes: 'His ideals have become a part of the system.' In that light, succession becomes less tricky than in a church that is anchored on one charismatic leader.

In many ways, he says Mr Kong's charisma has become 'routinised' in the church. 'You can learn the rules; for example, throw your voice or stretch out

your hand a certain way, imitating the pastor.'

Some aspects of how City Harvest does church are also institutionalised in its ISOs. The church is proud that in March 2004, it was awarded ISO 9001:2000.

The certification covers the organisation and management of its services, public events, ministries, and education programmes such as its School of Theology. This was upgraded to 2008 ISO standards in April last year.

Also, to ensure continuity of the church and succour the flock, City Harvest has been leaning hard on what observers call 'elder statesman figures'.

During last month's fortnight-long grand opening, among the guests who were introduced were two respected Anglicans, the veteran missionary Canon Soh Chye Ann, and Canon James Wong, a prolific planter of churches and former president of the National Council of Churches of Singapore.

Canon Wong, 72, who mentored the young Kong Hee before the protege pioneered City Harvest with 20 young people in 1989, tells The Straits Times he still visits the independent megachurch, to make sure its youth do not stray from the straight and narrow.

City Harvest has roped in other 'father figures' as well. Mr Kong announced late last year that two internationally renowned Christian leaders will help to improve the church's operations, governance and accountability.

Reverend A.R. Bernard was appointed chairman of the independent advisory board. The former Wall Street banker founded the Christian Cultural Centre, a 33,000-member church in New York. He is a member of the US Senate Budget Committee's Debt Reduction Task Force.

Reverend Phil Pringle of Christian City Church in Sydney, who oversees more than 250 affiliated churches worldwide, was named the advisory pastor.

Long-time friends of City Harvest, both men have preached there at least twice a year for more than a decade. Rev Pringle's role is to consult on day-to-day matters, and he now flies in every month or two. Rev Bernard oversees church governance and structure.

According to City News Weekly, Mr Kong told the congregation when he introduced them in October last year: 'If there is anything I've learnt through the process of this investigation, it is the need for a greater level of accountability and governance in the operations of City Harvest Church.'

He said the two men have expertise in these areas, adding: 'Through their independent perspectives, they will bring fresh and novel ideas to build up our church in the years to come.'

Expanding on the theme of the future, Rev Bernard also addressed the church: 'We are considering the best way at this point to ensure longevity and perpetuity of the ministry. The whole advisory committee is about making the congregation feel safe and assured. We are accepting responsibility for the future of the church.'

While Mr Kong has portrayed the duo as wise men, Dr Mathews wonders if the advisers, who are insiders, may just be a 'non-diverse, yes-man board'. However, if the main intention is to reassure the congregation, then the board serves its purpose as the two leaders are esteemed and trusted by members, he says.

The two advisers, as increasingly regular preachers, also expound on the church's new narrative.

During the height of the investigation after CAD officers in May last year seized computers and documents from the church's Suntec offices, acting on complaints from the public about alleged misuse of church funds, Rev Pringle preached: 'A church is not built upon one person, it's built on many.'

Rev Bernard of New York dispenses one-liners that stir up faith. 'Be excited, not distracted,' he exhorted recently.

Mr Kong's own recent sermon titles include The Power Of Faith, Breaking Through The Shame Barrier and Do Not Look Back. His deputy senior pastor Tan, who has been questioned by the CAD, has also pontificated on topics like The Power Of Endurance and Built To Last.

While it is easy to speculate that such sermons parallel Mr Kong's troubled situation, worshippers say topics like faith are a staple in churches, and notably so in City Harvest. 'I can picture that a sermon has many applications to many individuals,' says Ms Liew Mei Choo, in her 40s, a church cell group leader and personal development consultant.

As in corporate crisis management, cell leaders like her were also encouraged to keep open lines of communication to members with any questions about the probe. During regular cell or small-group meetings, leaders were encouraged to talk openly or address complaints. Members could also call pastoral staff directly if they wanted answers to uncomfortable questions.

Meanwhile, the tech-savvy Mr Kong prolifically posts quotes on Twitter and Facebook accounts on courage and soldiering on, which routinely attract up to 200 'Likes'.

Ms Cho Pei Lin, a director at Asia PR Werkz and a former lawyer who specialises in crisis and litigation communications, says: 'If a CEO is being investigated, the rest of management must come in and make assurances of

good leadership continuity.

'It must take the position that the organisation must go on; it is not closing down. There must be concrete steps to show evidence of that,' adds Ms Cho, who has advised companies here on product recall and accusations of anti-competition.

'City Harvest is putting in credible faces, just like when Gerard Ee, a trusted public figure and an accountant, was brought into the National Kidney Foundation. The idea is to minimise drop-outs of supporters. You can expect some amount of distrust, unhappiness and questions, so there must be more assurance.'

In particular, she notes that Mr Kong's constant, multi-platform updates help to allay doubts.

'Members are key. A leader in an organisation facing litigation should personally reassure members and give regular updates through direct communications to supporters and the public,' she says.

The net result of all these conscientious efforts is that despite Mr Kong's serial crises last year - the probe, charges of plagiarism and revelations of his wife's Hollywood lifestyle - many church members interviewed say they are persuaded that 'God's work must still go on' and they are a part of it, come whatever verdict by the CAD.

Indeed, freshly audited figures of City Harvest show no precipitous fall in membership.

The audited attendance was 30,878 last year, which is 1,863 people - or 6 per cent - fewer than the record count of 32,741 in 2009.

These figures, compiled by the church and audited last month by two independent auditors, Stanfield & O'Dell of the United States and Global Church Solutions of Australia, were presented on Sunday by the church management to about 700 leaders.

To be sure, the church has not grown at its previous sizzling rates of 15 per cent - the average yearly growth rate over the past decade - which peaked at 27 per cent in 2000.

But many like Dr Mathews do not think members will scatter after the investigation concludes. In any church, he says, there is a periphery and a highly loyal, influential core.

'A megachurch will have a fairly large periphery that is not so anchored and will move when there is some instability, or if the church is not the successful model of the day,' he says. 'The idea is that they are drawn to the church in

the first place because of its success.'

City Harvest has a fairly good core, he reckons, and the church provides attractive services too. These span a lively Children's Church, a business networking arm and a School of Theology.

Also, amid swirling changes in City Harvest and a broader leadership base, Mr Kong remains central.

Mr Robert Dodd, in his 50s, an American missionary-turned-teacher and cell group leader who has been with the church since 1995, says: 'Kong is still teaching and preaching actively. He is very much in the picture.'

Indeed, Mr Kong was very much in the picture at the inaugural Suntec services.

'These last 10 months have been so difficult. You have seen Pastor at his worst. You have seen me crying and weeping, depressed, put on weight,' he confided.

'You saw me crawling back and keep on trusting God. You saw me telling you: 'Guys, you can do it', he said, animation filling his voice. 'Thank you for loving us. God has a great future for us.'