

Megachurches in Singapore

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City Harvest Church, Singapore. [Some rights reserved](#) by [ad.hermann](#).

Over the past three years, a major church scandal has unfolded in the island state of Singapore (literally, the “Lion City”). The target of investigation is the mighty City Harvest megachurch, which claims more than 20,000 adherents. Founding pastor Kong Hee has been accused of diverting at least \$20 million to support his wife’s pop music career. Several other church leaders have been implicated in alleged cover-ups.

At first sight such a scandal might seem unremarkable. Sadly, clergy on all continents sometimes fail to live up to their principles, and churches often lack accountability.

What is astonishing is the existence of megachurches in Singapore, and their enormous popularity. This fact challenges much of what we commonly think we know about the nature of Christianity outside its traditional Euro-American heartlands. It also raises basic questions about the process of secularization.

Christianity is thriving in Singapore. Since 1980, the number of reported Christians has roughly doubled to about 20 percent of the state’s 5.5 million people. About a third of those Christians are Roman Catholic; most of the remainder are charismatics and evangelicals.

As in many great Asian cities, the most conspicuous symbol of that expansion is the megachurch. Besides City Harvest, Singapore is home to New Creation Church, which has over 30,000 members; Faith Community Baptist, with 12,000; Victory

Family Centre; and the Covenant Evangelical Free Church. As the names suggest, such churches would be very familiar to anyone who knows the structure and worship style of charismatic or evangelical groups in North America or around the Pacific Rim. They combine prosperity teachings with lively, vibrant services, all to the tune of cutting-edge contemporary music.

With superstar pastor Joseph Prince, the fast-growing New Creation fits every stereotype of the expanding megachurch. It offers a wide range of media activities and is deeply involved in commercial and entrepreneurial investments. Immensely strengthened by the practice of tithing, these churches have become a huge economic force. New Creation's main sanctuary, with its spaceship architecture, proclaims success and glitzy modernity.

This Christian presence matters because Singapore is an influential center of wealth and media power for the Pacific Rim and the Chinese diaspora. And Prince has launched revivals and crusades in the United States itself. What happens in the Lion City does not stay there.

Most of the usual explanations for Christian expansion in Asia fall flat in the case of Singapore. Do we imagine a community of the very poor seeking consolation for the rapid economic changes reshaping their lives, looking for spiritual opium to make their lives tolerable? To the contrary, Singapore is one of the world's richest societies, one of the four Asian Dragons that have dominated the Pacific Rim's economy since the 1960s. By conventional measures such as GDP per capita, it usually counts in the top five wealthiest countries worldwide, alongside Arab Gulf nations. In some countries, churches fulfill many functions left by weak or unstable governments, but the state in Singapore is a powerful and efficient presence.

Nor should we think of churches growing in backward country areas under the shadow of the booming city. Much smaller in area than Rhode Island, Singapore is a pure city-state with no rural areas whatever. Literacy is close to 100 percent, and English is widely spoken. Those booming megachurches are more likely to attract astute financial planners than confused peasants.

Other likely predictors of faith are likewise absent. Normally, low fertility rates and small family size correlate nicely with secularization, and Singapore is one of the world's least fertile societies, producing far fewer children even than Western Europe. Secularism does indeed have its followers, and one-sixth of Singaporeans

espouse no religion whatever. Multiple religions, though, continue to thrive, with the growth of Christian numbers the most impressive aspect of the story.

I don't have an answer as to why Singapore defies so many assumptions about Christian growth. Perhaps the Americanized megachurch ethos appeals to upwardly mobile groups fascinated by progress and modernity. Most of the recent Christian growth has been at the expense of Buddhism, which perhaps seems too traditional, too much the religion of the grandparents. Undoubtedly too, such congregations offer a sense of community and extended family of a kind that is cherished amidst all the torrid consumerist growth. City Harvest in particular draws heavily on young singles.

Perhaps we are just wrong to seek elaborate cultural explanations for faith. Perhaps the people attending those churches just hear there a message that they believe and that makes sense of their lives.