

Cho Yong-gi, Korean founder of world's largest megachurch, dies at 85

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(Hong Chan-Sun / Newsis via AP)

The founder of one of the world's largest megachurches has died, according to news reports from Korea. The English-language Korean Herald reported that Cho Yong-gi died at a Seoul hospital on September 14. He was 85.

Cho, known in the United States as David Yonggi Cho, was the founder of the Yoido Full Gospel Church, a Pentecostal megachurch with hundreds of thousands of members.

Cho founded the church in 1958. It would eventually claim the title of the world's largest church, according to Guinness World Records, with close to 800,000 members. As many as 200,000 people attended weekly services, drawn by Cho's hopeful preaching and optimistic messages about a better life.

Though membership has since declined to 600,000, it's still the largest Protestant church in South Korea, with 400 pastors and evangelists in the country and 500 missionaries abroad.

Cho retired as pastor of the Yoido Church in 2007. In 2014, he was convicted for embezzling millions from the church and received a suspended sentence. Still, Cho remained a beloved figure and was named pastor emeritus by the church.

A number of Cho's sermons are posted on the church's website. The English-language version of the site also includes a greeting from Cho.

"All I did was offer my life just like the boy who gave the five loaves and two fish," Cho writes in the message. "I simply held on to the dreams that the Lord gave me, and it was He who grew Yoido Full Gospel Church to 750,000 members to become the World's largest church. This is entirely a grace given to us by God." —Religion News Service. The Associated Press contributed to this report.