

## Palm Oil, Green Groups and Charlatans

AS SINGAPORE was waking up one recent morning, investigators were swooping on the homes of a senior pastor and 16 others related to a charismatic church.

The commercial crime officers searched the office of the controversial City Harvest Church (CHC) and carted away a large amount of financial records and computers.

The 17, including 45-year-old Senior Pastor Kong Lee, were taken away for questioning as part of a government investigation into complaints of misuse of church funds.

It is one of the biggest investigations of a religious institution here in recent years. No one, however, has been arrested. CHC is the latest of a series of controversies involving high-profile leaders of religious or charity bodies in Singapore.

Since 2004, three of them - a Catholic priest, a top Buddhist monk, and a national charity figure - had been convicted and jailed. This has made the Kong Lee investigation a top story here.

CHC, which has 33,000 followers, shocked the country in April when it announced that it had bought a S\$310mil stake in the premier Suntec Singapore building.

The central figure of the mega-church is the evangelistic Kong Lee, a type of Christian preacher that long flourished in America but is only now appearing in predominantly Buddhist Singapore.

These preachers conduct services in ultra-modern surroundings with high-tech lights and rock music to spread their faith, and in the process have turned religion into a mega show-business and mega money-making machine.

The controversy over CHC is the latest of several in recent years involving money collected by religious and charity organisations.

Details of the raids were sparse, but unconfirmed reports said that Kong Lee was picked up in his posh Somerset condo at 6 am on Monday and questioned for 18 hours. The office premises at Suntek were raided at 7am as soon as a staff opened the door. It was searched and a large number of documents and computers taken away.

How can a 45-year-old man raise so much money and do such a mega-deal, something that even tycoons cannot?

Has economic pressure pushed more Singaporeans towards religion for spiritual solace or is it the hypnotic environment and the sleek preaching? No one really knows for sure.

For an answer, I watched several videos of how the man worked his magic on the crowd as he appealed for building funds.

In a plush auditorium equipped with state-of-the-art audiovisual systems, he mesmerized his followers.

Amid colorful lights and loud music that resembled a pop concert rather than a religious gathering, Kong Lee appealed to housewives and families to help him build "a new home for God".

Schoolchildren were asked to donate their Lunar New Year money filled ang pows. In the background a giant screen flashed photographs of people putting money into a box.

The pastor took the microphone to thank recent contributors, who included a couple selling their 5-room public flat to downgrade to a 3-roomer, to offer S\$20,000 to the church building.

Another was a young man who sold his favorite motorcycle and donated the entire proceedings. With each name mentioned, the audience cheered.

There are several other mega-churches with evangelical and fund-raising abilities, posing potential problems for this multi-religious country.

One is The New Creation Church, which plans to invest S\$280mil to build a mega-complex with a lifestyle-entertainment-cultural theme. With some 22,000 members, the church raised eyebrows when it was reported that its charismatic preacher was paid a salary of S\$500,000 in the last financial year.

The investigation into CHC came seven months after a top Buddhist monk, Venerable Shi Ming Yi, was convicted of misusing donated money and sentenced to nine months' imprisonment (reduced to six on appeal).

The 2009 trial of the English-educated, high-living Buddhist monk who owned three exclusive properties, country club memberships and loved luxurious cars showed how far the money culture had spread in Singapore and how easily followers can be scammed.

In his trial, the 48-year-old monk told the Court that "we live in a modern world ... no longer like what it was in the past". When asked to elaborate, the monk said: "If people earn more, they will spend more. Many religious people, not just myself, are very different now."

Other high profile prosecutions were:

> Catholic priest Father Joachim Kang was sentenced to seven-and-half years' jail in 2004 for embezzling S\$5.1mil in church funds.

> T.T. Durai, former National Kidney Foundation CEO, a public charity, was jailed for three months for falsifying invoices. Durai too, drew a large salary and enjoyed perks of office that would have made many CEOs green with envy!

Singaporeans blame the greed on a materialistic society rather than just the priests and monks, who are also humans like us.

Reading all this, I can't help but wonder at the obvious parallels with the shenanigans so prevalent in the green movement today. What adds significantly to my discomfiture is when the green groups take on a patently obvious incongruous position in their green campaigns, a position that is incompatible with their stated goals. A case in point would be the baffling anti-palm oil campaigns conducted by the likes of Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth (FOE) and the Rainforest Action Network (RAN).

For one, their target, palm oil which they accuse of massive deforestation and thus threatening the extinction of orang utans is probably the most inherently sustainable crop with the highest productivity and thus most efficient land use factor amongst all edible oilseeds. With a yield of 4-5 metric tons per hectare, a yield that is close to ten times the yield of other oilseed crops, palm oil requires ten times less land to produce the same unit of edible oil as its nearest competitor. Palm oil, therefore does not require quite as much land as its critics would want us to believe.

This explains why, Malaysia, which had been the world's largest producer of palm oil for over a century still has an enviable forest cover of more than 60%, which is one of the highest forest cover prevailing in the world today, certainly far higher than the 11% forest cover prevailing in the United Kingdom, from which FOE hails.

Further, palm oil cultivation takes up less than 1% of the total world agricultural area, with Malaysian palm oil plantations occupying less than 0.5% of it. How can it then be credible to claim that palm oil is causing "massive deforestation" and is responsible for 20% of global carbon emission?

What knocked the feet from under the green groups was when research from Wageningen University in the Netherlands showed that "palm oil is the most efficient energy crop."

The university's finding is a rejection of environmental NGOs and the anti-palm oil lobbyists who consistently claim that palm oil is unsustainable.

Its research found that palm oil, sugar cane and sweet sorghum are currently the most sustainable energy crops. These commodities also produce "far smaller quantities of greenhouse gases than fossil fuels".

The university's analysis considered nine different energy crops against nine different sustainability criteria with palm oil coming out on top while biofuel from maize from the United States and wheat from Europe scored far lower.

The report's author, Sander de Vries, concluded that sustainable sugar canes and oil palms get the most energy per hectare and cause the least environmental damage.

De Vries also highlighted a major advantage of the oil palm crop was that, unlike other energy crops, it produces enough residue to power the oil extraction processes.

In the light of these concerted attacks against a crop that occupies just 1% of the world agricultural area, it is certainly unconscionable for the green groups to conveniently remain silent on the environmental impact of 18 million tons of coal mined in the UK as well as the other 99% cultivated land in the rest of the world.

Now that the cat is out of the bag that the EU is funding up to 70% of the annual budgets of green groups such as FOE and wittingly or unwittingly, their anti-palm oil campaigns, the picture is less foggy now. The EU has its own edible oil industries to protect such as rapeseed and sunflower. How else can it be explained when the EU places onerous renewable energy standards (RED) on palm oil and yet fails to do the same for competing oils which are far less sustainably cultivated, except that they are cultivated in the EU.

PalmHugger is compelled to ask whether this is due to the fact that most of these competing oils are cultivated in the developed economies from which these critics hail?

If conservation is truly a concern, the green NGOs should propose that palm oil be cultivated in place of the other oilseed crops such as soy, corn, sunflower and rapeseed (weather permitting) in view of its superior efficient land use!

The claims of impending orang utan extinction are no less wild and misleading. RAN was compelled to sheepishly remove from their website recently their wild claim that palm oil cultivation would cause the orang utan to go extinct by 2011. Unfortunately for RAN, 2010 arrived and the orang utan population in the wild which is currently estimated to range from 45,000 to 69,000, instead of perishing actually grew when previously undiscovered tribes numbering over 2,000 were recently discovered in Indonesian Borneo!

In the view of PalmHugger, these shenanigans by these green groups are silly enough that it should alert any objective observer that something does not jive with their dire predictions of impending doom. Could these green morons be actually cynical charlatans like the holy con artists enumerated above, coldly milking and exploiting the basic altruistic instinct of governments, corporations and the gullible public to do good and save the planet, for the funding that these groups require to fund their existence and the good life? Could these green groups be supping with the devil?

It is well known that FOE has global funds exceeding US\$300 million and all the 3 green groups have one thing in common; their office bearers draw fat salaries and hardly live paupers' lifestyles! The parallels are too sickeningly familiar and similar to the scams of the holy con artists! THE END.

## About the Author

[Palmhugger](#) is a palm oil advocacy site that makes no apologies for exposing the lies, untruths and equivocations on palm oil spewed by a coterie of environmental morons against the world's most sustainable edible oil and biofuel feedstock. We are part of a collective group of palm oil sympathizers that have grown tired of the blatant untruths, spin, lies and unfair trade bloc promoting activities of green NGOs like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth (FOE) against palm oil.

In vigorously exploding the myths and falsehoods propagated about palm oil in relation to deforestation, global warming, palm based biodiesel, the environment and the sustainability of palm oil, let the environmental morons be forewarned: In the interests of truth, we'll never hesitate to call a spade a spade; in exposing your lies about palm oil, with absolutely no holds barred!"

Palmhugger is made up of professionals and individuals with a great passion for the truth. We are biologists, creative designers, engineers, business men and women, professional tennis players, stay-at-home moms, retirees, college students, film makers, journalists, communication experts; you name it!

Our goals are all the same - to advance the cause of truth through better and wider dissemination of true palm oil environmental news and views, assisting in CSR initiatives, or developing programs for advocacy and lobbying of palm oil environmental matters, always with an emphasis on truth.

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