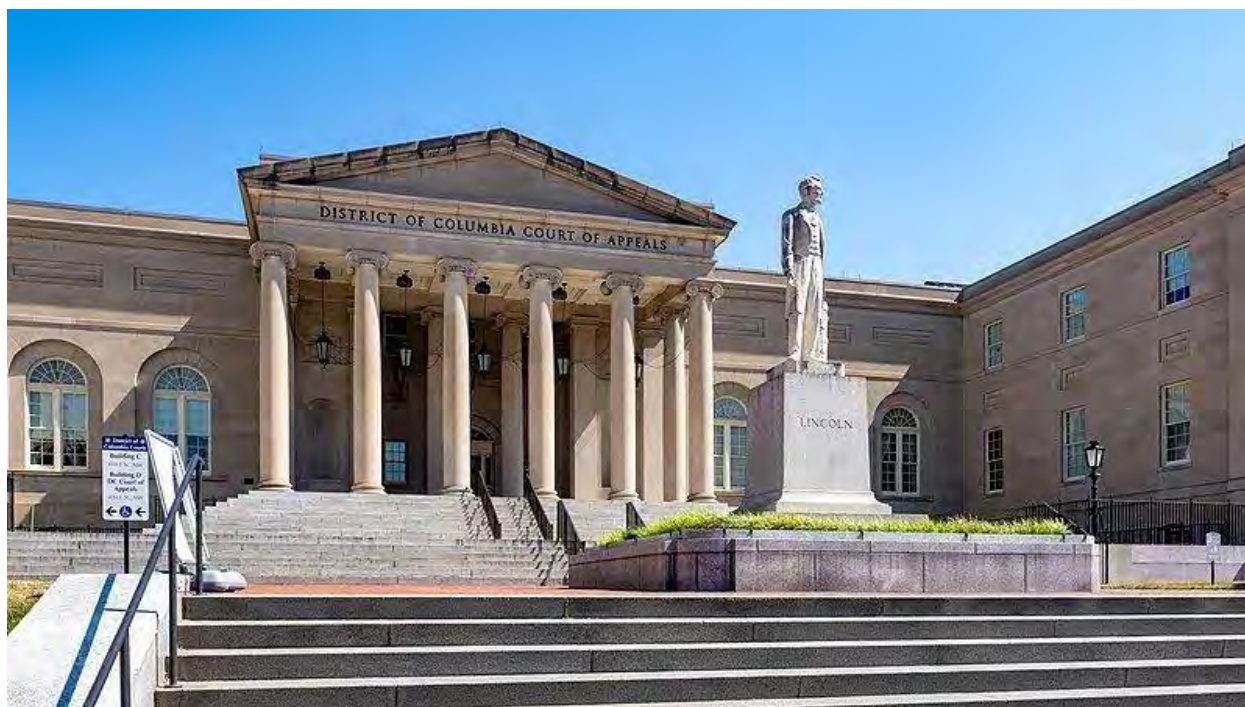


FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Unification Church's Court Case Raises \$3 Billion Question of Faith and Finance

Knut Holdhus
February 15, 2025



District of Columbia Court of Appeals 2024



Alex Swoyer (2016)



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Media warns that risky precedent is set by Washington appeals court if self-dealing case is thrown out due to religious ties

The Washington Times

The Washington Times commented 11th February on a complex legal battle over control of \$3 billion in assets belonging to the [Unification Church](#).

In an article titled "[Unification Church dispute over funds gets day in court in D.C.](#)", legal affairs reporter Alex Swoyer and staff writer Stephen Dinan report that the case has reached a Washington, D.C. appeals court. And it raises questions about whether judicial intervention in the matter would violate the First Amendment.

Judges weigh constitutional limits on church dispute

The piece by Swoyer and Dinan goes a long way to confirm [what Mark Wingfield wrote](#) for the Baptist News Global 11th February. He emphasized that the long-standing legal principle of "ecclesial abstention" generally prevents courts from intervening in matters concerning church governance due to the First Amendment's

protection of religious freedom. Wingfield warned of the danger that this principle allows bad actors to get away in cases involving large-scale fraud and gross financial misconduct.



Hyun Jin "Preston"
Moon in 2007

The Washington Times article describes the very same problem, how a panel of three judges expressed reluctance to involve the courts in the dispute, as it appears deeply intertwined with religious doctrine and church governance - areas traditionally outside the judiciary's purview.

At the heart of the case is a disagreement between two factions:

the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) International, which asserts it is upholding the legacy and wishes of the late Rev. [Sun Myung Moon](#) (1920-2012), the [Unification Church](#)'s founder.

Preston Moon, [Rev. Moon](#)'s eldest living son. Preston Moon was once considered a likely successor to his [father](#) but later faced challenges to that

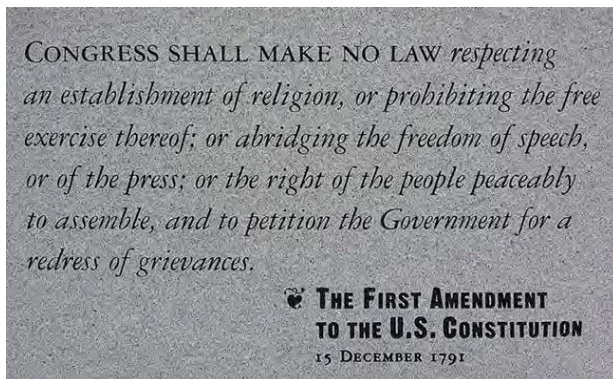
role.

The [Family Federation](#) accuses Preston Moon and the UCI, previously called Unification Church International, of diverting assets, now valued at approximately \$3 billion, that were meant to support the [church](#)'s mission. Instead, they claim, the funds were redirected toward Preston Moon's personal projects.

Legal arguments and judicial skepticism

Representing the [Family Federation](#), attorney Cathy Hinger argued that if the lower courts allowed her clients to proceed with their case, they could demonstrate that Preston Moon acted in bad faith, engaging in self-dealing that unlawfully diverted church funds.

Hinger told the judges that the transfers essentially became a way to launder the D.C. nonprofit assets, stripping them of the protections and oversight required by local nonprofit laws.



"The First Amendment to The U.S. Constitution" Monument in Independence National Historic Park in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

However, Jacob Roth, the attorney representing Preston Moon, countered that his client was acting in accordance with the [church](#)'s mission and that the First Amendment prohibits courts from interfering in religious matters.



Judge Joshua Deahl appeared to find merit in Roth's argument, questioning whether determining "bad faith" would require the court to assess whether the assets were used in alignment with [Unification Church](#) principles - a religious judgment that the judiciary is not equipped to make.

The judge noted that there would have been no disagreement whether the disputed financial moves furthered the [church](#)'s mission if [Rev. Moon](#) himself had made them. That suggests, according to Deahl, that the real issue here is not the decisions themselves but who made them - a question he for some reason claims is rooted in [church](#) doctrine.

Judge Deahl also pointed out that [Rev. Moon](#) frequently used [church](#) funds for projects that Deahl maintains were personal in nature, such as establishing The Washington Times in 1982. He added that boosting one's profile seems to go hand in hand with elevating the [church](#)'s profile.



In response, Hinger, speaking for the [religious organization](#), maintained that Preston Moon's actions exceeded what could be considered legitimate [church](#)-related spending, arguing that he had engaged in outright self-dealing. She asserted that the [Family Federation](#) had evidence to prove this in court.

Judge Vijay Shanker, however, was unconvinced, questioning whether the claims were sufficiently supported by legal filings. He asked where exactly the self-dealing could be found. Shanker claimed that this isn't just a trial issue; it's a matter of properly pleading and demonstrating grounds for summary judgment.

A longstanding legal battle

The Washington daily describes how this case has been making its way through Washington, D.C.'s legal system since 2011 and has previously been before the appeals court. In 2022, the appellate judges ruled that the First Amendment largely shielded Preston Moon and

UCI from legal claims but instructed the lower court to examine allegations of fraud more closely. Judge Deahl was part of that decision as well.

On Tuesday, UCI's attorney Derek Shaffer argued that it was time to put an end to the litigation. He maintained that the case has drained the parties involved, even that it has placed an undue burden on a [religious movement](#). He asserted that continuing the case was itself an act of bad faith.

Broader implications and concerns from advocacy groups



"Nameless", painting by Luis Vargas Santa Cruz about clergy abuse in Catholicism

As [reported earlier](#) - and now pointed out by The Washington Times - the legal battle has drawn attention from various advocacy organizations. A coalition of child welfare and anti-clergy abuse groups has sided with the [Family Federation](#), warning that dismissing the case on church autonomy grounds could set a dangerous precedent.

In their legal brief, the coalition argued that shielding religious institutions from legal scrutiny has historically enabled misconduct to go unchecked.

The coalition led by Child USA stated,

"For too long, the failure to adjudicate claims where religion was superficially involved enabled institutional bad actors to seek shelter from the very laws that were designed to deter their harmful activities."

The coalition claims that the Catholic Church's clergy abuse scandals are a stark reminder of the societal cost when religious institutions operate beyond the reach of the law, potentially

harming untold numbers and obstructing justice.

The Washington Times' ownership and editorial independence

In their article, Swoyer and Dinan point out that The Washington Times was founded by [Sun Myung Moon](#) and [Hak Ja Han](#) and is owned by Operations Holdings Ltd., a business subsidiary of the [Unification Church](#). Despite this ownership structure, the newspaper maintains independent editorial control, with professional journalists overseeing its content.

Text: Knut Holdhus

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The logo of of Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, formerly known as Unification Church, is seen on the wall of the the building housing its headquarters in Tokyo, Thursday, Oct. 12, 2023. Japan's government is convening a meeting... [more >](#)



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By Alex Swoyer and Stephen Dinan - The Washington Times - Tuesday, February 11, 2025

An appeals court in the District grappled Tuesday with a thorny case involving control of \$3 billion in assets of the Unification Church and whether judges are violating the First Amendment if they try to settle the dispute over how the money was used.

The three-judge panel seemed wary of wading into the dispute, suggesting it was wrapped in ecclesiastical questions of church hierarchy and mission that the courts aren't able to sort through.

On one side is the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification International, which says it is carrying out the wishes of the Rev. [Sun Myung Moon](#), the late founder of the global church.

Opposing them is Preston Moon, the late reverend's eldest son, who at one point appeared to be the reverend's successor before having that called into question.

The [Family Federation](#) says Preston Moon and his Unification Church International (UCI) took money and property that was supposed to go to the church's mission — some \$3 billion worth, in current value — and siphoned it away to his own projects.

Cathy Hinger, who represented the [Family Federation](#), said if her clients are allowed to make the argument in lower courts, they could prove Preston Moon acted out of bad faith and self-dealing and that the money should revert to the [federation](#).

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“The issue is the transfers became a vehicle to essentially launder the D.C. nonprofit assets of all the protection and guardrails of the D.C. nonprofit laws,” she told the court.

But Jacob Roth, who represented Preston Moon, said his client was faithfully carrying out the church’s mission — and he said the First Amendment means the courts shouldn’t get involved.

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That argument seemed to appeal to Judge Joshua Deahl.

“To me when you say it’s bad faith, it keeps coming back to true, if not being used to advance Unification [Church] purposes. But in order to say that requires some religious determination that I don’t really have the capacity to make,” the judge told Ms. Hinger.

He offered up a hypothetical, asking what if Rev. Moon, who was the undisputed leader of the movement before his death, had made the same moves as Preston Moon.

The judge said there would be no argument that the moves furthered the church’s purpose — so that means the argument over Preston Moon isn’t about the decisions, but rather who made them. And that, he suggested, is a matter of church doctrine the courts have declined to consider.

Judge Deahl added that a lot of Rev. Moon’s projects were personal, including support for The Washington Times, which he founded in 1982.

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“Raising your profile seems part and parcel with raising the profile of the church,” Judge Deahl said.

Ms. Hinger said Preston Moon’s moves went beyond that, and constituted self-dealing. She said the [Family Federation](#) could prove that at trial.

Judge Vijay Shanker said he didn’t see anything in the documents to back up those allegations.

“Where is the self-dealing?” he asked. “It is not a trial issue. It is a pleading issue and a summary judgment issue.”

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The legal battle has been kicking around the city's courts since 2011, and has been before the same appeals court before, too.

The last time, in 2022, the appellate judges ruled that the First Amendment claims generally shielded Preston Moon and UCI from the legal challenge, but told the trial court to delve more deeply into the fraud claims. Judge Deahl was part of that previous decision.

Derek Shaffer, who represented UCI, told the court on Tuesday it was time to shut down the proceedings.

"It has taxed the parties. It has taxed a religious movement to no end," Mr. Shaffer said, adding that he thought continuing the lawsuit is bad faith.

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The legal issues involved in the case have attracted attention from other interests, with a coalition of child welfare and anti-clergy abuse groups backing the [Family Federation](#). In their brief they said using the church autonomy argument to shut off legal action would be a dangerous road to take.

"For too long, the failure to adjudicate claims where religion was superficially involved enabled institutional bad actors to seek shelter from the very laws that were designed to deter their harmful activities," said the groups, led by Child USA. "The Catholic Church's clergy-abuse era is strong testimony to the cost to society of religious institutions that seek to relegate themselves to the private sphere, where unchecked, they may harm untold numbers and obstruct the administration of justice."

The Washington Times was founded by Reverend [Sun Myung Moon](#) and Hak Ja Han Moon and is owned by [Operations Holdings Ltd.](#), a business subsidiary of the Unification Church. Editorial control is vested in its independent professional journalists.

• *Stephen Dinan can be reached at sdinan@washingtontimes.com.*


• *Alex Swoyer can be reached at aswoyer@washingtontimes.com.*

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