

## FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Hyun Jin Preston Moon - Concealing Fraud Behind Religious Smokescreen?

Knut Holdhus  
February 1, 2025



*Hyun Jin Preston Moon speaking in 2007*

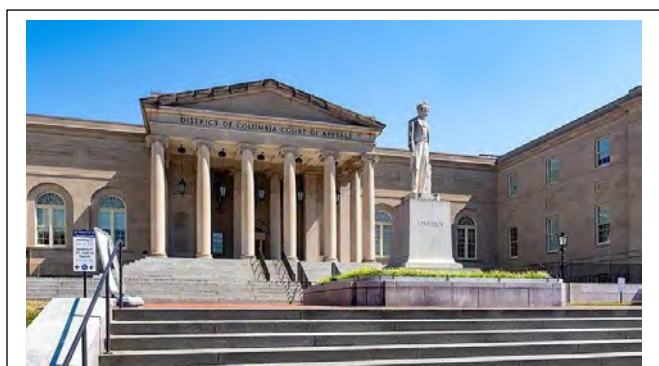


**Baptist  
News  
Global**

**Legal documents submitted in fraud case claiming defendants are "manipulating religious abstention doctrine to conceal secular wrongdoings behind religious smokescreen"**

See also [Legal Battle Continues to Regain Stolen Funds](#)

On 29th January 2025, Baptist News Global, a Baptist news agency based in Jacksonville, Florida published an article headlined, "[DC court asked to limit use of 'ecclesial abstention' when fraud is involved](#)". It was penned by Mark Wingfield, executive director and publisher of the news agency.

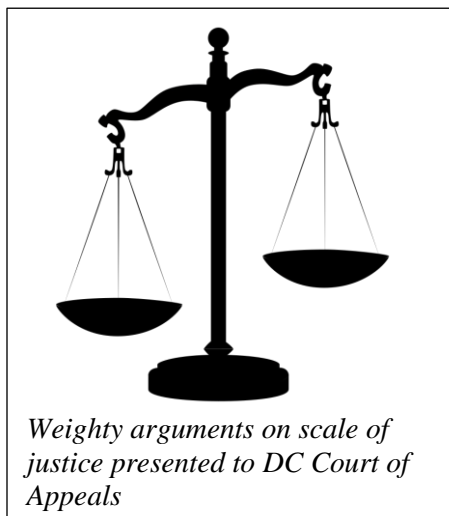


*District of Columbia Court of Appeals*

According to Wingfield, on 11th February, the District of Columbia Court of Appeals will hear a case that could have broad implications for how courts handle disputes involving religious institutions. The case challenges the long-standing legal principle of "ecclesial abstention", which generally prevents courts from intervening in matters concerning church governance due to the First Amendment's protection of religious freedom.

Wingfield writes that courts have used this doctrine for decades to avoid ruling on internal church matters, including employment disputes and leadership conflicts. However, the case of [The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification International v. Hyun Jin "Preston" Moon](#) tests whether this legal shield should extend to cases involving fraud and financial misconduct.

### Background of the Case



*Weighty arguments on scale of justice presented to DC Court of Appeals*

This legal dispute, which has been ongoing for over a decade, revolves around Hyun Jin "Preston" Moon, a son of the late [Sun Myung Moon](#) (1920-2012), the founder of the religious movement formerly known as the [Unification Church](#). The plaintiffs, representing the church now officially called the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), accuse Preston Moon of diverting \$3 billion in [church](#) assets for personal use.

The [Unification Church](#), originally [established in 1954](#) as the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, amassed significant wealth under [Sun Myung Moon's](#) leadership. [Moon](#), who was born in Korea in 1920 and later immigrated to the United States, appointed his son to leadership roles in the [church](#) in the late 1990s.

Baptist News Global explains that in 2006, Preston Moon was named president and chairman of the Unification Church International. However, in later years, the [elder Moon](#) reportedly lost faith in his son's leadership and instructed him to step down.

Rather than resigning, Preston Moon allegedly worked with others to take control of the nonprofit's board, renaming it "UCI" to sever ties with the [Unification Church](#). The lawsuit claims that he then misused [church](#) funds for personal enrichment. Legal action against him began while [Sun Myung Moon](#) was still

alive, and the mother, [Hak Ja Han](#), who remains a leader in the [religious organization](#), is among those seeking restitution.

## The Legal Challenge

Wingfield points out that if this were a dispute involving a family-owned business, courts would typically investigate financial records and evidence to determine whether fraud occurred. However, because the contested funds are tied to a religious institution, courts have hesitated to intervene. The key legal question is whether the doctrine of ecclesial abstention should prevent courts from adjudicating cases where financial misconduct is alleged.

The Baptist news agency emphasizes that the plaintiffs argue that the courts have wrongly avoided addressing their claims, stating in their legal complaint:

The trial court declined to examine allegations of self-dealing and contract violations, even though these claims do not involve religious leadership, doctrine, or faith. Instead, they pertain to property disputes and fiduciary responsibilities, which could and should be decided based on neutral legal principles.

The court failed to determine whether an exception to ecclesial abstention exists in cases of fraud, corruption, or collusion. By refusing to address this issue, the trial court effectively "handed defendants absolute immunity for misconduct for which everyone else in civil society must be accountable."



*The Catholic Church in trouble over thousands of sexual abuse cases. Here, the President of the Portuguese Episcopal Conference, José Ornelas (Bishop of Leiria-Fátima), makes an address following the presentation of the report of the Independent Commission for the Study of Child Sexual Abuse in the Portuguese Catholic Church, on 13 February 2023*

The plaintiffs warn that allowing the doctrine of religious abstention to shield fraudulent behavior creates a dangerous precedent. They argue that if the ruling is not overturned, it will enable bad actors to misuse religious institutions to hide financial misconduct and evade legal consequences.

### Support from Advocacy Groups

Mark Wingfield mentions that several organizations have taken a public stand in support of the plaintiffs, among them a coalition advocating for victims of clergy sexual abuse, including Child USA, Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), and the Zero Abuse Project. In an amicus brief handed to the court, their argument emphasizes the broader societal risks of allowing religious institutions to operate beyond legal scrutiny.

Their brief states,

"Defendants' successful manipulation of the religious abstention doctrine sets a dangerous precedent that will encourage others to follow Preston Moon's stratagem of concealing secular wrongdoing behind a religious smokescreen."

In the past, courts often accepted broad First Amendment claims without considering their implications, allowing religious institutions to shield themselves from legal accountability.

The groups argue that past failures to hold religious organizations accountable have had dire consequences, citing the Catholic Church's clergy abuse scandals as an example.

Wingfield quotes from the amicus brief,

"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 above-mentioned coalition emphasizes that the "bad actors" within religious institutions should not be allowed to exploit the First Amendment to escape responsibility for actions that cause harm.

The coalition further argue that courts have increasingly recognized that religious freedom does not equate to legal immunity. The ongoing legal evolution, particularly in cases related to child sexual abuse, underscores the need for religious institutions to be held to the same standards as other entities in civil society.

## The Significance of the Case



*How will the DC Court of Appeals rule?*

The outcome of this case could shape how courts handle financial disputes within religious organizations. The plaintiffs urge the appellate court to reject the trial court's stance, arguing that religious entities should not be immune from legal oversight when fraud and financial misappropriation are at issue.

In their concluding statement, the advocacy groups assert that courts across the country have begun dismantling legal protections that have historically shielded religious organizations from accountability. They call on the DC Court of Appeals to take a similar stand and ensure that fraudulent actions within religious institutions are subject to legal scrutiny.

As this case progresses, its implications extend beyond the [Family Federation](#),

potentially influencing future legal battles involving religious organizations and financial misconduct. The ruling could determine whether religious entities can continue to use ecclesial abstention as a defense in cases where fraud and corruption are alleged, setting an important precedent for the intersection of religious freedom and legal accountability.

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Text: Knut Holdhus

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# Legal Battle Continues To Regain Stolen Funds

• September 8, 2024 • Knut Holdhus



**Press release on legal battle to get back funds misappropriated by Hyun Jin Preston Moon and co-defendants**

See also ["Concealing Fraud Behind Religious Smokescreen"](#)



*Family Federation for World Peace and Unification USA Logo*

The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification of USA issued a press release on 5th September 2024. In it the federation states that the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification International (FFWPUI) is continuing its legal battle against Hyun Jin "Preston" Moon and his co-defendants, accusing them of misappropriating \$3 billion in church assets.

In a recent filing with the District of Columbia Court of Appeals, FFWPUI argues that the U.S. courts have jurisdiction over the case despite Moon's claims that the issue involves religious freedom protected by the First Amendment. FFWPUI asserts that Moon's defense is a "religious smokescreen" meant to shield him from accountability for secular

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wrongdoing, such as fraud and self-dealing. They emphasize that the case is about upholding legal responsibilities and preventing misuse of religious protections to evade liability.

Here is the text of the press release: (See the [PRNewswire original version](#))

## FFWPUI Continues the Fight to Hold Preston Moon Accountable for Alleged \$3 Billion Scheme

**News provided by Family Federation for World Peace and Unification**

Sep 05, 2024, 11:49 ET



District of Columbia Court of Appeals. Photo (2024): Ajay Suresh / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 2.0 Gen](#)

NEW YORK, Sept. 5, 2024 /PRNewswire/ — The [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) International (FFWPUI) continues to seek justice in the United States against Hyun Jin “Preston” Moon and his codefendants for allegedly misappropriating \$3 billion worth of Church assets. In a new Court filing with the District of Columbia Court of Appeals, FFWPUI argues that U.S. Courts absolutely have jurisdiction to try the case, where an individual fraudulently conveyed Church assets for his personal enrichment.

FFWPUI holds firm in its belief that the First Amendment does not reach the self-dealing and other breaches at issue in this case and, therefore, the Court has both the ability and responsibility to rule on this case.

In their latest filing with the Court, FFWPUI contends Preston Moon and his codefendants put forward legally incorrect and factually untrue arguments to claim absolute immunity. Their arguments are nothing more than a “religious smokescreen” to shield their wrongdoing and to disguise this appeal as a dispute about succession. Yet, as FFWPUI explains in its reply brief:



Hyun Jin Preston Moon in December 2008. Photo: [FFWPU](#)

*“Abundant evidence exists that **Defendants acted fraudulently and collusively** and have reimagined the ‘facts’ to **erect a religious smokescreen** to avoid liability for purely secular wrongdoing.”*

*“It is **an affront to the rule of law** for Defendants to contend that courts must abstain from enforcing legal rights and duties (e.g., a corporate director’s fiduciary duty to refrain from self-dealing) if a defendant lays claim to ‘messianic’ status. As **amici curiae** aptly point out, “**the First Amendment is not a shield behind which religious adherents can escape liability for social wrongs they committed,**” and adopting an abstention doctrine **without a limiting principle sets a dangerous precedent**, sheltering bad actors contrary to the public interest.”*

We know what this case is about: ensuring that bad actors, like the Defendants, cannot distort First Amendment religious protections to avoid answering for their wrongdoing. The Court can, and should, rule on this case, or it risks setting a dangerous precedent for future bad actors seeking to abuse religious protections to cloak their fraudulent

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and collusive activities.

See also ["Concealing Fraud Behind Religious Smokescreen"](#)

**Featured image** above: Hyun Jin Preston Moon speaking in 2007.  
Photo: [FFWPU](#)

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