

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: UPI bias - Is unfair reporting shaped by court losses?

Knut Holdhus
August 12, 2025



Hyun Jin "Preston" Moon along with the logos of UPI and News World Communications, the parent company that owns UPI

UPI From courtroom to newsroom: Growing concerns over UPI bias as its ownership ties cast shadows over its critical reporting on the Family Federation

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor



Hyun Jin Moon (left) and his right-hand man Youngjun Kim in Gapyeong, South Korea 25th Feb. 2007. They are both married to daughters of Chung-hwan Kwak, a key supporter of Hyun Jin Moon, who is married to Jun-sook Kwak, while Kim's wife is Shin-sook Kwak. Another key ally of Hyun Jin Moon is Jin-man Kwak, the son of Chung-hwan Kwak

UPI, under a leadership that includes Hyun Jin "Preston" Moon and Youngjun Kim, has published a string of investigative reports on legal actions in South Korea regarding the [Unification Church](#) / [Family Federation](#).

UPI (United Press International) was in the mid-20th century a prominent high-volume global news agency but may today best be described as reduced to a niche wire service.

And niche it is judging by the detailed coverage of the current investigations in South Korea into bribes allegedly given to the former First Lady by a former high-ranking member of the [Family Federation](#).

The UPI seems to exceed other news agencies in terms of volume and details in this case.

All its seven articles from 8th July to 7th August are written by Youngjun Kim, the former Vice Chairman of UPI and known to be Hyun Jin Moon's right-hand man.

Hyun Jin Moon is also known as Preston Moon and is the Chairman of News World Communications - the parent company that owns UPI.

And News World Communications belongs to UCI - short for Unification Church

International - a nonprofit holding entity originally established to manage the global assets and businesses

affiliated with the [Unification Church](#), founded by [Sun Myung Moon](#).



*Hyun Jin "Preston" Moon
listening to his father's speech
3rd Jan. 3, 2008*

In 2010, UCI led by Hyun Jin "Preston" Moon amended its articles of incorporation to remove explicit loyalty to the [Unification Church's](#) doctrines and leadership. This was disastrous for the [church](#). Effectively, billions worth of assets and businesses went lost as they came under the control of a body split from the [church](#). That naturally led to legal disputes.

The legal battle between the [Family Federation](#) and Unification Church International (UCI), led by Hyun Jin "Preston" Moon, originated in a 2011 lawsuit. The [Family Federation](#) alleged UCI directors breached fiduciary duties by amending articles to shift from church-specific missions, removing loyal directors, and diverting ~\$500 million in assets (now valued up to \$3 billion) to entities like the Global Peace Foundation and Kingdom Investments Foundation for personal or non-church pursuits. Hyun Jin "Preston" Moon is founder and chairman of the Global Peace Foundation, Youngjun Kim is International Senior Vice President.

The Washington D.C. Superior Court allowed the case in 2015, issued a 2018 injunction against donations, and granted partial summary judgment to the [Family Federation](#) in 2019, ordering director removals. Appeals escalated: A 2022 ruling (Moon III) reversed much of it as nonjusticiable under the First Amendment's religious abstention doctrine [See editor's note below]. Remaining claims were dismissed on remand. On 3rd July 2025, the D.C. Court of Appeals affirmed the full dismissal, concluding the 14-year dispute in UCI's favor.



*Chung-hwan Kwak (1936-),
father-in-law of Hyun Jin Moon
and Honorary President of the
Global Peace Foundation,
chairman and president of News
World Communications 2002-
2009. Served as chairman and
president of the [Family
Federation](#) from 1996 to 2008.
He also served many years as
International Director of World
Missions of the [Unification
Church](#). Photo (2007):*

The seven UPI reports published since then on legal actions in South Korea regarding the [Unification Church](#) / [Family Federation](#) naturally raise questions of editorial impartiality and potential bias. As the long-running litigation pitted UCI and Preston Moon against [Family Federation](#), and UPI is under influence of UCI, there is real concern that UPI coverage reflects editorial bias favoring the UCI side - such as greater attention to allegations or framing of the [Family Federation](#) in a negative light.

The headlines of the seven reports from 8th July to 7th August, are uniformly critical toward the [Family Federation](#) side ([Unification Church](#)), referencing arrests, raids, investigations, and scandal.

The framing largely tracks the official Korean investigative narrative, but without visible counterpoint voices sympathetic to the [Family Federation's](#) perspective.

UPI is nominally a news agency; professional norms typically require separation between ownership influence and newsroom decisions. However, actual independence may be moderated by ownership interests.

Even if the investigative journalism is factually accurate and based on primary reporting, critics may perceive that UPI's outlet is more willing to highlight investigations against the [Family Federation](#) given its owners' longstanding conflict.

Putting out one critical article after the other may easily be perceived as an attempt to justify the "diversion" of assets worth a huge sum - possibly as much as 3 billion US dollars today - away from the [religious organization](#) to which those assets originally belonged. By portraying the [Family Federation](#) and its leadership in as bad a light as possible, that diversion of funds feels justified.

Another justification of the "diversion" of the above-mentioned assets can be found in the UPI article of 7th August on the current South Korean investigations. There, Youngjun Kim writes,

"But internal divisions intensified following [Moon's](#) death in 2012, particularly over succession and theology."

In actual fact, what Kim calls "internal divisions" was the breakaway of a tiny fraction of members who chose to be loyal to Hyun Jin "Preston" Moon - or simply followed the money.

And judging by the large output of articles critical of the [Family Federation](#), one easily gets the impression that UCI is not content with a victory in the US courts. Through the UPI, they have found another arena to discredit the [religious organization](#) they got their assets from.



United Press International building in Washington D.C. in April 2005

Anyone relying on UPI coverage of the [Family Federation](#) investigations should be aware of UPI's ownership structure and public litigation context, and complement with information from other independent or South Korean-based outlets for balance.

See also [Risky Precedent: Church Ties and Case Dismissal](#)

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

Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[Editor's note: The religious abstention doctrine - also sometimes called the ecclesiastical abstention doctrine - is a principle developed by U.S. courts under the First Amendment's religion clauses (the Free Exercise Clause and the Establishment Clause) that says civil courts must generally avoid deciding disputes that would require them to interpret matters of religious doctrine, faith, or internal church governance.

The First Amendment bars government (including the judiciary) from interfering in purely religious questions.

Courts may decide certain disputes involving religious organizations only if they can do so using "neutral principles of law" that don't require interpreting religious doctrine.

When resolving a dispute would require deciding who is right on a religious question, the court must abstain.]

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“Concealing Fraud Behind Religious Smokescreen”

- February 1, 2025
- Knut Holdhus

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

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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.



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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

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.



Weighty arguments on scale of justice presented to DC Court of Appeals. Photo: 99joseph / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image

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:

1. The trial court declined to examine allegations of self-dealing

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1. 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.**
2. 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 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.**



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. Photo (Feb. 2023): Agencia Lusa. License: [CC Attr 3.0 Unp](#)

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**



*How will the DC Court of Appeals rule?
Illustration: Microsoft Designer Image Creator, 1st Feb. 2025*

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

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.

Text: Knut Holdhus

See also [Risky Precedent: Church Ties and Case Dismissal](#)

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Featured image above: Hyun Jin Preston Moon speaking in 2007.
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intervention in the matter would violate the *First Amendment*.

Judges weigh constitutional limits on church dispute



Baptist News Global

Logo of Baptist News Global

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.

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.



From “The First Amendment to The U.S. Constitution” Monument in Independence National Historic Park in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Photo: [Ed Uthman / Wikimedia Commons](#). License: [CC ASA 2.0 Gen](#)

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



Alex Swoyer. Photo (2016): [Gage Skidmore / Wikimedia Commons](#). License: [CC ASA 2.0 Gen](#). Cropped



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

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,



Joshua Deahl. Photo (2022): *United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs / Wikimedia Commons*

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removed the [church's mission](#). Commons. [Public domain image](#)

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.



Vijay Shanker. Photo (2022): United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain image](#)

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

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."



Dismissing the case on church autonomy grounds could set a dangerous precedent. Here, selection from "Nameless", painting by Luis Vargas Santa Cruz (Q112692608) about clergy abuse in Catholicism. Photo: Marafeminista / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0](#). Cropped

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.

See also [UPI Bias: Does Legal History Shape Reporting?](#)

Text: Knut Holdhus

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