

# Acts of VCBC

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Reverend Kong claims he was wrongfully fired from his job as senior pastor. Members of his former congregation are speaking out against the church leadership. /GOOGLE EARTH

## Firing of senior pastor divides large Vancouver church congregation

The Truth, Vancouver

A church with one of the Lower Mainland's largest congregations is being sued by a former senior pastor who claims he was fired without cause. The suit says Rev. Alfred Kong suffered embarrassment and humiliation as a result of his termination by church leadership.

Rev. Kong, who was recruited in Hong Kong by the church in January 2011, has also filed a complaint with the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal. The Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church in South Vancouver had a congregation of nearly 1,000 members when Rev. Kong was terminated effective last October 4th. Since then, approximately one third of the congregation has left the church – some to set up the new Mission Baptist Church.

VCBC congregation includes both Chinese and English-speaking members and the church is led by a council and board of directors. Since there are many overlapping positions among leaders, the church is ultimately led by only 11 people.

Documents filed by Rev. Kong's lawyer David McWhinnie in B.C. Supreme Court claim the senior pastor was fired without notice toward the end of three months sick leave he had taken. The claim states church leadership sent a notice to all members on July 14, 2013, stating that Rev. Kong

would be terminated while he was on sick leave with a six-month severance package.

The lawsuit claims the manner of dismissal was abusive, unfair and resulted in mental distress, embarrassment, anxiety and stress. The lawsuit seeks general damages as well as aggravated and/or punitive damages.

Sources among congregation members say the action taken by the church leadership followed a bid by Rev. Kong to investigate allegations that a long-standing church leader had solicited money from fellow members of the congregation for questionable investments. The same leader had been removed from the deaconship 20 years prior due to a financial dispute.

The senior pastor set up a seven-person committee to resolve the dispute. But committee members were unable to agree on a conclusion.

Rev. Kong found there was enough information to take action and removed this individual as a church leader. Subsequently, this individual and 17 other church members, many from the leadership team, signed a petition demanding Rev. Kong reinstate the individual as church deacon.

In May 2013, two junior pastors resigned and sent letters questioning Rev. Kong's suitability as senior pastor.

A confidential letter sent by Rev. Kong to the church

personnel committee complaining of being treated unfairly was released by a member of the committee to all church members without Rev. Kong's knowledge and permission.

Kelly Chan, a 40-year member of the church, who was a church deacon on the board of directors, past chair of the personnel committee and a moderator, attempted to mediate concerns expressed by Rev. Kong. But he was subsequently dismissed from all his roles within the church at a hastily convened meeting that he didn't attend. The meeting was facilitated by Philip Mah who acted as moderator.

This spring (March), Mr. Chan was formally removed as church deacon in a motion put forward by the church leadership. Church members who asked why Mr. Chan was being removed as a deacon were ignored.

Those speaking out against the actions of the church leadership team say this is contrary to the Society Act of British Columbia requirements and church bylaws.

Over 100 concerned members signed a petition demanding six church leaders step aside by taking a two-year sabbatical. The leadership team refused and published the petition in a church bulletin sent out to all members of the congregation that included the original signature of every person who had signed it the

petition.

Henry Cheung, chair of Board of Directors, responded to the petition letter by writing, "A group of dissenters has employed unethical tactics to discredit the integrity of the

*"My wife and I went to a members meeting and it almost degenerated into a fist fight. They behaved like thugs."*

current church leaders."

Elean, a long-time active member of the church, says there were a number of instances of "breach of trust" where church leadership released confidential information by posting it on the bulletin board and providing copies to congregation members.

"I feel that if I were to speak about something in confidence and have it released to the public is an incredible violation of my right to voice my opinion in confidence," she says.

Concerned congregation members complain that the leadership team has put in place 2014 election guidelines designed to prevent them from being nominated to serve in church.

"The conflict between church members with unresolved

issues keeps growing and now the leadership is burning through money by hiring lawyers," says Kelly Chan who has now been removed from all his church management roles.

Concerned members see only one solution. "These people need to step down and should not be serving the church for the next few years. This time off from church leadership positions is not a punishment. This sabbatical time away from church leadership positions is to give these church leaders a time of rest and relief so that they can rest in quietness and return to God," they say.

A long-time church member, software technical writer and former member of the church Personnel Committee, says he and his wife stopped attending VCBC last May.

"My wife and I went to a members meeting and it almost degenerated into a fist fight. They behaved like thugs. Over one thousand members and 40 years of history and they split the church in less than a year."

With both a lawsuit and complaint to the B.C. Civil Rights Tribunal now pending, the church congregation has declined dramatically as once loyal church members take sides in the dispute, with many choosing to leave the Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church. ■