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Whatever Happened to “The Local Church”?

By Tal Davis

In the 1960s and 70s, a set of Christian books by a Chinese writer was very popular among young evangelicals. The writer was famous for having been severely persecuted by the Chinese Communists after the revolution in 1948. He spent the last years of his life in prison until his death in 1972. His name was Watchman Nee (1903-1972). One of his most popular tomes was titled *The Normal Christian Life*. Growing up, Nee was raised in a Chinese Methodist family. As a young man he was influenced by the writings of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) and the Plymouth Brethren. Eventually he broke with the Brethren because of their exclusivity but adopted their non-denominational church organization.

In the 1930s he became the leader of an independent group of Christians in China. He also began to teach that there should only be one church congregation in each local community. Nee led training conferences and preached in the churches until the Communist Revolution shut them down in 1952. He also wrote many books including *The Normal Christian Life* and *The Spiritual Man*, both of which are still in print.

In 1932, Nee was joined in his ministry by a man named Witness Lee (1905-1997) who became one of Nee’s most trusted advisors. In 1948, just before the Communist Revolution took control of the Chinese mainland, Nee sent Lee to Taiwan to start churches on that island. Since Taiwan remained free of communist control, the movement grew under Lee’s leadership, even though Watchman Nee languished in prison. Eventually the movement spread to other Asian countries and to the United States. In 1962, Lee migrated to California where he founded Living Stream Ministries and Publications. In time, he was recognized by all those in the Local Church movement as its de facto head. Lee’s movement continued with the ecclesiastical conviction that only one church should be constituted in each community – thus the name, “The Local Church.” The implication, like that of most sectar-

ian groups, was that they were the only true Christian church in any community. Apparently the church regards itself as a modern reformation and renewal of authentic Christianity. Each local congregation simply calls itself “the church in (whatever city).” New churches were started by members moving into a city and establishing a new congregation in which to proselytize new members. There are now estimated to be about 30,000 members in the USA.

Watchman Nee’s and Witness Lee’s books and recordings are published and distributed by Living Stream Ministry in Anaheim, California. They also publish a Bible translation called *The Recovery Bible*. Its scholarly reliability is not known.

Witness Lee also instituted some controversial theological and practical concepts that got the attention of some evangelical counter-cult ministries. One group, The Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP) published, in 1977, a small book titled *The God-Men: An Inquiry Into Witness Lee and the Local Church* by Neil T. Duddy. The book accused the Local Church of authoritarianism, thought reform, isolation of members, deceptive recruiting, use of fear and humiliation to control members, and financial malfeasance. Other counter-cult groups in various publications also accused them of bordering on theological heresy. They pointed to some confusing Local Church doctrines such as deification (the concept that believers can be joined spiritually with God – an idea taught in Eastern Orthodoxy), the nature of God, the fullness of salvation, and the nature of the Church.

As a result of these published criticisms, a few of the Local Churches filed lawsuits against the counter-cult ministries and publishers, accusing them of libel. In one instance, in a suit against SCP, the publishers of *The God-Men*, they won the case and were awarded \$11.9 million. The judgment caused SCP to file for bankruptcy, though

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it later recovered and is still active today. In any case, in 1997 Witness Lee died. The current leadership of the movement is not known. Most likely it is a group of elders appointed by Lee before his death. Its USA CEO/President is listed on legal documents as Raymond Graver.

Since his death, in the early 2000s, several sets of evangelical scholars made careful examinations of the beliefs and practices of the Local Church and Living Stream Ministry. Their evaluations were mixed. Several of them, including scholars at Fuller Theological Seminary and a team at the Christian Research Institute, concluded that the earlier criticisms were unwarranted. They decided that the Local Church was basically an orthodox Christian movement. Other prominent evangelical scholars nonetheless disagreed and remained skeptical of the Local Church's biblical authenticity.

On its website Living Stream Ministry posts the following Statement of Faith:

Holding the Bible as the complete and only divine revelation, we strongly believe that God is eternally one and also eternally the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the three being distinct but not separate. We hold that Christ is both the complete God and the perfect man. Without abandoning His divinity, He was conceived in the womb of a human virgin, lived a genuine human life on earth, and died a vicarious and all-inclusive death on the cross. After three days He resurrected bodily and has ascended to the heavens. He is now in glory, fully God but still fully man. We look to His imminent return with the kingdom of God, by which He will reign over the earth in the millennium and in eternity. We confess that the third of the Trinity, the Spirit, is equally God. All that the Father has and is, is expressed by the Son; and all that the Son has and is, is realized as the Spirit. We further believe that mankind is in need of God's salvation. Though we were absolutely unable to fulfill the heavy demands of God's righteousness, holiness, and glory, Christ fulfilled all the requirements through His death on the cross. Because of Christ's death, God has for-

given us of our sins, justified us by making Christ our righteousness, and reconciled us to Himself. Based on Christ's redemption, God regenerates the redeemed with His Spirit to consummate His salvation, that they may become His children. Now possessing God's life and nature, the believers enjoy a daily salvation in His Body in this age and the eternal salvation in the coming age and in eternity. In eternity we will dwell with God in the New Jerusalem, the consummation of God's salvation of His elect. (<https://www.lsm.org/lsm-statement-faith.html>)

This statement reads very orthodox and clear, so we will take it as it reads. But as we all know, things can be written to sound good and actually mean something else. In this case we will simply suspend judgment.

One final note of caution: In researching this article we did run across one area of concern from the website MinistryWatch. That is an organization that objectively evaluates the credibility of Christian ministries' financial practices (<https://ministrywatch.com/>). They recently down-graded Living Stream Ministry to a transparency grade of D, and a Donor Confidence Score of 36 (i.e.: "Withhold Giving" – advising Christians not to give financial support to the ministry). Here is their report:

Today, Living Stream Ministry continues to operate out of Anaheim, California. In 2023, the organization had \$21 million in revenue-almost double its revenue from 2020, which was \$11.7 million. According to its website, LSM does not "solicit donations or contributions." The organization does sell books, audio books, CDs, and ebooks on its site. In addition, it hosts numerous conferences throughout the year. While its revenue in 2023 was \$21 million, its expenses were just \$16.8 million. Its General and Admin costs were 20%, compared with its sector median of 12%. At least eight staff members make six-figure salaries. LSM has \$112.2 million in net assets and it is not a member of the ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability). The organization did not respond to multiple requests for comment. Min-

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istryWatch Donor Confidence Score: 36 (out of a possible 100) "Withhold Giving." MinistryWatch Financial Efficiency Rating: 2 Stars (out of a possible 5 Stars). MinistryWatch Transparency Grade: D. Revenue in Most Recent Year Available: \$21,064,029. Five-Year Revenue Trend: Increasing (by 29%). Percent of Revenue Living Stream Ministry Spends on Fundraising: 0% Percent. Peer Group Spends on Fundraising: 5%. CEO/President: Raymond Graver President's Salary and Other Compensation: \$47,857.

by Brittany Smith, MinistryWatch,
March 26, 2025

In conclusion, we pray that The Local Church people have an authentic faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Our hope is that they are not depending on their church membership or leaders (dead or alive) for their salvation. We are concerned that they seem to ele-

vate their fellowship above all others, which implies they see themselves as somehow superior.

In any case, it is unlikely that any of us will encounter members or congregations of the Local Church. We do advise caution about ordering Living Stream Ministry literature or *The Recovery Bible*. We suggest reliable scholarly modern translations like the New American Standard Bible (NASB), The New International Version (NIV), or the Christian Standard Bible (CSB),

Sources:

Melton, J. Gordon. *Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Eighth Edition). Detroit: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

(<https://www.lsm.org/lsm-statement-faith.html>)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_Church_controversies

<https://ministrywatch.com/>

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