

## The ecclesiology of Witness Lee

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Witness Lee (1905-97) and his 'Local Church' movement have never attained numerical significance. As a western researcher, what fascinates me most about this missionary movement is the fact that it is non-western in origin. True enough, their missionary emphasis is not primarily on the salvation of 'souls', but on the oneness of the Body of Christ expressed locally through churches untainted by doctrinal 'sectarianism'. The ground of the church, they claim, is 'based [entirely] on locality' – not on doctrine or other 'man-made' methods: "A New Testament church is the meeting together for worship, prayer, fellowship, and mutual edification, of all the people of God in a given locality, on the ground that they are Christians."<sup>1</sup> According to their logic, a church established on doctrinal grounds – e.g. on the immersion of believers in contradistinction to infant baptism – is not a church at all, but a 'man-made' sect which a true believer needs to abandon completely.

'Local Church' adherents are usually quite suspicious of Christians outside of their own circle. (During a visit to Manila several years ago I contacted some people I knew were part of this movement, and they were not even willing to tell me when and where they came together as a church!) Although scattered references to their history can be found both in their own written materials and in polemical writings against them, no systematic history of the movement has ever been written. A detailed history lies beyond my scope here, but I would like to note some highlights in the movement's early history in the U.S, and, as a Norwegian living in Norway, provide some insights into the movement's genesis here in Scandinavia.

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<sup>1</sup> Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Anaheim, California: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), 77,

## *Witness Lee*

Lee (Li Chang-shou) grew up in Chefoo in northern China,<sup>2</sup> was converted through female evangelist Peace Wang in 1925<sup>3</sup> and soon joined a local Plymouth Brethren assembly (Benjamin Newton group). That very same year<sup>4</sup> he was introduced to the ministry of Watchman Nee, first of all through the latter's *Present Testimony* magazine.<sup>5</sup> In 1933 he joined Nee's work as his co-laborer.<sup>6</sup> Just before the communist take-over in 1950 there were approximately 1000 churches connected with Nee's ministry.<sup>7</sup> In 1949 Lee was sent to Taiwan, where a church planting initiative had commenced two years earlier. In fact, only about 200 believers on the entire island considered themselves a part of Nee's church planting efforts. A few months after Lee's arrival, however, this group had been augmented to some 800 believers.<sup>8</sup> When Lee after four months of travelling within South East Asia returned to

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<sup>2</sup> Witness Lee, *History of the Church and the Local Churches* (Anaheim, California: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), 59.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, *History*, 113; Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee. A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age* (Anaheim, California: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), 284.

<sup>4</sup> Angus Kinnear errs writing that Lee was introduced to Nee's magazine two years later – in 1927. (Angus Kinnear, *Against the Tide* [Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1978], 144.)

<sup>5</sup> This was Nee's first magazine and appeared in 1923. It was replaced by *The Christian* appearing monthly from 1925. However, it ceased after two years and *The Present Testimony* reappeared for seven additional years. Then (1934) both magazines were published, together with a third magazine entitled *The News of the Churches*. (Lee, *History*, 61, 101-102, 136.)

<sup>6</sup> Lee, *History*, 35.

<sup>7</sup> James Chen, *The Passing of the Torch* (Auburn, Maine: Christian Books Publishing House, 1988), 4.

<sup>8</sup> However, we need to keep in mind that at least 500 of these were mainland refugees who already identified with Nee's church building praxis. (Norman Howard Cliff, "The Life and Theology of Watchman Nee." M.Phil. thesis, Open University, 1983, 102.)

Taiwan in March 1953, the work had grown additionally.<sup>9</sup> He himself claims that the churches grew from 500 to 20,000 between 1949 and 1955.<sup>10</sup> A critical article from Hong Kong, however, suggests that the membership rate in Taiwan included some 50,000 in 1955.<sup>11</sup> According to this particular article, in 1952 Lee had started to train future collaborators, beginning with two individuals and having some 200 after one year was completed. The movement experienced tremendous growth all over Southeast Asia, and particularly in Taiwan and in the

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<sup>9</sup> Tung Siu Kwan, "The Waves of the 'Local Church'," *Bridge* (Hong Kong), No. 57, Jan.-Feb. 1993, 2. We have good reason to suspect that much of the recruiting took place among people who were already believers: "Following the Chinese Communist occupation of mainland China, a large number of the Chinese Christians came to Taiwan to live. Upon their first arrival, they found most of the churches on the island using Taiwanese. They were unable to understand what the preachers were saying. However there was a small number of the churches which used Mandarin. The Church Assembly Hall (Nee's group), the True Jesus Church, and the chapel in the Y.M.C.A. which used Mandarin, filled the gap. They were able to meet the religious requirements of many mainland Christians who at one time were literally a lost flock. On the mainland there were many denominational churches which they could attend, but when they came to Taiwan, their missionary friends were unable to catch up with their movement and supply their spiritual needs." (Hallington K. Tong, *Christianity in Taiwan. A History*. [Taipei, Taiwan: China Post, 1961], 110.)

<sup>10</sup> Lee, *History*, 59. Jack Sparks writes in *The Mind Benders* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2nd. ed., 1979), 221: "Between 1949 and 1955 it appears that the size of the Little Flock grew from 500 to 23,000 on the island." The authenticity of this claim is verified by Hallington K. Tong, writing: "[...] 52 churches of the Church Assembly Hall located in various places on the island, with a combined attendance of more than 20,000" (*Christianity in Taiwan*, 113.). Also cf. Allan J. Swanson, *Taiwan: Mainline versus Independent Church Growth. A Study in Contrasts* (South Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1970), 190 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Kwan, "The Waves of The 'Local Church'," 2.

Philippines where the churches numbered some 6,000 members in 1968.<sup>12</sup>

### *Additional laborers sent out from mainland China*

Lee, however, was not the first laborer sent out from mainland China. Simon Meek (Miao Shou-hsun) had labored in the Philippines since 1931. And Stephen Kaung (Chiang Sheo-tao), who was introduced to Nee's meetings in Shanghai during the latter's high school years and who "joined the work" in 1935,<sup>13</sup> ministered briefly in Singapore<sup>14</sup> before he via India had a narrow escape back to China as the Japanese invaded Singapore. During the Sino-Japanese war he ministered in the city of Chungking<sup>15</sup> until 1949 as he was sent out to the Philippines<sup>16</sup> where he remained for three years.

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<sup>12</sup> Sparks, *ibid*, 222. Neither should the work in Hong Kong be ignored. It was started by K.H. Weigh and Faithful Luke in 1937. They immediately initiated "open air meetings and cottage meetings" as they understood that all Protestant denominations were negative towards them. Luke later relocated to Singapore in order to pioneer a new work, and was replaced by James Weigh who came from mainland China. Growth boomed significantly after a visit by Nee and Lee in 1949, and by Nee again in 1950. According to a 1956 estimate they then counted some 2,500 believers. (Cliff, *ibid.*, 100-101.)

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Kaung, "Life of Watchman Nee," tape 2 in a series of 3.

<sup>14</sup> Kinnear, *ibid.*, 205. Daniel Tan seems to have been the first coworker being sent to Singapore, probably already during the 30s. (Kinnear, *ibid*, 181.)

<sup>15</sup> Kinnear, *ibid*, 217.

<sup>16</sup> After having sent his colaborer Simon Meek to the Philippines in 1931, Nee remained a month in Manila en route to England via Singapore in 1937. The next year he sent Lucas Wu to assist Meek in the work. After Witness Lee visited Manila in 1950 [1951?], the recruitment of new members increased significantly. During Angus Kinnear's visit in 1955, the latter estimated that the Manila church alone counted some 1,200 believers. (Cliff, *ibid.*, 98-99.)

### *The movement arrives in the U.S.*

In 1952 Kaung arrived in the US visiting a small church fellowship in Hollis (New York City), originally influenced by the the teachings of the British 'Keswickean' T. Austin-Sparks.<sup>17</sup> A certain Mr. Lind of Scandinavian ancestry, who had formerly pastored a Swedish church in Minnesota, had established the church fellowship in Hollis. At some point he was introduced to Austin-Sparks<sup>18</sup> and visited the latter's Honor Oak assembly in London on several occasions. As the missionary couple Thornton and Carol Stearns returned from China to the U.S., they were encouraged by Austin-Sparks to get in touch with Mr. Lind. And they soon decided to be a part of the church fellowship in Hollis.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Watchman Nee had become acquainted with the Stearns already back in 1931.<sup>20</sup> Thornton, who was a "Professor of Orthopedics in the Medical School" and ministered out of the Presbyterian field in Tsinan (in the Shantung province),<sup>21</sup> and then in Shanghai,<sup>22</sup> - later even as a church elder<sup>23</sup> - contributed to the 'Austin-Sparks fellowship' gradually receiving a more 'Watchman Nee-perspective'. Bakht Singh from India visited

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<sup>17</sup> For further information on Austin-Sparks, cf. Geir Lie, "T. Austin-Sparks – a brief introduction." *Refleks* 3-1 (2004): 48-52.

<sup>18</sup> During a certain period of time Austin-Sparks visited the U.S. annually. Some of the groups he had contact with included Lind's group and the Hepzebah House (guesthouse for missionaries) – both located in New York City.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Kaung, informal phone conversation dated April 15 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Kinnear, *ibid.*, 145-46.

<sup>21</sup> Kinnear, *ibid.*, 145.

<sup>22</sup> Kinnear, *ibid.*, 167.

<sup>23</sup> Kinnear, *ibid.*, 200-1.

the church fellowship in 1960 and taught a similar message to what they already were accustomed to.<sup>24</sup>

Stephen Kaung knew the Stearns before he arrived in the U.S. Lind had by now passed away and the church fellowship only counted some 30-40 believers. Nonetheless, Kaung decided to make his visit a permanent one and remained until 1970.

In spite of his arrival to the U.S. in 1952, Witness Lee still claims that the first expression of genuine 'church life' within the U.S. originated in San Francisco in 1958. Here a Chinese-speaking 'Local Church' assembly with connections to Lee's ministry in Taiwan was established. That very same year Lee visited the U.S. for the first time and also came to New York, Los Angeles<sup>25</sup> and, naturally, the church in San Francisco. Lee returned to the U.S. in 1960 and was received among groups who were familiar with English translations of Watchman Nee's books. One of these groups was the Navigators headquartered in Glen Erie, Colorado.<sup>26</sup>

### **Westmoreland Chapel**

Prior to Lee's first visit to the U.S. in 1958, a brother-in-law of Watchman Nee had moved to Los Angeles and started to attend

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<sup>24</sup> For further information on Singh, cf. Daniel Smith, *A Prophet of God: Bakht Singh of India* (Washington D.C.: International Students, Inc., 1959) and Bakht Singh, *The Skill of His Loving Hands* (Bombay: Gospel Literature Service, n.d.).

<sup>25</sup> Kaung used to recommend the church Westmoreland Chapel in Los Angeles to Chinese people who arrived in the U.S. desiring to settle down on the West Coast. In that respect it is only natural that Witness Lee also sought out the city of Los Angeles.

<sup>26</sup> Sparks, *ibid.*, 223.

Westmoreland Chapel.<sup>27</sup> The church had befriended T. Austin-Sparks before their first pastor James R. Graham moved to Taiwan where he established two Christian colleges. During the mid 50s, when Austin-Sparks visited them, he was asked whether he had somebody in the Honor Oak fellowship who could lead them on 'in the Lord'.<sup>28</sup> He then sent them Charles John Bacon Harrison (1901-67),<sup>29</sup> a former Anglican vicar. The latter left London in 1957 and found his place among Westmoreland Chapel's leading 'brothers'.<sup>30</sup> Several Chinese families attended the assembly from 1957 to 1962 but "they never fully merged into the identity of Westmorland [sic] Chapel."<sup>31</sup> Lee left Taiwan permanently and moved to the city of Los Angeles in 1962.<sup>32</sup> He also introduced himself to the church, but as he insisted that Harrison should

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<sup>27</sup> In the early 40s about 100 individuals left "a certain large church in Los Angeles" based on the issue of divorce-remarriage. The newly established group then contacted Dr. James R. Graham, a 'come outer' who had recently severed ties with his own denomination asking him to be their pastor. ("Westmoreland Chapel," unpublished manuscript.)

<sup>28</sup> "Westmoreland Chapel."

<sup>29</sup> Harrison was born and grew up as a missionary kid in India. After graduation from Cambridge University with an M.A. in 1928, being ordained in the Anglican Church two years previously, later serving as vicar in Christ Church, Bomley, Kent, he left the Anglican Church in 1935 becoming a member of Austin-Sparks' church fellowship on Honor Oak Road in London. (Josephine Taylor, "A Brief History," unpublished manuscript, dated August 1996.)

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Sparks, *ibid.*, 223. James Reetzke writes in "The Lord's Recovery of Experiencing Christ and Practicing the Church Life in Oneness" that Samuel Chang in 1959 "moved from the church in Hong Kong to Los Angeles. He began to meet with our group and to share with us concerning the ground of the church." (<http://www.lordsrecovery.org/history/iv.html>) This means that the theological basis was quite well prepared when Lee returned permanently to Los Angeles in 1962.

<sup>32</sup> Witness Lee, *The Practical Expression of the Church* (Anaheim, California: The Stream Publishers, 1974), 184.

proclaim the assembly to be 'The Church in Los Angeles' thereby signifying that he could not recognize the legitimacy of other Christian assemblies within the city, a schism was inevitable. Shortly thereafter several of the church members – not only the Chinese – left Westmoreland Chapel and established 'The Church in Los Angeles'.<sup>33</sup> A critic of Lee, Jack Sparks, writes:

An issue came up over Witness Lee himself. The Chinese faction sided with Lee, while others from Westmorland [sic] opposed this faction. As a result, the group split and in 1962 the divisive element from Westmorland [sic] Chapel, under Lee's not-too-well-disguised leadership, "claimed the ground" in Los Angeles. The movement was now fully underway in the United States.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Church in Los Angeles**

Already back in 1963 the newly started church arranged its first yearly training – i.e., several weeks of intense Bible teaching. Quite a few of the attendants came from other parts of the nation but decided to relocate in order to be a part of Lee's work. During September-October 1969 some 200 newcomers made the church its own. Lee was also represented in Texas through three small churches in Lubbock, Waco and Denton, respectively. That very same year, though, most of the church decided to move to Houston where they established 'The Church' there. Two years later some of them again relocated, this time to Dallas, while 'The Church in Austin' came into existence in 1973.

The church planting endeavor in Houston probably served as a catalyst for Lee-adherents within the North East part of the U.S who then decided to move to Akron, Ohio. Around the same time about

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<sup>33</sup> Taylor, *ibid.* On May 27 1962 some 20 believers met in Samuel Chang's home as 'the church in Los Angeles.' Lee was not present during this gathering, but was in Seattle. However, he had intimate contact with the group and came from time to time down to Los Angeles in order to provide teaching. On November 30 he moved permanently to Los Angeles. (Reetzke, *ibid.*)

<sup>34</sup> Sparks, *ibid.*, 223.

40 individuals left the Los Angeles church for Atlanta, Georgia, and a similar sized group of people left for Chicago.

### **Witness Lee versus Stephen Kaung**

Lee and Kaung had collaborated in the Far East. Their relationship was severed around 1970, though. Although Kaung speaks approvingly of Nee's ecclesiology (as it is expressed in the latter's book *The Normal Christian Church Life*) he now considers Lee to having become too extreme and exclusive.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> One of Lee's former 'muskateers', William T. Freeman, authored a polemical defense for Lee's 'Local Church' movement in 1981 - *In Defense of Truth (A Reply of the Local Churches to the Book "The God-Men")* [Seattle: Northwest Christian Publications, Inc., 1981]. This polemical work was primarily a response to Neil T. Duddy and The Spiritual Counterfeits Project's book *The God-Men, An Inquiry into Witness Lee & the Local Church* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1981). Freeman has since withdrawn from Lee's movement due to disagreement with "some of the present attitudes, emphases, and practices of the local churches and the Living Stream Ministry." (Freeman, letter to the author, dated March 14 1996.) However, he still stands by his former defense of Lee, who according to him, was "grossly misrepresented by various cult writers." (In practice the alleged misrepresentation came through the above mentioned book by Neil Duddy, in addition to Jack Sparks, *The Mind Benders* (this book already being cited in previous footnotes). The latter work was counterresponded to by Gene Ford, *Who Is the Real Mindbender?* (Anaheim, California: Gene Ford, 1977), Ron Kangas, *Mind Bending or Mind Renewing?* (Anaheim, California: Gene Ford, 1977) and J. Gordon Melton, *An Open Letter Concerning the Local Church, Witness Lee and the God-Men Controversy* (Santa Barbara, California: Institute for the Study of American Religion, 1985). However, Lee still chose to sue Duddy and Sparks, the result being that the publishers withdrew *The Mind Benders* from the market while the author and publisher of *The God-Men* was sentenced to pay almost 12 million USD. After Freeman's leaving the 'Local Church' movement, he departed from Seattle and moved to Scottsdale, Arizona. He has since relocated to Spokane, Washington. ([http://www.whitworth.edu/whitworthian/spring2005/0222/news/freeman\\_index.htm](http://www.whitworth.edu/whitworthian/spring2005/0222/news/freeman_index.htm))

In contradistinction to Lee, Kaung had maintained good relations with various church fellowships, and around 1970 he moved from New York City to Washington D.C where he ministered among his fellow-believers until 1976. The tension between him and Lee was just about to surface, and in 1973 Lee had sent 16 people (led by Bill Mallon) to New York City to live there.<sup>36</sup> The former 'Austin-Sparks-fellowship' was now formally connected to Witness Lee's network. Some of Lee's followers relocated to Washington D.C., but the attempt to take over the church there also did not succeed. Therefore, there are now two groups there, one with connections to Kaung and another with connections to Lee. In 1976 Kaung himself moved to Richmond, Virginia. He leads Christian Fellowship Publishers which translates and publishes Watchman Nee's books in English.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> As early as during the 1940s, Witness Lee had made preparation for evangelical work in new geographical fields in China by relocating a representative amount of the Chefoo church membership: "Groups of families, selected as to personnel and representing a suitable cross section of trades and professions - gardeners, shoemakers, teachers, nurses, barbers - were chosen and carefully prepared for their venture. [...] All these gave themselves to the church, who supplied their travel expenses and three months' living costs at their destination. At the end of that period they were expected to support themselves in the new setting." (Kinnear, *ibid.*, 230-1.) At a gathering Watchman Nee held for his collaborators in 1948, it was decided to build further on Lee's experiences from the early 1940s. It was agreed to "concentrate fellow workers for ministry in regional centers until local churches [were] fully established" (p. 232.). When the new church was an established fact, it was time to send out "whole communities" in order to plant new churches in unreached areas. The fact that this new praxis tended to conflict with their former view that the local *church* and its elders were not subjugated under the 'ministry gifts' that were represented within 'the *work*', was hardly ever touched upon.

<sup>37</sup> Kaung, informal phone conversation, dated April 15 1996.

## The movement – a fringe group

The ‘Local Church’-movement<sup>38</sup> is considered a fringe group, at best, by most Christians within the U.S. Cal Beisner, Robert and Gretchen Passantino have this to say:

Problems between the Local Church and other Christians were slight and scattered until 1974. In 1974, the churches following Lee began to proselytize much more openly than before, and to make their disdain of “organized Christianity” [Catholicism and Protestantism] much more plain. Church members in the Southern California area began to disrupt other church’s services, and to call other Christians members of “Babylon”. These practices soon spread to the other Local Churches.<sup>39</sup>

Let us also include a quotation from Witness Lee himself:

Judaism is Satanic, Catholicism is demonic, and Protestantism is without Christ. They teach Christ’s name, but He is not there. Do you really believe that today the living Lord Jesus is in the Protestant churches? Whether you believe it or not, the Lord says that He is outside the door.<sup>40</sup>

Theological critiques against the movement have concentrated on their erroneous trinitarian views, among other things. The Lutheran writer Robert Passantino has identified these views with Sabellianism (“monarchianistic modalism”) and tritheism. However, Passantino’s critique has been counterresponded to by Gene Ford, a Lee-adherent:

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<sup>38</sup> The term ‘Local Church’ is not recognized as a proper name among the church membership.

<sup>39</sup> Walter Martin, ed., *The New Cults* (Santa Ana: Vision House Publisher, 1980), 381. Tung Siu-kwan writes in the article “The Waves of the ‘Local Church’” p. 4: “Parading in the streets of Southern California, [Lee’s] group often printed “God hates Christianity” on their T-shirts; they also burned banners with the word “religion” on them. On the other side, they raised high “Jesus Christ is Lord!” banners and had their big drums imprinted with “Jesus is Lord.” It is clear that they considered all other churches had degenerated into “religion” and only they themselves “walked on the right path.”

<sup>40</sup> *The Stream Magazine*, vol. 14, no. 4 (November 1976):. 12. Quoted from *The New Cults*, 384.

We believe that God is three and has been eternally so. We also believe that God is one. How this can be we make no attempt to explain. We simply believe it because it is the clear teaching of the Word of God.<sup>41</sup>

Passantino has since responded to Ford's counterresponse and claims, against the latter, that the 'Local Church' movement at times teaches a *logical* form of modalism ("[that] claim[s] that God cannot be both Father and Son and Holy Spirit at the same time and [...] therefore say[s] that God was first the Father, became the Son, and then became the Holy Spirit") and at other times a *non-logical* form of modalism ("[that] recognize[s] that often the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are spoken of at the same time. These modalists try to say that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit somehow exist at the same time and yet are each other"). The non-logical variant is identified by Passantino as Patripassianism:

Few Patripassians of the third and fourth centuries said much about the Holy Spirit; one who did, Marcellus of Ancyra, taught the personal identity of the Spirit with the Father and Son, just as [Witness] Lee does.<sup>42</sup>

However, critiques against the movement have not exclusively concentrated on heterodox theology. In a 1988 pamphlet entitled *Reconsideration of the Vision* which circulated within many of the 'local churches' Lee (identified as 'Mr. X') was accused of financial irregularities. The anonymous publishers of the pamphlet also criticized Lee for having departed from the Bible on essential doctrines (also having departed from the teachings of Nee), and also for having claimed that

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<sup>41</sup> Gene Ford, *A Reply to the Tract Against Witness Lee and the Local Church* (Anaheim, California: Living Stream Ministry, 1976), 16.

<sup>42</sup> Walter Martin, ed., *The New Cults*, 396.

every age is only allowed to have one spiritual leader – with himself [Lee] being that leader for today. [They] also question [Lee’s] behavior in several areas, accusing him of being “puffed up,” of not disciplining his seriously erring “second son” (identified by former church members as Phillip Lee), of improperly insulting coworkers and elders, and of seeking to replace older and more spiritually mature leaders who might call him to accountability with “arrogant” but loyal younger followers.”<sup>43</sup>

Many within the movement were unhappy with Lee due to his “longterm failure to deal with the ‘sinful’ behavior of his son Phillip. It is contended that ‘gross immorality’ and other sins were committed by Phillip over a ten-year period, with Witness Lee’s knowledge, and that Lee and his co-workers tolerated and covered up this behavior.”<sup>44</sup> The ever increasing dissatisfaction within the movement resulted in a massive exodus of former participants where quite a few ‘local churches’ (especially in Europe) severed their connection with Lee and his organizational work. John So,<sup>45</sup> who lives in Germany, on one occasion compared Lee with the Japanese army which occupied the Philippines during the Second World War (while Lee – according to So - “invaded the ecclesia in Anaheim,<sup>46</sup> seized and occupied it, and turned it into an ‘ecclesia of [Witness Lee].’”) So also compared Lee with Jezebel, “the prophetess who killed all of God’s prophets to make herself the only one to speak for God.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Elliot Miller and William M. Alnor, “Turmoil in the ‘Local Church’.” *Christian Research Journal* (Fall 1988): 5.

<sup>44</sup> Miller and Alnor, *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> So is Chinese by descent, but was born and grew up in the Philippines.

<sup>46</sup> Witness Lee and his Living Stream Ministry moved from Los Angeles to Anaheim in 1974.

<sup>47</sup> Tung Siu-kwan, “The Waves of the ‘Local Church’”, 7. It is interesting to note that So’s wife and Albert Lim (Witness Lee’s son-in-law) are brother and sister. No doubt, it made the situation more complicated because of the personal relationships.

## *The 'Local Church' in Denmark*

Witness Lee visited Denmark in 1957 as a speaker at Poul Madsen's annual convention at Nyborg Strand (on the island of Fyn). Another connection was through the two Ghanaians Thomas Quai and Ransford Ackah, who attempted to promote Lee's movement after having been introduced to it within the U.S. Also the American missionary Paul Gullans visited Denmark on a number of occasions speaking on God's 'one and only church'. One additional connection was a group of believers within Copenhagen who wanted to live out Watchman Nee's vision of the church as this vision was expressed in the latter's book *The Normal Christian Church Life* (translated into Danish as *Bibelske menigheder*).<sup>48</sup>

During the early 70s So was invited to hold meetings in Denmark by Kjestine Jepsen, a former missionary to China. So also was introduced to the group in Copenhagen. In 1977 he also got to know a few young families in Jylland who had broken with the Lutheran Inner Mission and had been water baptized among Pentecostal believers. This particular group soon organized as 'the church' in Give. Due to their relationship with So they followed his example in severing their relationship to Witness Lee and his organizational work during the late 80s.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Eva Johansen writes in a letter to the author, dated January 27 1998: "[I have] personally been involved – primarily because I from 1959 to 1961 – at Witness Lee's invitation participated in a 7 months' training program for the local churches in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, the Philippines et.al. in Taipei and then participated in a gigantic evangelization program in the Far East. Back in Copenhagen I got married to Marius Johansen, whom had been an elder in [Kristent Fælleskab] for several years, but whom together with many others, felt that they should publish a second Danish edition of Watchman Nee's *The Normal Christian Church Life* (now entitled *Det normale Kristne Menighedsliv*) and give a stronger emphasis on the church needing to be expressed locally. This was the little group in Copenhagen in 1970."

<sup>49</sup> Eva Johansen and Bjarne Lindberg, letter to the author, dated December 16 1997.

### *The 'Local Church' in Norway*

Finn Østergaard from Denmark was introduced to the teachings of Witness Lee in Givne and relocated to Norway in 1983. At first he lived in Sollihøgda where he gradually gathered people for private house meetings. During the first years he was also active in the streets of Oslo distributing pamphlets by Witness Lee on church life. Østergaard's 'work' in Norway never became numerically significant, and the house group disbanded several years ago. Østergaard feels this is partly attributable to the schism between several of the churches in Germany and Anaheim having had a negative effect on the ongoing work within Scandinavia.<sup>50</sup>

In the city of Oslo, Pilegrimsfolket, with Jan Egil Hafsaahl at the head, has shown a certain interest for Lee's church-oriented literature. However, this has not led to any formal connection with the 'Local Church' movement.<sup>51</sup> Neither has the influence of a Norwegian couple, who was introduced to the movement in the U.S., succeeded in promoting the movement after moving back to their home country.

### *The 'Local Church' in Sweden*

In Sweden the movement took hold among certain believers connected to Hans Erik Svensk, a former Baptist from Karlskrona and later active among the Open Brethren. After having relocated to Klippan in Skåne, he was introduced to the movement via Paul

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<sup>50</sup> "The Standing of the Church in Anaheim." Taped transcript of a Christian meeting, Aug. 28 1988. One of the participaters, Albert Knoch, said: "But, I must say that as I listened to the fellowship in the localities in Europe, I heard just about the same things. They are asking: 'Are we really the local church, with a general standing, open to every Christian in Oslo, Norway? Or are we a sect?' They, like us, are concerned, because through their practices over the past few years—and they were trying to follow what they considered the up-to-date, present moving of the Lord—they found out that more and more they were becoming a very special kind of 'church', not a local church (ie., in their meetings they read only certain materials, etc.)."

<sup>51</sup> Finn Østergaard, phone conversation, dated November 21 1997.

Gullans in 1971. Gullans himself had met the movement via his two sons Mark and Steve.

Through Steve Gullans contact was initiated with John So, who had quit his medical studies in Germany and moved to the U.S. in 1967-68 in order to participate in the Witness Lee kind of church life. Friends from Germany visited him in 1970 and then went back to their home country and established 'the church in Freiburg'. So returned to Germany in 1971. In 1973 the church relocated to Frankfurt<sup>52</sup> and three years later to Stuttgart.<sup>53</sup>

Hans Erik Svensk held open house meetings once a week. Together with several of the people who regularly attended these meetings he participated in a conference in Stuttgart and was fascinated further. Most of the young people from his house group, however, lost interest when they learned that women had to cover their heads during the meetings.

Svensk's family moved to Stockholm in 1980 where they today meet with some 30 believers. Svensk's son-in-law, Sonny Young, is the most pronounced leader among them. For many years the group had regular contact with 'the saints' in Germany and Denmark, respectively. Contrary to them, the Swedish group has chosen to maintain their connection to Lee's organization in the U.S.<sup>54</sup>



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<sup>52</sup> "Die 'Gemeinde' in Frankfurt besteht noch nicht lang. Ein Teil der jetzigen Mitglieder kommt aus Freiburg, wo sich seit durch 1970 durch den Einfluß eines Chinesen eine kleine Gruppe zusammengefunden hatte. Um an einem zentralen Ort ein weiteres Betätigungsfeld zu haben, zogen die etwa 40 Mitglieder seit Herbst 1973 alle nach Frankfurt." Ingrid Reimer, "Die 'Ortsgemeinde' nach Watchman Nee." *Materialdienst Aus der Evangelischen Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen der EKD* 1975, 153.

<sup>53</sup> Ingrid Reimer, "Die Gemeinde (Kirche) in Stuttgart." *Materialdienst Aus der Evangelischen Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen der EKD* 1976, 243.

<sup>54</sup> Sonny Youngs, phone conversation, dated June 11 1998.