

# **A FUTURE AND A HOPE**

Church Life Beyond  
the Local Church Movement

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Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are from the New King James Version (NKJV) and the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

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# Chapter 1

## The Writing on the Wall

God has numbered your kingdom and finished it...  
You have been weighed in the balances  
and found wanting...  
Your kingdom has been divided...  
(Daniel 5:5:26-28)

At the outset, I'd like to clarify some basic terminology and hopefully avoid confusing the uninitiated reader. When I use the term "Local Church," such as in the subtitle of this book, I don't mean it the way it has been commonly employed in the Christian world. There, "local churches" simply denote Christian congregations that are locally accessible to the public. I am going to be a great deal more specific than that. The "Local Churches" as I use the expression, will refer to particular congregations that have some level of alignment with Witness Lee and his publishing house, the Living Stream Ministry.

Different views and opinions will emerge when talking to people who have been involved with the Local Churches. I have no interest in cataloguing and addressing all of them. My belief, simply stated, is that somewhere along the line most of these churches hardened into a movement of religious idiosyncrasies and extremes. Local Church insiders casually refer to their involvement with the group as being "the church life." Yet my contention is that authentic New Testament church life cannot exist within it to any compelling degree. Over the last few years, many have

come to similar conclusions and to varying extents have withdrawn, looking for fresher, saner fields. This book was written for them since they have more than likely heard that upon leaving “the Recovery” (that is, the Living Stream Ministry’s version of it), there is no place left to go except religious Babylon. Happily, the Holy Spirit is not confined by such edicts, which the following chapters will go on to demonstrate.

## A Downward Trend

According to members who long preceded me in the group, Local Church dynamics began eroding at an early stage. The downward trend was so incremental that as usual in church history, the majority barely even noticed it. At some point before they declined to movement status, many local churches had functioned as vibrant communities of prayer, the Bible, and fellowship. It was a setting where believers could taste New Testament church life. This infant book of Acts experience had a kind of raw, unrefined power. It was only a matter of time before someone felt it more efficient to domesticate that power by rigidly defining it. As a result, the spontaneity of yesterday was slowly supplanted, giving way to an “enjoyment” of forms, exercises, ways, activities, and the strictest kind of systematic theology. Dogmatism crept in. Almost imperceptibly, the simple Christian faith became indistinguishable from the “vision” that defined the Movement. By the late seventies, the group’s informal oneness of the spirit was well on its way to morphing into organizational uniformity (despite vigorous official denials). Purges, politics, jealousy, the rumor mill, and subtle forms of character assassinations surfaced. By the mid-eighties, the entire package was looking very similar to the “fallen Christianity” that the group had often ridiculed.

## Firsthand Experiences and Observations

In 1984 I experienced a congenial introduction to the Local Church. Being a young idealistic person, I found its brethren-influenced style of Bible teaching fascinating, its stress on Christian oneness noble, and the camaraderie among its members warm. That combination—truth, oneness, and companionship—is always basically enough to ensure that any serious believer will continue with a group of Christians. At least it was for me.

However given the benefit of a few years and some closer inspection, I began to see extremes in the Movement that went well beyond the mild eccentricities normally found among Christian groups. The most glaring of these was the stress on the group's central figure, Witness Lee. I understood the concept of appreciation and respect toward ministers, but when titles like “the oracle,” “the minister of the age” and “the apostle” were routinely ascribed to Lee it struck me as being devotion of an unbalanced kind.

According to my long-term observations, this issue alone raised red flags in more people than all the other questionable items in the Local Church Movement put together. It is only a matter of time before intelligent people start making uncomfortable, probing assessments. Some of them begin doing it much sooner than later. As a textbook case in point, I remember the comments of a flustered couple after one weekend conference. The entire thrust of that time had been spent promoting a new Movement-sanctioned practice called PSRP that involved praying over, studying, memorizing and reciting Witness Lee's teachings. “We're seekers of the Lord,” the couple said. “We came here because we heard that there might be something of Christ in this conference, but now we're wondering if you people are following Jesus at all. It seems that

following Witness Lee is far more important to you.” They couldn’t understand the conference weekend and I knew exactly why. Much of the Local Church experience made no sense without subscribing to beliefs concerning Lee Himself, his ministry, and his alleged special place in the plan of God.

According to the Living Stream Ministry, the PR stance on the affiliation between Witness Lee and the Local Churches was that he did not control any of them. The truth is that he would never have needed to do so. Lee had written all of the group’s commentaries, its hymnal was assembled by Him and the footnotes of its special translation of the Bible (the Recovery Version) had been written by him as well. Lee conducted all conferences and trainings. Local Churches watched Lee videos, repeated Lee’s teachings in their meetings, credited Lee by name dozens of times in those same meetings, had book service rooms only stocked with Lee’s writings, and considered anything essentially not from Lee a product of religious Babylon or at least seriously inferior in content. They adopted Lee’s opinions about holidays, family, and other Christians. They accepted the idea that since he had already studied every Christian book worthy of consideration, then there was no need to go back and read them.

Local Church members solemnly assured one another that Lee had brought together all the riches of the church age into one neat theological package. Supplemental research was redundant; the heights of revelation had already been reached. Besides, additional input, especially from other sources, might poison the well.

Even if Witness Lee himself had not intentionally produced this overall mindset, zealous lieutenants and a network of loyal supporters throughout the churches made it their mission to do so. Yet these same people would unflinchingly deny that they were “Leeites.” Neither would they accept the

suggestion that their churches were ministry churches. Their consciences had been trained with an elaborate system of explanations about why Lee and His publishing company were the rightful foundation and fellowship of real churches. These rationalizations involved the idea of a minister (and ministry) of the age, a recovery of the church, a series of up-to-date revelations, and numerous other assurances given through the Movement's pulpit. Where the Ministry publicly castigated other Christians for polarizing around their favorite ministers, somehow, some way, Local Churches that polarized around Witness Lee were exempt from the same sin of sectarianism. It was a blatant double standard, which made sense only in the minds of the faithful.

#### The Midwest—A Different Kind of Area

Removed as they were from the movement's Californian epicenter, the Midwest Local Churches echoed some of the same extremes as their associate congregations, but less dramatically. There, one might receive at least a respectable nod for studying materials not published by the Living Stream Ministry, as long as the theology in question was sound and proven by time. Accordingly, I found my way into Christian writings beyond those of just Nee and Lee. These included an array of brethren authors—Darby, Bellett, Stanley, Stoney, Kelly, Ritchie, Soltau, and Mackintosh, to name a few. Then there were the church fathers, reformers, puritans, great evangelists, and inner life figures. As a further development, I added contemporary writers, examining their works through the same filter of discernment that I had used on all the others.

Ministry spokespersons had issued ominous warnings about the spiritual corruption that would occur when receiving help from other Christians. But the sum total of my experience was an enrichment and a

balance that kept me from falling into the Movement's excessive prejudices. If I had become corrupt in any sense of the word, it was only according to a Living Stream dictionary, where corruption meant that a person failed to agree with everything the organization taught.

Another tempering influence in the Midwest was its full time ministry training program. Wherever official Living Stream trainings were held, one could expect to hear an endless torrent of pro-Movement rhetoric. The Midwest training was different. First of all, it was presided over by Titus Chu, a man who had been a disciple and coworker of Witness Lee, yet was not considered one of the West Coast elite. Chu had become particularly effective in the Midwest, raising up a number of local churches and full-time workers. However, his success eventually earned him the scorn of suspicious men and gossips within Living Stream Ministry environs.

I entered Chu's training in 1988, at a time before the clouds of controversy had begun to seriously gather over it. Immediately I found myself surrounded by men who were gifted speakers, practically skilled, and some quite scholarly. All of them seemed to possess a level of honest objectivity about what they were in and what they believed. It was a setting that I found inspiring and so I began in earnest to develop an evangelistic preaching and teaching ministry of my own.

Naturally, I knew quite well the Local Church Movement's hostility towards the idea of developing personal ministry (only Witness Lee was recognized as having one; all others were treated as ambitious pretenders). Regardless, I felt that such thoughts were sanctimonious rubbish. Too many times the exhortation to have nothing and be nothing was heard among Local Church members minus the spirit in which John Nelson Darby had originally delivered it. If having nothing meant an individual saint should have no ministry for

the house of God, then Darby himself had run afoul of the biblical thoughts of giving food at the appointed time in Matthew 24 or investing talents in Matthew 25 or the injunction to heed one's own ministry. I set aside pietistic self-abasement, deciding that where I needed humbling, the Lord could speak to me about it or arrange the circumstances to accomplish it.

Following Witness Lee's death in 1997, his replacements assumed the pulpit, but where Lee had been more conservative about making claims and demands, these men had no such reservations. They moved to prohibit Christian books other than those produced within the Living Stream Ministry, announced that Lee had been "the acting God" on the earth, and opposed from the platform anything that disagreed with their peculiar application of Lee's views.

Under these circumstances, the atmosphere ripened for a protestant outcry. And when it finally came, it came from the Midwest. By then I had entered the responsibilities not only of a seasoned full-time Christian worker, but those related to church eldership as well. From that vantage point, I was finally exposed to the full extent of the Movement's dirty laundry, of infighting and slander, broken agreements and "brotherly" disrespect. Not only I, but other church leaders had long felt that the Movement was headed into directions too radical for endorsement. From where we stood, adherence to these directions had negatively affected our spiritual life level, had contributed to dwindling numbers in our meetings, and had made many churches not only a pariah in the Christian world but an oddity in the secular community itself.

As our compliance with the ministry agenda shrunk, so did our participation in ministry events—"Feasts" and other gatherings where participation was mandated in order to prove our oneness with the rest of "the body." Instead, we began to focus our attention locally, emphasizing the gospel, the Bible, and getting

along with other Christians in our city. From the viewpoint of the Living Stream, this was an apostasy of sorts and the only solution was to excommunicate Titus Chu. Apparently it was assumed that the straying congregations were Chu's pocket churches, controlled by his daily whims and private agenda. Disavowing him through a very public quarantine procedure would more than likely encourage the churches in question to return to the Living Stream fold. But for the most part, this did not happen.

After a lengthy and ugly excommunication procedure with five hours of testimony delivered against Titus Chu, churches that were of a mind for freedom remained that way. We had gotten a taste of higher ground and were not going to surrender it to Movement headquarters. So a further assumption was evidently made—that the churches did not capitulate because their various leaderships were occupied with puppet elders—"yes men" belonging to Titus Chu.

This led to a further and more invasive strategy. Midwestern local churches were still sprinkled with loyalists—individuals who held to views consistent with the narrowest attitudes of "the ministry." These little groups could function as "sleeper cells" which could be activated from the inside against uncooperative local churches. With encouragement from persons of repute, these members would disobey local leadership in the name of "standing firm for the ministry" and promote the interests of Living Stream right in the backyards of non-compliant elders. If church leadership then attempted to deal with the resulting upset, lawsuits were pressed against them (as in Columbus and Mansfield, OH) or corporate uprisings would occur to sweep away the boards of trustees and plant elders who were friendly to the Living Stream (as in Rochester, MN). In addition, traveling agitators would go from place to place rallying the ignorant zeal of church people, feigning that terrible outrages had been

committed against God's interests (as in Toronto, Canada).

These locally ill-affected members tended to be far less principled than their founder. Although many in the past had admired Watchman Nee's lamb-like obedience and humility in accepting church discipline, they could no longer point to him as an example. "The ministry" was now producing Christians who were likely to sue their own congregational leaders if they felt misunderstood or if they did not get their way.

Ecclesiastical lawlessness went into full operation. Eventually anything could be said or done as long as it was in the name of "the ministry" or "the body." Cutting locks off of meeting hall doors, lying, and backbiting occurred, as well as circulating slanderous letters, video tapes, or recorded telephone conversations. It would do no good to ask any of these people about what Watchman Nee would have done. They had long since abandoned his personal example of a life under the dealing of the cross. Nor were they affected when confronted with the Bible. Ways were found to circumvent the truth of scripture and excuse the outrageous behavior. Yet in the midst of it all, the perpetrators still managed to speak of conscience, albeit a conscience molded by abnormal religious views.

### The Backdrop of this Book

When Living Stream followers sued the church in Columbus, Ohio, bad fruit had become evident to the point that we could no longer pretend that the tree producing it was good. We began to see the situation as it really existed and not as positive "spin" portrayed it. The writing was on the wall. The Lord had been traded for the lawyer. Searching the scripture for answers had been exchanged for searching the corporate resolutions for loopholes. The power of the cross became the power of the vote. If prayer went up to God, it did so asking

Him to bless strategies hatched by men who were trying to seize church assets and overthrow congregational leadership. Meanwhile the simple minded continued to be assured that their involvement in such things was for the good of “the ministry of the age.” The absence of a healthy check-and-balance in the Movement camp all but guaranteed their cooperation. Unquestioned loyalty effectively nullified any arguments concerning means or methods.

Against this backdrop, many of us realized that the Lord was not only moving on, but perhaps already had. It was not long before some congregations began to speak of church life beyond the confines of the local church movement. In Columbus, those considerations, birthed through prayer, frustration, and truth have shaped the theme of this book. Of course not everyone will agree with the conclusions reached. Those who continue happily within the Local Church Movement will no doubt dismiss this volume as evil fiction. Perhaps some will attribute it to bitterness, ambition, or an assortment of other negative influences. For decades such stock responses have been endlessly recycled against persons seeking to remark on the extremes of the Movement. It was easier than honestly listening and of course, a lot less threatening.

I understand the reluctance to entertain alternate points of view, especially those perceived as being hostile. One of the most unnerving experiences in the human life is the shaking up of cherished religious beliefs. People will do anything to keep that from happening. At one end of the extreme, some simply silence their ideological foes by murdering them. News of this reaches us every day from the Middle East. The perpetrators solve their “sacred” disputes by making the unfaithful or questioning disappear, thus eliminating challenges. At the other, more pacifistic end of the extreme lie those who arm themselves not with guns and bombs, but with thoughts, reasons, excuses, and

redirects. They react to challenges with platitudes that do not really answer anything. These folks cannot be convinced by any logic. Truth is frightening to them—not doctrinal truth per se, since they allegedly love it, but truth as it relates to the real state of things.

Having spent almost a quarter century in the Local Church Movement, I am quite familiar with the arsenal of patterned responses used when challenges emerge. Speak of someone who left the Movement and you will get knowing nods and hear the “real” reasons why they departed—that they were too worldly, too religious, or just didn’t see anything. They didn’t get a leadership position in the church, or the boyfriend/girlfriend they wanted. They didn’t exercise their spirit or wanted their own ministry or didn’t see “the body” or were offended by some ridiculous thing. But Local Church apologists assure us that no one ever leaves for a valid reason. There is no such thing as a justifiable cause.

In saying this, I do not think that all past criticisms of the Local Churches were fair. However, in the history of the Movement, valid objections have just as quickly been lumped with all the rest as blindly negative. Genuine spiritual discernment, which would have revealed the difference, has largely been shelved. Now what passes as discernment in the group has far less to do with the Bible and life than it does with the effect of slow-drip indoctrination. That is why I cannot expect a fair appraisal of this book from the group’s rank-and-file membership. Ultimately only the Lord can judge, but I must also trust those more objective, fair-minded readers who will be able to decide whether I sound fleshly or unreasonable in these upcoming pages.

No doubt, some will allege that this writing only exists to sow discord among Living Stream adherents. On the contrary, as my subtitle implies, it is for those who have already departed the Local Church Movement or intend on doing so. And although this publication

may inadvertently land in the laps of those who are still inside, they are not my intended audience. In fact, my motivation for writing *A Future* and *A Hope* lies specifically in portraying a positive destiny. While I will address a number of past things that I feel need refutation, it is only with a view of presenting something better. I do not plan to dish up hot plates of ridicule throughout this work. Other than feeding vindictiveness, no book solely dominated by a negative thesis can render much help to its readers. My desire is to offer hope for those who want to recapture their church life again (minus, of course, the things that originally killed it). This is not easy. Time, society, and God Himself have moved on, necessitating a church life that is now located in the twenty-first century.

There is no use in trying to resurrect the past. Regardless of what measures we take, we will not succeed in bringing back the church life of 1969 or 1972 or 1976. All we can do at present is to adopt the Apostle Paul's example of forgetting the things that are behind, while stretching forward to the things that are before. This is a difficult concept to appreciate. Many folks with extensive past glory days unconsciously long for the reinstatement of them. At the very least, they use them as a measuring stick for whatever happens today. *A Future* and *A Hope* will not advocate returning to those good old days, but advancing to the fresh new ones.

In the meantime at present, there are plenty of individuals and even entire churches who are looking for the exodus trail. The problem lies in knowing what to do once we've taken it. One course of action for a disenfranchised local church is to default to what it has always done, minus organizational loyalties to the Living Stream Ministry. In that scenario, for the most part, meetings, attitudes, and practices all remain unchanged. The only difference is that there are no special materials in the meetings and no promotions of

conferences and trainings. From my observation, this is not sufficient for the health and upward mobility of a church. As you will see in this book, it takes a lot more than subtraction to get a group of saints headed “on the upward way.” In fact, without the addition of new attitudes and views, the odds are good that a church will actually dwindle. In a setting where we exist solely because we didn’t like what we were doing before, vision can become myopic and spiritual strength feeble. Saints will slowly wander away.

Predictably, Ministry headquarters interprets this kind of attrition as proof of the Lord’s displeasure. Divorces, sins, and shrinking numbers in the departing group will all be held up as confirmation of God’s displeasure toward those who left His move. As I will demonstrate in this book, such critical talk is nonsense. There are other, far more practical reasons for these kind of failures. None of them have to do with a curse that comes from leaving a specially anointed organization. In fact, if a group of departing Christians can change the basis of their being together from negative to positive, blessing will come. And that is what this book is all about—a promising, fruitful future for believers who are looking for church life beyond the Local Church Movement.

My guess is that as you read on, you will feel both comfortably agreeable and slightly unsettled with the things I will present. You will wonder whether I have been overly affected by modern trends in Christianity or perhaps you will wonder if I remain too friendly to local church thinking. But this book is not intended to be a boxed and packaged treatise. There are things that you will find impossible to currently implement. Other items will no longer apply to you, since you have already moved beyond them. More than likely, however, you will profit from receiving an overall view of church life that is unencumbered, liberated from decades of religious accretion. Having seen the

possibilities, perhaps the dream buried within you for this kind of fellowship will once again be uncovered, motivating you to rise up and reclaim it.