

# Chapter 4

## Church Life Beyond “Uniqueness”

If anyone thinks himself to be something,  
when he is nothing, he deceives himself.  
(Gal. 6:3)

The recruiting motto of the United States Marine Corps is “The few, the proud, the Marines.” Some Christians, sadly, have manufactured the equivalent of that motto to express the thought of a religious elite. And among professing evangelicals, the Local Church Movement has excelled at fostering that morale in its members. The less than desirable result has been the few and the proud, but not the Marines. Still, members endlessly promise one another that above all Christians, they are the Lord’s unique move on the earth.

The sense of being special is an integral part of any group that is headed down the road to aberrant status. According to Stephen Arterburn in his bestselling book, *Toxic Faith*, there are ten characteristics of a flawed faith system. Occupying the number one spot is a group’s effort to create an aura of uniqueness about itself.

Members of toxic faith systems reach a point in their addictive progression where they make claims about themselves to set themselves apart from others. (163)

Johnson & VanVonderen concur:

First, leadership projects a “we alone are right” mentality, which permeates the system. Members must remain in the system if they want to be “safe,” or stay “on good terms” with God, or not to be viewed as “wrong” or “backslidden.” (76)

This strategy is effective in keeping the membership roster intact, even if members notice things amiss about the organization itself. Fear in departing the group then becomes an almost palpable force. Johnson & VanVonderen continue:

We have counseled many Christians, who, after deciding to leave their church, were told horrifying things. “God is going to withdraw His Spirit from you and your family.” “God will destroy your business.” “Without our protection, Satan will get your children.” “You and your family will come under a curse.” This is spiritual blackmail and it’s abuse. And it does cause people to stay in abusive places. (77)

Unfortunately, Living Stream authorities have not been above these tactics. Threatening insinuations have been made from their pulpit about departing LC members who later died or whose usefulness to God was neutralized. Members are thus duly warned, lest the same things fall upon them if they try to leave the Movement.

Those who issue the warnings seem oblivious to the fact that people die all the time, regardless of past or present associations with the Living Stream Ministry. In fact, a number of Ministry luminaries themselves have recently suffered deaths that could be considered untimely. Equally groundless is the allegation that no ex-member has been greatly used by

the Lord after departing. “Greatly used” is a vague term. If it means notoriety, then even the most loyal insiders to the Movement fail this test, as they are completely unknown to the vast majority of the Christian public. Nor can “greatly used” refer to size of following since, as a whole, the Local Church Movement itself would then fail, being almost insignificant in proportion to other Christian groups. “Greatly used” ends up then, being an abstract ideal in the minds of Ministry preachers. It is all threatening language, but under objective scrutiny, turns out to be nothing more than superficial attempts at intimidation.

### The Myth of an Overcomer’s Greenhouse

Another avenue of reinforcing a “uniqueness” belief in the LC Movement is the teaching of the overcomer-producing church. This of course firmly connects the victorious Christians of Scripture with all the trappings of the Movement—its attitudes, practices, and above all else, its loyalty to the Living Stream Ministry. Members are hesitantly willing to concede that there might be overcoming believers in other Christian groups. They also just as quickly add, however, that it is very difficult to overcome without being in “Philadelphia” (which, of course, is the thirty or so people who identify themselves as the church in that city).

Armed with the overcomer mindset, members feel confident to appraise the Christian landscape as largely degraded. I would agree with the statement that Christianity has its fair share of failures. However, do Movement Churches really fare any better? Or, can the very same factors of degradation also be found among them, hidden away from sight? Penetrating the Movement’s “God-man” exterior might yield some telling discoveries. I have personally known or heard (from reliable sources) of cases involving active

homosexuality, divorces, pornographic addictions, lying, stealing, backbiting, public temper tantrums, frivolous law suits, greed, division, drug and alcohol addictions, fornication, adultery, and blatant power struggles. These failures come from a broad geographical spectrum, and not from just one church or region. Now it would be unfair to say that the LC Movement has more of these things going on than in “Christianity.” No, the Local Churches are not worse than others, but neither are they the sparkling antithesis of corruption that they self-advertise. Just like their fellow believers, Movement folk also fall victim to the worst elements of the flesh and far more than they’d like to admit. This is true despite their continual claims of being the best place to produce overcomers. Given the facts, we find no sanctification in the Local Churches that is measurably superior to their serious Christian neighbors.

In fact, due to their emphasis upon so many peripheral matters, Movement churches may well be some of the most difficult places on earth for Christians to genuinely thrive. Using the churches of Revelation as a template, we could easily infer a defeated condition to LC members (just as they have done to others). For instance, failure in Ephesus is related to losing the strong, personal affectionate love for Christ Himself. The single most alarming feature about the befuddled Movement mindset is that it cannot tell the difference between Christ and utterances, outlines, trainings, conferences, videos, footnotes, special men or organizations. Since the latter borrows its subject matter from the former, then the assumption tends to be that they are identical. Thus, first love easily defaults to “the ministry” with hardly anyone noticing.

Failure in Pergamos involves a marriage to the world. LSM authorities solemnly define this ungodly union as the church using “gimmicks,” contemporary music, drama, and any other method that differs from their paradigm. We must wonder, though, if they have

not so narrowly defined “the world” as to miss the larger definition of it. For in the Local Church camp we find the strength of the world casually used to achieve Movement agendas and straighten out “problems.” This has included business schemes and the lust for church real estate as well as a long history of court actions and the numerous threats of them (Going back as far as the mid-sixties—see Wikipedia, Local Church controversies online).

In Thyatira the main failure is idolatry, which the LC Movement (and others) describe as uplifting religious icons. We must ask if idolatry should also include the uplifting of venerated ministers, their gravesites, museum-homes, sock drawers, and desks. Needless to say, popery and its associated relics belong to Roman Catholicism, not to a “nest” of overcomers.

The chief problem in Sardis is spiritual death. Movement members swear by the life-giving properties of LC meetings and literature. However, whether this is “life” or religious conditioning of some sort remains to be seen. Spiritual life is a subjective matter as long as it is confined to the realm of sensation. The veteran LC member describes a video conference as “glorious” and “living.” The honest outsider describes the same meeting as “boring,” and “freakish.” Movement churches cannot lay objective claim to being alive when so much negative opinion runs to the contrary.

Philadelphia is the alleged recovered church, warned to hold onto its little power, the Lord’s Word, and the Lord’s name. Movement churches claim to “hold” these items and therefore fulfill the description of Philadelphia, but are these things genuinely held, or a pale imitation? Is the “little power” the same as the power of money and the courts? Furthermore, is the organization’s hand firmly upon the Bible or some diluted form of it called “the interpreted Word”? Are Movement churches singing the praises of the Lord’s name or Witness Lee’s? The answers to these questions,

which should be evident to any onlooker, place serious question marks on the Movement's "recovered" standing.

Last of all, Laodicea represents a condition of spiritual pride. Even the newest observer can note the tremendous superiority complex of the LC movement. This can hardly be disguised, as members publicly laud themselves for being spiritually rich, while belittling others. Perhaps the Laodicean portrayal is the most appropriate one for the Movement and the most pathetic. For as the faithful assure themselves of their overcoming condition, the Lord finds it disgusting, saying, "I will vomit you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:16).

In view of the foregoing, much of the LC Movement may in a cruel irony, actually be defeated Christians who have been falsely assured that they are overcomers. The LC-overcomer case becomes even weaker when we interpret the seven churches as seven subsequent periods of church history. If the last four churches represent Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Brethrenism, and degraded Brethrenism, the picture will show us that across all these traditions the overcomers are equally distributed and not concentrated in one place. Ultimately, being an overcomer is not a matter of membership in a particular organization. It has everything to do with following the scriptural instructions plainly spelled out concerning how to overcome!

Carefully considered from many angles, the boast of an overcomer greenhouse in Movement churches is a sensationalist myth at best. It certainly works to produce stalwart members, but not necessarily victorious believers.

### Assuming the Mantle of Recovery

The most powerful of all images in the consciousness of Local Church members continues to be

the idea that they are the virtual equivalent of “the Lord’s Recovery.” So pervasive is this belief that when speaking of the date when someone joined a Local Church, it is referred to as when they came into “the Recovery.” If someone leaves a Local Church, he is said to have left “the Recovery.” Once inside, members are charged to preserve “the uniqueness of the Lord’s Recovery” by guarding its borders from influences on the outside.

The word “unique” leaves no room for comrades, friends, or cousins. It means one and only, unparalleled. Yet Exclusive Brethren circles also claim to be the unique recipients of recovered truth, even down until today. For instance, A.J. Gardiner, a notable teacher among the Taylor Brethren said, “The great thing is to be in the current of what the Lord is giving at the moment...to live in the day in which the truth of the assembly in all its features is being recovered” (Shuff 113). No doubt Gardiner was not referring to some generalized recovery among God’s people, but a recovery clearly delineated by the practices, doctrines, and persons in his group. Another strain of Brethren called “Needed Truth Brethren,” also “regarded themselves as a remnant after the pattern of post-exilic Israel” (Shuff 45). Due to these and other extreme attitudes, they would eventually be labeled as “the most narrow-minded and fanatical of all believers” (Shuff 45).

The Brethren were not the only other believers who fell into the snare of “remnant” ecclesiology. This is the claim of many legal, hyper-spiritual, and even heretical groups who all doggedly believed in their uniqueness. The obvious problem with their claims is that there cannot be many unique moves of God on this earth. Someone must be wrong. In fact, all except the “true,” must be pretenders. So, when these groups encounter each other, they typically dismiss one another as Satanic counterfeits.

The central idea in the Local Church Movement (as with others) is that the authentic New Testament church and its associated experiences were lost and then gradually recovered through specific, sequential, persons and groups. But the New Testament has nothing whatsoever to say about a future choreographed recovery of the church. We have prophetic foretelling from the Apostle Paul about its decline (1 Tim 4:1), but no apostolic footnote predicting a return through a unique group of people. There are slight intimations about the Lord sending “Apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers...for the equipping of the saints...until we all come to the unity of the faith” (Eph. 4:11, 13, 14). Perhaps we could derive from this thought a very general work of divine recovery, but it is far from the ponderous certainties that LSM teachers have sought to proliferate.

Most of the Movement’s scriptural basis for the recovery ideal lies in the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah. There, the return of the Jews to the Holy Land is considered a foreshadowing of “the Lord’s Recovery” of the church. Local Church enthusiasts add as an extra ingredient the ministries of W.Nee and W.Lee as the highest and consummate “recovery” pinnacle.

There are many dangers in basing a group’s corporate identity and mission upon the interpretation of an Old Testament picture. This is especially so when that picture lacks confirmation by any corresponding New Testament truth. Without apostolic guidelines that limit such interpretations, imaginative minds will find in every Old Testament passage new binding doctrines, church principles, and restrictions on Christian liberty. Before anyone knows it, a religious system could be raised up that is occupied with things that seem foreign to the mission of the New Testament church.



The Old Testament principle of divine recovery does not necessarily contradict New Testament truth. Still, important caveats must govern it. For instance, we do not see in the Bible a group of New Testament believers separating from the church at large and then standing as the church apart from the church. The overcomers in Revelation chapters 2 & 3 are not directed to leave their churches and come together as a super-lampstand, an eighth church that represents the true church. Nor do we see people charged to pack their bags for the sixth lampstand, the church in Philadelphia. Yes, Paul speaks of “a great house” in 2 Timothy, where gold and silver vessels should cleanse themselves from vessels of wood and clay. But this sounds like an exhortation for individuals to take heed to their companionships. It is not a license for wholesale departure from the great house in order to build another house. Neither Revelation 2 & 3 nor any other passage in the New Testament describes a group of churches called to a fellowship apart from Christians at large.

Yet another justification for claiming Recovery status lies in the LC Movement’s particular understanding of church history. Most any serious LC member can chronicle the steps God has allegedly taken until reaching the zenith of His recovery with his two “faithful servants,” Watchman Nee and Witness Lee.

According to this version of church history, all the important spiritual contributions for the last two thousand years lead unerringly to southern California. The problem with this approach is that many other groups have also attempted to trace a “silver thread” down through the centuries from the twelve apostles to themselves. This highly selective form of interpretation appears convincing to the layman. But when factoring in events considered important by the rest of the Christian community, church history looks anything but simple. I was first made aware of this when Christian

History Magazine ran an issue that showcased the one hundred most important events in church history. Very few of them intersected with ones that I had been taught were vitally important.

I realized that under the hand of a biased editor, historical events judged as extraneous could be removed, including all the things thought unimportant, the matters not understood, and other elements considered needless, peculiar, or “dead.” Where church history began as a bush, it ends up looking like a telephone pole. And of course, the “pole” will point right to “the editor” and his group. But such clean, linear advancement is illusory. A humanly imposed pattern makes church history all about God’s quest for a particular Christian subset.

The Lord has certainly progressed through the ages with His people, calling them to repentance where they departed from salient truths, and returning them to health. In history we find that items like justification by faith were neglected and then restored to the full attention of God’s people. Spiritual experiences suffered complete disregard only to be emphasized afresh later. Church life as a whole suffered the paralyzing onslaught of tradition, then was rediscovered. Yes, there is the principle of loss and recovery, or better yet, an ebb and flow of divine things and the realities attached to them. However, there is no such thing as a precise group of people bounded with organizational lines, who can say, “We are the Lord’s Recovery.”

Naturally, those who profess to own a Recovery “formula” would disagree. They want to be the unique place—God’s private Eden, reserved for the fortunate few. This desire to possess or at least occupy “what the Lord is doing” can become an obsession like children playing King of the Mountain. Consider it: A third grader manages to push all of the second graders off of a pile of dirt. He names himself “king” and his heap “the mountain.” In reality, he is nothing. Even the school

janitor has more authority than he does. And his mountain—the mulch pile in your backyard is taller. Still, from the vantage point of that elementary school playground, there is nothing greater than his freckled little self and his mound of dirt.

In a way reminiscent of this playground drama, narrow groups and movements scan their enclosed horizons, concluding that God is not doing anything significant through anyone else on the globe. They are by default, “King of the Mountain.” In reality, however, nothing short of omniscience could ever possibly establish the exact boundaries of God’s work among His redeemed or currently assign levels of importance to it.

Yet, such is the incredible hubris of men who without hesitation refer to themselves as “the Lord’s Recovery” as though it had nothing to do with anyone else. Even that mighty servant of the Lord, Elijah, felt that he alone was uniquely faithful. Yet he was wrong! God saw seven thousand others. Paul warned of certain self-assurances as being potentially delusional when he said, “if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Gal. 6:3). H.A. Ironside quotes J.R. Caldwell:

It has been fully proved in the past that God does not own “high church” claims. In the providence of God, that which assumes to be or even to represent, “the church of God on earth” has always been quickly proved to be wanting, and a very few years have sufficed to reduce it to fragments. So must it ever be, for God will never attach His power to that which assumes to be what it is not...” (142)

We can safely say that Jesus Christ is unique, along with His work, His covenant, and His Body. What is objectionable is the idea that a group of Christians

within that Body is unique in that God counts only them as integral to His eternal purpose.

In my early days with the Local Churches, I remember often being struck with a sense of unlikely wonder. I had been blessed to stumble across the latest phase of “God’s Move.” As it turned out, I was right to feel the implausibility of it. No such thing exists—at least not in the realm of truth.

### The Negative Fruit of Uniqueness

A very popular claim in the Local Church Movement is that “the oneness of the Body” is being recovered. Considering the principle of Psalm 133, real unity ought to result in something “good and pleasant” between brothers. It is reasonable to believe that if a unique recovery of oneness were occurring, then those involved would be very pleasantly disposed toward their brothers in the faith, even the ones not involved in said recovery. There would be such breadth of heart and graciousness in this unity, that it would be a magnet to some and at the very least, an example to others.

“By this,” the Lord Jesus said, “all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Unfortunately, groups that focus upon their unique “oneness” almost always attain it at the price of brotherly love. The late Dr. James Brookes wrote about some notable Christians of his day who were the targets of Brethren scorn: “Many of them have suffered from the base slanders and cruel insinuations and causeless hatred of those in this ‘little’ system” (Ironsides 199). The Brethren were believers touted as standing for the primitive simplicity and oneness of God’s people. Yet paradoxically, they became famous for their loathing of those not among them.

In an even stronger way, we find among LC Movement Churches a membership saturated with the foulest attitudes toward other Christians. In fact,

“Christianity” is one of the most insulting words in the Local Church vocabulary. It is considered the roost of false or unclear teachers, the fulfillment of every filthy Old Testament type, and a mixed source that will ultimately dull the vision granted through Witness Lee.

One does not need to search very far in order to verify this attitude. Judgmental opinions against outsiders fairly pepper Movement literature. They surface so often that a receptive reader could easily be influenced over a brief period to develop serious problems with his Christian neighbors. Interwoven with positive elements are numerous innuendoes and direct criticisms portraying the redeemed of God as “poor, poor Christianity.” Ultimately, out of all this, a warped belief becomes evident that the Lord’s enemies are His own children, His own household, His very own Body (except for those few who meet with the Local Churches).

Crowning the mean-spirited rhetoric is the now infamous “Protestantism is Christless” judgment, spoken by W.Lee himself. This is very likely the most serious of all the Movement’s charges against others, since the majority of the world’s born again Christians occupy that category (though they would not necessarily label themselves as Protestant). That incendiary remark has generated so much controversy that efforts have been made to decode what it “really meant.” One explanation maintains that the Local Churches are not against Christians; only the Protestant religious system that Christians occupy. However, this simplified distinction is far more challenging than what we would believe. It is like saying, “We hate sin, but not the sinner.” While believers repeat this handy little mantra, in real life they often find it too difficult to sort through, and just end up hating the sinner as well as his sin.

No matter how one tries to dodge the issue, the Christians in a system eventually reflect and even

become the values and beliefs of that system. So, if simple LC members have been helped to hate the Protestant system, the odds are that they will also hate the people in it. Ironically, Christians who steadily maintain that the Local Church is a cult also say that they are against the LC system, but not the people in it. So, the same reasoning that the LC Movement uses to justify its bias against Christianity has also been used against them. Of course when faced with their own logic, Movement leadership was not consoled by this “separation of people and system” rationale and decided to sue the offending parties in court!

Jealousy and strife are two unavoidable characteristics of the divisive heart (1 Cor. 3:3). This is due to the fact that “unique” fellowships always lead to the formation of an “us” and “them.” The “them” is the ideological foe represented by the rest of the Christian community—those who have not “seen the revelation.” Insiders perceive these “blinded” believers as a massive threat to their doctrinal and spiritual purity. And it is nearly impossible for them to mask their poor attitudes. One man described to me a small group setting where a non-LSM book (but soundly evangelical) was being read. Each person took a turn reading, except a pro-LSM woman, who passed the book on each time, poker-faced, without so much as a glance downward. Knowing something of her personal religious bents, he concluded that the ministry she was under was hate-based. Another person, a Christian not familiar with LC Movement culture, asked why a pro-LSM man who worked with him could not ever carry on a pleasant conversation about God. “He spends all his time trying to correct me,” the man said.

These examples, unfortunately, tend to be typical. Fancying themselves to be caretakers of unique truths, sect members will experience difficulty having peaceful feelings toward those on the outside, even if they leave the group in question. In the LC Movement,

so much enmity and suspicion is sown through so many different avenues, that departing members report still having trouble associating with other Christians, much less worshipping together with them.

Jealousy, the other chief characteristic of the narrow soul, is the smoldering resentment against the successes of those who are “not supposed to be blessed.” When the dreaded megachurch down the street or a neighborhood free group or some community church grows by leaps and bounds, the sectarian heart is seized with the need to somehow explain it away. How could that other group prosper, unless of course, they cheated by using illicit means? “Shallow,” “worldly,” and “social work,” are some of the favorite accusations leveled against them. Thus, jealousy ensures that a repertoire of disqualifying charges be kept on hand, so that the advances of others will not be appreciated.

Toward the end of his life, W.Lee made a statement of repentance concerning his condemnatory stance against Christians. However, it was far too little, far too late. After decades of fiery rhetoric aimed at those outside the camp, it would have taken another lifetime of teaching to reconstitute his listeners to more moderate attitudes. It is probably a moot point, anyway. The present day leaders of the Living Stream Ministry deny the force of W.Lee’s pulpit apology. They evidently know that such words taken at face value could undermine the “uniqueness” so painstakingly built into their membership mentality. So, where censure upon outsiders might soften, or where a “Christianity influence” begins to encroach, Movement lieutenants will remind members to avoid the contamination of other Christians. This zero tolerance approach continually stirs fear and hatred against those on the outside. At the same time, it minimizes any dynamic that might lead to change in the camp.

Obviously, this is not the oneness described in the Holy Scriptures. It is another man-created

separation in the Body of Christ, once again emphasizing “purity” and “uniqueness.” Returning for a moment to the so-called “recovery books” of the Old Testament, we find no heart of hostility existing between those who returned to the Holy Land and those who stayed in Babylon. Those remaining materially supplied those who returned—“And all those who were around them encouraged them [emphasis mine] with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with precious things, besides all that was willingly offered” (Ezr. 1:6). Nor did those who return see themselves as separate from those who stayed. This is evident in Ezra’s prayer, uttered from Jerusalem, yet speaking of those in Babylon and Jerusalem as a unified whole—“Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been very guilty, and for our iniquities, we, our kings, and our priests have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to humiliation, as it is this day. And now for a little while grace has been shown from the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage” (Ezr. 9:7-8). A genuine recovery of oneness would not forsake the oneness of all God’s people in order to achieve oneness among an elite few. Still less would it defame those among God’s people who were reluctant to be involved with it.

If something is being recovered, that means it existed, was lost, and then was found. But the oneness supposedly recovered by the LC Movement, so marred with animosity toward others, cannot be located in the scriptures. It never existed. Thus, we ought to remember a simple principle: when something was recovered that never actually existed in the past, then it has not been recovered; it has been invented.

Okay Then, Who Are We?



Far from feeling sinful, sectarian systems can embolden their members while providing a sense of exclusive belonging, security, and mission. Lest we live in that kind of fool's paradise, we must construct, from the ground up, what we really are according to truth. This will not be too difficult. The Bible only tells us that we are the Body of Christ. We are not something else, something better, or something superior. We do not stand apart from the Body of Christ, since that is a divisive statement. Nor are we better than the rest of the Body of Christ as that is an elitist statement. We are simply Christians, members of the overall Body, no better than anyone else. The Bible refuses to say more. It does not describe a "manchild church" or a church of the firstfruits. Far from fleeing common fellowship for more victorious pastures, the overcomers remain in the context of ordinary church involvement all the way up until the rapture.

Flustered saints have asked me, "Then if we're not the Lord's Recovery, what makes us any different than anyone else?" In response to this question, I would ask, must we be different? Must we try to have something other than what Christians at large are offering—things like biblical truth, salvation, Christ, the loving community of the believers, and help in perfecting one's ministry? In fact, if we are hoping to impart something other than those things, then it is we who no longer match the biblical description of the church. When we cannot be peaceful among other Christian groups without assuming an elevated status, then that is the lingering fruit of a partisan mindset, not a legitimate vision.

Instead of asking how we can maintain differences from other Christians, we ought to be asking how, in harmonious coexistence with them, can we best serve the needs of our lost communities. It is true that we once justified our existence on the basis of uniquely

being “the Lord’s Recovery.” Now it is time to find meaning in the biblical injunctions of preaching to the lost, discipling the found, and building up those who have been discipled. (And no, this is not the same as LC Movement efforts to gain members).

Some further ask, Then if we are nothing special, why not just disband and join other Christian groups? Maybe that is a legitimate proposal, where a Local Church has been crawling along for many years with an attendance in the very low double digits, and no one is present with a gift for establishing a church. I would not recommend turning your fellowship into an Alamo, where you are determined to “take a stand” no matter what the costs. This occurs when meetings are dead, the youth hate it and can’t wait to escape, your spouse is withering from lack of companionship, and you find yourself over the long-term, merely tolerating the whole thing with no plan, no clue, and no energy to change it. Not to mention, newcomers to the church are as rare as woolly mammoths. Still, you feel that remaining is a matter of sacred duty as all twelve of you slowly stagnate. That’s what I mean by “Alamo.”

Yes, under those conditions, you may want to rethink what you’re doing. This could possibly involve seeking help from another congregation. But even that doesn’t mean abandoning your previous intention to be a church. You could continue meeting on a semi-independent basis, using the strengths of a larger, better established congregation like a crutch for a while to make up your lack. Before a decision of this kind, however, I would encourage you to finish reading this book. There are a number of items left to be covered that may very well enhance your local labor.

Let’s return to the larger question of “Why not just join other groups?” There is no reason to impound your congregation if it already has a small but operational leadership, a core of somewhat committed members, a passable fellowship and an overall identity

as a church. Under those circumstances, fine-tuning might be required and perhaps an overhaul, but certainly nothing more drastic than that. Instead, a pragmatic inventory needs to be taken of what a church of this kind has to offer the community surrounding it. For instance, a positive feature in our past Movement culture was the stress on depth of truth. Used properly, this will always be appreciated by other believers (as long as it does not become rank dogmatism). Those who can responsibly minister Bible truth are great assets to any congregation. This is especially so at a time when it is hard to tell the difference between self-help psychology and genuine gospel revelation.

For example, in addition to good teaching, our campus work here in Columbus had to identify what service it could provide the Ohio State University. This firstly meant realizing what we were not. We were not, in fact, some national campus organization with huge financial resources. We didn't have money, size or celebrity workers. But what we did have were some young consecrated folks who had a strong interest in discipling others.

Identifying such congregational strengths helps determine your "niche" in the locally expressed Body of Christ. So, after a lot of fellowship and prayer, we came to the conclusion that in many respects we were doing the same thing as other groups—bringing them to the Lord and the Bible and a holy life (which was wonderful). But we also had a little something extra in the area of equipping people for ministry.

We accentuated our niche by producing materials, a structure that people could progress through, and a cohesive vision statement. Blessing immediately followed in the lives of the youth joining us. In your particular situation, you also will no doubt identify certain strengths that the Lord has provided. Some of these will be positive residuals that were

gained through time in the Local Church Movement (like the propensity for teaching). Other items will be specific gifts of the people who meet with you (such as musical talents). Still another may be the overall culture of your church (like having a warm, friendly environment). You might even see your prevailing demographic as a blessing (We have seniors—seniors can certainly help other seniors! Or, young couples can work with other young couples). By all means, invest the time and energy to develop whatever you have in order to get the desired effect of gospel-discipling-building up. Of course if you can produce things in your church that you don't already have, fine, do it. However, don't let precious existing resources atrophy while trying to be something that you are not.

Taking our place in the common fellowship of Christ's Body considerably simplifies and enriches church life. However, it comes at the price of shedding religious egos. That means banishing the habit of vilifying everyone else (or even nicely demoting them). If we are special, or in some positive sense "unique," then let others tell us. Just as Paul said, they will report that God is truly among you (1 Cor. 14:25). If we spend most of our time trying to convince ourselves and our visitors how special we are, how unique, pure, and God-blessed, then there's something wrong. Together with all true believers, we have been equally elevated to the greatest place in the universe—to be Christ's own body. Our mission is not to occupy some fictitious higher peak. Being at rest with this humble reality, we can then turn our attention to the more pressing concerns of living out what we are.

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