

'Local Church' Scrutinized by Critics

Controversy erupted after an evangelical group endorsed the publisher of Witness Lee's writings

A controversial group known as the Local Church—which has been accused of being a cult in past decades—has been endorsed by the nation's most influential Christian publisher's association. The move has opened up a new debate about the beliefs of the group and one of its founders, Witness Lee.

The group's publishing arm, Living Stream Ministry (LSM) of Anaheim, Calif., distributes books written by Lee, who died in 1997. After years of complaints about its questionable doctrines, LSM was granted membership in the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA), association President Doug Ross confirmed in November.

As part of that process, LSM signed the ECPA's statement of faith, Ross said. LSM touts this move as more proof that Lee's doctrines are sound and that critics and cult-watchers who have attacked Lee's works for years are either misinformed or are jealous of the Local Church's growth. LSM is a longtime member of the Christian Booksellers Association as well.

The Local Church now has more than 3,000 congregations worldwide and more than 250,000 members, with about 250 churches and 25,000 members in the United States and Canada, an LSM spokesman said.

Critics say Living Stream has never refuted Lee's questionable definition of the Trinity, which some say is "modalism" —a

doctrine that caused Oneness Pentecostals to split from the Assemblies of God in the early 1900s. Nor has Living Stream refuted Lee's own statements about the Local Church being the one true church, critics say.

LSM denies belief in modalism, claims belief in the widely accepted orthodox Trinity doctrine and denies that the Local Church does not recognize other churches or denominations as legitimate members of the body of Christ, spokesperson Chris Wilde told Charisma.

"Modalism says that the Father became the Son and ceased to be the Father, and that the Spirit became the Son and ceased to be the Spirit. We do not teach that. That is heresy," Wilde said.

Wilde also denied that the Local Church's habit of naming local congregations after the city of its location, such as 'The Local Church of Los Angeles,' translates as a declaration that the Local Church is the only true church in that city, as critics charge. The term "Local Church" is still used because it is closely tied to the biblical admonition for believers to work in unity and avoid divisions, Wilde said.

Watchman Nee (1903-1972), a Chinese evangelist and Lee's mentor, founded the Local Church in 1927 in Shanghai because he believed that denominational competition is unbiblical, according to *Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices*. In mainstream circles, Nee's works are more widely accepted as doctrinally sound than Lee's.

Lee joined the Local Church movement in the 1930s and became a

close associate of Nee's. Nee sent Lee to Taiwan in 1948, where nationalist forces had gathered while communists took over the mainland. The communists arrested Nee in 1952 and eventually sent him to prison for the remainder of his life. Lee brought the Local Church movement to the United States in the 1960s.

Lee's interpretation of this one-church theory has drawn criticism from observers for years because Lee said in Living Stream publications that other churches are not ordained of God.

"Consider the situation in Orange County [Calif.]," Lee wrote in Young People's Training, a Living Stream publication. "Anaheim is famous for three things—for schools, parks and 'churches.' In the eyes of God, these are not churches, but confusions, fornications."

ECPA's Ross said his staff met with LSM officials on several occasions because they knew that "there are people who would be carrying ideas about Living Stream that are carry-overs from days gone by. They eagerly signed our statement of faith and answered all of our questions satisfactorily."

Many critics of LSM have never sat down with LSM to discuss the concerns, Ross added, and urged anyone to visit the LSM-sponsored Web site at to read LSM's responses to the doctrinal challenges it has faced.

But critics of Lee's teachings dismiss LSM's ECPA membership as any sort of relief over the controversy surrounding Lee.

"It means very little that Living Stream Ministries has signed

the ECPA's statement of faith," said investigative journalist, author and cult-watcher Richard Abanes. "Many doctrinally aberrant organizations could do the same thing. The [ECPA faith] statement only deals in general terms using language that such organizations could agree to, given how they radically redefine doctrinal terms.

"It is true—I have not sat down and met with [LSM], but I have read a plethora of material they have written," Abanes said. "I haven't met Billy Graham either, but I certainly know what he believes."

Abanes and doctrinal watchdogs such as Watchman Fellowship said they are alarmed that LSM has only defended Lee's teachings and never admitted to any error. And they said LSM has a reputation for trying to silence their critics with legal action, another accusation Wilde denied.

"What is true is that if something is coming into print that we believe is in complete disharmony with the truth, we make every admonition according to the Scriptures to meet with our brothers to overcome misunderstandings," Wilde said. "[Suing] is never our first response or our desire."

Watchman Fellowship President James K. Walker disagreed with Wilde's assessment.

"Evangelicals should be very cautious about accepting Living Stream Ministry or the Local Church of Witness Lee as one of us," Walker said. "What Lee meant by 'Trinity' often seems contradictory. He also taught, 'The Father, the Son and the Spirit are not three separate persons or three Gods; they are one God, one reality, one person.'"

Walker quoted Lee's own words on denominations: "'When we were in denominations, we were blind. I do not believe that any dear Christians who have really received sight from the Lord could still remain in denominations.'"

And on LSM's alleged propensity for legal threats against critics, Walker said: "If the Local Church truly sees evangelical Christians as brothers, it is violating biblical prohibition against suing brothers. It would seem that either the Local Church has no regard for 1 Corinthians 6, or they don't regard evangelical Christians as their brothers."

Wilde said LSM greatly desires an open dialogue with evangelicals in order to further the work of Nee and Lee.

"There is a resurgence in the Watchman Nee ministry today because it really calls believers into a deeper experience of Christ," he said. "We are trying to break this [public image] boundary, no question about it."

Billy Bruce