

Publisher Sued Over Local Church 'Cult' Charge

A controversial church movement has sued another member of the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA) over renewed charges that it is a cult.

The Local Church, its Living Streams Ministry (LSM) and 96 Local Church congregations across the country are seeking a combined total of \$136 million from Harvest House Publishers and the co-authors of its Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions, John Ankerberg and John Weldon.

Founded in China in the 1920s by Watchman Nee and later brought to the United States by Nee's disciple, Witness Lee, the Local Church currently claims some 25,000 members in 300 churches across the country and more than 250,000 members in 3,000 churches worldwide.

But the movement has long been viewed critically by cult-watchers. They say that LSM has never sufficiently distanced itself from questionable teachings on topics such as the Trinity or the nature of the church.

The Local Church's Anaheim, publishing ministry had hoped that its acceptance into the ECPA last year would help improve its profile. LSM said in a statement it had been "greatly disturbed" by the Local Church's "abhorrent" inclusion in the Ankerberg-Weldon book.

"Its false statements concerning illegal and immoral behaviors

affect our ministry and churches and our relationships with fellow Christians,” the statement added.

The libel action was filed Dec. 31, 2001, in Harris County District Court, Texas. LSM said it had gone to court reluctantly, after repeated efforts to “resolve our differences”—including six letters to Harvest House and the authors asking for a face-to-face meeting—had failed.

LSM has previously won two legal battles over books that criticized the Local Church. At Harvest House Publishers, based in Eugene, Ore., a spokesperson said: “[We] and our currently limited in the comments we can offer on this matter at the advice of our attorneys.” ECPA Vice President Kelly Gallagher also said that he had been advised not to comment on the action.

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