

THE LOCAL CHURCHES

*“Genuine Believers
and Fellow Members
of the Body of Christ”*

Testimonies of Three Prominent
Christian Organizations:

*Hank Hanegraaff,
Christian Research Institute*

*Gretchen Passantino,
Answers in Action*

Fuller Theological Seminary

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Phil. 1:7 – Even as it is right for me to think this concerning you all because you have me in your heart, since both in my bonds and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel you are all fellow partakers with me of grace.

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PREFACE

Over the years the local churches have welcomed dialogue with scholars who were willing to conduct honest and thorough research in order to understand our beliefs and practices. We have been privileged over the past five years to have engaged in dialogue and Christian fellowship with a number of such researchers and scholars. The content of this book reflects some of the progress that has been made both in dispelling misconceptions concerning the teachings and practices of the local churches and Living Stream Ministry (LSM) and in raising an awareness of the riches of the ministry we have inherited. LSM publishes the writings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee (see www.lsm.org and www.ministrybooks.org).

This book sets forth the writings of leaders of three Christian organizations: Christian Research Institute (CRI), Answers in Action (AIA), and Fuller Theological Seminary.

In the 1970s CRI published criticisms of the local churches that were widely disseminated and accepted as fact. Those publications became the source material on which other Christian apologists and writers relied to publish the same and similar wrong conclusions. Given the zeal exhibited on all sides in that period of time, it is not surprising that misunderstandings were exacerbated. At that time absolute attitudes, especially of the young, resulted in strife and personal offenses instead of Christian dialogue in mutual respect.

In 2003 Hank Hanegraaff, the President of CRI; Elliot Miller, the editor-in-chief of CRI's flagship publication *Christian Research Journal*; Bob and Gretchen Passantino, the founders and Directors of Answers in Action (AIA); and representatives of the local churches and LSM desired to meet together. In the first meeting representatives of the local churches and LSM testified of their belief in the essentials of the Christian faith concerning the Bible, the Triune God, the person and work of Christ, salvation, and the church. As a result of that meeting, CRI and

AIA launched a re-evaluation of the teachings and practices of the local churches. Now that the local churches have been in the United States for many years, there are many resources regarding our teachings and practices that were not as available in the years when the initial evaluation was made. Although others continue to rely on old criticisms, CRI and AIA have made use of that complete information. Their evaluation has been far more extensive than the initial review decades before, and this new study has arrived at far different conclusions.

In his foreword Hank Hanegraaff affirms that “the local churches are an authentic expression of New Testament Christianity” and “I stand shoulder to shoulder with the local churches when it comes to the essentials that define biblical orthodoxy.” Gretchen Passantino similarly concludes her article by saying: “A Christian believer who joins the local churches will find sound theology, enriching worship, challenging discipleship, and enthusiastic evangelism opportunities. After 40 years of Christian faith, I have not lost my ‘first love’ of Jesus Christ. I recognize that same vibrant Spirit in the local churches.”

In late 2004 a separate dialogue was initiated between Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, and representatives of the local churches and LSM. A group of three distinguished members of the Seminary—President Richard Mouw, Dean of Theology Howard Loewen, and Professor of Systematic Theology Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen—performed an extensive and careful review and evaluation of our teachings and practices. Of their meetings with the representatives of the local churches and LSM they said, “Our times together were characterized by sincere, open, transparent, and unrestricted dialog.” As a result of their review, they issued a statement (also reproduced in this book) in which they concluded “that the teachings and practices of the local churches and its members represent the genuine, historical, biblical Christian faith in every essential aspect.” They also reported finding “a great disparity between the perceptions that have been generated in some

circles concerning the teachings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee and the actual teachings found in their writings.”

We are grateful for the dialogue we have had with members of CRI, AIA, and Fuller Theological Seminary, dialogue which has been both frank and full of sweet Christian fellowship. We are deeply moved by the faithfulness of our brothers and our sister in Christ in adhering to the essentials of the Christian faith and receiving all those who hold “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) without regard to personal consequences.

We do not wish to give the impression that they agree with us on every point of biblical interpretation. Rather, we agree with them that the standard of being received in the circle of Christian fellowship is acceptance of the common faith and that all other matters are subject to fellowship and mutual respect of our differences within that circle.

In the same principle of mutual respect we have set forth the authors’ own words and perspective on historical events. This does not mean that we would say some of the things in the same way or with the same historical perspective. For example, the word “movement” is not a word we would use to describe ourselves. Nevertheless, the cause of the truth is overwhelmingly served by the authors’ writings and actual differences are small. We commit all understanding to the Lord and His Spirit’s enlightening of each reader.

Finally, we reaffirm our willingness to dialogue with all scholars, researchers, and any others who desire a true and accurate understanding of who we are, what we believe, and how we practice the Christian faith.

Benson Phillips Dan Towle Andrew Yu Chris Wilde
November 2008

FOREWORD

It is with great pleasure that I add this foreword to Gretchen Passantino's excellent evaluation of a Christian movement known as the Local Churches (the local churches). Gretchen is the quintessential example of a brilliant yet humble servant of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. She is emblematic of a new breed of apologists more interested in attracting converts to the Almighty than attracting people to their arguments.

The local churches are a classic case in point. Gretchen and her husband Bob did an initial evaluation of the movement in the mid-1970s. For reasons outlined in this document, that evaluation was incomplete and therefore deficient. Unfortunately it has become the basis for much of the criticism leveled against the work of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee globally. Indeed, it formed the backdrop for the ministry statements I inherited when I assumed the presidency of the Christian Research Institute (CRI).

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As president of CRI and host of the Bible Answer Man radio broadcast, I have personally been asked to weigh in on the controversies surrounding the local churches and ... Living Stream Ministry.

been asked to weigh in on the controversies surrounding the local churches and their publishing and distribution arm Living Stream Ministry. As such, I initiated a primary research project that included interaction with their publications as well as interaction with programs and people associated with their churches and Living Stream Ministry. I asked Gretchen Passantino, who has been and continues to be a trusted colleague, as well as Elliot Miller, editor-in-chief of the *Christian*

Research Journal, to join me in this process. While this primary research is still ongoing, the following statements are beyond dispute.

First, the local churches are *not* a cult from a theological perspective. In this sense, a cult may be defined as a pseudo-Christian organization that claims to be Christian but compromises, confuses, and contradicts essential Christian doctrine. While I personally have profound differences with the movement when it comes to secondary issues, such as the timing of the tribulation or the meaning of the millennium, I stand shoulder to shoulder with the local churches when it comes to the essentials that define biblical orthodoxy. With respect to the Trinity, for example, we are united in the reality that there is one God revealed in three persons who are eternally distinct. Although we may disagree on the exegesis of particular passages, this premise is inviolate. It is significant to note that in interacting with members of the local churches over a protracted period of time, I have witnessed in them a keen interest in doctrinal precision sadly missing today in major segments of the evangelical community.

Furthermore, the local churches are *not* a cult from a sociological perspective. In this sense, a cult is a religious or semi-religious sect whose followers are controlled by strong leadership in virtually every dimension of their lives. Devotees characteristically manifest a displaced loyalty for the “guru” and the group and are galvanized together through physical and/or psychological intimidation tactics. It is more than unfortunate that the local churches have been uncharitably lumped together with sociological cults involved in the most heinous activities conceivable. It is truly tragic that this classification has been used to persecute and imprison members of the local churches in various regions around the world.

Finally, the local churches *are* an authentic expression of New Testament Christianity. Moreover, as a group forged in the cauldron of persecution, it has much to offer Western Christianity. In this respect three things immediately come to mind. First is their practice of prophesying—not in the sense of foretelling the future but in the 1 Corinthians 14 sense of exhorting, edifying, encouraging, educating, equipping, and explicating Scripture. In such a practice, constituents are corporately involved in worship through the Word. Second is their practice of pray-reading (in addition to Bible study) as a meaningful link between the intake of Scripture and efficacious communion with God in prayer. And third is their fervent commitment to the Great Commission

(Matthew 28:19). If the early Christian church had one distinguishing characteristic, it was their passion to communicate the love, joy, and peace that only Jesus Christ can bring to the human heart. As we become entrenched in an age of esotericism, it is essential that genuine believers in all

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walks of life emulate this passion—a passion I have personally witnessed as I shared in fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ from local churches in places as far away as London, England, Seoul, Korea, and Nanjing, China.

In sum, along with Christians from a broad range of persuasions, the local churches are dedicated to both proper doctrine (orthodoxy) and proper practice (orthopraxy). As such, they march by the maxim, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.” While we will no doubt

continue to debate secondary issues this side of the veil, I have no doubt that we will spend an eternity together growing in the knowledge of the One who saved us by faith alone, through grace alone, on account of Christ alone.

Hank Hanegraaff
President, Christian Research Institute
September 2008

THE LOCAL CHURCHES: A GENUINE CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT

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Challenging Spiritual Options on Campus

I remember my undergraduate university days as a time of enthusiastic activism toward changing the world. I was an energetic leader in the American collegial turmoil of the late 1960s, early 1970s, as dedicated to defending my progressive European history professor from loss of tenure as I was to protesting corporate expansion in the nearby natural wetlands. The daughter of a dedicated old-school newspaper journalist, I was committed to the precept that if I didn't like the world around me, I should do something to change it.

When I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior, my entire world was turned upside down. The same zeal I had used to explore the personal angst of James Joyce or to march on the dean's office demonstrating, I now threw unreservedly into my newfound Christian faith. I was fully convinced that in the few remaining months before the rapture of the Church and the coming of the great tribulation and the Anti-Christ, I and my fellow "Jesus freaks" would "do something" to change the world for Jesus Christ.

It was no wonder my parents were concerned that I had "gone off the deep end." They didn't know whether to thank God I had such strong faith or to be afraid that I had become spiritually reckless.

Credentials for Testing Spiritual Movements

That was nearly 40 years ago and it took some time before my parents became convinced that my spiritual zeal represented authentic Christian conversion. My enthusiastic faith activism was the nexus which prompted me to dedicate my life to

Christian apologetics, the work of discerning true and false spiritual movements compared to the standard of authentic biblical Christian faith. Over the last 37 years I have become one of the leading Christian evangelical apologists determining whether spiritual movements that claim to represent biblical Christianity are orthodox or heretical. My professional studies certainly endured far into my career and, indeed, continue to this day. But it was the early days of my Christian walk, when I first abandoned myself to Jesus Christ, that most prepared me to understand and empathize with young adults of any decade

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who are spiritually transformed and dedicate their young lives to spiritual service, often to the confusion and consternation of their parents.

If you are a young person who is experiencing your own spiritual epiphany, let me encourage you that your spiritual life will be enriched and enhanced as you join yourself to a true work of God,

whether that is with the brothers and sisters of the local churches or in some other fellowship where God is working. God really is interested in capturing your heart for his service and he really will empower you to make your world a better place through Jesus Christ. If you are a parent, proud of your young adult offspring's seemingly overnight spiritual blossoming, but afraid that he or she is going to crash and burn in spiritual chaos, let me reassure you. The local churches are a legitimate, theologically orthodox, spiritually faithful involvement by means of which your offspring can develop genuine Christian commitment and maturity. They are not a dangerous ensnarement of the devil.

Why Young Christians Offend Nearly Everyone

When I was a new Christian on the campus of the University of California (Irvine) in 1970, my fervent Christian enthusiasm was hard for most people to take. I just knew Jesus was real, and everyone else should experience what I was experiencing.

My friends thought I had gone crazy. I prayed in tongues instead of using drugs or drinking. I read the Bible instead of going to movies like *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I invited my friends to church instead of to test lab alcohol binges in Upper Newport Bay.

My parents thought I had gone off the deep end. They had nothing against Christian faith, as long as it was quiet, discrete, inoffensive, and Methodist. They weren't ready for my total rejection of "dead, dry denominationalism." They were hurt when I told them I had experienced God in a ratty "revival tent" instead of in the modern, well-upholstered pews of a suburban church. They feared for my life and my future when I announced that God might call me to sacrifice my life for Jesus on the mission field in far off Africa or Asia.

My professors were profoundly disappointed that one of their brightest, most articulate young scholars had thrown her mind away on hysterical religion, the "opiate of the people." When I challenged my *Bible as Literature* professor for equal time to argue the historical accuracy of the Bible, he was incredulous. My sociology professor couldn't figure out how to explain cultural relativity to me when I kept asking him if he were certain there are no certainties, if he really knew it was true that truth can't be known, if he weren't a hypocrite to say "all beliefs are true," except for my radical Christian faith that insisted Jesus was the only way, truth, and life. In short, when my heart was captured by Jesus Christ, I upset nearly everyone in my world. I am no stranger to disruptive-seeming faith.

Religious Diversity among American Youth

I became a Christian in 1970, at the beginning of a time of nearly unprecedented religious fervor among American young people. From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, American teenagers and young adults enthusiastically embraced a wide variety of spectacular spiritual movements.

Some were decidedly orthodox in their Christian teachings and practices. The Navigators, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, and Evangelism Explosion were some of the movements that harnessed the enthusiastic faith of young people with a minimum of shock or discomfort to parents and denominational pastors and leaders.

Others were more radical, harnessing some of the same passion of the hippies and anti-war protestors in the name of Jesus. The Calvary Chapel movement, Jews for Jesus, and the many non-denominational, untitled Christian “Jesus Freaks” carried the same essential biblical message, but their behavior, vocabulary, and practices were radical and divisive for their times.

Many of the most radical spiritual movements were decidedly un-Christian, whether openly or surreptitiously. The Children of God claimed to be fully Christian but their prophet, “Moses David” Berg, taught and practiced moral depravity in the name of Christ. Rev. Sun Myung Moon came from Korea claiming to be the “Lord of the Second Advent” sent by God to finish the salvation work Jesus failed to complete. Jim Jones moved his People’s Temple to South America and led them into slaughter with his own suicide and the suicide and/or murder of more than 900 of his followers. The more blatantly non-Christian movements like the Hare Krishnas brought the gods of the East to the Western world and made us comfortable with terms like reincarnation and karma.

Equipped for Spiritual Discernment

In this exciting milieu of spiritual challenge my Christian faith matured and I embarked on a career path that paired my voracious thirst for knowledge with my deep devotion to Christian truth. My undergraduate degree in comparative literature gave me a unique introduction to a wide variety of religious worldviews and spiritual experiences stretching around the world and across five thousand years of civilization. My subsequent studies in theology, doctrine, world religions, church history, apologetics, and other theological disciplines gave me a breadth of scholarly insight into varieties of religious experiences. Working with one of the pioneers of cult apologists, the late Dr. Walter Martin, gave me invaluable experience in both equipping Christians to defend the Christian faith and evangelizing those who embraced other faiths.

With my first husband, Bob Passantino (who died late in 2003), I dedicated my adult life to the field of apologetics. What set Bob and me apart from many apologists of those decades was a product of our early years as enthusiastic campus Christians: we spent most of our time and effort interacting with people from the perspective of their own faith commitments rather than mostly distant academic observation. We tried to give the “strange” movements the benefit of the doubt. We drew the line at the essential Christian doctrines that defined biblical belief rather than the non-essentials that distinguished Christians within the wider unified faith. We applied what my late husband called “the golden rule apologetic”—don’t hold your doctrinal opponent to a standard you cannot meet, or challenge those who differ with you on grounds on which you could not stand.

Over the years we became trusted as well-reasoned, empathetic, accurate, theologically conservative Christian apologists. When we provoked critical responses, they arose from our refusal to acquiesce to popular but inaccurate mischaracterizations of

others. Sometimes they arose because we saw developing trends or threats to Christian faith that others discounted. Even as we became more experienced and better educated, we maintained the same commitment to exacting research and careful analysis that exemplified the work of Walter Martin.

Re-assessing an Early Evaluation

Because of our careful work, our evaluations were rarely overturned. But when we recognized that we had failed to make a valid deduction, or further investigation changed the situation, we readily modified our assessment.

The most significant re-assessment from my career concerns the teachings and practices of a movement of Christians with its origins in China popularly described as the local churches,

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founded under the teachings of the two Christians from China, Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. In the mid-1970s, we concluded that some of the teachings and practices of the leaders and their movement were heretical and we warned people not to become

involved with the American manifestation of this movement. While some of our colleagues went so far as to say that the group was actually a non-Christian cult masquerading as a Christian movement, we stopped short of that denouncement. This was primarily because we were convinced through personal interaction with some of the American members that these were genuine Christians who had genuine relationships with Jesus Christ, but who seemed at least confused about some essential teachings and practices.

Now, more than 30 years after our first limited investigation between 1975 and 1980, I have had the opportunity to conduct an entirely new, thorough re-investigation and re-assessment of the teachings and practices of the local churches, including the teachings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. I have had full access to all of the printed and recorded materials of the movement. I have had full access to any members, whether neophyte converts or leading brothers who have served the local churches for decades. I have conducted careful, thorough research for many months. I am convinced that I have a much better, more accurate, better informed basis from which to conclude that this movement

is a Christian movement whose teachings and practices are well within Christian orthodoxy. Rather than classifying them among the same kinds of movements that were false manifestations of

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Christian faith, such as Jim Jones's Peoples' Temple, they should be classified among the orthodox but startlingly vibrant churches like those coming out of the "Jesus Movement."

I am among a handful of Christian apologists or theologians who have spent sufficient time with a breadth of primary documentation and at least as importantly had lengthy direct interaction with leading members and others in this movement. I am confident that my current assessment is supported by the evidence. I stand confidently with Dr. Richard Mouw, Dr. Howard Loewen, and Dr. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, all of Fuller Theological Seminary, and with Hank Hanegraaff and Elliot Miller of the Christian Research Institute in affirming the Christian orthodoxy of the local churches.

Other apologetics colleagues continue to insist that the teachings and practices of the local churches are heretical and outside Christian orthodoxy. Surprisingly, they base their insistence on the very same incomplete work Bob and I produced between 1975 and 1980, despite the fact that I can demonstrate the insufficiency in breadth, depth, and analysis of that former research base. My current assessment should carry much greater weight than did that first endeavor. Unless and until any of my dissenting colleagues are willing to engage in the much larger body of documentation—enhanced by a much deeper application of the study of the wider Christian church not only in its diversity around the world, but also in its diversity through the centuries, and augmented by a much greater number of personal interactions and direct conversations with leading and ordinary members—their continuing denunciation is untenable.

Orthodox Theology and Doctrine

The theology and doctrine of the local churches was generally unknown when the first missionaries from China came to the United States. These Chinese Christians brought the same gospel back to the United States as originally had been brought

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to them in previous generations, but it was presented in terminology and concepts that were comfortable for them, but that seemed strange to most American Christians.

As also affirmed by Fuller Theological Seminary the teachings of Watchman Nee, Witness Lee, and the local

churches affirm the essential doctrinal positions of the historic Christian Church regarding the nature of God, the doctrine of

the Trinity, the nature, person, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the doctrine of the atonement, the nature of humans before and after the fall, the plan of salvation (redemption), the nature of the church, the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, and Christ's bodily, visible Second Coming for final judgment and the reconciliation of all things. Not only are these teachings fully within orthodoxy, they are more carefully explained and contrasted to heretical beliefs than they are in most American Christian churches. Most local church believers in America understand and can explain essential biblical doctrine better than can most traditional American Christians.

Orthodox Christian Living

The practices of the local churches at first glance may seem to be aberrant. Most startling is the insistence that their churches take no name except for a geographical designator (the church in Anaheim, for example) and that no individual member or worker among the churches nationally or internationally has any greater authority or power than anyone else. How is it possible, the cynic might wonder, that with no authority structure, all of the churches seem so similar not merely in doctrine but also in practice? How can it be that there is an international publishing organization that also provides for conferences and ministry events from "leading brothers," and yet no one is "in charge"? The local churches attribute the Holy Spirit as the source of this unity. Some of the "leading brothers" freely admit that their experience, age, years of co-working with Witness Lee before his death, and the logistic ability to network with the churches internationally, pose an administrative system of a sort. Careful inquiry and observation has convinced me that the independent administration of each church is actual, not illusory, and that the "leadership" has earned its ability to be followed by humble service, not by subtle control.

Distinctive Theology and Practices that Prompt Concern

If the local churches movement were just like any other American church experience, the controversy and accusations against them would probably not have arisen. That they have generated controversy in many of the communities in which they have planted congregations indicates they are different from many more mainstream Christian churches.

A careful comparison of local church theology to historical biblical theology shows that the biggest differences are differences of expression and experience rather than actual content.

Church Life

Church life in the local churches is primarily distinguished from typical American evangelicalism because of the local churches' attempts to experience church as they think it was in the New Testament, before the rise of denominationalism or other congregational distinctives.

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That is why they refuse to name their churches or erect a national or international authority structure. They believe that a biblical description of "the church" in any given locality is merely "the church"—not the Baptist Church and the Lutheran Church and the Community Church, etc. They believe that the church in any given

locality includes all Christian believers in that area, regardless of whether all the believers meet together or recognize their unity above their denominational or name distinctions. Although they have been accused of believing that only those who meet with

them are true Christians, that is not their belief and it is not what they practice.

Another aspect of the local churches' attempts to live New Testament church life is their enthusiastic commitment to worship and fellowship throughout the week, not just once a week. Local church congregations model their activities on examples from the New Testament of Christians who shared their assets (although the local churches are not communal), provided social assistance to their needy members, practiced discipleship of younger members by mature members, dedicated themselves to intensive study of Scripture, and cooperated in preaching the gospel throughout the community. To many American evangelicals, this intensive, time-consuming commitment is at best challenging to Christians who don't do as much, and at worst indicates an unhealthy isolation from the wider community. Nevertheless, the local churches carefully and specifically encourage their members to be fully involved in a biblical way with respect to their families, the direction of their lives, other Christian believers, their local community, and their nation.

Church Worship

Local church worship is derived from their understanding of worship in the New Testament, and looks more like the "primitive" worship of the nineteenth century Plymouth Brethren background which the Chinese local churches first emulated, than it does contemporary American evangelical denominational or community based churches. Because they do not have a clergy/laity authority structure, services are very plain, have components contributed by a variety of brothers and sisters worshipping together, and typically have more prayer, simple hymn singing, and vocal worship than formal orders of service or pastor-directed sermons. Their version of communal prayer combined with Scripture (called pray-reading) has been misconstrued as mindless babbling by outsiders, although

participants are instead seeking to internalize the objective truth of Scripture in a subjective experience of the Holy Spirit applying it to them as they worship together.

Even though the local churches hold similar end times views as many American evangelicals (dispensational premillennialism), their commitment to evangelism and discipleship is woven through their end times views. This means they persist in maturing in Christ in anticipation of His Second Coming as a bridegroom for his pure bride. This also means they urgently penetrate the society around them with the power of the gospel preparatory to what they see as the imminent closing of the “gospel age.” For many American evangelicals such intensity in daily discipleship and evangelism is unusual.

This is only a brief survey of some of the teachings and practices of the local churches. The publications of Living Stream Ministry provide specific descriptions of local church teachings and practices and, together with the actual practices of those churches, persuasive evidence that the teachings and practices of the local churches are orthodox, not heretical.

From Critic to Endorser

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I changed from a critic of the local churches in the 1970s to an endorser in the twenty-first century for several significant reasons.

reasons. The five reasons most significant for this brief survey are these.

First, as much as the “Jesus Freak” Christianity many of us embraced in the late 1960s, early 1970s, was startlingly different from the “dead denominationalism” of my

parents’ generation, it was still a product of American rational modernism. Facts, arguments, evidence, and reason reigned

supreme not only in the science lab and university classroom, but even in the theologian's study and the church's missions department. Confronted with a religious movement that embraced subjective spiritual experience along with objective rational argumentation, Bob and I failed to fairly evaluate the breadth of local church beliefs. Instead we essentially ignored whatever was not Aristotelean, criticizing an incomplete conceptual model of their theology. Through careful study of church history, especially ancient and eastern church history, I have come to understand and appreciate a less purely analytical but more fully personal theology such as is demonstrated in the ancient near eastern theology of the early church fathers or the eastern orthodox theology of the Byzantine churches.

Second, since the enthusiastic young American converts to the local churches pointed directly from themselves to the New Testament churches, our initial analysis failed to give proper weight to the historical roots of the local churches in China, especially in the mission efforts of the Brethren Churches. For example, without its historical context, it was easy for young converts as well as young critics like Bob and me to take their self-identity as "the church in XX (city)" as exclusive rejection of all other Christians and churches.

Third, the amount of material available to the public in English at that time was inadequate to fully and fairly represent the depth and breadth of local church theology. Even those messages given in English by Witness Lee in America came from a Chinese national who had spent most of his life and ministry in China among those who shared his cultural, historical, social, and spiritual experiences. The main theological statements of Nee and Lee came in the context of Bible studies and training sessions for believers who already embraced the distinctive understandings of the churches, not in the context of answering outsiders' questions or defending themselves from

critics. With this very limited research base, it is understandable that Bob and I concluded that comments by members like “I experience Christ as the Spirit” meant that the believer was confusing the persons of the Trinity and was guilty of the heresy of modalism. In fact, since this has been such a contentious issue between the churches and their critics, it has become the case that most brothers and sisters in the local churches are much better able to define, explain, and defend the orthodox doctrine of the trinity in distinction from modalism than the average Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, or non-denominational Christians!

Fourth, as with my early conversion experiences and those of many other new and enthusiastic believers, many of the earliest American believers who aligned themselves with the local churches failed to temper their zeal with irenic compassion toward believers outside their movement. Just as my parents assumed I was rejecting them and their faith by my exuberant declaration that “dead denominationalism” was being replaced by God’s new movement of the Spirit, so did many assume that this import from Asia sought to supplant and exclude other American churches. When Witness Lee preached that “Christendom,” including Roman Catholicism and the churches of the Reformation, was “fallen” and “that the Lord was recovering” a purer practice of church life distinguished only by local proximity, both outside critics and even some members interpreted this to mean that the local churches saw themselves as the only genuine Christians. Subsequent clarifications of respected leadership and correction of immature local church members have demonstrated that while the local churches are adamant about refusing to distinguish themselves by anything other than local proximity, they recognize valid Christian faith among Christians in all of the orthodox denominational churches.

Fifth, the beginnings of the local churches in America were consumed with a positive and simple declaration of the faith their Chinese believers had embraced and practiced and brought to America with insufficient consideration for different culture, terminology, history, experience, and relationship. Consequently, over time the churches had to learn to explain themselves more fully to outsiders, taking into consideration problems and assumptions they had not previously encountered. This can be compared to the experience of the early Christian church. In the beginning in Jerusalem, nearly all the new believers in Jesus as the Messiah were Jewish residents of Israel. To say "Jesus the Messiah is Lord!" conveyed a rich complex of theology, history, experience, and culture in terminology that encompassed 2,000 years of spiritual history. As the church was planted by the Holy Spirit in new places with converts of different religious experience, culture, history, and theological terminology, those simple statements had to be explained, defended, and contrasted to other beliefs. Within 500 years, the simple Christian declaration had expanded to the nearly 1,000 words of the Athanasian Creed. The theology had not changed, the wording had. In the same way, the uncontested, experience-developed theology of the local churches, as they gained visibility in America in the 1970s, has now, more than 30 years later, been more fully, carefully, and contextually explained and defended in subsequent local churches literature.

There are many more reasons that I, colleagues from Fuller Theological Seminary, Hank Hanegraaff, and Elliot Miller were compelled to assess our evaluation of the teachings and practices of the local churches and to affirm that our brothers and sisters in this movement are fully orthodox in Christian faith and life. The reasons summarized here should reassure concerned observers of the local churches' Christian commitment.

A Christian believer who joins the local churches will find sound theology, enriching worship, challenging discipleship, and enthusiastic evangelism opportunities. After 40 years of Christian faith, I have not lost my “first love” of Jesus Christ. I recognize that same vibrant Spirit in the local churches.

About the Author

Gretchen Passantino is co-founder and director of Answers In Action, one of the oldest and most respected apologetics organizations. She holds a B.A. in comparative literature from the University of California (Irvine) and an M.Div. (apologetics

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emphasis) from Faith Evangelical Lutheran Seminary (Tacoma, WA). She is a respected author of books and articles on apologetics, world religions, and theology. She serves as an adjunct graduate faculty member with Faith Seminary. Gretchen Passantino co-authored *The New Cults* (1980) with Dr. Walter Martin

that contains an appendix on the local churches with her previous research conclusions. She contributes to a multi-part reevaluation of local churches’ teachings and practices for *The Christian Research Journal* (forthcoming).



STATEMENT FROM FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Fuller Theological Seminary (Fuller) and leaders from the local churches and its publishing service, Living Stream Ministry (LSM), have recently completed two years of extensive dialog. During this time Fuller conducted a thorough review and examination of the major teachings and practices of the local churches, with particular emphasis on the writings of Witness Lee and Watchman Nee, as published by Living Stream Ministry. This process was undertaken in an attempt to answer many of the questions and accusations that are often associated with this group of churches and to locate the teachings and practices of these two men and the local churches in light of historical, orthodox Christianity. Participants in the dialog from Fuller included Dr. Richard Mouw, President and Professor of

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Christian Philosophy; Dr. Howard Loewen, Dean of the School of Theology and Professor of Theology and Ethics; and Dr. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Professor of Systematic Theology. Representing the local churches were Minoru Chen, Abraham Ho, and Dan Towle. Representing LSM were Ron Kangas, Benson Phillips, Chris Wilde, and Andrew Yu.

It is the conclusion of Fuller Theological Seminary that the teachings and practices of the local churches and its members represent the genuine, historical, biblical Christian faith in every essential aspect. One of the initial tasks facing Fuller was to determine if the portrayal of the ministry typically presented by its critics accurately reflects the teachings of the ministry. On this point we have found a great disparity between the perceptions that have been generated in some circles concerning the teachings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee and the actual teachings found in their writings. Particularly, the teachings of Witness Lee have been grossly misrepresented and therefore most frequently misunderstood in the general Christian

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community, especially among those who classify themselves as evangelicals. We consistently discovered that when examined fairly in the light of scripture and church history, the actual teachings in question have significant biblical and historical credence. Therefore, we believe that they deserve the attention and consideration of the entire Body of Christ.

It is important to note, in understanding the process that we have undergone, that considerable attention was devoted at the outset to the stand of these churches on the essential elements of the genuine Christian faith adhered to by all true Christian believers. We believe that if agreement on the basic tenets of the faith can be clearly established, then subsequent dialog and discussion concerning non-essential teachings properly fall within the realm of the fellowship of believers. This determination was made by reading their publications and through our fellowship in five face-to-face meetings between

Fuller and representatives of these churches and this ministry. In regard to their teaching and testimony concerning God, the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the Bible, salvation, and the oneness and unity of the Church, the Body of Christ, we found them to be unequivocally orthodox. Furthermore, we found their profession of faith to be consistent with the major creeds, even though their profession is not creedal in format. Moreover, we also can say with certainty that no evidence of cultic or cult-like attributes have been found by us among the leaders of the ministry or the members of the local churches who adhere to the teachings represented in the publications of Living Stream Ministry. Consequently, we are easily and comfortably able to receive them as genuine believers and fellow members of the Body of Christ, and we unreservedly recommend that all Christian believers likewise extend to them the right hand of fellowship.

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Our times together were characterized by sincere, open, transparent, and unrestricted dialog. There were several topics that we at Fuller approached with particular interest, such as the Trinity, the mingling of divinity and humanity, deification, modalism, their interpretation and practice of the “local” church, the divine and human natures of Christ, and their attitude toward believers outside their congregations. We were given unlimited freedom to explore each of these areas. In every instance we found the public perception of some to be far removed from the actual published teachings as well as the beliefs and practices of the believers in the local churches.

This statement is intended to provide those interested with a general overview of the process that we have been involved with and our overall conclusions. This brief statement will be followed in the coming months by a paper addressing the aforementioned and other important theological topics in greater detail. Representatives of the local churches and Living Stream Ministry have agreed to write a statement outlining in summary form their teachings on the major topics of interest concerning them. Comments by Fuller will be offered on their teachings, as we have come to understand them after significant research and dialog.

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