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Leader's Son Excommunicated

Crisis Threatens Future of Little-Known Church

By RUSSELL CHANDLER, Times Religion Writer

Growing dissent in the Local Church movement led by Witness Lee of Anaheim has resulted in the excommunication of Lee's son and a leadership crisis that threatens the future of the little-known sect.

According to interviews with former and current members, the anonymous publication of a 20-page pamphlet critical of the movement has sparked unprecedented controversy within the group and seriously depleted several congregations.

Stormy meetings—including shouting matches—at recent gatherings of the group in Anaheim have created a rift between members and some of the leaders, according to those present.

Philip Lee, a powerful figure in the church second only to his father, was excommunicated by some members at a meeting in Anaheim on Oct. 16 and by church elders several weeks later, several persons told The Times. They said the action was based on allegations that the younger Lee had been involved in immoral actions with a female church member.

'A Public Announcement'

Neither Witness Lee nor Philip Lee could be reached for comment, but a church elder in Anaheim said the excommunication "was a matter of record [from] . . . a public announcement."

Meanwhile, at least one local congregation—the Church in Rosemead—has distanced itself from the Living Stream Ministry, the tape and publishing arm of the Local Church movement.

The Local Church, founded in 1920 and brought to the United States from China in 1963, claims about 120,000 members worldwide, with an estimated 25,000 of them in Taiwan. About 12,000 members belong to 125 local congregations in the United States. Attendance at the Church in Anaheim, which once ran above 300 on a Sunday, is less than half that now, observers said.

Witness Lee was an intimate associate of Nee Tuo Sheng, known as Watchman Nee, who formed the organization when he became convinced that Christianity as taught by Western missionaries was defective. There should be only one Christian church in each city, Nee determined, based on his interpretation of the New Testament.

When the Communist Party swept into power in China in the late 1940s, Lee went to Taiwan but Nee remained behind and was jailed in 1952 on charges on being a U.S. spy—accusations denied by the Local Church. Nee died in a Shanghai jail shortly before his scheduled release.

Members of the Local Church meet in unmarked halls and usually shy away from Christians in other denominations, believing that the Local Church is the only true faith.

The dispute over Philip Lee's

role in the church and criticism of Witness Lee's alleged heavy-handed authority over the local congregations and members' lives has been simmering for nearly a year. But members who are still active in the group have refused to talk to reporters for attribution, and John Ingals, a leading elder at the Anaheim church, said the problems were best handled internally out of the public eye. He refused further comment.

Some former members furnished The Times with transcriptions of taped emotional meetings in Anaheim and a copy of the pamphlet that has been circulated widely among church members in Taiwan and the United States. Several still sympathetic to the church's teachings said they were trying to reform it in a way that would give local congregations more autonomy and make church financial statements available.

'False Prophet'

The circulated document suggests that a "Mr. X"—who persons close to the church identify as Witness Lee—is a "false prophet," and calls for church members to obey the Bible rather than a human leader. "Mr. X" twisted the Bible by teaching that there is to be but one spiritual leader during any age, and that leader for the present age is Witness Lee, the pamphlet says.

The leaflet, titled "Reconsideration of the Vision," also alleges that "Mr. X" engaged in questionable business deals and "arranged to have his eldest son as president" of a firm that went bankrupt.

Further, according to the pamphlet, "Mr. X" was "puffed up," did not discipline his "second son," (Philip), and insulted workers and elders while seeking to replace older leaders with younger followers.

Several former elders in Southern California congregations of the church, speaking on condition that they not be named, said doubt and confusion about the Lees and the Living Stream Ministry was widespread in several congregations in Washington, Texas and Arizona, as well as overseas.

Earlier Turmoil

"Many are against a one-man papal system . . . that in practice is very devious," declared one former elder in a telephone interview.

The Local Church also underwent turmoil in 1978 when Max D. Rapoport, then considered the heir apparent of the movement, quit his position as president of the Church in Anaheim. Earlier in the year, the leader of the Boston church departed.

Both cited intense psychological pressures to conform in one's views and to perform up to expectations. Witness Lee, in a rare interview, denied the allegations: "In our church we are so free. We are free in thinking," he said then.

The names, addresses and phone numbers of 2,400 sisters are printed in the just-published 1989 Los Angeles

Catholic Directory—the first time that the nuns have been included in the annual sourcebook for parishes, priests and organizations of the three-county archdiocese.



Mary Glennon

When Sister Mary Glennon assumed her duties as the archdiocese's first female vicar for women religious (sisters) a year ago, she learned from the Sisters' Council, which meets monthly, that inclusion in the directory was the advisory body's No. 1 priority.

Besides the lack of recognition that exclusion implied, Glennon said that a practical reason existed for listing nuns from Santa Maria to Pomona.

"In the past, sisters all lived in

New Chapter in

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP)—Three former Orlando residents are on trial in U.S. District Court on charges of conspiring to defraud the Internal Revenue Service by recruiting church members to the controversial Universal Life Church and advising them how to write off much of their income.

"The theme of the overt acts in this trial is 'there is a sucker born every minute,' and in Central Florida . . . there were a number of suckers," Bruce Hinshelwood, a federal prosecutor, told the jury in the trial of Scott Slayback Jr., 60, William Wakeman Jr., 46, and David Hurley, 54.

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