

The Local Church on Campus by Rachael Alterman

The Lord works in mysterious ways

Mystery revealed about religious groups on campuses nationwide; your campus is their mecca.

By Rachel Alterman

Uncle Sam wants you. He wants you to fight in his army to save your country. Witness Lee wants you too. He wants you to fight in his army to save your soul. Uncle Sam will give you health and retirement benefits, maybe a medal or two, and the promise of financial security. Witness Lee will give you fellowship and freindship, maybe a meal or two, and the guidance toward personal salvation.

Like may Christians, members of the Local Church -- a self-proclaimed non-denominational Christian group -- have sung about being in the Lord's army. But Witness Lee, the head of the Local Church movement, wants you to go a step further. He wants to teach you to take a walk with the Lord.

People from around the world, including UT students, travel to Anaheim, California or Taipei, Taiwan for full-time training in what one ex-member terms "Witness Lee's army." Trainees use hymnals and Bibles instead of combat boots and machine guns as they learn different techniques of evangelism and proselytizing "the Lord's Recovery."

The Local Church follows teachings developed in the 1920s by a Chinese Christian convert named Ni Shutsu, who later changed his name to To-Shen, or "Watchman" Nee. According to The Encyclopedia of American Religions, Third Edition, Nee professed that Christians should organize geographically. The belief holds that there is only one church per city, and all Christians in the locality are under its dominion.

Nee's successor, Witness Lee, began to cultivate the movement in the United States in 1962, and he founded the Living Stream Ministry, a publishing company. Since then, the Local Church movement has brought cries of joy and salvation for some -- cries of desolation and anger from others.

Robert Daves' daughter, Tara, recently went to Anaheim for full-time training for the Local Church. Two years ago, after Tara began meeting with the UT group Christians on Campus, Daves asked her to come home to Dallas for her mother's birthday. She told them she would have to get permission.

"My daughter was raised, I thought, to think for herself," laments Daves. "She was being subverted by this organization. ... She was unable to go anywhere, or do anything without their permission. No person should be subjected to that."

Daves says, "There's absolutely no way that anybody on campus can prevent being aproached by these people. I think there ought to be a federal law that would keep them from taking people like my daughter {to become} an automaton, a little robot, so she would end up being a self-serving slave for them in July [when she becomes a full-time worker]. As far as I am concerned, they have taken away her will to think for herself, and that's what I call brainwashing."

Fervorous comments like these are common. They come from grief-stricken parents who condemn the Local Church for destroying families. Some families are silent; thay say it is too painful to discuss their children's transformations. Some have simply been estranged by their children and do not know why.

Local Church members are equally intense in embracing the group's ideals. "Caring, unity, fellowship, focusing on the word of God, experiencing a Christian life to the fullest -- these are the things that I find with Christians on Campus and the Local Church," says Lisa Lowry, a UT accounting senior.

The Local Church is the name commonly given to the movement, though members say the church takes on the name of the city. Names and denominations, they say, are divisive.

Congregants of the Church in Austin meet in a converted gray hotel at 2530 South Congress Avenue. The Church's only visible identification is a sign outside that reads "Christ is Life." In 1988 the Local Church reported 13,050 members in 150 churches in the United States; 152,000 members meet worldwide.

Members of the Local Church say they welcome any Believer in a given locality. "What we teach is that every Christian in Austin is part of the church. In God's eyes, there is the Church in Austin, and every born-again believer is a part of that," says Gary Evans, a church elder. Members, called saints, shun secular life. They prefer to focus on a personal relationship with their Lord, Jesus Christ.

"We meet on the ground of oneness, based on locality," explains Chris Lynch, an officer of Christians on Campus and a

member of the Church in Austin. "[It's] not necessarily under the same roof, but it's the same administration. That's the local expression of the church. Based upon the New Testament, we have to meet as the Church in Austin. Simply, it means we're coming out of all the denominations. We stand as a testimony of Christ's body in this city."

Witness Lee introduced several innovative practices within the movement. He publishes his own interpretation of the New Testament in the Recovery Version Bible. Lee also introduced the practice of pray-reading, repeating key phrases of a biblical verse in order to "pray the word back to the Lord." Members also learn to "call upon the name of the Lord" by chanting "Oh, Lord Jesus," opening their souls to allow Jesus to enter.

Witness Lee teaches that Christians who are not a part of the Local Church are wandering stars. In order to save them, Lee developed a program to spread the movement. Wandering stars can be converted into the church by calling the Lord's name three times; then members baptize the "new one" in water-- preferably within 15 minutes. Any bathtub will do.

Some of these innovations have prompted members to leave the ministry. They say Lee's role is too authoritarian. They complain that Lee's interpretation of the doctrine strays from traditional Christianity.

Saints and elders say theirs is a loving, inclusive organization. Some ex-members say the practices and teachings are divisive and elitist. "It's a glorified denomination," says Jeff, an engineering senior who met {with} both groups for over two years. "They're so much against denominations, they've become one. They don't even realize it."

But Evans refutes this charge. "We teach that you should not focus on differences, you should focus on Christ. It's very bothersome to us when these rumors get spread," he says.

Members say Lee is a teacher, a brother. Ex-members say they were bothered that Lee is revered as God's oracle on the earth today. "Lee became our god. He was our conscience. We had no faith of our own," says Bob Smith, an ex-elder of the Church in Pittsburg.

Lynch sees the relationship differently. "Witness Lee is a brother that has been used by the Lord very much," he says. "I feel like he's seen a lot of God's work."

Other Christians on Campus/Local Church members echo this sentiment. "Just like you might say a son would look up to the father in experience, age, wisdom, we receive a lot of basic spiritual help from the ministry of Witness Lee," says Cary Ard, a Christians on Campus officer.

The ministry, and Lee's domain in particular, has been lambasted with accusations and fiery condemnations. Opponents denounce the Local Church, claiming its methods are deceptive, its leadership consuming and its doctrine heretical. Some even call it a cult. Members defend their movement by denouncing accusations as personal vendettas. {mospagebreak title=Hidden agenda or immaculate connection?}

Hidden agenda or immaculate connection?

Christians on Campus has been a UT student organization since Evans, an elder at the Church in Austin, founded it in 1974, which suggests the church and the campus group are intimately related. Yet leaders of both maintain the campus group is autonomous -- not a recruiting arm for the Church.

"We're presenting people with a personal relationship with Christ, so going to church is not our thrust," says Ard. "We don't try to make anything secret, but at the same time, if you realize our purpose, then I think it's clear."

The relationship between the groups is anything but clear. Members' and opponents' testimonies conflict as to why the groups are linked. The campus officers, who all meet with the Local Church, say many students meet with both groups, though Church attendance is not required.

Lowry says the campus group's sole purpose is simple. "We are Christians who meet [for fellowship and Bible study] on campus." Hence the name.

Ard says, "To be in accordance with the University rules, our meetings have to be open to everyone, and we're happy to do this."

Ex-members do not disagree. They conceded the student organization would gladly welcome any Christian -- in order to draw the student into the Local Church. "The whole purpose of [Christians on Campus] being there is to recruit college kids [into the Church]," says Linda, who was a "full-timer" on the UT campus for four years. "They won't admit it to a reporter, but it's always been that way. I know."

Jeff agrees. "I could detect the Bible study was just outreach for another ministry. They made it seem they were just a

campus group, but it had a parent group. Christians on Campus is an extension of the Local Church," he says.

Jan Bennett, who left the Local Church after almost 17 years, says, "Christians on Campus is the recruiting arm of the Local Church. You will not meet a single member of Christians on Campus who is not a member of the Local Church." Bennett grew up in the organization and practiced its ministry in Texas, Georgia, and Florida before leaving the group.

"Here are innocent and naive [students], and those are the very young people they prey on," she says.

A connection between the organizations does not have to imply malevolence, but ex-members like Bennett do not paint a pretty picture of this one. "The whole thing about the Local Church is they forget the oneness of Christians. As a whole, the only thing that ties us together is Christ -- not whether we follow Billy Graham, Witness Lee, or Jim Bakker," she says.

"Boy, you find out how little that means if you start disagreeing with Witness Lee. Whether you believe in Christ or not becomes secondary to whether you believe and follow Witness Lee," says Bennett.

The UT Campus Activities Office lists 58 religious organizations, many of which, says Ard, have "an inner-relationship" with one particular church. "We're not some special, set-apart kind of group in that type of way," he says.

The difference, say ex-members, is that Christians on Campus is deceptive. "When I was first in [the campus group] they didn't invite me to Sunday night meetings, only when it seemed like I was for them," recalls Jeff. "People who join the Local Church aren't going to get the full story. They're going to gradually bring you into the ministry of the Local Church and Witness Lee. They'll sound impressive. They'll paint you a picture of how you think the church should be."

Linda, who worked with the UT Christians on Campus as well as on two other campuses, says, "We told them we were a group of students meeting on campus. Don Looper and Gary Evans would tell us 'Don't tell somebody right away that we're involved with Witness Lee,' because when I was involved there was a couple of books that had come out that caused flack about the Local Church that was very much affecting their outreach."

Religion is a personal, deep-seeded topic -- not to be tampered with lightly. Say the words "false prophet," "heresy," or the ever-inflammatory "cult," to members of the Local Church, and they are quick to take offense.

And why not? Bad press hurts their organization and its purpose. Lowry explains, "It hurts people coming to the Lord if Christians on Campus has a bad name."

"Our concern is not that people will say bad things about us," says Evans. "We want to have fellowship with other Believers at UT and not have anyone's hard feelings cause divisions."

Campus leaders act defensively because they have had bouts with interrogations. A May 1, 1990 article in The Daily Texan used the word "cult" in a headline and story about Christians on Campus, which Ard and other members note to be especially damaging.

"We are on the defensive," says Ard, "and we have a very good reason to be because in our very recent history this has just come out. ... It's something we don't take lightly at all."

The word sparks controversy which surrounds this organization. "Christians are involved with the Local Church, and I don't think Christians are involved in cults, so I cannot consider the Local Church a cult," says Jeff. "But I will say they use cultic practices." {mospagebreak title=So, what is a cult?}

So, what is a cult?

The definition of "cult" has been misconstrued. People tend to conjure up images of poison kool-aid, kooks, and airport scoundrels. The term can also be applied to religious groups, political groups, business organizations, and self-help groups.

According to Dr. Philip Abramowitz, director of the Task Force on Missionaries and Cults in New York City, a cult is often a pseudo-religious group led by one individual who employs brainwashing or mind control to make members believe they are the chosen few to be saved.

Marcia Rudin, director of the International Cult Education Project, says cult organizations can be especially damaging to students. "They often disrupt the student's education process and career aims. They can weaken the student physically, work them to eshuastion, and manipulate them psychologically. It controls the students' [lives] -- regulating their sexual lives, taking away a lot of money."

"Cults are dangerous because of the psychological impact their affiliation can have," says Abramowitz. "Destruction of

individual thought, of the family unit, and disregard for you as an individual are part of the emotional destruction."

College campuses are rich recruiting grounds. "You cannot find a campus without cults, missionaries, and prophetic organizations," says Abramowitz. "They snare people going through transition. They look for very bright people."

Witness Lee teaches that college students need his ministry. A Living Stream Ministry booklet, Preaching the gospel on college campuses, quotes Lee: "In America many freshmen attend college away from home. Since they are considered full-grown, they may leave home once they have graduated from high school. Many of them are lonely and homesick. If we invite them into our living rooms for a little snack or perhaps a dinner, they will feel at home and this will open them to the Lord and the truth."

The Church in Austin fulfills Lee's plan by sponsoring Saturday night dinners for Christians on Campus members. They also sponsor all-day outings twice a semester where attendees zealously fellowship and pray.

Bennett labels the Local Church. "We call it a cult -- a Christian group that has cultish practices," she says. "Because they tell you to follow one man instead of God. They tell you to cut off communication with anyone outside the group, but they'll deny that in public," she says. "Not everybody is corrupt; I think the higher up you go in the hierarchy, the more corrupt they are."

Members lament the accusations. "It's a very popular lie," says Ard. "The sad thing is, what is presented about us is totally misconstrued. To place the Local Church and Witness Lee in a category of a cult, firstly, is erroneous.

"It's a religious buzz word that's associated with the occult. For a Christian group to be labeled a cult is a very serious thing. At UT it's tossed around quite freely."

Hope Evans, former president of the Cult Awareness Council in Dallas, explains why UT students need to be aware of potentially destructive groups. "Austin is one of the Meccas in the United States," she says. "There is a myth in this country that 'Nobody is going to manipulate or control me.' But if the group wants to grow economically, who is the group going to recruit? The best. Groups look for leaders with talent, energy, and enthusiasm," she explains.

"College campuses, for 20 years, have been key recruiting grounds because they are full of people looking to begin life," says Evans.

College students who become involved in cults often are blind to manipulative techniques. They do not see their idealism is exploited. Often, notes Abramowitz, the leader uses slave labor to raise money. {mospagebreak title=Praying or paying for salvation?}

Praying or paying for salvation?

Just as the Local Church is listed in The Encyclopedia of American Religions, it is also listed in the Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults. This entry describes the ministry's history, beliefs, and ensuing controversy: "The last 15 years have been a time of continual conflict between the Local Church and those in the larger Evangelical Christian community who perceived the theological innovations of Witness Lee as departing from acceptable Evangelical thought..."

The conflict surrounding the ministry grew when the Local Church won \$11.9 million in a libel lawsuit against Neil Duddy, who wrote The God-men, which was ultimately recalled. The book accuses Lee and the ministry leaders of mismanaging Church funds and psychologically damaging members.

"If there are 600 to 1,000 people coming to a conference [at \$50-\$100 per person], where does the money go?" questions Bennett. "Not to mention what you pay for materials. You had to buy what he [Lee] told you to buy -- whatever his latest book was. ... They charged big registration fees to watch this man on video on a night when the church would have been meeting anyway."

Despite the money they put out, the members care for the church meeting halls. "I can't tell you how many floors I've scrubbed and buffed," says Bennett.

But members do not mind; they believe they are working in "the Lord's economy." They do it for God. "It's practical service," explains Jeff, "which is serving God. [Lee will] say 'This is God's organism. Do you want God to pay you?'"

When Jeff was active in the Local Church/Christians on Campus, he paid \$3 for a Saturday outing in McKinney park, which included three meals supplied by the Church in Austin, and \$25 for a conference. ("Conferences are really powerful," says Jeff. "Imagine 100 burning Christians, really committed to Christ.") A Believer could also fork over \$50 or \$100 for a two-week training, or more for a four-month semester of full-time training.

Lee uses other common methods for raising funds. lolani Yamashiro says, "Neil [Wolfson, a Christians on Campus

officer,] literally told me this -- that they don't pass around a plate or anything, they just have a little slot [on the meeting-hall building] that you just stick your envelope through there. But one of the girls later on told me that they encourage you to give cash because then it's really between you and the Lord."

Some wonder if that divine connection is what keeps the Living Stream Ministry in business. Ex-members question the enterprise and Lee's intentions in running it. "The public face of the Living Stream Ministry is that it's a publishing company and that's it," says Linda. "As far as I know, unless they've recently changed their status, they're a non-profit organization. It's the way Witness Lee juggles his money. Everybody knows it, but legally I guess it would be called speculation."

"It's a publishing firm," says Gary Evans. "They print material that churches can receive if they like. There is no connection other than that."

But according to Ard, "The Living Stream Ministry helps coordinate full-time training. There is a wall [on the property]. One side is where the Living Stream Ministry [operates], and the other side is where the Church in Anaheim meets."

This disparity prompted Robert Daves to cut his daughter off financially. "I do not want any of my money going to support that organization in any way, and that's why I cut her off," he says. "I was not going to give her any way to take money from me and convert it to assistance to that organization. {mospagebreak title=Whose family do you belong to anyway?}

Whose family do you belong to anyway?

"Potential harm to people's families -- that's the bottom line," says Linda. "It can affect the way you relate to your family; it can have a permanent to long-lasting impact on your relationship with your family, and it shouldn't."

Iolani Yamashiro, a UT graduate student in music who met with the campus and church groups for over one year ("They are the same thing," she says.), remembers being warned that her parents would disapprove of her involvement. "I was ready for this kind of reaction from people because they tell you when you go to their meetings that people will say it's a cult. And they tell you that your parents will turn against you. And they tell you that you'll be persecuted, but it's all for Christ. You're standing for Christ, and persecution for Christ is good."

"The thing is, there are nice people, [but] in order to be accepted, you'll do what they say," says Linda. "Your family quickly learns that they better shut up, or they'll never see you again."

Hope Evans explains how, during a period of transition, a cult-like organization can be attractive. "We all have our lows, down days, or we are at crossroads. Those are the times when we are vulnerable to suggestion. And when somebody comes with a positive, aggressive opinion, that is very appealing when you're in turmoil," she says.

Lisa Lowry was getting over a broken relationship and her sister's death. "I was unhappy," says Lisa. "I wasn't living how I was supposed to be. In the course of that, I searched for new friends and a different place to live."

Lisa answered an ad in the Arlington newspaper which described a family looking for a Christian boarder to live in their home. "Over a period of time I visited their meeting," says Lisa. "I just felt so at home; it refreshed me and encouraged me. I just decided I wanted to meet there. That was October 1985." She thought her family would be happy she had found her happiness.

"That's standard operating procedure," says Carol Lowry, who has since formed an informal support-group of ex-members and parents of members. "They took her into their home, made her part of the family, and walked her right into the door of the Local Church."

Mrs. Lowry had never heard of the movement before her daughter's involvement, though she had read books by Watchman Nee. She complains that her daughter used a superior tone to condemn everyone who did not subscribe to the ideas of locality and oneness taught by her new church, the Local Church.

When Lisa moved to Austin to live with her parents, her mother helped her unpack and noticed that all of her books were written by the same man -- Witness Lee. "That's when I knew something was wrong and I said, 'Lisa, this is a cult,'" says Mrs. Lowry.

Both Lowrys say that their conflict intensified in the following months. "I did really tacky things like going through my daughter's mail and finding letters telling her to leave her home or she'd be dead in Christ," says Mrs. Lowry. "I am sorry I invaded my daughter's privacy; I shouldn't have. But I know that cults distance adult children from their families; it always happens, always. My reaction was I was losing another child, and I was fighting with anything I could come up with to fight."

When the Lowrys heard from a Local Church member that they were no longer considered Lisa's family -- the church was -- Mrs. Lowry (in her own words) "went a little bezerk."

"Do you know what grief stricken and distraught means? I have said some things I shouldn't have, but they have been out of total terror and total panic because I know too much," she says softly.

"I've balked to people who have attempted suicide because of this group, and I've talked to the families of those who have succeeded in killing themselves. And I talked to mothers and daddies whose children were hidden from them. I know too much to stay calm and peaceful about my daughter's involvement in this; I can't do it. I weep and I cry. [My husband] is just grieving himself to death over the loss of his daughter and so am I. I will never stop fighting to expose the organization."

Like Carol Lowry, Robert Daves is dealing with a sense that he has lost his child. "We are completely devastated," says Daves. "Something I'll always cherish was the relationship I had with my daughter. It isn't there anymore; I'll miss it. Men aren't supposed to cry, but I feel like it sometimes." {mospagebreak title=Beware of false prophets}

Beware of false prophets ... Ye shall know them by their fruits
--Matthew 7:15-16

Approximately 70 UT students meet weekly as Christians on Campus in the Texas Union and classroom buildings for Bible study and fellowship. Many are invited to Saturday night dinner. Students who put their name on the organization's list on the West Mall will receive a lot of attention.

"They appoint someone to care for this person," says Jeff. "They take care of anything you want. They make you want them to be around. They're really into you -- it's bombardment with love. They seem to be really concerned with your spiritual relationship. I think that part is really sincere."

Lisa Lowry says, "We're out there [on campus, in the community] looking for people who are looking for us."

Jeff believes the group seeks out naive Christians. "They're looking for people who respect the Bible but don't read it, because they won't question Lee's authority," he says.

Evangelizing and preaching in the Austin community is a way to spread the gospel. "Door knocking is to help people become Christians, to help people get saved," says Lisa. The practice is not exclusive to the Local Church, but distributing a booklet called *The Mystery of Human Life* is. The booklet is published by the Living Stream Ministry.

Christians on Campus members label contacts "cold, warm, or hot." Cold members, according to Jeff, are not interested and decline invitations to meet on campus. Warm contacts usually know a brother or sister (member); they seem receptive. Hot contacts are students who have expressed interest or participated in fellowships or outings.

Joining the organization is not painful, say ex-members, but leaving it often is. Students like Jeff found the group's methods and teachings are simply not their style. But others, those who invest much time and emotion, are scathed when -- and if -- they leave.

"Some people said if you leave the Local Church, God will hurt you," explains Jeff. "It's really hard to leave the Church. There's massive peer pressure. You even begin questioning your own beliefs. 'How can 40,000 people be wrong?' Very few people, even [if] they know the teaching is aberrational, will admit it. No one wants to go to a 1,000-year outer darkness. It's not going to be a pleasant stay."

Ex-members describe utter fear upon leaving the organization. "When we left the Local Church in Miami, penniless, we thought that God was going to strike us down before we got to Mississippi," recalls Bennett. She laughs now, but the memories are not pleasant.

"I am a product, my problems are products of decisions these men made," says Bennett. "We stayed on in the Local Church because we had nothing else." When she finally did leave, she found she was angry. "I dug my fingernails into my palm one day so deep that they bled. I said, 'This is sick.' I couldn't even hear the word being preached."

Some students are asked to leave, like Jeff was when he told the brothers he lived with that he thought Witness Lee's interpretation of some Bible verses are inaccurate. Jeff was, in fact, asked to move out of the house -- a house owned and inhabited by Local Church members.

"All they have to do is stand up and say I disagree with Witness Lee; I don't think he's God's deputy on earth. Find out how welcome they are after that," says Linda.

Bennett's voice gets low as she describes her fundamental feelings about the ministry. "I cannot tell you how serious I

am about this. I have two children and they are my life. If my daughters got involved in the Local Church, I would do anything short of taking their lives to get them out of there. I would tell everything I know, and I would get ex-elders to tell everything they know."

Jeff warns fellow students to investigate before committing to the group. "I don't consider the Local Church detrimental except in their teachings. If you don't know the truth [according to the scripture], you're prey to false teachers."

Like a mantra, ex-members and parents of members echo this refrain. "It makes me really sad, because they're committed and they're sincere, yet they're being led into falsehood," says Yamashiro. "I think it's Witness Lee. I really do." {mospagebreak title=Endnotes}

Alterman is Utmost managing editor. After researching this article for four months, she decided she was quite happy being a nice Jewish girl.

Pseudonyms protect some sources who insisted that their real names not be used. Former member Jan Bennett says that the Local Church "quarantines" ex-members and opponents, and these sources fear they will be ostracized.

Some corrections to spelling and other errors were made during translation to HTML. Words added are enclosed in {braces}. Last updated 09 March 1996