

## Building a Global Network of Local Churches: Vital Group, Home Meeting, and Cooperate Body<sup>①</sup>

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**Abstract:** The local church movement initiated by Watchman Nee (1903 – 1972) and Witness Lee (1905 – 1997), is one of few Chinese Christian churches, which went globalized with a local conversion capability. Originally influenced by the Plymouth Brethren, it developed a Chinese version as part of the indigenization movement, and updated against the new background of world Christianity since the 1970s. Opposed to the traditional clergy system of one preaching while all others listening, Nee and Lee promoted a cooperate Body of functional members. Vital group and home meeting are two important tools. Churches are divided as cell groups, and every believer becomes an evangelist. While a local church is the contacting point of each locality (defined as a city), regional work/mission guarantees the inter fellowship between the local churches, and international conferences formed a universal network. Full-time training is the school for “professionals.” Based on a solid theological foundation and with more than 250,000 followers across the five main continents, it not only provides a legacy for “House Churches” in China, but also proves effective in the global landscape of Christianity.

**Key words:** vital group; home meeting; local church; Witness Lee

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In *Houses that Change the World*, Wolfgang Simson proposes an ideal church model of this global era:

The church I dreamed of is like a spiritual extended family – organic, not organized, relational, not formal. It has a persecution – proof structure. It matures under tears, multiplies under pressure, breathes under water, grows under the carpet; it flourishes in the desert, sees in the dark and thrives in the midst of chaos. A church that can multiply like five loaves and two fish in the hands of Jesus, where the fathers turn their hearts to their sons and the sons their hearts to their fathers, where its people are its resources, and which has only one name to boast about, the Lamb of God.<sup>②</sup>

This ideal model which Simson dreamed of is house church. A classic on this topic, he considers that his book has three purposes: as a vision statement, a manifesto, and a church – planting manual.

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① This research is supported by the National Grant for Social Sciences of China, “Global Pentecostalism and Christianity in Contemporary China” (11CZJ009). 本文受国家社科基金项目“全球五旬节运动与当代中国基督教” (11CZJ009) 支持。

② Wolfgang Simson, *Houses that Change the World: The Return of the House Churches*, (Ennelsbüll, Germany: C & P Publishing, 1999), X iii. Similar discussions can also see: Larry Knider, *House Church Networks: A Church for a New Generation*, (Lititz, PA: House to House Publications, 2001).

Simson's first thesis is — "Christianity is a way of life, not a series of religious meeting."<sup>③</sup> As he says, the current church model started with Constantine, and it is a combination of two elements: "a Christian version of the Old Testament temple — the Cathedral — and a worship pattern styled after the Jewish synagogue."<sup>④</sup> He calls this the "cathagogue," which became a blueprint of churches in the historical process. As he says:

This reformed-Roman-Catholic-Jewish meeting pattern was baptized by Baptists, anointed by Pentecostals, misused by cults, renewed by Charismatic Christians, put into uniform by the Salvation Army, dry-cleaned by Quakers-but was never radically changed. The "services" were still essentially performances, audience-oriented masses, usually formal and liturgical religious events, where many spectators and consumers observe a few very involved religious specialists performing for them and with them.<sup>⑤</sup>

He criticizes the predominant model of Protestantism, i. e. the congregational church. In his view, the congregational church is a compromise of two kinds of churches; the cell and the celebration. However, it missed out on both sides. The congregational — type church is "a political solution which suited the state and conveniently fitted into the religious patterns of the world at the same time"; and in many ways, it is "a triumph of the religious spirit, a return to the law and religious patterns of the Old Testament and even pagan religions."<sup>⑥</sup> The congregational church is a self — defeating structure; it creates the very problems it wants to solve.

Simson thinks that this traditional church model is the biggest barrier to Christianity as a faith; and house church is the solution to this problem. In his definition:

The house church is a way of living the Christian life communally in ordinary homes through supernatural power. It is the way redeemed people live locally. It is the organic way disciples follow Jesus together in everyday life. ... House churches emerge when truly converted people stop living their own life for their own ends, start living a community life according to the values of the Kingdom of God, and start to share their life and resources with those Christians and not — yet — Christians around themselves.<sup>⑦</sup>

Hegoes on further to say that house church is "the body of Christ in an ordinary house," and it is like "a spiritual extended family."<sup>⑧</sup>

Simson discusses the basic characteristics of a house church: "meating" (the Lord's Supper is a substantial supper with a symbolic meaning rather than a symbolic supper with a substantial meaning); teaching each other how to obey; sharing material and spiritual blessings; praying together.<sup>⑨</sup> He also differentiates house churches from homegroups; while the former is "in itself the church in its fullest and most holistic sense"; the latter is just a small part of the big and "real church," or a "mini — version" of the church.<sup>⑩</sup> A more important distinction is made between house churches and cell churches. He listed

③ *Ibid.*

④ *Ibid.*

⑤ *Ibid.*, 7.

⑥ *Ibid.*, 25 — 26.

⑦ *Ibid.*, 79.

⑧ *Ibid.*, 80.

⑨ *Ibid.*, 82 — 89.

⑩ *Ibid.*, 94.

13 items from philosophical through structural to contextual dimensions. Simply speaking, he thinks that the cell church is still a program – oriented organization with a pyramid leadership, while the house church is a kind of organism characterized by interdependence and fatherhood.<sup>①</sup> At last, Simson promotes a five – fold ministry, as recorded in Ephesians 4: 11 – 13, i. e. the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and the teachers; rather than the popular models of pastors or evangelists. For him, the church should be “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ himself as the chief cornerstone.”<sup>②</sup> Following this, the union of churches is not based on denominationalism, but based on a locality.

The above discussions are very inspiring to the “house churches” in China. And Simson does quote one Chinese Christian, Watchman Nee, in his argument, and lists Nee’s book in his reference readings. One the other hand, the Chinese house church movement also becomes a distinctive case in the landscape of world Christianity. Among all, the Local Church initiated by Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, updated with a global version since the 1970s, can be taken as a typical example to discuss the simultaneous developments of Chinese Christian churches and world Christianity in the contemporary period.

## I. From Watchman Nee to Witness Lee: A Chinese Brethren Movement

The Local Church Movement, under the supervision of Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903 – 1972) and Witness Lee (Li Changshou, 1905 – 1997), can be seen as a Chinese version of the house church movement, which also has a large influence on the Chinese “House Churches.”<sup>③</sup> While Nee is a popular figure in the Western Christian world due to his books, such as *The Spiritual Man* and *The Normal Christian Life*, Lee brought the Chinese ministry to the West physically, and nourished a global campaign that exists even now. In the 1930s, under the influence of the Plymouth Brethren, Nee developed his ecclesiology in the well – known *Rethinking the Work* (*Gongzuo de zaisi*).<sup>④</sup> A year later, the English version was published under the title, *Concerning Our Missions*. In this breakthrough work, Nee proposed his famous argument on the ground of the church; that is, the church should be based on locality, or just city, as recorded in the New Testament. He also argued that, home is a right place for church meetings, rather than the large halls; and fellowship is more important than buildings. Lee updated Nee’s

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① *Ibid.*, 137 – 154.

② *Ibid.*, 119.

③ See Liu Yi, “Globalization of Chinese Christianity: A Study of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee’s Ministry,” presented in “The 9<sup>th</sup> International Seminar of Northeast Asia Council of the Historical Studies of Christianity” (Yokohama, Japan; Keio University, August 7 – 9, 2012).

④ Now in the official publishing house, the work is entitled *The Normal Christian Church Life*; and to some extent, this change just reflects the new interpretation of Watchman Nee’s ministry under the leadership of Witness Lee. See Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life; The New Testament Pattern of the Churches, the Ministry, and the Work*, (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1980; 1994). A discussion on Watchman Nee, see Liu Yi, “Universal Body & Local Churches: Watchman Nee’s Legacy in the Chinese Context,” in Lin Shih Hao and Chou Fu Chu, eds., *No Death, No Life: 2011 Symposium on Modern Chinese Christian Theology*, (Taipei: Olive Publishing, 2012), 93 – 111.

visions, both in the revivals of 1940s, and more importantly in the new context of 1980s. Then, Witness Lee returned to Taiwan from the United States, in order to promote “the God-ordained Way,” or “the New Way.” His basic practice is similar to the cell groups popular in Korea or the house churches in America; that is, to divide the large congregation in small groups, and at the same time, to make the congregation and cell groups more alive through the function of every believer.

In the author’s view, this development is not only a continuation of Nee’s ministry, but also a development under the influence of the new trends in the West. While Witness Lee is still a controversial person both in China and the Christian world, the author thinks that his thinking on this topic is not only a reflection of the situation of “House Churches” in China, but also provides some new inspirations to “Chinese Christianity” as part of world Christianity. In the following, the author will focus on the works and preaches of Witness Lee since the 1980s, to discuss his view as a Chinese version of the house church movement.

### **The God-ordained Way**

Witness Lee begins his discussion with criticizing and reflecting on the current situation of Christianity. In his view, “The practice of today’s Christianity is a destruction of the church life”.<sup>⑤</sup> Christianity is now a human religion saturated with demonic and satanic things. It is full of organizations, as well as formalities and rituals. Especially, the clergy-laity system annuls the function of the members of Christ. The extreme example can be seen in Roman Catholicism, characteristic of a hierarchy of cardinals, archbishops and bishops with the Pope as the center.

Based on a careful and hard study of the Scriptures, he thinks, “God’s ordained way has been fully and clearly revealed in the New Testament, yet Christians through all the centuries, from the last part of the first century down to today, have neglected it”. It is also called “the new way”. The point is that “it is not old but quite ancient”. It does have a root in early Christianity. However, everything that belongs to God is always new. “With God, there is no oldness, everything is new.”<sup>⑥</sup>

In this new way, there are four specific steps. First, all believers are priests of the New Testament gospel. Thus all of them have to go out to preach and to bring people to Christ. Second, when new believers got in, they have to be fed and nourished in home meetings. Third, all believers need to become perfect through the help of each other in small group meetings. Fourth, all believers need to prophesy in small meetings and church meetings for the building up of the Body of Christ.<sup>⑦</sup> In simple terms, it is called begetting, feeding, perfecting and building, corresponding to four forms of meeting—gospel meeting, home meeting, district meeting and church meeting.

<sup>⑤</sup> Witness Lee, *The God-ordained Way to Practice the New Testament Economy*, (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1987), 18.

<sup>⑥</sup> Witness Lee, *The Exercise & Practice of the God-ordained Way*, (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1989), 2.

<sup>⑦</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-9.

In early times, Witness Lee paid particular concern to gospel preaching and home meeting. As he says:

I made the decision to come back to the biblical way, that is, the God – ordained way to preach the gospel in the homes, to set up meetings in the homes, to edify the saints in the homes, and to build up the church in the homes. Home sweet home! In this new way there are just two words: Go! Home! We should go out of our own homes and bring the Bible, the gospel, the Lord Jesus, the Triune God, grace, light, life, and the dynamic salvation into the new ones' homes! Do not ask them to come to us; rather, we must go to them to set up the church meeting in their homes. We will fulfill our destiny to bear fruit by going out to others' homes. ③

According to him, gospel preaching is the believers' destiny which is defined in God's economy. In a parabolic way, it is described as fruit – bearing. "To bear fruit is the way to fulfill God's destiny, and the way to bear fruit is to visit people by knocking on their doors. The way to have fruit that remains is by setting up home meetings with the new believers and by praying for the home meetings of the believers." ④

Witness Lee compares the old way and the new way; the former is called the worship in religion and the latter as the worship in reality. "Christianity has brought the church into the religious world, but today in the Lord's recovery we are endeavoring to enjoy the Lord by being rescued from Christianity." ⑤ While the old way annuls the function of the children of God, the new way is just to recover this function. It is also a way to save Christianity from formality and degradation, and to recover its living and activeness as the faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Home Meeting**

Following the tradition of Christianity, Witness Lee takes the Pentecost as the initiation of church. However, he grabbed two phrases in Acts 2:46, "day by day" and "from house to house," to show that home meeting is the right way of church. ⑥ He continues with the example of Acts 5:42—every believer's home is promising; every believer can set up home meetings. ⑦

To some extent, Witness Lee is crazy with home meetings. His principle is "just to set up home meetings". As he says:

Are you going to be holy? Set up a home meeting. Are you going to be spiritual? Set up a home meeting. Are you going to know the Bible? Nothing will force you to seek the knowledge of the Bible more than setting up a home meeting. The home meetings will force you to seek after the proper, spiritual knowledge, and while you are seeking the knowledge for teaching others, you yourself will be taught, enlightened, and nourished. ⑧

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③ Witness Lee, *The God – ordained Way to Practice the New Testament Economy*, 103.

④ *Ibid.*, 104.

⑤ *Ibid.*, 117.

⑥ Witness Lee, *The Home Meetings; The Unique Way for the Increase and the Building Up of the Church*, (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1986), 7 – 8.

⑦ *Ibid.*, 19 – 20.

⑧ *Ibid.*, 20.

His passion and fascination also has a deep theological implication, for he believes that “the home meetings are absolutely the meetings of the church and in the church.”<sup>④</sup>

As a Chinese, even though he was displaced from his hometown, Witness Lee appreciates the warm and living environment of homes, in contrast to the formality and void of big halls. He also takes the parable of family feast to describe the home meetings. For example:<sup>⑤</sup>

The home meetings are all in the brothers' and sisters' homes. One sits here; another sits there. One comes early; another comes late. Everyone speaks a little, and there is no need for any formality. This is the best point about the home meetings.

In every meeting we should eat and drink the Lord's word.

The home meeting is not a Bible class in a seminary. ...The home meetings are “eating” meetings.

The most important thing is to spread out the Lord's words as a feast.

Mutuality and speaking are two key characteristics of home meetings. He says, “The main purpose of the home meeting is to promote speaking by everyone,”<sup>⑥</sup> and “to speak in the meetings is a way of blessing”.<sup>⑦</sup> In his view, human beings are communal, and Christians are even more communal than the common people. The church should be a meeting of love. However, most Christians even don't know the other one beside him or her when they go to attend church service. It is really a miserable matter of today's Christianity.

He compares the situation in big meetings and home meetings:

In the big meetings you cannot pray, but in the home meetings you can pray. In the big meetings you cannot speak, but in the home meetings you can speak. In the big meetings you cannot sing, but in the home meetings you can sing. All these are functions that cannot be fulfilled by the big meetings.<sup>⑧</sup>

In the home meetings, everyone becomes a seeking one, a serving one, a preaching one, a teaching one, and one that spontaneously witness for the Lord.

Witness Lee can't help showing his love and passion to home meetings. As he says, “My heart is in the home meetings. My concern is for the home meetings. My joy is in the home meetings, and my compliments are concerning the home meetings”. However, he does have a reasonable cause for this, with the conclusion: “the increase and spread of the church depend fully on the home meetings,” and “The home meetings are the foundation for the building of the church”.<sup>⑨</sup>

One further discussion is that, people should not just invite others to have meetings in their homes, but also send deliveries to others' homes. This is called “one - on - one” service.

<sup>④</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>⑤</sup> Witness Lee, *Key Points on the Home Meetings*, (Anaheim, CA; Living Stream Ministry, 1986), 14 - 16.

<sup>⑥</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>⑦</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>⑧</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>⑨</sup> Witness Lee, *Key Points on the Home Meetings*, 71 - 72.

Witness Lee uses the example of restaurants. He says, formerly people can only come to our place to have food; if they came at the wrong time, they will have nothing to eat. Now, we should develop delivery service, that is, to send food to people's homes. This guaranties that they can have food timely and continually. It may be seen as the outreach service of home meetings. ①

### **The Vital Group**

In early times, Witness Lee did not make distinction between home meeting and small group meeting. Later, he found that the home meeting is mainly for feeding and nourishing new believers, while small group meeting is the key characteristic of God – ordained way. Based on this, he went further to develop the concept of “vital group.”

According to him, the purpose of the vital groups is to live two kinds of lives: the kingdom life and the church life. He quotes the scriptures in Matthew 18: 15 – 22 and 2 Timothy 2:22. The former is on kingdom life, while the later is on church life. And he says that “a vital group is a real representation of the church”. ②

He describesthat the constituents of the vital groups are in six categories: the believers in Christ, the disciples of Christ, the Witnesses of Christ, the members of Christ, the brothers of Christ, and the prophets of Christ. ③ And to be vital, the believers should have intimate and thorough fellowship with the Lord; have a thorough confession of their failures, defects, and wrongdoings, as well as practices of the flesh and of the natural man; pray thoroughly for visiting of people and for those whom they visit and contact; and be familiar with all the outlines of the recent messages concerning the person of Christ and His accomplishments in the three stages of His full ministry. ④

Witness Lee connects the vital group with the ministry of overcomers. He describes the foursteps of God's move on the earth; through the Adamic race, through the Abrahamic race, through the church, and through the overcomers. ⑤ He thinks that we are now in the age of overcomers. “The vital groups should be composed of people who are overcomers”. ⑥ He says, “the overcomers are the successful people in God's economy”; to be vital means to be living and active, that is to overcome deadness and lukewarmness; that is also to overcome the degradation of today's church. ⑦

However, the vital group is not a matter of miracles. He insists that “a vital group is a group of normal Christians,” ⑧ and “to be vital is to be common”. ⑨ Then, what is the meaning of being

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① *Ibid.*, 75.

② Witness Lee, *The Vital Groups*, (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1996), 7.

③ *Ibid.*, 15.

④ *Ibid.*, 136 – 137.

⑤ Witness Lee, *The Training and the Practice of the Vital Groups*, (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1993), 5.

⑥ *Ibid.*, 12.

⑦ *Ibid.*, 15 – 20.

⑧ *Ibid.*, 60.

⑨ *Ibid.*, 145.

normal? Witness Lee defines it in the God – ordained way:

Normal Christians beget, bring forth, normal Christians. After hearing the preaching of the gospel, a person should be led to repent thoroughly. He should make a thorough confession before God of his mistakes, wrongdoing, shortcomings, defects, transgressions, trespasses, sins, and evils. He should also ask forgiveness of anyone whom he has offended. Through this kind of repentance and confession, he will begin to have a close, intimate fellowship with the Lord and with his fellow believers. Then he can also be perfected concerning how to pray, how to read the Word of God, how to call on the Lord’s name, and how to exercise his spirit. Spontaneously, he will become vital – living, burning, and fruit – bearing. A vital person is one who repents to the uttermost, confess thoroughly, contacts the Lord God intimately, and fellowships with this fellow Christians closely. ③

This is the normal Christian life. According to Lee, deadness, lukewarmness, and barrenness are three main enemies for good Christians. And people should be alive, charismatic and fruitful.

In later times, the vital group becomes a powerful weapon of gospel preaching. For this, Witness Lee talked a lot, on how to contact and gain people. A key practice is PSRP—pray – reading, studying, reciting, and prophesying. He suggests that people should always keep four or five new ones under their care. In his words, “the only way for us is to contact people, and the only secret of our success is to have constant contacts for our whole life”. ④

### Prophesying

Witness Lee has a distinctive interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14: “Prophesying is not in the sense of predicting, foretelling, but in the sense of speaking for the Lord and speaking forth the Lord to dispense Christ to people. It is the excelling gift for the building up of the church”. ⑤ He emphasizes the meaning of “dispensing”. To speak forth implies to dispense; and to speak forth God and Christ is to minister and dispense God and Christ to people. ⑥

According to him, prophesying is the highest function of church meetings. It is defined in three dimensions; building up for the church, encouragement for the believers, and consolation for the saints’ welfare. ⑦ In a prophecy, it includes the following constituents; the knowledge and experience of God, Christ, and the spiritual things; the utterance to speak forth what we know and have experienced of God, Christ, and the spiritual things; the sight under the divine enlightenment concerning the situation and environment in which we are; the instant inspiration of the indwelling Spirit that stirs up our spirit to speak. ⑧

③ *Ibid.*, 62 – 63.

④ *Ibid.*, 103.

⑤ Witness Lee, *Prophesying in the Church Meetings for the Organic Building up of the Church as the Body of Christ*, (Anaheim, CA; Living Stream Ministry, 1989), “Preface.”

⑥ Witness Lee, *The Practice of Prophesying*, (Anaheim, CA; Living Stream Ministry, 1990), 8 – 9.

⑦ Witness Lee, *Prophesying in the Church Meetings for the Organic Building up of the Church as the Body of Christ*, 22.

⑧ Witness Lee, *The Practice of Prophesying*, 13 – 15.



Lee insists that “All the believers have the capacity to prophesy and have the obligation to prophesy”.<sup>48</sup> The capacity is in the divine life, which the believers possess and enjoy and which needs to increase within them. Then the capacity may be developed unto their ability. The obligation is the fulfillment of their spiritual service, in which they are indebted to God’s salvation.

Prophesying is “divine speaking, God’s oracle”; it is not “ordinary words spoken in a natural way,” but rather “a speaking in the element of God’s divinity.”<sup>49</sup> As Lee says:

In speaking forth a proper prophecy, we should not adhere to personal experiences, testimonies, feelings, thoughts, opinions, affections, and reactions to any persons, matters, and things. When we prophecy, we should reject our personal feelings, thoughts, opinions, and even affections. We should also stay away from our reactions to our spouse, our neighbors, the elders, and the brothers and sisters. To prophecy, in principle, is not to speak for oneself, not to speak forth oneself, and even the more, not to dispense oneself into people.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, Lee thinks that a prophecy must have “the instant inspiration of the Spirit”.<sup>51</sup> It is not a speaking according to letters but one filled with the revelation of the Holy Spirit; it is not to read what we have composed but at the opportune time to speak what we have composed in a living way; it should not be mere doctrine gained from a Bible study, but something of a spiritual vision.

For Lee, to prophesy is to cooperate with God. He thinks that it is the expression of the principle of incarnation. As he says:

In the New Testament, God operates through the principles of incarnation. God does not do anything by Himself, especially in the matter of speaking. He prefers to speak through us and speak within us. Moreover, the principle of incarnation is not merely that God works with man. It is that God works within man, and the two work as one. When we speak, the very Lord whom we speak forth is speaking with us and within us.<sup>52</sup>

Conversely, all men’s speaking constituted a universal sound on the earth, which is represented by the church as the Body of Christ.

## II. House Churches in China: Reality and Vision

Since the 1980s, there is a so – called “house church” movement in China, against the

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<sup>48</sup> Witness Lee, *Prophesying in the Church Meetings for the Organic Building up of the Church as the Body of Christ*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>50</sup> Witness Lee, *The Practice of Prophesying*, 37.

<sup>51</sup> Witness Lee, *Prophesying in the Church Meetings for the Organic Building up of the Church as the Body of Christ*, 55.

<sup>52</sup> Witness Lee, *The Practice of Prophesying*, 41 – 42.

bigger context of “Christian Fever” or “Religious Fever.”<sup>⑤</sup> Though some of them are not in “houses,” as a whole, they form a kind of “new Christianity” different from Roman Catholicism as well as the Protestant denominations. This can be seen as part of the great changes of world Christianity, featured in Philip Jenkins’ two notorious books, *The Next Christendom* and *The New Faces of Christianity*.<sup>⑥</sup> Or as a Chinese American scholar argued recently, it is a “popular Christian movement.”<sup>⑦</sup> There are a lot of descriptions and explanations for this phenomenon. Put it simply, from a perspective of history of religion, we may just say that it is the flow of the Holy Spirit.

The author’s questions are these: How will this new movement challenge the current church structure in China? Does it have any universal significance in Christianity as a world movement? What can the Local Church Movement contribute to this new trend as a typical case?

First, most people will agree that the “house churches” have created division and antagonism among the Chinese churches. And for the authorities both in the political and religious sphere, “house church” means a trouble to much extent. Objectively, we have to admit that it is a challenge to the current church structure under the leadership of The Three – self Patriotic Committee and the China Christian Council. It can be traced to the political campaigns during the 1950s, typically represented by the inter – personal enmities between prominent figures such as Wang Mingdao and Ding Guangxun (K. H. Ting, or later Bishop Ting).<sup>⑧</sup> And we still can feel it obviously during field work today. Mostly, we are told that the TSPM churches are unbelievers, political agents or even traitors of the church. Whether these are facts or not, it reflects that the current church structure lags behind the new trends of Chinese Christianity.

Second, there is a church reconstruction campaign since the 1980s, with Bishop Ting as a prominent leader, including returning of church properties, church buildings, theological education, social service, etc. Due to his personal denominational background and also China’s church situation, Bishop Ting once hoped to reconstruct the Chinese church structure according to the Anglican – Episcopal way, which later proved to be a failure.<sup>⑨</sup> And as much as I know, a lot of young church leaders as well as teachers and students in theological seminaries preferred to a

⑤ See Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Tony Lambert, *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1994); David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*, (Washington, DC; Regnery; Lanham, MD: National Book Network, 2006 [2003]).

⑥ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); idem, *The New Face of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⑦ See Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in China*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

⑧ On the Three-self Movement in the 1950s, see Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three – Self Movement, and China’s United Front*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); Ying Fuk – tsang and Leung Ka – lun, *Washi niandai saizi yundong de yangjia* [The Three – Self Patriotic Movement in 1950s], (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 1996).

⑨ Ting’s thinking and activities can be seen in: Philip L. Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K. H. Ting and the Chinese Church*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007).

kind of “reformed theology,” symbolized by a Presbyterian system on earth.<sup>55</sup> However, very unfortunately, most of them easily fall in the dualism of orthodoxy – heterodoxy, as in Chinese history and the political authorities, and always tend to denounce some groups as cults for theological or practical reasons. This prevented a mutual understanding between the professional clergy and the laity, the urban and the rural, as well as the intellectuals and the common people.

Third, while there have been numerous proposals to solve this issue, the author proposes that “house church network” should be an alternative way for consideration. On one side, it reflects the reality of Chinese churches today; on the other side, it is a universal version originating from the new trends of world Christianity and shared by many innovative ministries around the globe. The Local Church Movement initiated by Watchman Nee and Witness Lee should be a reference, even just for critical reasons. Its legacy is firstly historical, for it is born in the Chinese land as a solution to the church issue in modern China; and secondly, it is connected with the global landscape of Christianity due to Witness Lee’s groundbreaking work in the United States, Latin America and Southeast Asia, and even Europe.

However, the actual situation is always more complicated than ideal models. Even in the historical period, Watchman Nee had to face the paradox of denominationalism and division inside;<sup>56</sup> and till now Watchman Nee was still a counter – revolutionary in terms of the Chinese political authority. The new group under the leadership of Witness Lee even became “*xiejiao*” (evil cult) which is with the name of “the Yellers” (*huhān pai*). And presently, we are informed that the Local Churches are separated from both TSPM churches and house churches, for they claimed they are the only orthodoxy and others cannot accommodate their distinctive systems unless they join their exclusive membership. From the other side of the picture, we can see that huge church buildings become a vision for most church leaders, whether they are in TSPM or house churches. Both the Christians and the larger society tend to see physical buildings as proofs of Christianity. And in the common worship service, we can see that more and more people prefer the ritualized Anglican – Episcopal style. Institutionalization is accelerating when the church membership is big enough; and it seems that the West has much more power than the indigenous, and the urban more power than the rural.

### III. Conclusion

This article is a preliminary discussion on house churches, with a comparison to the similar

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<sup>55</sup> For example, Aiming Wang, *Church in China: Faith, Ethics, Structure: The Heritage of the Reformation for the Future of the Church in China*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009).

<sup>56</sup> One example is the debate between Watchman Nee, David Yang (Yang Shaotang) and Huang Yu Shen in early 1950s, see Liu Yi, “Jindai zhongguo de jiaohui wenti: yi Ni Tuosheng, Yang Shaotang he Huang Yu Shen de taolun weili” [Church Issue in Modern China: A Debate between Watchman Nee, David Yang and Huang Yu Shen], presented in “Duoxueke shiye xia de jidujiao bentuhua xueshu yuntaohui” [Symposium on Indigenization of Christianity from Multi – Disciplinary Perspectives ], (Fuzhou: Fujian Normal University, November 2 – 4, 2012).

trends globally and a particular concern to the Local Church Movement led by Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. The author have a few purposes: (1) To believers, researchers and administrators inside, they need to go beyond the “distinctive situation” of China, to have a more comprehensive view of Christianity, rather than to sting on Chinese characteristics; (2) To Christians, scholars, politicians and social activists who have a concern on Chinese church, they need to go beyond the imagination of persecutions and revivals, to have a more specific and complex picture of Chinese churches, and to try to understand them in their historical process and local context; (3) Especially to scholars whether they are foreigners or Chinese, including the author himself, we should understand the limitations of academic research. We can put out a lot of proposals, but we should never think to take on the role of administrators instead of advisors. And we should try not to become agents of different parts of the debate, politically or religiously.

A last word is for the house church itself. I will not agree with Wolfgang Simson or Witness Lee completely; and as a scholar, most of all, I can't accept their absolutism, which also led to the ruthless critics of their opponents. However, in this paper, I have to call the scholars' attention to house churches, not only as a distinctive Chinese phenomenon, but also as a new trend of world Christianity. Especially in the Chinese context, political administrators, academic scholars and Christian believers have to admit the organism and diversity of Christian Churches; and to some extent, it is a better choice to keep the balance between TSPM churches and house churches, as well as between state and church, rather than dreaming to solve the problem once for all.

中文题目:

## 建构地方教会的全球网络:活力排、家庭聚会及合一身体

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**摘要:**由倪柝声(1903 - 1972)和李常受(1905 - 1997)发起的地方教会运动是少有的走向全球并致力于当地信徒皈依的华人教会。它最早受普利茅斯弟兄会的影响,后在本色化运动中发展出了独特的中国模式,并在1970年代以来世界基督教运动的新背景下得以更新。同传统上一人讲道、众人听的教会模式不同,倪柝声和李常受倡导教会所有成员的功用与合一。活力排和家庭聚会是两大重要的方式。教会被分化为许多细胞组织,每一个信徒都可以做传道人。地方教会是每个地方信徒的联络点(以城市为单位),地区性的工作(差传)保证了不同地方教会的交通,一年七次的国际会议则培养了一个全球网络。全时间训练是培养“专业人员”的学校。建立于一个坚实的神学基础,并在全球五大洲拥有超过25万信徒,地方教会为中国的“家庭教会”提供了合法性,并在全球基督教的大环境中证实了其有效性。

**关键词:**活力排、家庭聚会、地方教会、李常受

