

Who Represents the Local Churches?

The question, "**Who represents the local churches?**" seems simple enough, easily answered. The obvious answer is, "The elders." Both brothers Nee and Lee taught that the elders administrate the affairs of a local church. The local church is not the sphere of the workers (apostles). Hence, one would expect the elders to represent the local church in dealing with government, financial and legal affairs. W. Nee says,¹ "**In a local church the highest authority is the elders. All the matters are handled by the elders. The apostles cannot directly interfere with a local church; they cannot deal with the affairs of a local church.**" Moreover, the elders' sphere of administration is limited to their own locality. In W. Nee's words,² "**The elders can administrate the church in their own locality but not those in other localities.**" This has been the local churches' teaching and practice for decades. These points may seem self-evident. However, recent public statements contradict this long-established teaching and practice.

Christianity Today Letter

A recent issue of **Christianity Today** contains a letter³ representing the "Local Churches." It begins with the words, "*Our congregations (known to outsiders as the Local Church) and the Living Stream Ministry appreciate....*" The end of the letter, indicating the authors, bears these names:

"Dan Towle

Chris Wilde

**Local Churches and
Living Stream Ministry**

Orange County, California"

Our focus here is not so much on the contents, as the signatories. According to this document, **two brothers, Dan Towle and Chris Wilde, represent the "Local Churches."** No doubt these brothers are qualified to act on behalf of LSM. Both brothers are closely connected with LSM. However, that status does not give them the right to represent the local churches. **The question is: Can they represent the "Local Churches"?** The **Christianity Today** letter gives the impression that these two brothers' views represent all the local churches. Is that in fact the case? May we ask, **who authorized these brothers to represent all the local churches?** Since elders are the "highest authority" in a local church, when did all the elders appoint these two brothers to speak on their behalf? When did all the local church elders "deputize" these brothers? Or are they self-appointed representatives of the local churches? Were they appointed at an LSM elders' meeting or training? Even if such "deputizing" took place, is it valid? Is it scriptural? Brother Lee proclaimed,⁴ "**The very great, particular characteristic in the Lord's recovery is to do everything according to the Bible.**" Then, may we ask, Is these brothers' claim to represent the local churches "**according to the Bible**"? Where is such a practice recorded in the New Testament?

No New Testament Examples

In our realization, the New Testament gives no example of a few brothers acting as representatives of all the local churches. In Acts 11 Barnabas and Saul were "delegates" of the church in Antioch, bringing their material gifts to Jerusalem. In this case, Barnabas and Saul represented their own local church, the church in Antioch, in taking the gift. The Jerusalem elders received the gift as representatives of the church in Jerusalem. Along similar lines, a few brothers from Corinth and the surrounding churches, serving as "**apostles of the churches,**" (2 Cor. 8:23) brought material gifts to Judea. Finally, the Jerusalem elders participated in the Acts 15 conference as representatives of the church in Jerusalem. Brother Lee makes it abundantly clear⁵ the elders represented only the church in Jerusalem, not other churches. We find no case in the New Testament of **brothers representing all the local churches.** Neither a prescriptive teaching nor a descriptive example of this practice appears in the Bible.

Representing 100 Churches OR All the US Churches?

The **Christianity Today (CT)** letter³ addresses recent developments in LSM's litigation with Harvest House publishers. Those familiar with the case know that fewer than 100 of the 300 US local churches participated directly in this legal case. Over 200 US local churches did not directly participate as plaintiffs. Churches in the US MidWest, for example, were notably absent. Based upon these facts, the two brothers can perhaps claim to represent 100 local churches, **a minority** of all local churches in the US. That is very different from acting (or writing) on behalf of **all** the US churches. Yet the letter published in **Christianity Today** gives the impression Dan Towle and Chris Wilde represent **all** the local churches. Again, is such representation valid? Is it scriptural?

This is not the first time individual brothers have claimed to represent the local churches. A recent public statement⁶ by LSM responding to the Texas Court decision ended with instructions to the media: **"Editors: For additional information or interviews, you may contact:**

Chris Wilde with Living Stream Ministry

chris@lsm.org (714) 226-1720

Dan Towle with the Local Church

danslawsuitinfo@yahoo.com (714) 606-2689

Barry Langberg, the Plaintiff's Attorney

blangberg@stroock.com (310) 556-5800"

Again, we have no problem with Chris Wilde representing LSM, nor with Barry Langberg being the legal attorney. However,⁷ **how can Dan Towle represent "the Local Church"?** **Moreover, what is this entity, "the Local Church"?**

"The Local Church" —"a Serious Mistake"

Before addressing that question, we note the phrase, "*The Local Church*," contradicts our fundamental stand. The booklet, **The Beliefs and Practices of the local churches** clearly states,⁸ "*The term 'local church' is not a name; it is a description To print the words "local church" with capital letters is a serious mistake, for this gives the impression that our name is 'local church.'"* Hence, LSM's statement contains **"a serious mistake."** In view of this, some readers might ask: Are the LSM-brothers clear on the truth concerning the local church? Others might consider the phrases, "*with the Local Church*" and "*Local Churches*" (used in the **CT** letter) as synonymous. However, the matter doesn't end there; the situation is more serious.

What Is "The Local Church" Association?

Research indicates that the original litigation and the recent appeal were filed on behalf of⁹ **"The Local Church, Living Stream Ministry and individual Local Churches throughout the country."** Besides LSM and 96 individual local churches, there is another entity called, **"The Local Church"!** Evidently this entity, "*The Local Church*," differs from, yet co-exists with, "*the local churches*." Again, what is this entity—**"The Local Church"?**

LSM's website informs us,¹⁰ **"The Local Church is an unincorporated association of Christian congregations. Each of these congregations is also known as the local church in their respective city...."** So, this mysterious entity, **"The Local Church,"** is **"an unincorporated association of Christian congregations"—the local churches!** Apparently there is an "umbrella organization," called "*The Local Church*," encompassing the local churches! The LSM website confirms this, by referring to¹⁰ **"The Local Church and its affiliate local churches...."** The term, "affiliate" connotes subordination and control¹¹—suggesting that the local churches are subordinate to "The Local Church"! May we ask: **How many saints in the Lord's recovery are aware such an association exists? How many know whether their local church belongs to that organization? Don't they have the right to know? How many US local churches are members?**

Presumably Dan Towle holds a prominent position—president, executive-director, etc.,—in this association. Perhaps in that capacity, he can represent "The Local Church" association. However, **holding a position in that organization does not bestow the right to represent all the local churches!** Moreover, is "The Local Church" association scriptural? Is it according to the apostles' teaching? Is it according to the teaching of Brothers Nee and Lee?

Further, isn't there an appearance of "sleight of hand" here? On the surface the two designations seem virtually interchangeable. Yet "**Dan Towle with the Local Church**" means he represents an organization, "The Local Church" association. In contrast, the phrase in the **CT** letter, "**Dan Towle, Chris Wilde Local Churches and LSM**" asserts they represent all the local churches. Why hasn't this important distinction been made transparently clear?

Is "The Local Church" Association Scriptural? Is It According to the Apostles' Teaching?

Watchman Nee's teaching is clear:¹² *"the local church is the highest authority on earth. Above the local church, the Lord has not established a federated church, a mother church or a head church....[I]n the Bible only the local church is recognized as the unique unit. Above her there is no authority."* Certainly Brother Nee would not countenance any federation, association or alliance of local churches. He said,¹³ *"any extra-local union of believers around a center other than the Lord...[causes] the specific character of the churches of God to be lost."* This rules out any "extra-local umbrella organization," like "The Local Church" association. W. Nee warned against any "federation of churches," stating,¹⁴ *"It is the federation of different companies of believers that has brought such evils as dabbling in politics into the Church of God. There is power in a federated 'church,' but it is carnal power, not spiritual."* "Association" and "federation" are synonyms. Brother Lee also warned against organizational concepts such as "federation." He said,¹⁵ *"Both autonomy and **federation are outside of the biblical revelation** according to the teaching of the apostles."* What could be more clear? Both Brothers Nee and Lee spoke against entities like "The Local Church" association. Why then has this association been created? Why is its existence tolerated? Perhaps the "blended co-workers" will retort: "This association means nothing." Then we respond, "If it 'means nothing,' terminate it immediately!"

Let's Be Pragmatic?

Some pragmatists might defend a "Local Church Association," saying it allows the local churches to act in concert on matters such as litigation. However, we expect Brother Nee would regard it as the "thin end of the wedge," leading to "evils," such as involvement in politics, the exercise of "carnal power" and centralization.

Witness Lee also warned against organization saying,¹⁶ *"We were warned...to **be careful about the matter of organization...such an organizational system annuls the organic Body of Christ. In the Body of Christ, there is no organization. But the fallen and deformed Christianity is full of organization. It is a religious, organizational system."*** In the light of Brother Lee's sober warning, may we ask: Isn't "The Local Church" association organizational? Isn't it part of "an organizational system" which (in W. Lee's words) "annuls the organic Body of Christ"? Doesn't "The Local Church" association belong to "fallen and deformed Christianity [which] is full of organization"? Where is the¹⁷ **"unbridgeable gap between the Lord's recovery and Christianity"**? How can the "blended co-workers" emphasize the Body, where "there is no organization" and yet tolerate an organizational entity, "The Local Church" association? Are they practicing what they preach?

Fuller Theological Seminary's Public Statement

Some might regard litigation as a "special case" where normal requirements are suspended so a few brothers can represent the local churches in legal matters. However, LSM's litigation is not the only case. In other instances, LSM-brothers have also claimed to represent the local churches.

Recently a public statement¹⁸ issued by Fuller Theological Seminary circulated among the saints in the local churches. That statement begins: *"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 dialogue. During this time Fuller conducted a thorough review and examination of the major teachings and practices of the local churches..."* Evidently, some brothers—designated as "**leaders from the local churches**"—participated in discussions with professors from Fuller. The statement continues, *"**Representing the local churches were Minoru Chen, Abraham Ho, and Dan Towle. Representing LSM were Ron Kangas, Benson Phillips, Chris Wilde, and Andrew Yu.**"* Our focus is not the contents of Fuller's statement, but the representation of the local churches. We have no problem with four brothers representing LSM. However, we have serious problems with three brothers—designated "**leaders from the local churches**"—"representing the local churches."

According to our knowledge, Minoru Chen is an elder of the church in Irvine CA; Dan Towle is an elder of the church in Fullerton, CA. Evidently Abraham Ho is an elder of a church in Cerritos, CA. As such **they can represent (at most) these three local churches.** Brother Nee tells us,¹⁹ *"The Word of God...nowhere speaks of elders managing the affairs of several local churches."* Yet, Fuller's statement designates the three brothers as **"leaders from the local churches," "representing the local churches."** In the context of Fuller's statement, the phrase, **"the local churches"** means all the local churches, since reference is made to *"the major teachings and practices of the local churches."* Again, may we ask, **on what basis can these three brothers claim to represent all the local churches? When and by whom were these three brothers authorized to represent all the local churches** in discussions with Fuller Theological Seminary? Even if this three-brother "delegation" was deputized, is such a practice scriptural; is it valid? Some of these brothers are closely related to LSM and are considered "blended co-workers." However, given the distinction between "the work" and the "churches," **being a "blended co-worker" does not confer the right to represent all the local churches.**

Practicing Pragmatism OR Absolute for the Truth?

Pragmatists might respond: "Oh, come on! Someone must represent the local churches; Why not these three?" However, that was not the stand of Brothers Nee and Lee. They stood upon the Bible and were absolute for the truth. They did not compromise the truth in the interests of pragmatism and convenience. W. Nee declared,²⁰ **"The Bible is our only standard...if it is not the Word of the Bible, we could never agree...."** He charged,²¹ **"Whatever the Bible does not have, the church must by all means reject. Otherwise, all those who follow the Lord faithfully will leave...."** Certainly the Bible doesn't recognize an entity like "The Local Church" association existing in parallel with the local churches. Neither do the Scriptures endorse a few brothers representing all the local churches. These are unscriptural practices. Witness Lee declared,²² **"The very great, particular characteristic in the Lord's recovery is to do everything according to the Bible."**

Brother Nee charged,²³ **"...the truth is absolute. The standard of the divine Word must not be lowered to the level of our personal attainment. We cannot tamper with the truth in any way in order to justify our deficiencies."** May we ask, **in these matters—"The Local Church" association and the representation of the local churches—is the truth being upheld or is it being sacrificed on the altar of convenience?** W. Nee called on the co-workers in particular to uphold the truth. He said,²⁴ **"Every worker of the Lord must uphold the absoluteness of the truth. ...If a man is not absolute to the truth, he will, in the course of his work, sacrifice God's truth for man, himself, or his own desires. A basic requirement for being a servant of the Lord is to not sacrifice the truth."** We do not regard these matters as insignificant items which can be overlooked. If the "blended co-workers" don't uphold the truth, but rather **"sacrifice"** and **"tamper with the truth"** in these matters, what about greater things? Moreover, isn't a higher standard required of the "blended co-workers" than of the saints? In W. Nee's words, **"Every worker of the Lord must uphold the absoluteness of the truth."**

Conclusion

We asked, **"Who represents the local churches?"** Watchman Nee taught²⁵ *"an important principle,...that the apostolic work and the local church are quite distinct."* Therefore, he says,²⁶ *"we must differentiate clearly between the work and the churches...we must avoid confusing them; otherwise we shall make serious mistakes."* A "blended co-worker" echoes this, saying²⁷ *"If you do not know the distinction between the ministry and the church, there will also be problems."* In their distinct spheres,²⁸ *"the apostles manage the work; the elders manage the church."* Brother Nee also addressed the question of "representation," saying,²⁹ **"Apostles and elders are the highest representative of the [universal] Church and the churches [respectively]."** Apostles represent the Church in terms of work and ministry. But, **it is the elders who represent the local church.** This distinction is not negated by the Church being the Body.³⁰ In recent public statements, some "blended co-workers" claim to represent **all** the local churches. By making this **"serious mistake,"** they trample underfoot the New Testament distinction between "the work" and the local churches. The "blended co-workers" already claim to be the sole representatives of "the Ministry" and "the Work" in the Lord's recovery. Now some "blended co-workers" claim to speak on behalf of **all** the local churches. This usurps the elders' role of representing their local churches. In view of this, some might ask: Is this a step towards centralization?

NOTES:

1. Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs*, p. 147
 2. W. Nee, *Church Affairs*, p. 140
 3. "Readers Write" in *Christianity Today*, May, 2006, vol. 50, Number 5 pp. 14, 16
 4. Witness Lee, "**One Accord for the Lord's Move**," *Elders' Training*, Book 7, p. 107
 5. Rcv. Acts 15:2 fn. 2; Acts 15:6 fn. 1
 6. LSM "**Statement on the Court of Appeals Decision**," Jan. 16, 2006 [contendingforthefaith.com]
 7. In other public documents posted on contendingforthefaith.com another person represents "the Local Churches." "Protest letters" to "Mr. Robert C. Hawkins, President, Harvest House Publishers" dated Jan. 11, 2001 and Nov. 20, 2001 are signed by: "Andrew Yu For Living Stream Ministry, **Richard W. Taylor For the Local Churches** and Daniel E. Towle For the Co-Workers." Richard W. Taylor is better known as "Dick Taylor." In this instance, Dan Towle has "changed hats" and is representing "the Co-workers." The same questions apply—on what basis can Dick Taylor represent "the Local Churches"?
<http://www.contendingforthefaith.com/libel-litigations/harvest-house-et-al/PublicDocs/pd08-01.html>
 8. "The Co-workers in the Lord's Recovery," *The Beliefs and Practices of the local churches*, LSM, (1978) p. 15
 9. "We consider the appeal to the courts by Living Stream Ministry, *The Local Church* and the local churches to be similar to Paul's in Acts 25" "**Is our Appeal to the Courts in Accordance with Scripture?**" www.contendingforthefaith.com.
- The parties appealing the Jan. 2006 Texas Court decision are designated as: "**The Local Church, Living Stream Ministry and individual Local Churches throughout the country.**" [February, 16, 2006] [contendingforthefaith.com](http://www.contendingforthefaith.com)
10. From "*Living Stream Ministry & The Local Church: Background Information*" [contendingforthefaith.com <http://www.contendingforthefaith.com/libel-litigations/harvest-house-et-al/ministry.html>]
 11. "affiliate" (verb): "**1.** To adopt or accept as a member, **subordinate associate**, or branch: *The HMO affiliated the clinics last year.* **2.** To associate (oneself) as a **subordinate, subsidiary**, employee, or member: *affiliated herself with a new law firm.*" [**American Heritage Dictionary**]
"An affiliated person or organization; **specifically** : a business entity **effectively controlling or controlled by another or associated with others under common ownership or control**" [**Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law**, 1996.] "An organization that is related to another organization through **some type of control or ownership**. For example, a U.S.-based company may have a foreign affiliate that handles overseas sales." [**Wall Street Words**, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003]
 12. W Nee, *Church Affairs*, p. 147
 13. W. Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 69
 14. W. Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 70
 15. W. Lee, *The Body of Christ*, p. 17
 16. W. Lee, *The Body of Christ*, p. 16
 17. *The Ministry*, vol. 8, no. 6, (June 2004) p. 10
 18. The recent letter to *Christianity Today* makes reference to this statement (see note 3)
 19. W. Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 44
 20. W. Nee, *The Christian*, Issue No. 1, 1925, in *Collected Works*, vol. #11, p. 1231
 21. W. Nee, *Further Talks on the Church Life*, p. 64
 22. W. Lee, "**One Accord for the Lord's Move**," *Elders' Training*, Book 7, p. 107
 23. W. Nee, *The Character of the Lord's Worker, Collected Works*, vol. 52, p. 152
 24. W. Nee, *The Character of the Lord's Worker, Collected Works*, vol. 52, p. 151
 25. W. Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 106
 26. W. Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 99
 27. *The Ministry*, vol.9, No.6, (June 2005) p. 12
 28. W. Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 100
 29. W. Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 185. The context reads:
"**Apostles and elders are the highest representative of the [universal] Church and the churches**

[respectively]. *Apostles hold the highest office in the work, but in the local church they—as apostles—hold no office at all; elders, on the other hand, hold the chief office in the local church, but as elders they have no place in the work...* The context justifies our insertion of “[respectively].”

30. W. Nee, ***The Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works***, vol. 30, pp. 186-8