

RELIGIONS *of the World*

A COMPREHENSIVE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

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Introduction

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Living Church of God

In the years following the death of founder Herbert W. Armstrong (b. 1892) in 1986, the WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD (WCOG) dropped his distinctive teachings one by one under its new pastor, General Joseph W. Tkach (1827–1995), and moved closer to standard conservative Protestant teachings. Many WCOG ministers found this difficult to accept. One of these was Roderick C. Meredith, who had been one of Armstrong's earliest students and had been with the WCOG since 1949. In 1992, after confrontations with the new leadership of the WCOG, Meredith left to found his own sabbatarian millenarian church, the Global Church of God, holding firmly to the teachings of the WCOG during Armstrong's lifetime. Because of Meredith's previously high position in WCOG as senior evangelist, many other members left to follow him. The Global Church of God grew to a peak membership of around seven thousand.

Armstrong had taught "top-down" church governance, with a single leader having sole authority over the church, and Meredith followed this model. In 1998 the board of the Global Church sought to temper Meredith's authority over his church; after a number of heated meetings and the quite public exchange of accusatory letters, Meredith left his own church and founded the Living Church of God, taking 70–80 percent of his ministers and members with him. The Living Church of God is more or less the old Global Church of God under a different name.

The remnant of the Global Church, reduced to fewer than one thousand members, tried to continue, but they faced a dramatic drop in income from members' tithes. This difficulty was only compounded when founding members, now with the Living Church, demanded the repayment of loans they had made for the start-up funding of the Global Church, which voluntarily entered into the legal equivalent of bankruptcy. Its members reformed as the Church of God, a Christian Fellowship (CGCF). In 2001 most of CGCF merged with the largest WCOG offshoot, UNITED CHURCH OF GOD; a minority reformed as Church of the Eternal God, still known in the U.K. by its original name of Global Church of God. Shortly after Meredith left the Global Church of God, another minister, David C. Pack, left to found the Restored Church of God, perhaps the most hard-line of all the offshoots from the "Worldwide family." Pack has published a book-length list of 280 teachings that he claims the "new" Worldwide Church has changed from Armstrong's original teachings, and a further list of 174 teachings in which he believes all the other offshoots, be-

tween them, deviate from Armstrong's truth. The Restored Church of God has several hundred members.

The Living Church of God claims to hold to all the traditional teachings of Herbert W. Armstrong and the WCOG at the time of his death. Like most of the offshoots, it emphasizes in its literature and broadcasts the need to watch world news to "prove" that these are the End Times. The second or third largest offshoot from the WCOG, the Living Church of God continues to sponsor a radio show called *Tomorrow's World*, the same name made famous by the WCOG, and it publishes a periodical with the same name. There are an estimated five thousand to six thousand members.

Addresses:

Living Church of God
 P.O. Box 503077
 San Diego, CA 92150-3077
<http://www.tommorrowworld.org>

Church of God, a Christian Fellowship
 P.O. Box 161698
 Fort Worth, TX 76161-1698
<http://www.cgcf.org>

Restored Church of God
 P.O. Box 23295
 Wadsworth, OH 44282
<http://www.restorecog.org>
<http://www.truegospelrcg.org>

David V. Barrett

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The Local Church

The Local Church is the name assumed in the West by a movement variously known as the Little Flock, Assembly Hall Churches, or more derogatorily, the Shouters. The Local Church grew out of the life and thoughts of Nee To-sheng, better known in the West as Watchman Nee (1903–1972). Nee was born in Shantou, China, and trained in classical Chinese studies. He was converted to Christianity in 1920 under the ministry of Dora Yu, a Methodist missionary who ran a Bible school in Shanghai. He was also deeply influenced by the writings of the British-based Keswick Revival and the PLYMOUTH BRETHREN (EXCLUSIVE). He found himself drawn to the Plymouth Brethren and was associated with them into the 1930s.

Nee began his own ministry with a magazine, *Revival*, in 1923 and finished his first major book, *The Spiritual Man*, in 1928. By this time he had also come to the conclusion that the unity of the church would be best expressed by the establishment of only one church in each city; that is, that denominational competition was unbiblical and the only reason for different churches was geographical—hence the name Local Church. The first Local Church was founded in Shanghai in 1927. Nee also agreed with the ideal previously articulated by several nineteenth-century missionaries as “three-self.” In order to make the Protestant Christian movement in China independent of foreign churches, missions were urged to work toward three types of independence: self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation. Incarnating such an ideal was, of course, integral to the several indigenous Chinese Christian movements, including the Local Church. From the Brethren, Nee absorbed a dispensational approach to the Bible, seeing human history as unfolding in a series of God’s dispensations, during each of which God changed his way of relating to humanity.

The movement’s growth was somewhat disrupted by World War II and the Japanese invasion. In 1942 Nee took a job at the pharmaceutical company owned by his brother in order to raise money to support continued evangelical efforts, which had by this time become international. Some saw his taking a secular job as contradictory to his ministry, and the church’s elders forbade him from preaching in Shanghai. The issue was not resolved until 1947, when Nee gave the church all of his business assets and withdrew from further secular work. He also encouraged other church members to hand over their business assets to the church, and the profits from these businesses began to be used to expand the evangelical work.

In the 1930s, Witness Lee (1905–1997) joined the Local Church movement and through the decade became a close associate of Nee. In 1948, Nee sent Lee to Taiwan where the defeated Nationalist forces were to gather as the Communists took control of the mainland. The church came under attack from the Communist regime in the early 1950s. In 1952 Nee was arrested, and in 1956 he was tried and convicted of corrupt business practices and violations of public morals. He spent the rest of his life in jail. The government recognized only one Protestant church body, the Chinese Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement, with which all Protestant Christians were required to affiliate. Thus the Local Church was banned in China, and Nee’s movement became divided, with some congregations being absorbed into the Chinese Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement and others continuing as independent congregations outside legal structures.

However, the movement continued to grow outside of China. From Witness Lee’s work in Taiwan, the Local Church began to spread throughout Southeast Asia, beginning with the ethnic Chinese communities in the larger

cities. In 1962 Lee moved to the United States, learned English, and began to spread the movement among English-speaking residents of California, a first step in making the Local Church a truly international movement.

Lee gained an initial following among Evangelical Christians attracted to his emphasis on the spiritual life and the immediate relationship between God and humanity. He continued the theology earlier articulated by Nee, which viewed humans as tripartite beings (body, soul, and spirit) and recognized an intimate relationship between God’s Spirit and the human spirit. However, in the 1970s, as Lee expanded upon this mystical theology, trouble developed when some former followers began to suggest that Lee’s approach, and some new language he introduced to focus the teachings, represented a loss of distinction between God and humanity and a distortion of traditional Christian teachings on the Trinity.

The seriousness of the theological charges were undergirded by the perception that Lee had gained most of his membership at the expense of other churches. In the early 1980s, the controversy erupted after spokespersons for several Christian anticult ministries, led by the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, accused the Local Church of being a cult. Included in their list of objections were several unique practices of the church, such as “Calling upon the name of the Lord,” and the invocation of God by the loud repetition of phrases such as “O Lord Jesus.” (This is the practice that had given Nee’s followers the appellation “Shouters” in China.) In response, Lee had his theology and the church’s practices examined by several trained theologians, who could find nothing heretical, and he attempted to reconcile his differences with his Evangelical antagonists. However, the problems had grown with the expansion of anticult ministries, and he was unable to resolve them. So in 1985 he sued the Spiritual Counterfeits Project in court and won a large multimillion-dollar judgment for libel and slander. Other groups and individuals subsequently withdrew their attacks.

Following the court case, Lee began a new effort to encourage the further spread of the Local Church, which had stagnated in the 1980s. He moved to Taiwan for a period and led in the reorganization of the Local Church around a new emphasis on evangelism. He continued to lead the movement until his death in 1997.

The Local Churches are organized as autonomous congregations, each led by elders selected from among its own membership. The congregations are tied together by their mutual acceptance of the fundamental doctrines and approach initially articulated by Nee and continued by Lee. Upon his arrival in California, Lee assumed the role of apostle and teacher. He organized Living Stream Ministry as an instrument to provide leadership for all of the local congregations. He published a magazine, a number of books, and pamphlets. He also held regular training sessions to educate leaders on both the practical leadership of the churches and

the theological development of church life. Most church elders were part-time, unsalaried workers, but as the movement grew, some elders were designated as full-time coworkers. Although there are no ordained ministers, the coworkers have assumed many roles typically held by ordained clergy.

Living Stream Ministry continues to serve as the uniting force of the Local Church congregations. During the years of Lee's ministry, the Local Church became a worldwide movement, and it has associated congregations on every continent. Each congregation takes the name of the city in which its members reside. An unknown number of people, reportedly as high as eight hundred thousand, continue the ministry of Watchman Nee in mainland China, where a number of leaders have been arrested for preaching outside the established churches. In a 1983 court case, the movement was declared to be counterrevolutionary in but one of a variety of actions to suppress the group, and various international human rights groups have come to its defense. The Local Church in Hong Kong has a large following, necessitating multiple meeting halls, and some sixty thousand members are found across Taiwan. Strong congregations are located throughout Southeast Asia, where the movement has moved beyond its base within the Chinese communities, and also across North America. Many Local Churches have their own Web sites. Worldwide membership is in excess of one million.

The belief statement of the Local churches identifies it with conservative Protestant Free Church beliefs. It strongly affirms the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, and the verbal inspiration of the Bible. Sectarian divisions and denominationalism is eschewed, and the oneness of Christian believers is affirmed. The Local Church places itself in a history of "recovery" of biblical Christianity, which it deems was lost through the centuries after the Apostolic era. The recovery began with Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation and continued through other movements, including the Methodists and the Plymouth Brethren. A new phase began with Watchman Nee and his emphasis on the Local Church.

Lee kept up a prodigious schedule of teaching and speaking through the thirty-five years after his move to the United States. His lectures and sermons were transcribed and published and constitute a large collection of Christian literature. He wrote a multivolume commentary on the Bible and a translation of the Bible, published as the Recovery Version. Recordings of Lee's Bible studies are featured on the Local Church's radio program, *Life Study of the Bible*.

Address:

Living Stream Ministry
2431 W. La Palma Ave.
Anaheim, CA 92801

<http://www.lsm.org/> (in English, Chinese, Spanish, and Korean)
<http://www.livingstream.com/>

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London Missionary Society

The London Missionary Society (LMS), now a constituent part of the Council for World Mission, is one of several organizations that facilitated the massive expansion of Christianity around the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It emerged in 1795 in England out of the growing consciousness there of people in the world outside Europe, itself a sign of developing British colonial interests worldwide. Particular inspiration came from the widely published letters sent back to England by William Carey (1761–1834), who had launched a mission in India in 1793.

Thus, in December 1794, a group of ministers and laypeople from the Church of England, the Presbyterian Church, and from the Independents or the Congregational Church (the largest number) met to consider the idea of forming a pan-denominational missionary society. In the end, the Congregationalists became the primary supporters of the new London Missionary Society, constituted in 1795. Both the Church of England and the Presbyterian Church soon had their own competing missionary structures.

The primary field chosen for work was the South Pacific, then a territory devoid of Protestant church work. The LMS purchased a ship, the *Duff*, and in September 1796 it sent thirteen men, five women, and two children. This first cadre was dispersed between Tahiti and Tonga, with one person staying in the Marquesas. Beginning with this initial band, the society would dispatch additional missionaries to the Cook Islands and then to most of the larger South Pacific island groups. These first missionaries set a pattern for later missionaries—working with the indigenous population to train a set of local teachers and leaders and translating and publishing the Bible in the local language.

Early in the nineteenth century, the society turned its attention to Africa. Two of the most famous people in Christian missionary history, John MacKenzie (1835–1899) and David Livingstone (1813–1873), were LMS missionaries