

Epilogue

*"I am gone like a shadow when it lengthens;
I am shaken off like a locust"*
(Psalms 109:23)

This book was a ridiculous six years in the making. I often fretted about the unfinished parts of it, wishing that I was a faster writer.

During this period of time, I received much correspondence from around the globe. Most urged me to finish *Future*. A few complained that I seemed obsessed with Living Stream Ministry. I found those to be the most laughable. Could any writer be less engaged with his subject matter than what I had become? I had no personal quarrels with any Anaheim figure and the entire lawsuit debacle was dwindling on the horizon with each passing year. I was also no longer privy to inside events as they happened and the emotional outrage they produced in me. Besides, ministry and new church life were calling me out of that old realm into uncharted joys.

It became clear that I would never complete a book like this one by riding an ongoing torrent of passion. It would take calm commitment and a firm grasp on the object of the book, which was to provide helpful fellowship for those who wished to transition out of LC Movement church life. And so I eventually found it a matter of strictest personal discipline to get to that last page.

Looking back on the entire process, I can't help but see divine wisdom overruling my intentions to quickly get something into print. For one thing, I had unknowingly intended to finish this work before my personal journey in the LC Movement was complete.

That would have left a skewed analysis of the subject matter with the Living Stream Ministry cast as the "bad guys" and a free pass for the LC Midwest region.

It is common knowledge by now that I was handed my hat by Titus Chu and shown the door back in 2010. That effectively separated me from his work. But few understand the dynamics leading up to that point. From the first day I entered the Midwest work in 1988, my role there could hardly have been called routine.

I'll explain. Some corporations have what is known as a "skunkworks" division. It typically refers to a part of the company that flies under the radar and does highly experimental work. In the meantime, upper level management allows and even funds its existence, hoping that there might be a breakthrough behind closed doors—something that would significantly contribute to the future of the entire industry by producing the "next generation product."

I basically lived in the unofficial Midwest skunkworks division together with a few other daring souls, and loved it. Except for low level grumbling from certain senior voices, I was given the freedom to do what I wanted. That generally meant tweaking local church dynamics in order to reach middle America. My efforts were either admired and copied, or greeted with suspicion and secretly criticized. This went on for a good many years. It was accepted that I would never be a "company man." I deeply believed, however, that if I worked long enough and creatively enough, whatever I discovered would become valuable currency for the Midwest, and maybe the rest of the Local Church Movement. No one during that time, however, was subscribing to anything new in a mass market kind of way. I was hardly "hot" in that sense of the word.

Interestingly enough, my skunkworks operation would have dragged along on its belly forever had it not been for the tensions between the West Coast and the Midwest. After Witness Lee died in 1997, the

remaining Anaheim cadre accelerated their criticism of Titus Chu and his often independent ways of labor. As they dropped innuendo bombs on "a certain senior brother" or "a certain region" during their messages from the LSM podium, the church life they represented began to smell of manipulation and politics.

I was certainly not the only one to notice. Mass disillusionment set in, triggering what I call "The Midwest Ten Year Window" (1998-2008). During that time, willingness to experiment and break out of the LSM mold soared to new heights.

The Church in Cleveland began a Saturday night ministry for area outreach and revival (called "the Jubilee") that incorporated a guest preacher (for a while, that was me), contemporary hymns, and finally, a band. Later, other localities picked up the model. In the years following, the large Mountaintop and Ignite youth gatherings were started, and churches began to cautiously adopt contemporary Christian music, forming their own bands.

Most of these innovations received Midwest senior level endorsement. But still the changes afoot triggered responses of various kinds. Some were blindly dismissive, leveling indictments of worldliness and "fallen Christianity." Those reactions were obviously easier than researching, processing, and arriving at informed opinions. However, with the launch of the Concerned Brothers website, there promised to be an overall rethinking of attitudes. My skunkworks almost dissolved as its contents threatened to go mainstream in the Midwest local churches. Naturally, I was thrilled. In certain respects we were beginning to behave like evangelical congregations. I cannot claim credit for the positive and exciting things happening during that time. There was no solitary hero. It seemed that people were investigating and adding their own innovations.

Then, the worst possible thing happened—around 2007, the rift between the LSM-dominated West Coast

churches and the Midwest local churches took a definite turn. Titus Chu was quarantined, finalizing the formation of two separate regional entities. Along with those developments, the impetus for learning new things rapidly died down. Gone was the competition between the two areas and the resulting rush for research and development.

The chronology of articles on the “Concerned Brothers” website reflects the cooling trend toward new thinking. The initial period had been well represented by articles responding to LSM attacks against Midwest practices (like Mountain Top, etc.), and critiques of LSM’s call for cookie-cutter uniformity. However, the initiative that promised to reevaluate accepted teachings drooped. After the West-Midwest split the number of contributors dwindled down to one, Nigel Tomes (This book in its earlier stages had already been removed from the site for being too controversial).

The Midwest became its own country, reviving a definite and growing interest in preserving “the family traditions,” “the particular heritage,” and “the distinct identity” of the Local Churches. The window of opportunity quietly shut. My experimental work continued, except this time not with a wink from benevolent seniors, but with uneasy feelings that I might be doing work as an enemy of the newly formed state. I had moved beyond bands and Sunday morning preaching, and toward things like decentralization of churches and evangelical church planting models. It was too much for Midwest seniors, especially since they saw themselves as the new caretakers of orthodoxy.

It came as no surprise then, when I was called to Cleveland one day, accompanied by a Columbus elder. We both knew what would probably take place—I would be questioned and found guilty. The ride up north was by no means quiet. The elder expressed all sorts of sentiments supportive to me. But as we gathered in that room with Titus Chu and an extremely loyal

Cleveland elder, the big talk noticeably disappeared. My Columbus elder friend put his head down and silently looked at the floor as if he were a puppy spanked with a newspaper. The interrogation had begun. I honestly laid out what I believed, which comprise the contents of this book (apparently no one in the room had bothered to read it, even after it had been posted online for years).

At the end of the session I was politely told my view of the local ground was inconsistent with theirs. Titus embraced me for the last time while his Cleveland assistant refused even to shake my hand. After so many years of service together, the dogma of the local ground had separated yet another group of brothers.¹

The drama was yet to play out, for back in Columbus another elder confronted me, stirred by his interpretation of the events, and bent on straightening me out. He made a number of uncharitable accusations, including that of financial impropriety. Apparently the brother had forgotten that for over a decade I had lived in humble church property, had no retirement, no savings, and nothing whatsoever to show for over 20 years of service in the local church. The man had been a friend of mine, yet since he was under the influence of religious politics none of my protestations even made a dent. His allegations didn't need to be true, anyway. It has long been a popular way of discrediting ministers to either affix sexual or financial misconduct to them. Given the baser instincts of man (and the poor track record of some ministers, it is true), the immediate assumption is that all such claims must be valid.

"You were doing your own work all along," voices said. My response was, "Of course!" Independent thought is what skunkworks is all about. Anyone who knew me and claimed that they thought I was marching to the beat of either Anaheim or Cleveland had to be insane. Ironically, while the experimental, progressive climate among the Midwest churches had been in vogue,

some of those same voices had celebrated my activities. Regardless, by summer, 2010, it was over for me both at the regional and local levels.

Collateral damaged ensued. Those who had labored in close proximity to me were given ultimatums and told to either choose alignment with my work or the Midwest work. For practical, worldly-wise individuals, it should have been an easy decision. I had nothing to offer financially, no large numbers, no global opportunities, and no promise of success. Even the minor influence I once exercised in the Midwest had all but disappeared under the weight of warning words and private “fellowship.”

Still, a few who had labored with me chose the costly and difficult compass described in this book. Over time, others, to a greater or lesser extent, have done the same. All have paid the price of being shunned—that is, unofficially ostracized.

Up until this moment, change has occurred among Local Churches in different parts of the globe, even if reluctantly. Some LC’s have derived assistance from *Future* in transitioning from their former patterns of practice. At the very least, they were helped to make sense of the system in which they spent so many years. However, the book certainly was not an all-purpose tool.

For instance, I frequently receive critique for not aggressively calling out particular leaders on bad conduct issues. From this book’s very conception, I consciously determined not to make personal cases against individuals. Such writing would have an incredibly short shelf life as the guilty parties and the people directly affected by them passed off the stage. Instead, I focused on the errors of the Movement itself.

More than a critical review of the past, though, I wished to offer alternatives that leaders might take and seriously implement. The easiest position in the world to play is armchair quarterback—to watch others and become professional critics of their moves. Even the

ability to portray what is right needs an effective translation into the real world. It is possible to wax eloquent on the fine nuances of scripture here and there, to display superiority of insight, and still succeed in doing nothing. As demonstrated in the book of Acts, three-dimensional clarity about spirituality, the church, etc., occurs in the very matrix of mission (the preaching of the gospel and the discipling of others). Otherwise, we end up with a beautiful and correct description of how things ought to be, yet without anything tangible in our hands—the error of theory without practice, or, “faith without works.”

I have received something of an education during these last six years while on the LC Movement bench, and then the last two while completely outside the stadium. Much of my observation has had to do with how human beings deal with disappointments. In the beginning of my personal LC exodus, I hoped that ex-members would provide a groundswell of support for new evangelical beginnings and new church initiatives. That was, unfortunately, naïve. Instead, there was widespread attrition; saints left the Movement and subsequently fell prey to various things.

Cynicism was one of them, as it bred a reluctance to trust anything or anyone ever again. Sadly for some of my disillusioned LC friends, suspicion hovered even over the Scriptures. Then there were those who embraced a casual form of antinomianism (Lit. “against law”), rejecting *carte blanche* all structure and leadership models of nearly every stripe. “Freedom” became the slogan that replaced “God’s economy,” but was just as empty. And finally, the so-called “Prosperity Gospel” claimed ground with a few. That curious blend of motivational speaking, self-help therapy, deism, multi-level sales schemes, external Old Testament promises, and a thousand inspirational one-liners moved saints away from the hope of eternal life to the hope of things in *this* life.

I quickly found that appealing to bright new plans within these souls was going to be an ill-fated effort. But I sympathized with them all the same. Many ex-LC members no longer had their youth to throw into anything. It was a fact I myself acutely felt when considering a new church plant at 46 years of age (the average age for that kind of labor tends to be 30).

I began to wonder if it really was all over—if there could ever again be new enterprises in the house of God, at least among us. Others who have wished for the same in recent years sought to restore Local Church momentum by resurrecting “sacred cows” from the scrap heap. For instance, they assigned blame to those who messed up the local ground pattern found in Nee and Lee’s early writings. Their logic was that the teaching was right but the people were wrong and so, “Let’s try again, but harder this time!” Then they issued solemn assurances of blessing to those who returned to the local ground blueprint. This, however, hardly constitutes a promising course of action. The new thing would simply be an old thing reloaded and set to explode in the face of yet another unsuspecting generation.

So why bother with any version of an LC future? Well, the desire for a church restart, complete with reupholstering and rebuild, I believe, is a wish for something redemptive. We hope that after all the time, the energy, the tears, the prayer, the sacrifice, and the difficult decisions that made up LC life, something might arise to keep it all from seeming a colossal waste. I am among those hopeful hearts.

Since 2006, the vast majority of people contacting me about *Future* have been individuals. Alone and displaced, they are not necessarily interested in starting anything. Where possible, however, I encourage them to do so, even if it just means launching a small group. A living room Bible study can easily turn into a thriving, growing fellowship. I will always support these efforts (personally, if possible), as

long as the group isn't trying to be a small scale LC museum or an encounter group where the errors of the movement are rehearsed ad infinitum.

At the time of this writing, the number of ex-LC leaders has increased. I consider myself privileged to be in touch with a few. Some still shepherd clusters of saints. That makes transitional challenges for them even more formidable. In a group setting, it is obviously no longer one person processing former difficulties and making plans. A good leader will need to help others debunk old fears of the past and cast a vision for the future (as shown earlier in this book). No one, however, can simply subsist on dreams. A leader must be able to guide those with him to the elements of healthy community, Word, and service—tasks much easier said than done.

I lived through an epic transition for years in the Church in Columbus. The most dangerous phase was not in “leaving Egypt,” but stalling in the gray zone outside it. That is where a transitioning local church founders in a muddle of sentiment about the good old days, misapplied scripture, psychologically conditioned feelings about things (which they call “life”), and a semi-revulsion to any influence from other Christian groups. The effects are measurable: the transitioning group in question either disintegrates or fossilizes.

The urge to dig in right outside of the LC periphery is reflex-oriented. We all feel safer staying close to what we know, even if much of it drained us of spiritual vitality in the past. But given the dynamic nature of the Spirit's work, none of us has been called by God into such an entrenchment strategy.

I spent years trying to navigate the gray zone, only to encounter a final stop sign, saying, “This far and no farther.” Unfortunately, it fell short of anything I might have called the Good Land. Why continue the journey anyway, some of us wondered, when there was still some manna in the desert? Without LSM

domination, a handful of the old LC conventions were paying off again, if only in nickels and dimes. A trickle of vitality had returned. And so we settled for less. Or at least, some of us did.

In surveying this sometimes frustrating recent past, I am grateful for the lessons learned. I received an education in the complexities of the human heart, especially as it had been imprinted with Movement dogma. I was also primed for further experiences. As an ex-LC leader, I had the joy of starting a new non-LC congregation composed of mostly non-LC people (2009). The learning curve was incredibly steep. Insulation from outside concerns had retarded my overall preparedness for the challenge, and so I rushed to make up for it. On the outside, there were larger and more critical issues swirling around than I had been forced to consider while sequestered away in Movement “fellowships.” These were matters that threatened the very soul of the present Christian generation—things like post-modernism, religious pluralism, and basic Bible illiteracy. Other Christian workers had been fighting these great fires out in the field for a long time. Compared to such crises, insider concerns like the one-publication edict and other pedantic LC controversies sank into utter insignificance.

If negative challenges weren’t enough, positive ones certainly were. These related to gathering people, feeding them, and then equipping them for biblical service. All the fancy spiritual talk in the world just withered in the face of that kind of intense practical necessity. I had to seek a broader base of education and experience—daunting for someone already seasoned in a certain style of Christian work. But maybe the only thing that ever really gets old with a man is his heart. I’ve found that as long as youth can be preserved there, new things can flow without ceasing.

No one can say that the people of the LC Movement aren't a committed bunch. Sadly, this loyalty has been paid to a system that will give back to them less and less over time. There are signs of it now everywhere, including inside the large breakaway regions. Perhaps at some point, the same misapplied devotion shown to the Movement will find its rightful place within a more kingdom-minded church community—one that locally expresses the gospel shoulder to shoulder with others.

¹ Although every top level local church worker believes some form of local ground teaching, according to my observation, not one of them practices it. This is never more apparent than when workers enter a city to start a new church. Most establish a group that will be loyal to them, attend their conferences, participate in their trainings, and buy their books and tapes. It is thoroughly, in every sense, a ministry church. The most egregious examples are workers who disregard the efforts of others (including those who have already “taken the ground”) and set up their own fellowship. The excuses are always that the ground is exclusive or divisive or lost or too narrow or too broad. Therefore, the ground, they say, needs to be taken or retaken. In one city of this general area, four churches claim to be the local church in that city! The doctrine seems to have become a license for workers rather than any real constraining principle of oneness. Alas, self-contradiction is always the fate of those who insist on rigid church structure formulas!