

# Local Church of Witness Lee Testimony

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## My Experiences of the Local Church founded by Witness Lee.

How I became part of the Local Church for seven years, and the lessons I have learnt from that period of my life.

By Joy Hillary

### Introduction

This is what happened to me at the age of seventeen when I joined the Local Church led by Witness Lee. This is my story of how I became involved in this church and eventually left to become part of mainstream Christianity again.

I grew up in a loving, hardworking, Christian, farming family. My father was an elder and the session clerk of our local Presbyterian church. His duties involved parish visitations and actively supporting the current minister in a very practical way. From six years of age I did Correspondence Sunday School and loved the stories of Jesus healing people. I was deeply touched one evening as my father prayed with me using the Lord's Prayer, and from then on I knew God was real and that his presence was with me.

I was in our dormitory at Boarding School when I experienced salvation; my load of guilt was lifted off in Jesus name as another girl prayed me through the 'sinner's prayer'. I became a part of a mini revival in our dormitory. I learnt to pray as part of a group; I thrilled at reading the Bible and discovering who Jesus was.

I went nursing in Palmerston North, and there I was baptised in water and the Holy Spirit.

I appreciate these foundational experiences. The Holy Spirit reconfirmed them to me as I sought to re-establish who I was and what I believed in the years after I left the Local Church.

### How I became a member of the Local Church

In the weeks following experiencing the Holy Spirit doubts filled me and I began to have unanswered questions in my heart. At that time I didn't connect in very well to a regular church fellowship.

Instead I was drawn into a church group that began to control and dominate my life. They were very enthusiastic about fulfilling God's purpose on earth. They said such things as: 'Forget about the baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, we'll show you a better way'; 'We'll show you how to "call on the Lord" and "pray-read" the Bible'; 'We'll be a

community, a true family for you'; 'Throw your lot in with us, we are the Lord's recovery on the earth today'. It was with such words that I was drawn to them.

As a nursing student away from older family members I was vulnerable, looking for answers to life's questions and wanting a purpose and vision in life. So I fervently prayed, really wanting God to show me what to do. I paced the floor of my hostel room until I felt 'Yes I will join the Local Church'. My yearning to belong and desire to be "special" trapped me.

I had no idea how hard it would be to extricate myself from the place I was falling into. I was unaware of the threats of a thousand years of punishment in 'the dark room' if and when I ever wanted to leave, or of my own feelings of failure and grief when I finally did leave.

I didn't know about talking to older Christians, in fact I didn't know anyone in that category. I had been to the Presbyterian Church but hadn't connected into a group that I could relate to. So I hadn't a clue about how easy it could be for a young Christian to be deceived and led astray. This new group looked so good, and several of my friends were already in it. My father tried to dissuade me and 'preached' to me about Presbyterianism. He didn't know I was really looking for a relationship with Jesus. As I look back, I am very thankful for the experiences of God I had before I became a part of the local Church, as they became points of contact for me when the time came in later years to re-evaluate my life.

## **Life and Beliefs- Local Church Style**

Once I began attending the Local Church meetings I moved out of the nursing hostel to live with other single young women in the Sisters house. We all flatted together, ate together, went to meetings together, and marched down the streets carrying banners and wearing slogans. We believed we were living as they did in the New Testament times. We lived the 'one another' life to the full. We were all of the same mind, doing what we believed God was asking us to do.

## **Pray Reading**

Life fell into a routine. We rose early to have 'morning watch' each day at six thirty a.m. to 'pray-read' from the Bible and Witness Lee's books. As a group we would repeat a sentence or verse phrase by phrase again and again, each time emphasising a different word. By this 'pray-reading' we were taught to override our questions, doubts, and natural thinking. We made the Bible into a book only for 'spiritual' experiences and underlying meanings, rather than as a guide for teaching and actual life experience.

## **Calling on the Lord**

We would also practise what we termed 'calling on the Lord', continually shouting out 'O Lord Jesus'. Psychologically,

however, this opened us up to the psychic realm just as a mantra does for those in the New Age movement. I remember often being quite out of it during these times. We totally misused the scriptures to justify such practices. In fact God's people call out to God from the heart in times of trouble, rather than in a mindless repetition of a phrase as we did. I spent time in later years repenting for taking the Lord's name in vain by using his name this way. I prayed for healing in my human spirit for the damage that had been done. It still makes me feel ashamed when I hear people 'calling on the Lord'.

## **Church Life**

Many of us worked in the same places so we could have lunch and read our Bibles together again. We would also have a mid week meeting and weekend meetings and gather for conferences each long weekend. Our focus was on planting churches in various localities throughout New Zealand and Australia. We put on "Love Feasts" where outsiders would come for a lovely meal, being invited through our contacts with them on the street. We would greet each other as 'brother' or 'sister'. We would share meals in one another's homes. Practical work was shared; those who were good at one thing helped others who weren't. Homes were opened to one another for young ones to live in. Our children played with each other. When you were in you were really in! We were spiritually, and emotionally locked into the group.

I had completed my first eighteen months of training to be a registered nurse, and then the leaders decided that we all should move to Auckland from Palmerston North. I talked to an older couple in the Church who advised that I should leave my nursing and shift north. I considered I couldn't survive without being a part of the Church. Therefore I walked the corridor to the Matron's office and handed in my resignation. For many years I felt so heavy and bad about this, because I knew that I had let both my parents and myself down, and yet what else could I do? There was in my mind simply no choice except to pay the cost and move on.

## **Special Beliefs**

As members of the Local Church we believed we were God's chosen few, chosen to be his bride and prepare the way for the return of Jesus for the millennial reign. In our view we had come aside from the regular churches to be purely for God. We were very proud of the fact that we had no name, we were the church in whatever place we lived in. We were proud of having a special revelation from God that brought us further on than the mainline churches we had left. We believed we had fresh revelation from God through Witness Lee's teaching and leadership. We judged other churches, and considered them to be standing on doctrines that were revelations of past centuries. We thought that, as ours were the most up to date, they must be what God was doing today. We believed we were standing on the shoulders of the men of faith down through time and that we were in the forefront of God's purpose on the earth in our age. The irony was that these doctrines, which caused us to separate ourselves from the churches around us, only created another sect within Christendom.

## **Mingling of God's Spirit with Our Human spirit**

We were taught very strongly that in the action of being 'born again' the Holy Spirit mingled our spirit with the Spirit of Jesus. God brought humanity into Himself and that by this God became altered in his essence. I do not believe this is an accurate representation of the Bible. We must retain our identity as created beings with God as the Creator. Humanity and divinity co-existed in the person of Jesus Christ; they did not mingle within him and therefore do not mingle in us as redeemed people.

## **Conferences**

It was considered very important to attend international conferences, and those who were really unable to go felt very left out, so every effort was made to go on a regular basis. Each year we would gather up our dollars and buy a return ticket to the conference in Anaheim where we would go to many meetings with Witness Lee as the speaker. When we returned we would get another job to save again for the next trip or church need. I went over there four years in a row. I remember the times at the Anaheim meetings when people would offer to go to different cities to begin a new church in that locality. Nothing was too much, and decisions were being made just on the spur of the moment. This was how we were; we gave everything for our cause.

## **Total Commitment**

I had saved my first thousand dollars to buy a Volkswagen car, and when there was a need for money to send someone to a Conference in Anaheim U.S.A. I gave my money and said good-bye to my dreams for a car. We raised money to pay for the Meetinghouse with personal loans by the members. Our priority was Church first, family second, and ourselves last. In retrospect, our money was never used to express God's real love for others but just to fulfil the Church's selfish ideals. Our commitment to 'God's economy', another phrase we used to describe how God deals with mankind (which has nothing to do with economics), was total. We burned many things unnecessarily. My twenty-first birthday presents were burnt. The television set, and other things that were considered to be a distraction from God's highest will in the Church, were destroyed. Anything I had made as a craft I burnt, as we were taught that self was evil and as such we must destroy it and die to any expression of creativity.

## **Witness Lee's Books**

The only books I read, in those seven years, were by Witness Lee or Watchman Nee (the latter has been generally accepted by scholars in the mainstream church) and we treated the Witness Lee ones as if they were manna from heaven. We called him the fount from God. His words had an aura of inspiration about them as far as we were concerned.

I remember helping to unwrap the first set of our own church hymnbooks, with many special hymns praising our movement. We were excited at the prospect of having our own Recovery Bible with very full notes explaining the scriptures from Witness Lee's point of view. I'll never forget, after leaving the Church, the experience of actually reading a book other than what we had been focusing on, and realising that I didn't have to believe everything that was written down. I realised then how utterly limiting and futile it is to use only one person's interpretation of scripture. It is like seeing life in black and white instead of colour. In the Church we had been taught not to think but rather just to pray and accept the teachings and ways of the Church. We said we bypassed our mind and went straight to the spirit, we believed that the natural mind was evil and not to trust how we thought about issues. We simply put aside our abilities to consider, compare and come to conclusions. Forgetting that God calls us to 'reason together' about the issues of life and faith.

## **Water Baptism**

While in the Church I was water-baptised several times. These were occasions such as when there was a fresh teaching or when we were being urged to be more enthusiastic again; we showed our obedience by being water baptised. I now realise the first time I was water baptised was all that was needed.

## **Marriage**

In the Local Church marriage was only acceptable between members. In fact the lifestyle was so busy that to marry anyone outside the church would have been a disaster. Courtship was minimal, the teaching was that it didn't really matter who you married as long as both parties were full on in the church. John and I met in this context. We talked a few times, before he asked me to meet him at Mt Albert Park in downtown Auckland. I knew he was going to ask me to marry him and I was excited. Just as I had expected, he asked me and I agreed. We decided to marry in four weeks time.

Our policy as a church was totally anti-tradition and so it was natural for us to book ourselves into the registry office and keep things as simple as we could. I rang my parents and said, "I'm getting married on the 6th of May, and you are welcome to come!" Our beliefs raised church commitments above our family and prevented us from honouring our parents. After I left the Local Church I felt many a twinge of regret, and was very ashamed about how we went about 'our day'. I always wanted a proper church wedding and so, long after leaving the Local Church, on our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, we renewed our vows in our regular church service. Those feelings of inner tension around our marriage dissipated and I am content to know God's blessing is truly on us. Our marriage has been one of the good things to come out of those seven years and we have three beautiful, now adult, children.

## **Coming out of the Local Church**

We had been married for two and a half years and new things were happening in the church. My husband John was troubled about the Church teaching of coming out of mainline Christianity to be the expression of the true church in our city. He no longer agreed with this method of gaining unity for the wider church body. My comfortable nest was being stirred. Only eighteen months before we had talked together about how differently we felt about the church, and back then I had said to John, "If you go, I'll stay". My priority then was the Church over our marriage, because I had invested my whole life into it. I had altered my life radically to be a part of the 'group'; I was mentally and emotionally dependent on them and I couldn't conceive of living without them at my center. How sad it was that instead of being reliant on a relationship with God I was hooked on a group of people to fill my inner needs.

## **Witness Lee Directives**

At this time also the Church was told via the 'word of the Lord', that is Witness Lee, in Anaheim, that there were to be no more leaders. We were all on the same level, we were to be the church in Philadelphia, known in Revelation as the church of brotherly love. The ripple effect meant I then stepped back from leading a small group responsible for cleaning the hall. This re-enforced our attitudes against paid clergy in the mainstream churches.

Another teaching from Witness Lee at this time was that we needed to 'follow our spirit'. If the light was green we were to go ahead, orange wait and red stop altogether. John and I discussed this and he said that if we really did this we would be led right out of the Church. It was taught in the context of the Church and was never intended to become a doorway out, but God used this light to give me confidence to follow my spiritual intuition away from the Local Church.

John continued to be restless about staying in the church and I asked God what I should do about it. The Lord spoke to me audibly in my kitchen, as I was busy caring for my little child. "Follow your husband and I will look after you". That was a very clear direction from God, so I chose to take the path that would cost me nearly everything of the previous seven years of my life. The story Jesus told of the tax gatherer and the Pharisee coming to pray in the temple pricked me to the heart. I saw myself as the Pharisee, proud, arrogant and assuming the blessing of God, when in reality it was the tax collector who went home with his prayers answered.

## **Looking for a church home**

I remember we visited a home group from another Church and it was from that evening God opened the door for us to be able to begin to explore fellowship in the wider church again. We began to take tentative steps back into the wider Christian community. We put the children in the car and explored different services, the Presbyterian, the Brethren, the Baptist, the Assembly of God. None of them felt comfortable to us. In one very popular one the Pastor was revered just as Witness Lee had been in the Local Church, so we decided not to go back there. It hurt not to find a spiritual home but in

truth we still had many wrong attitudes toward Christians and were unable yet to be open enough ourselves. Other than visiting different churches it was three years before we were able to become a part of a regular Church fellowship. We discovered that to come out of the Church was one thing but to let go our accumulated attitudes from the Local Church was a much longer process.

## **Many Questions**

I began to find many questions in my mind. Everything that I had ever believed now came under the spotlight, but I was determined not to walk away from Christianity. What was I to believe? Who was I? How was I to relate to other Christians? Could I trust again? Would the pain and despair in my heart ever be healed? Would I ever stop crying? Was the experience of the Holy Spirit, of seven years before, real or not? What about my original water baptism?

One by one my questions were answered. I gave birth to my second child, and I asked Jesus to meet me when I woke in the night to feed him. Sure enough, after seven years of ignoring the baptism and gifts of the Holy Spirit, when I got up to feed my baby the Holy Spirit poured himself out on me again and I spoke in tongues and worshiped God in the night season. In those days I bought a spinning wheel and spun and knitted jerseys for the family. I would use this time to pray. In the same way I would pray while cleaning the dirty nappies; we had no disposables back then!

## **Becoming useful for God**

One of the questions I asked God at this time was, "Am I any use to you now?" He graciously brought across my path people who needed a listening ear. I remember sitting out on the grass talking with a troubled young girl about God and his love for her. I was thrilled that God trusted me to minister to the hurting ones.

## **Soulish Prayers**

In prayer he showed me how we had moved in witchcraft through soulish praying, in an attempt to damage people until they came back to the fold. After we left, God had led me to read the book 'The Latent Power of the Soul', by Watchman Nee, which gave me understanding of what was happening. I spent time really repenting for the part I had played in prayers against others. He showed me I had cursed my Christian brothers and sisters from my own spirit.

## **Isolation and restoration**

While we were a part of the Local Church we had bought a property in a cul-de-sac along with six or seven other families,

to maintain a close 'church-life' atmosphere. While we were in fellowship with everyone it was marvellous, but after we drew away from the fellowship it became very difficult to live there. My Local Church neighbour would play church tapes very loudly and I would stay inside so as not to hear so much. Another told me one day that I was a traitor to the cause. I watched the young girl who had been boarding with us carry her possessions across the road and up the hill to stay with another family. Our friends didn't come to visit because of the tension, and I watched my formerly best friend's wedding from across the road. I had chosen to pull away and they didn't know how to cope other than to ostracize and ignore us. I would pray and cry to the Lord to release us and for three years the situation continued. Finally one day I prayed and said "Lord if you want us to stay here the rest of our lives that's O.K.". I knew God had won a battle of submission in my heart. Within a month, a position in another province had opened up for us and we had sold our house and were gone. I still wonder at the hand of God in that move.

## ***Places of Healing***

### **Coping with grief**

During those three years God did open places of healing for me. We attended a home group for a short while and several times over those months I would put my three children in the pushchair and walk for forty minutes or more and visit the leader's home. She would hear my story as I would cry and share my heartaches, have a cup of tea and walk back home. One day I would like to thank her for being there and listening to a broken heart.

I would often look at the other families still in the Local Church, with a great longing for their friendship once again. I would think about the good times we had had, the trips we'd done together, and the meals we shared. I turned to eating for comfort and immersed myself in caring for my young family; they saved my sanity many a day. I didn't understand the grief I was experiencing and I was having difficulty finding out who I now was. My identity had come from being a part of the Local Church. I no longer seemed to have any real purpose for my life.

While we still lived in close proximity to the Local Church folk I longed to talk to another strong Christian family who lived across the road. The only difficulty was the feeling of living in a fish bowl, and I was too afraid to risk being seen knocking on her door by those still in the Local Church. One day, forced by my loneliness, I took the plunge and stepped out. It was lovely to have a cup of tea and chat about God while the children played together. The ice was broken and it wasn't quite so hard to go again.

My tears continued and only as I look back do I realise the grief and depression I was carrying. After a long time John said to me "Have you prayed about your tears?" So I went to God and asked him to help me. I saw a fountain and a hand gently stopped the flow. I didn't cry as much after that.



## **Letting go pride and hidden anger**

In those years, our attitudes toward other Christians were arrogant and stubborn. This pride separated us from others and helped us maintain a 'holier than thou' stance. I spent time repenting for my attitudes toward other Christians. I had not just hurt others but Jesus himself had carried the arrows of judgements I had shot, in his body as he protected the rest of his church. One time, in a conference meeting in Sydney, we had as a group desecrated the communion tradition of the mainline churches, by throwing bread and wine around the meeting and laughing. I spent much time in tears when the Holy Spirit showed me how I had joined in this despicable act and how he felt about those actions.

God began to show me how much anger I still had stored up in my heart, and he gently began to give me the strength to let go of the resentment and bitterness I still held, especially toward pastors and leaders in the Church. The anger feels along way away now that I have let it go and prayed for God's blessing on them. I have included a poem I wrote at that time on the last page.

## **Family again**

Although I had cut my family off for so many years, my parents and brothers welcomed me back with open arms. They felt as if they had regained their daughter and sister. I no longer had to stand apart; I could share my love with them again after so many years of shutting them out for fear of their influencing me away from the Church. They had maintained an attitude of love toward me all those years, for which I am still grateful. Years later I was able to nurse my Mother as cancer ate at her body and she passed on. God restored a closeness for me that I still treasure in my heart.

## **Changing my Identity to Fit Into the Local Church**

To cope with Local Church life I had to change many things about myself. I am indebted to a book called 'Captive Hearts Captive Minds' written by Madeline Landau Tobias and Janja Lalich. Reading this book gave me an understanding of my struggle for identity rooted in these years of my life. Here are the ways I deliberately took, shutting down my own self to become part of the group.

- I laid aside my own interests and creativity to blend in with the group's vision and purpose.
- I gave over my right to have a career, taking on factory jobs.
- I married on the basis that we would always and forever be in the church. My marriage was a lesser priority than the group.
- I dressed as the group dictated.
- I used the language of the group, conforming to their codes and expectations.

- I chose to believe exclusively as the leaders taught me; I did not think independently.
- I distanced myself from family and previous friends. They were viewed as people who would pull me away from the group.
- I put aside all previous spiritual experiences in favour of group experiences.
- All my energies were spent on the activities of the group.
- I became emotionally dependant on the group.
- I gave all my financial resources for the fulfilment of the group's aims.

These were the ways that I took on a false identity to be able to survive the environment that I found myself in.

## **Regaining my Identity after Leaving the Church**

Once I left the church I had to cope with many conflicting emotions, and confusion in my thinking. The following is a list of my experiences.

- Intellectual confusion. I did not know what I believed anymore. It took me three years to become sure of my belief system again.
- Guilty feelings. I had broken my promises to the group and to God to stay in the Local Church for the rest of my life. I was ashamed of being so proud and arrogant, of claiming to be 'special' in God's eyes.
- I was out of the group physically but I still carried many of the old attitudes within me. I would want to go to a regular church but be unable to trust, and have very strong judgements against them. For example: "The people here don't really care, they are only half hearted about what they are doing; where is their enthusiasm? Where are their teachings? Where is their commitment?"
- I grieved. I cried for three years most days. I was so lonely, as my close friends had shut me out and called me a traitor.
- I was afraid of being punished by God for having left his divine plan. Maybe I would suffer a thousand years in 'the dark room' as we had been taught we would.

One day God showed me a picture of my identity. I saw a fence line that had sunk into the swamp and as I prayed, the wire of 'me' that I had buried while I was in the group was lifted up and made clean. God had healed my brokenness.

## **Reflections**

I often wonder what life would have been like for me if I hadn't decided to give myself to the Church. My mind wanders down many paths, but I then conclude that God knows all things and he makes all things to work out for good. It took me many years to see that it wasn't God who led me into the Local Church, but that my own immaturity and insecurities were

the precursors to going into it.

But that experience was not all negative, for I would not be who I am today without it. God is able to use every situation for His own purpose, and I often say that those years were my Bible School. We memorised scripture, albeit with a very Local Church focus. We learned to share a testimony in a meeting and preach the gospel on street corners, but with a strong emphasis on joining the Church. We practised sharing our possessions and opening our homes to strangers. We built strong friendships that we valued. Later as I re-evaluated those years and took off my 'rose-tinted Local Church glasses', God was able to retrieve many things I still value now and that remain in my life.

In the years of self-revelation and healing after leaving the Local Church I often took great comfort from the scripture 'the bones which you have broken you will also mend'. I prayed in those years with utmost sincerity, 'God, don't mind my tears, you just do the work in me that you choose to do. I want to be your vessel for your good purposes in all of my life'. Here is the poem I wrote when I began to get in touch with my emotions about what had happened to me in those seven years.

## **Revenge Release**

The feeling in my body wells up from deep within,  
Raw, raging, alive and deadly,  
Anger is its name fuelled by revenge, deadly revenge.  
Oh heart you cling so tightly to your pain, your right of revenge.  
I see you cutting in pieces, tearing the life out of the one you love.  
Bittersweet revenge, destroying those you loved.

Who am I with fierceness in my heart?  
Who am I able to curse and die?  
This anguish struggles in my depths; alive beyond the life I give to it.  
O God you know what it's like, your Son too was torn in shreds.  
My heart struggles to give my pain up, to let revenge go beyond my reach.

O Jesus you have broken through! I cried out and you broke through my prison door,  
I am freed at last from my hearts fury, freed at last to love in purity.  
Who am I in this blessed peace?  
What happened to the black fury of the storm?  
O Jesus, in you, in your depths, I am secure.  
Love wells up from deep within, no longer twisted by revenge.  
Washed clean of my heart's cruel demands, washed pure in the lifeblood of Jesus Christ.

Thank you Jesus I am at peace.

## **My Life Now**

My motives for living and working for God are no longer to prove to the Local Church people that it is possible to succeed beyond their doors but to simply be obedient to God and love others with his love. I am happily a member of a mainstream church in my community. I find great fulfilment in discipling new Christians and being a facilitator of Jesus healing and delivering power to those who need it. I have written comprehensive studies for New Christians and also for heart healing.

## **Finding Help For Yourself**

If you are being pressured to join an exclusive group of people in the name of God please find a mature Christian to talk to about it. If you have been involved in a sect or cult, know that your life can be re-built and that there is new life beyond where you have been.

There are many ups and downs to rebuilding our lives, but throughout the process God is glorified and nothing matches the power of knowing the healing and releasing power of Jesus. My prayer for you is that God would give you the courage to follow the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit away from groups who claim 'special positions and revelations' and all that entails into a humble walk with God in a mainstream church fellowship.

## ***Other books by Joy Hillary (Dip. Leadership)***

'Unwrapping Christianity' Part one and Part two. Studies for New Christians

'Unwrapping the Heart' A workbook for emotional healing.

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