

“STEALING” MEETING HALLS?

Some dear saints have been influenced by malicious claims that Living Stream Ministry (LSM), the Defense and Confirmation Project (DCP), or the co-workers “stole” meeting halls by suing churches. Neither LSM, nor DCP, nor the co-workers have initiated any legal action against any local church, much less laid claim to any asset of any local church. Furthermore, no meeting halls were “stolen” either by LSM, the co-workers, or DCP. In stark contrast to these accusations, LSM has contributed funds to many local churches for them to acquire properties.

Non-profit corporations, including churches, are governed by particular federal and state laws which mandate making corporate documents and financials available and recognizing the rights of their members according to the corporations’ governing documents. On occasion, when these requirements were violated by some who improperly asserted authority, local saints have appealed to the courts to protect the members’ rights as set forth in the churches’ bylaws. These appeals prevented the “stealing” of meeting halls by improper persons in the churches in their respective localities.

Proper and Improper Exercise of Authority

In general, elders are appointed from among the brothers raised up locally (Titus 1:5). Though qualified co-workers are the visible channel of the elders’ appointment, it is the Holy Spirit who places men as overseers among God’s flock (Acts 14:23; 20:28). The ones who appoint elders recognize those men whom the Holy Spirit has prepared to oversee the flock as manifested by their comparative growth in life, their being equipped with the truth, and the shepherding care they render to the saints, all of which have already given them a measure of approvedness with the saints (1 Thes. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7). In no case should elders be appointed based on their loyalty to a particular worker.

The Lord commits a local church to the elders for their oversight and shepherding care. This does not mean that the churches belong to the elders. The New Testament speaks of “the church of God” (1 Cor. 1:2; 10:32), “the church of Christ” (Rom. 16:16), and “the churches of the saints” (1 Cor. 14:33). No church is ever referred to as the church of any worker or as the church of the elders. The function of workers is to serve the churches (1 Cor. 3:4-9; 2 Cor. 1:24; 11:28). The primary functions of the elders are to shepherd the saints (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2) and to be patterns to them (Heb. 13:7; 1 Pet. 5:3); they are also responsible to manage the church’s business affairs for the Lord’s interest, including the benefit of the saints (Acts 11:29-30; cf. 1 Tim. 3:3, footnote 5).

Among certain churches in the Great Lakes area, some brothers who were placed in positions of leadership, primarily through the divisive work of Titus Chu, came to view the church as their own private domain in which to exercise authority. A look at three examples—Mansfield and Columbus, Ohio; and Toronto, Canada—debunks the myths of lawsuits being initiated extra-locally to “steal” meeting halls.

Mansfield

The church in Mansfield, Ohio, was the earliest local church in the Great Lakes area. It began meeting in 1966, and it created a nonprofit corporation to manage its business affairs in 1972. When Titus Chu sent a worker to appoint four new “elders” in Mansfield, the church had already been meeting for forty years. None of the new “elders” were from Mansfield or had any standing among the saints there, some of whom were among the church’s original members. Yet they demanded obedience to their presumed authority, and within two months of their arrival they locked the meeting hall, barring 70% of the church from the meetings. They sought to wrest control of the church properties from the saints. The excluded members asked for a business meeting of the church in Mansfield’s corporation, but the “elders” ignored their request. When the “elders” would not hold a business meeting in accordance with the church bylaws, the members then appealed to the court so that they could exercise their right to vote. At the court’s direction, a business meeting was held on December 1, 2006, and a board of directors was lawfully elected. Having failed in their attempt to take control of the church and its property, the “elders” left of their own accord. See also www.afaithfulword.org/reports/OpenLetterFromMansfield.pdf.

Columbus

The church in Columbus, Ohio, was founded in 1977. In 1982 it acquired property for a meeting hall, which it developed by 1985. Later the church acquired a house near the campus of Ohio State University. When one of the original elders migrated to the Czech Republic in 2000, Titus Chu appointed three new elders. These new elders followed Titus's work to progressively isolate the church from the fellowship of all the churches. In 2005 these elders cancelled the semiannual video training that had been a source of supply to the saints since the church's inception. A group of saints asked the elders for and received permission to listen to audiotapes of the training in one of their own homes. The following summer, on July 30, 2006, the three elders cancelled the Lord's table and publicly accused those who listened to the audiotapes of the semiannual training of being divisive. Twenty-three saints signed a letter expressing concern and asking the elders for a time of fellowship. Without granting such a time, the elders again used a Lord's Day meeting on August 27 to publicly excoriate and excommunicate all twenty-three signers, barring them from entering the meeting hall. In response, the signers did not sue the church but rather asked the court to intervene to uphold their rights as members, to protect the saints against financial and other abuses, and to hold the elders accountable for irregularities. They asked for copies of the church's financial records. The judge ruled in favor of the saints' filing, but the elders still refused to comply. Eventually, in a negotiated settlement, the three men appointed by Titus Chu chose to take the campus house, agreed to not call themselves the church in Columbus, and ceded the meeting hall to those who chose to continue to stand as the church in Columbus. Subsequently, the three separated themselves from Titus Chu's work and then split from one another. See also [www.afaithfulword.org/reports/Standing for the church in Columbus.pdf](http://www.afaithfulword.org/reports/Standing%20for%20the%20church%20in%20Columbus.pdf).

Toronto

The church in Toronto was raised up through the ministry of Witness Lee beginning from 1969. After Brother Lee's passing, however, it became manifest that elders loyal to Titus Chu were taking a different way. They severed fellowship with local churches that did not follow Titus's ministry. They abandoned the way of life and truth and, with the excuse that young people needed such attractions, introduced worldly elements into the meetings, including rock bands and other forms of entertainment. They implemented oppressive measures to assert their authority and to disparage and intimidate those who did not agree with them, including setting up a camera in one of the church's meeting halls to monitor what the saints were speaking. When seventy-seven church members wrote to the elders to express concern over the direction the elders were taking, they were publicly branded as "LSM-aligned," and it was made clear that they were no longer welcome. Those loyal to Titus Chu improperly instituted new by-laws to take over the church, its properties, and its assets. Realizing that the group was no longer a genuine local church but had become a divisive sect, two hundred members left. The saints were relieved to be out from under oppression and after consideration decided not to pursue legal recourse so as not to be entangled in protracted court proceedings. In doing so, they relinquished their legitimate claim to the three meeting halls even though they had contributed much to their acquisition and maintenance. As with Mansfield and Columbus, that decision was made locally. See also www.afaithfulword.org/reports/#Toronto.

Conclusion

There are two striking points in all these cases. First, all the decisions concerning whether to seek relief from the courts were local decisions. Contrary to rumors, no legal action was initiated by LSM, DCP, or the co-workers. Being unfamiliar with legal proceedings, those who decided to go to court sought advice from both the co-workers and DCP. Nonetheless, all the decisions governing the pursuit of redress were local. Second, all the actions were taken to protect the churches from those who exercised improper "authority" to unilaterally redirect the churches and repurpose their assets. The facts do not support the accusation that LSM, DCP, or the co-workers "stole" any meeting hall.