

Signs of Declining Interest in LSM’s “Recovery”

Our purpose is to document a declining trend in peoples’ interest in LSM’s Local Church movement, aka, “the Lord’s Recovery.” The indexes analysed include terms used in Google Internet searches over the last decade—2004 to 2014.¹ The Internet’s global reach plus the spread of smart phones and other devices, mean the Internet is an important & growing source of information. A few decades ago ‘seekers’ might visit a Christian bookstore to inquire about books by Watchman Nee or Witness Lee. Or they might attend a meeting of ‘the Local Church.’ Today, their likely first response is to Google “Watchman Nee,” “Witness Lee,” “Living Stream Ministry” or “Recovery Version Bible,” before taking further action. A downward trend in this ‘first response’—Google searches on these key words--suggests a declining interest in LSM’s ‘Recovery.’ LSM’s local churches have responded to the Internet option by highlighting these key terms on their websites. Common descriptions on their websites include statements like: “A local church, the church in [city X], enjoys Christ & recommends the ministry of Witness Lee, Watchman Nee.” Key words, such as: “Witness Lee, Watchman Nee, the Recovery Version study Bible, Lovers of Jesus affiliated with the local churches,” are also featured. These terms highlight the distinctive features of LSM’s local churches, factors which might cause someone to attend an LSM church as opposed to the multitude of alternatives. Declining numbers of Google searches on these key terms suggest an underlying decline in interest, which will probably translate into fewer first-time attendees and a slower growth rate and (perhaps) a decline in overall Local Church membership. Our main purpose is the document such a decline. Beyond a few initial suggestions we leave the analysis of the underlying causes to others.

Google Trends

Google Trends is a tool allowing users to track the relative number of internet searches for key terms & phrases conducted using the Google search engine over the period 2004 to the present. Graphs are generated depicting monthly figures relative to the highest month (scaled to 100). Hence the number of searches is presented relative to the peak month over the decade. Multiple terms can also to graphed, relative to the peak month of the most popular search item. Data can also be filtered by the origin of the search inquiry in terms of global regions (e.g. worldwide, US, etc) plus state, metro-area and city, if sufficient data is available.

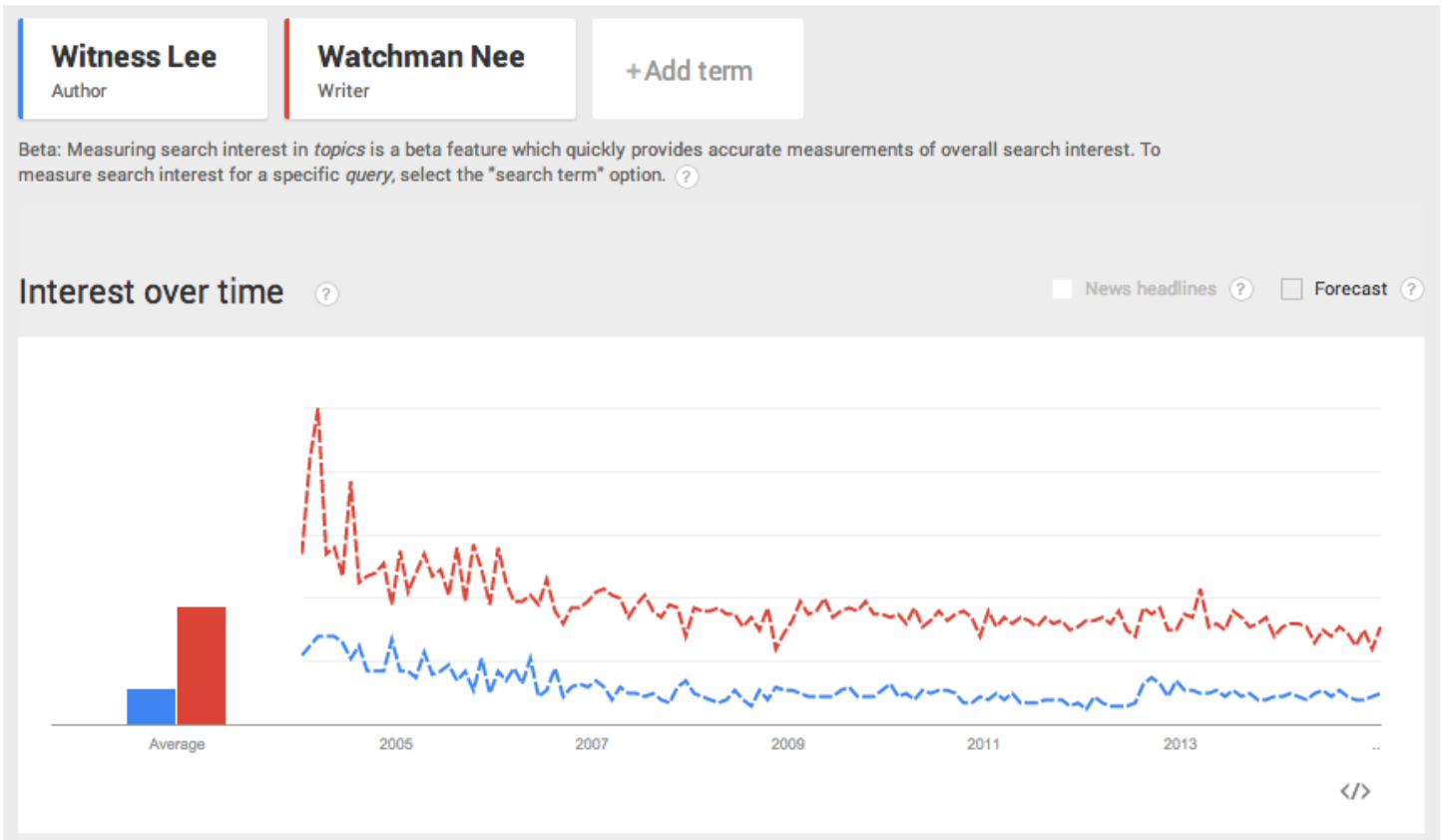
Trend Results—Declining Interest over Time

The graph below, on page 2, depicts “*Interest over Time*” as measured by the frequency of global Google searches for the terms, “Watchman Nee” (in red) and “Witness Lee,” (in blue) for the period Jan. 2004 to Dec. 2014.² The graph is ‘normalized’ by making the peak frequency 100% (in this case searches for “W. Nee” in March 2004) and adjusting all other figures relative to that point. Horizontal scale lines indicate 80%, 60%, 40% and 20%. Both graphs exhibit distinct downward trends, peaking early in 2004 and declining thereafter with seasonal & random fluctuations around that downward trend. Watchman Nee was a Google search subject three-times more frequently than Witness Lee; this ratio remains fairly constant throughout the period.

Searching for ‘Watchman Nee’

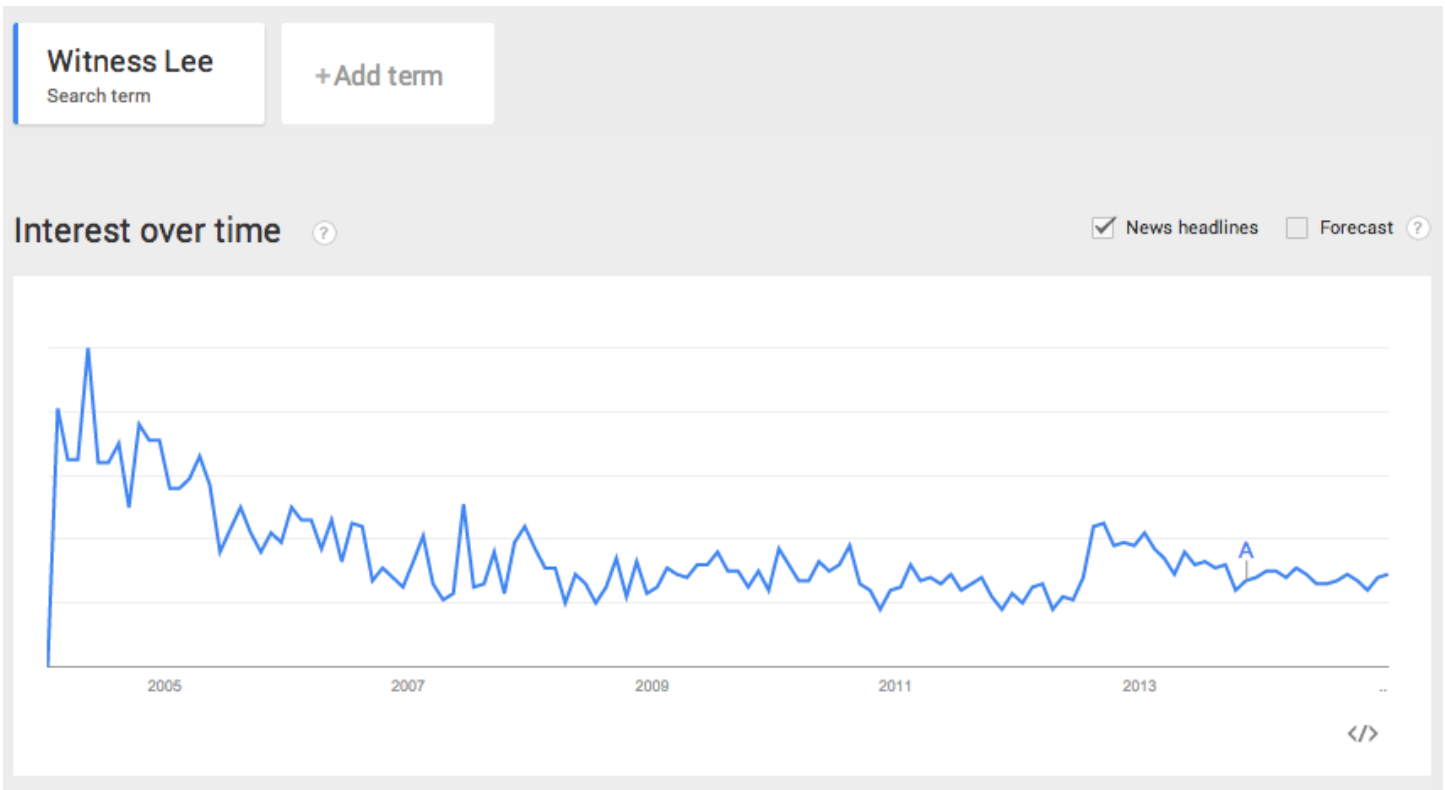
Global Google searches for “Watchman Nee” peaked in March 2004. By March 2013, a decade later, the incidence of searches was only 40% of the peak frequency. By March 2014 it was less than 30% of the peak. The predicted number of searches for 2015 was between 22% and 30% of the peak, 26% being the mid-point. Hence Google searches for “Watchman Nee” in the current year are expected to be only one quarter of the peak figure (Mar. 2004). Interestingly both the countries (Nigeria, South Africa) and cities [Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Accra (Ghana) & Lagos (Nigeria)] which ranked highest as search sources were in the ‘third world.’ Data for searches originating in the US showed the same overall pattern—peaking in March 2004, down to 35% of that figure by March 2014. States ranked highest as search sources included Tennessee, Oklahoma, Alabama and S. Carolina.

Globally the name “Witness Lee” appeared as a Google search item only one-third (33%) as frequently as “Watchman Nee.” By May/June 2012 searches for “W. Lee” were only 25% of those for “W. Nee.” However, an uptick in interest in late 2012 (Sept.–Dec.) appears to have temporarily offset some of the earlier declines.



Searching for 'Witness Lee'

The graph below depicts "Interest over time" in "Witness Lee" as measured by the volume of Google searches for that name. Again we see the temporary uptick in late 2012, followed by a resumption of a declining trend.



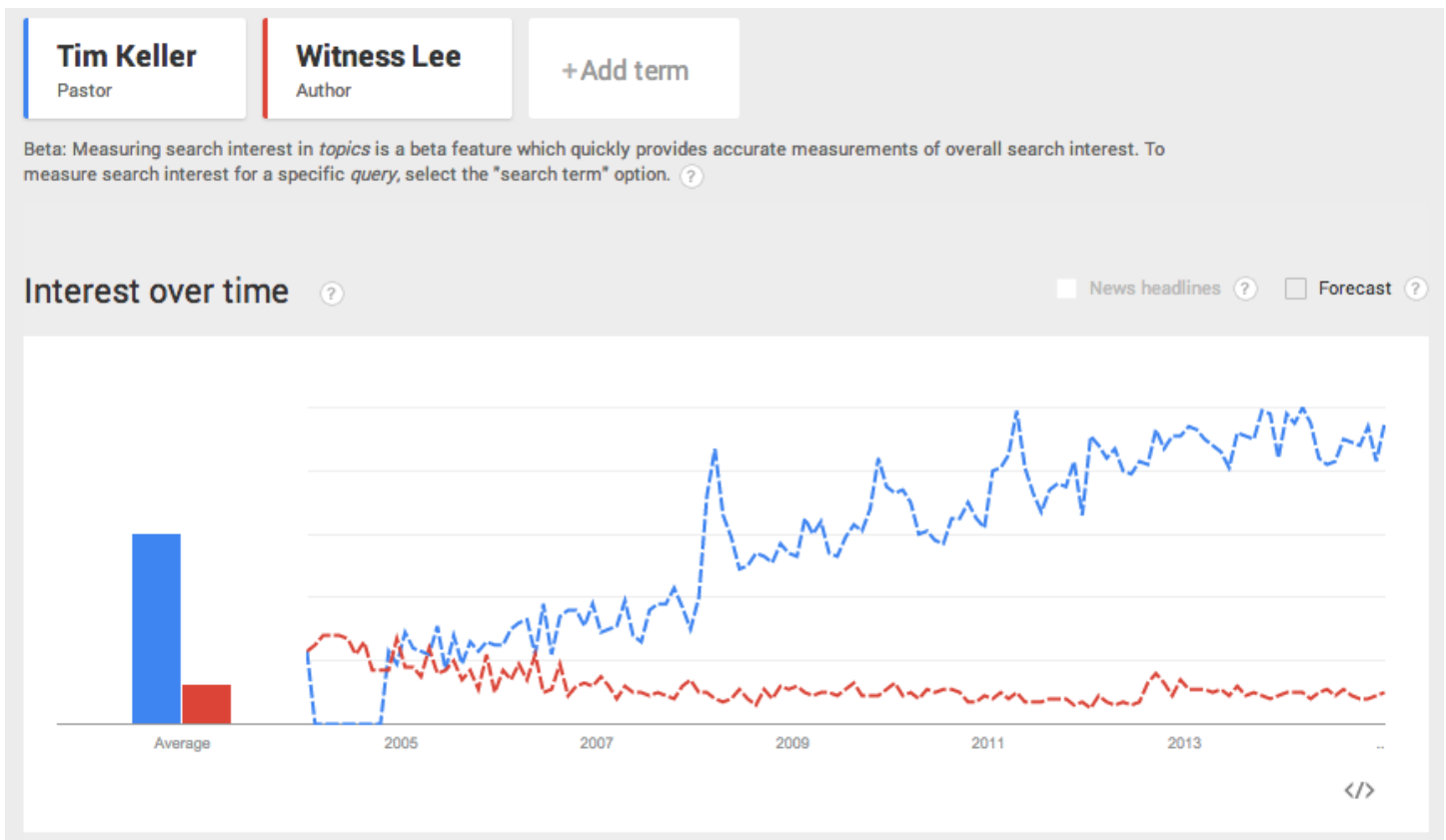
Witness Lee regularly “wrapped himself in Watchman Nee’s mantle” and appealed to his associations with him.³ LSM has consistently sought to leverage the popularity of Watchman Nee to generate interest in its teachings and publications.⁴ They ought to be concerned about indications of declining interest in Watchman Nee & Witness Lee which seems likely to translate into declining interest in LSM and its Local Churches.⁵

The pattern of Google searches for “Witness Lee” is similar to that for “Watchman Nee,” only scaled down proportionately.⁶ Globally the name “Witness Lee” appeared as a Google search item only 35% as frequently as “Watchman Nee.” Searches for “Witness Lee” peaked twice in 2004, in both Jan. & May of that year. By Jan. & May of 2014 this name was searched with only one third of the earlier frequency (33% & 34% respectively). For the current year (2015) Google predicts fewer searches—between 24% and 29% of the 2004 peak frequency. Globally the top source of searches for “Witness Lee” is the US followed by Brazil (66% of the US figure) and UK (half the US figure). The metro-areas of LA, New York & London (UK) are the top 3 cities ranked by search origin. The data for US-based searches exhibit a pattern similar to the global picture. US searches for “Witness Lee” peaked in May 2004. By May 2014 search frequency was one-third (34%) of the peak figure. California, Texas & Washington States ranked 1-2-3 as search sources. LA and NYC ranked 1-2 as metro-area sources.

Google searches for “Living Stream Ministry,” display the same overall pattern as the two authors LSM features—W. Nee & W. Lee. “LSM” peaked in Nov. 2004 & Oct. 2005 and declined thereafter. Lastly we note that “Titus Chu” made a “blip on the radar” as a Google search item on only one occasion—Nov., 2006,⁷ during LSM’s malicious quarantine campaign. This particular finding adds credence to the results reported above.

Observations—Google’s Trend is not LSM’s Friend

The trend is not LSM’s friend; Google searches for “Witness Lee” & “Watchman Nee” exhibit similar overall patterns—a declining trend. Searches for both items peaked in 2004 and declined asymptotically thereafter until the present (with some fluctuations around that overall downward trend). Meanwhile Google searches for some other ministers—e.g. Tim Keller, Matt. Chandler, Francis Chan--display upward momentum. [The graph below depicts ‘Interest over Time’ in terms of Google searches for ‘Tim Keller’ (blue) vs. ‘Witness Lee’ (red).]



The data themselves do not indicate the underlying causes of the decline in ‘*interest over time*’ for both W. Nee and W. Lee. Perhaps LSM and its “Local Churches” have not kept up with the constantly-changing Internet. Maybe LSM’s initial creative push for an Internet presence was not up-dated fast enough to keep LSM’s Internet offerings (websites, videos, etc) sufficiently attractive to retain the same level of search interest. If many Local Church websites remained static while competing offerings improved or expanded in number, then LSM’s Internet traffic would tend to fall off over time. Plus the growth of social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, etc) may reduce the time allocated by users to Google search,⁸ creating a ‘headwind’ for churches & ministries like LSM, which rely on the latter as their leading Internet strategy. Nevertheless, some ministries—e.g. Tim Keller, Matt. Chandler, Francis Chan--have clearly prospered, despite these ‘headwinds.’

Perhaps the problem is more fundamental; LSM & its affiliated Local Churches offer only two “product lines”—the ministries of Witness Lee and Watchman Nee. These two ministries taken together define LSM’s “brand.” LSM’s own teachings preclude them from ‘expanding their product line.’ For example contemporary Christian music & drama videos are anathema to LSM and its Local Churches.⁹ Through their own teachings, it seems LSM & its Local Churches have ‘painted themselves into a corner’ in terms of innovation & future development.

LSM’s teachings & practices have not changed over the last decade. Meanwhile, the personal & societal issues confronting Christians have changed; hence the “relevance gap” between LSM’s publications and Christians’ concerns has widened. LSM’s publications do not address issues raised by Islam & the rise of radical jihadists, for example.¹⁰ Where does radical Islam’s recent rise fit in LSM’s prophetic scenario? Neither W. Lee nor W. Nee addressed these issues, since they were not ‘front and center’ during their era. Perhaps indexes of declining interest reflect the principle espoused by W. Nee—“David served his own generation [Acts 13:36], he could not serve two.”¹¹ If W. Nee and W. Lee were “ministers of the Age,” that “age” was the 20th century, not the 21st.

Lastly we note that Google searches for “Witness Lee” & “Watchman Nee” appear to originate from different cities, countries & continents. Nigeria & South Africa ranked 1-2 as search-origins for “Watchman Nee;” the US was a distant 6th. African cities-- Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Accra (Ghana), Lagos (Nigeria) & Nairobi (Kenya) held the top 4 spots. By contrast Google searches for “Witness Lee” originate from the US, Brazil & UK; LA, NYC & London (UK) hold the top 3 spots according to city. This suggests that two distinct constituents are searching for these two ministers, with limited overlap. Plus this suggests that LSM faces additional challenges when it comes to harnessing third-world interest in “Watchman Nee” for their own purposes.

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Notes:

Thanks are extended to those commenting on earlier drafts. The author alone is responsible for the contents of this piece. The views expressed here are solely the author’s and should *not* be attributed to any believers, elders, co-workers or churches he is associated with. The author claims no particular expertise in the analysis of Internet data; the views expressed here on these subjects are therefore more tentative than usual.

1. Of course, strictly speaking the period 2004 to 2014 is eleven years, rather than a decade. “Decade’ is used as a short-hand approximation. Our analysis is limited to *Google searches in English*. Data for searches of ‘Watchman Nee’ & “Witness Lee” conducted *in Chinese* might show a very different pattern. But that would need data from other search engines besides Google (e.g. the Chinese equivalents of Google available in mainland China).
2. We note that there were also Google searches for the names, “Watchman Lee” & “Witness Nee.” For 2004 to 2014 these ‘errors’ occurred with a frequency of about 4% and 2% (respectively) relative to the total number of searches for “Watchman Nee” & “Witness Lee” combined. Since no ‘errors’ are reported prior to 2009 (below the reporting threshold?) the errors are relatively more important for 2009 to 2014. For 2009 to 2014 Google searches for the

- names, “Watchman Lee” & “Witness Nee” occurred with a frequency of about 6% and 3% (respectively) relative to the total number of searches for “Watchman Nee” & “Witness Lee” combined. So, for this period, there was an overall 9% ‘error rate’ in terms of searching for the wrong name--“Watchman Lee” or “Witness Nee.” Clearly, searching for “Watchman Lee” or “Witness Nee” is a simple mistake made by people unfamiliar with these 2 ministers. This supports the idea Google is an initial starting point in peoples’ investigation of W. Nee & W. Lee.
3. W. Lee frequently appealed to Watchman Nee and emphasized his association with W. Nee. For e.g. W. Lee asserted, “The greater part of my work is a continuation of that of Brother Watchman Nee.” [W. Lee, *Words of Training for the New Way, Vol. 1*, Chap. 3, Sect. 2] He also stated, “It is also a devilish, subtle lie to say that ...Witness Lee is different from Watchman Nee....I have to be faithful to the Lord, and I also have to be loyal to Brother Nee's commission.” [W. Lee, *History of the Church & the Local Churches*, Chap. 8, Sect. 8] Plus he says, “In the Lord's recovery today there is not only my ministry but also Brother Watchman Nee's ministry. These are not two ministries; they are one ministry and one speaking.” [W. Lee, *Crucial Principles for the Proper Church Life*, Chap. 4, Sect. 2]
 4. Take for e.g. LSM’s emphasis on the recognition given to Watchman Nee in the US Congress, House of Representatives, Thurs. July 30, 2009 [*Congressional Record* Vol. 155, #118 (Friday, July 31, 2009)] This event was emphasized by LSM’s websites, e.g. “contendingforthefaith.com.” On April 29, 2014 this public relations exercise was repeated when Speaker Joseph R. Pitts of Penn., gave both Watchman Nee & Witness Lee due respect.
 5. We do not track Google searches for “Local Church” or “Local Churches” since these terms are by definition generic. There is no way to distinguish between searches for LSM’s Local Church and searches for ‘the local church in the neighborhood’ or articles & news items addressing the subject of the generic ‘local church.’
 6. Google searches for “Witness Lee” also indicate the possibility of errors appearing in Google search statistics. On Tuesday 19 Nov. 2013 BBC World Radio aired a program under the headline “Witness—Lee Harvey Oswald in USSR,” with supporting media news releases [indicated by ‘A’ in the first 2 graphs above]. The radio broadcast examined the life of US President John F. Kennedy’s assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. However, note that the BBC headline juxtaposes the words “Witness” & “Lee.” In Google’s statistics, searches for the headline, “Witness—Lee Harvey Oswald in USSR,” count as searches for “Witness Lee.” This results in (random) errors which overestimate searches for “Witness Lee.”
 7. In Nov. 2006 Google searches for “Titus Chu” attained almost the same level as searches for “Witness Lee”—94% of the frequency. In all other months, prior & since, Google searches for “Titus Chu” were below the reporting threshold; so Google tracking statistics are not available (with the single exception of Nov. 2006).
 8. We are suggesting that LSM’s offerings—mainly writings by W. Lee & W. Nee—are more compatible with Google search than with social media (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, etc). No doubt LSM has a presence on Facebook; however “Witness Lee” has relatively few “likes” on Facebook. Plus we would speculate that users of Facebook are more interested in being “friends” with living people, than with the deceased (W. Lee, W. Nee, etc)!
 9. For more on this, see my article “*WWBLD—What Would Brother Lee Do? LSM’s Modus Operandi*” posted on www.LocalChurchDiscussions.com
 10. LSM’s English publications refer to “Islam” about 85 times, “Muslim” about 70 times, & the “Koran” less than 40 times—a very small number of citations given LSM’s voluminous publications. The term “jihad” never appears in LSM’s publications.
 11. The piece, ascribed to W. Nee, says: “David served in one generation [Acts 13:36], his own. He could not serve in two! Where today we seek to perpetuate our work by setting up an organization or society or system, the Old Testament saints served their own day and passed on. This is an important principle of life. Wheat is sown, grows, ears, is reaped, and then the whole plant, even to the root, is plowed out. God's work is spiritual to the point of having no earthly roots, no smell of earth on it at all. Men pass on, but the Lord remains. Everything to do with the Church must be up-to-date and living, meeting the present--one could never even say the passing--needs of the hour. Never must it become fixed, earth-bound static. God Himself takes away His workers, but He gives others. Our work suffers, but His never does. Nothing touches Him. He is still God.” [Watchman Nee, "*A Table in the Wilderness*"]

