

Church of Scientology members plead innocent to charges

WASHINGTON (UPI) — Nine members of the Church of Scientology, including the wife of founder L. Ron Hubbard, pleaded innocent today to charges they infiltrated federal agencies and stole government documents.

U.S. District Judge George Hart made it clear during the hour-long arraignment that he would reject church attempts to turn their trial into a forum for alledging 28 years of government harassment.

"The Church of Scientology is not on trial here and it's not going to be on trial," Hart said. "There will be no reference to religion throughout the trial.

"We're talking about stealing," the judge said. "That's a simple charge — like you went in a bank and took money."

It also was disclosed that grand juries in New York and Tampa, Fla., are investigating possible criminal conduct by the church, which already is accused in a 29-count indictment of placing members in typist jobs at the Justice Department and Internal Revenue Service to enable it to steal stacks of secret documents.

Hart denied motions by defense lawyers for a ruling sealing all documents in the case to protect the privacy of the defendants. Prosecutors argued the maneuver was intended for public relations purposes, noting the church has called repeated news conferences to denounce the government and now wants to prevent any adverse publicity from its alleged actions.

The church has admitted copying government documents, but said it did so to defend itself against harassment by the IRS, which has opposed granting it tax-exempt status, the Justice Department and other federal agencies.

The case is built around thousands of documents FBI agents seized in raids on the church's Los Angeles and Washington offices on July 8, 1977.

Two of the 11 defendants — Jane

Kember and Morris Budlong, whom prosecutors believe are in Sussex, England, did not appear for arraignment.

Those appearing before Hart included: Mary Sue Hubbard, Sussex, wife of the church founder; Henning Heldt, Los Angeles; Duke Snider, Mitchell Hermann and Cindy Raymond, all of Hollywood; Richard Weigand, Van Nuys; and Gregory Willardson, Beverly Hills.

They are charged with two

counts of conspiracy, 10 counts of theft of government property, 10 counts of burglary and one count of intercepting oral communications.

Two other suspects who entered innocent pleas — Gerald Bennett Wolfe, of Areleta, Calif., and Sharon Thomas, Los Angeles — allegedly are low-level church members who "infiltrated" the IRS and Justice Department. They faced related, but slightly different charges.

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