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Poor image plagued church from start

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CLEARWATER — Unlike some of his colleagues in the Clearwater business community, developer Alan Bomstein doesn't regard the Church of Scientology as a threat to the city's economic future.

But he does agree that L. Ron Hubbard's 32-year-old, self-styled "religion" has an image problem.

"The Church of Scientology," Bomstein says, "is the classic, textbook example of bad public relations."

On the eve of City Commission hearings into church activities, there is little doubt that Scientology is the least popular institution in Clearwater.

Its vocal critics include leaders of the business and religious communities. Depending on who is talking, Scientology is blamed for shrinking the tax base, hindering downtown development and threatening the city's youth.

THIS BROAD public antipathy is what drives the city's politicians in their continuing rhetorical battle with the church.

Scientologists complain that the City Commission is trying to drive them out of Clearwater. Few others are complaining.

Says School Board member Betty Hamilton:

"If you had a referendum tomorrow, 'Do you want Scientology to leave Pinellas County?' I think you'd have an overwhelming vote of 'yes.'"

Poor relations between the city and the church can be traced initially to Scientology's surreptitious entry into the city in late 1975. The church bought the old Fort Harrison Hotel and Bank of Clearwater building under the cover of two front groups.

THE SECRECY surrounding the purchases caused some local residents — especially Mayor Gabriel Cazares — to become suspicious. Since then, the community's misgivings about Scientology have grown for reasons that include:

✓ Exposure of an elaborate plan by Scientologists to infiltrate local institutions, discredit critics and take control of the city.

The church placed agents in the Chamber of Commerce, the *Clearwater Sun* and the Pinellas-Pasco State Attorney's Office among others. Scientologists plotted dirty tricks designed to smear Cazares, a *Sun* reporter and the husband of a reporter for the *St. Petersburg Times*.

These activities were graphically detailed in the church's own documents seized in Washington and Los Angeles by the FBI. The documents led to the convictions on federal charges of nine Scientologists, including Hubbard's wife, Mary Sue.

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Image from 1-B

A Times series based on the documents was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1980. That same year, the popular CBS news program *60 Minutes* broadcast a critical report on the church's activities.

✓ The church's refusal on religious grounds to pay property taxes on its vast holdings. Though the church has "donated" to the county amounts equivalent to taxes levied from 1976-78, it still contends it is not subject to taxation. The unpaid bill is now \$450,321.26 as the church's lengthy court battle with Pinellas Property Appraiser Ronald Schultz drags on.

✓ Scientology's reputation as one of several "cult" groups that allegedly gains complete control over the lives — and money — of converts.

National publicity about these groups, including the Unification Church of Rev. Sun Myung Moon and the Hare Krishna sect, has escalated since 1978 when more than 900 members of the People's Temple died at the Guyanese retreat of Rev. Jim Jones.

Reader's Digest, for example, has published articles last year entitled: "Scientology: Anatomy of a Frightening Cult," and "Scientology: The Sickening Spread."

ALL THIS has left its mark on public opinion.

A psychologist overseeing a Scientology-sponsored poll of eligible voters in 1980 concluded that Suncoast residents viewed Scientologists "as an influential, money-grubbing set of outsiders."

Sixty-eight percent of those polled said the Scientology movement could become another "Jonestown." More than half saw "nothing positive about it."

"We've made some mistakes in the past," admitted Hugh Wilhere, chief Scientology spokesman in Clearwater. But he said the church is "trying to repair the damage."

The attempt is made through public statements and involvement in a variety of civic affairs.

Wilhere, a curly haired, 37-year-old native of Philadelphia who discovered Scientology 16 years ago while serving in the Army, heads an active public affairs office. The office provides local reporters with a steady stream of information depicting the church favorably and criticizing its critics.

Then there are the organizations.

Through New Clearwater for the 80s, Scientology

trumpets revitalization of the city's ailing downtown. Through the Gerus Society, it speaks out for the elderly. Through Applied Scholastics, it decries "hidden illiteracy" among students. It financially supports Narconon, a group purporting to help drug abusers. The church gives money to local charities.

SCIENTOLOGY TOUTS not only its good works but also the financial boost it provides the Suncoast. Last year the church asserted that in 1980 it pumped \$10-million into the Tampa Bay economy. Wilhere said recently that Scientologists "help keep the (Clearwater) downtown alive economically" by patronizing local merchants.

Some smaller merchants reportedly depend heavily on Scientologists for business, but the business community as a whole would gladly bid the church farewell. The Chamber of Commerce has passed a resolution declaring Scientology unwelcome here.

The reaction of city leaders to the church's social service efforts can be summed up in a word: mistrust.

"I think that all of these efforts are self-serving, to gain credibility," snapped Mac Williams, the outspoken minister of Mount Carmel Baptist Church and president of the Clearwater NAACP. "I don't think they are really concerned about the elderly or the drug addicts."

"I think it's a smoke screen," added Bank of Clearwater President David Carley, "a reaction to the bad publicity they've had."

While the Gerus Society has drawn some praise for its work, other church-backed initiatives — even seemingly innocuous ones — have been rebuffed.

In 1980, Scientologists entered a team in a local church softball league. Other teams refused to play them, forfeiting the championship to the Scientologists. The next year, organizers of Clearwater's traditional Fun N' Sun parade changed parade rules to prevent the church from entering a float.

THE PINELLAS SCHOOL system — no advocate of drug abuse — decided in January that public school principals should not refer students to Narconon for drug rehabilitation.

One measure of the church's standing in the community can be taken from the steady stream of rumors about people and businesses possibly connected to Scientology.

Such scuttlebutt can drive customers away. Bob Koon, owner of the Sandy Book Store on Cleveland Street, complained last June that business had dropped 10 percent

because of unfounded rumors that the store was controlled by Scientologists.

"It hurts our image in the community," Koon complained at the time.

Annie Callaghan, president of the student council at Clearwater High School, recalled a similar reaction among students when it was disclosed recently that a nearby pizza parlor, My Friend's House, is owned by a Scientologist.

"We were (saying) like, don't even go over there," Miss Callaghan said.

Miss Callaghan attributed the negative reaction to publicity about church misdeeds and to fear of an unfamiliar organization.

"Everybody's afraid of things they don't know about," she said.

OTHER CRITICS use stronger language. John Czitri, owner of a Clearwater machine shop, denounces the church as "a cancer" that makes "robots" out of its members.

Since moving here from New Jersey three and a half years ago, Czitri, 44, has become part of the city's small group of anti-Scientology activists.

He has attended rallies held by Richard Tenney, a one-time city commissioner and fierce Scientology critic. He has a "Stamp Out Scientology" bumper sticker on his Pontiac station wagon.

"I feel good every time I pass the (Fort Harrison) hotel with my bumper sticker," said Czitri, referring to the church's headquarters in the downtown landmark. "I feel we should get rid of them."

Ministers at Clearwater's Christian churches are among the most vocal critics. Rev. Eugene Ensley of Peace Memorial Presbyterian Church said he considers the Church of Scientology "an overt physical threat." Williams, of Mount Carmel Baptist, called Scientology "a vicious cult." Williams added, "I don't think we're safe."

In seeming contradiction to these statements is the fact that the outward conduct of church members has been benign.

By most accounts, Scientologists have attempted little proselytizing in Clearwater. Their local activities center around counseling and training church members who visit from other cities.

Two Scientologists have committed suicide in Clearwater, but there have been no reported incidents of violence

attributed to church members.

"They're better behaved than the kids over at junior college," remarked government watchdog Charlie Finton.

It does not appear that Scientology's image problem has become the city's own. The presence of Scientology has had no effect on the vital tourist trade, according to industry spokesmen.

Some business leaders, including Chamber of Commerce President John Wyllys, contend that the church's presence discourages developers who might invigorate the sluggish downtown district. But Mayor Charles LeCher said there is no evidence of that.

"As long as they just stay to themselves," said Pinellas Circuit Court Clerk Karleen De Blaker, a former Clearwater city commissioner, "there's really no proof that they're doing anything to harm the community."

Some observers say hostility to Scientology would vanish if the church simply paid its taxes.

Wilhere blames lingering bad feelings on religious prejudices inflamed by a small group of vocal critics. Scientologists frequently compare their plight to that of Mormons and Jews in earlier times.

Some non-Scientologists are sympathetic to this complaint.

"RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE is a fact of life," agreed Norton Chervitz, part owner of a downtown shoe store. "Once (critics) get done with the Scientologists, who are they going to go after next?"

"When you're Jewish, it's hard not to be tolerant of another religion," added lawyer Raymond Gross, former president of the Clearwater Bar Association.

"It's just too easy to paint with broad strokes, to characterize all by the mistakes of a few," Gross added. "The individual Scientologist that you and I see walking down the street . . . they're just people who are here in good faith as far as I can tell."

Wilhere asserted that the church's public relations posture has improved in the last year or so, that some of the anti-Scientology sentiment has diminished after a peak when the damning documents were released by the FBI in 1979.

"I don't feel that the whole community of Clearwater is against me," he said.

There is a silent minority of church supporters in the city, Wilhere explained. But he added, "You just can't ask them to go out and defend you . . . under these circumstances."