

Scientology starts publicity campaign

By STEVEN GIRARDI
Sun staff writer

The Church of Scientology has embarked on a citywide publicity campaign in the wake of five days of public hearings on the sect by the Clearwater City Commission, a church minister said Monday.

At a 10:30 a.m. press conference, Scientology spokesman the Rev. Hugh Wilhere announced the beginning of an "open house" publicity campaign. Less than an hour earlier church attorney Paul B. Johnson of Tampa had told the Commission he would not use the four days set aside for church rebuttal.

The open house includes tours of the Fort Harrison, a filmed interview with Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard, demonstrations of the E-meter used during church auditing or counseling, lobby displays of church programs and "all aspects of Scientology," Wilhere said.

"In pursuit of what we consider important, our church has failed to provide adequate in-

formation to the people of this community," said Wilhere. Earlier he said he has been a church minister for many years but just recently began using the title.

"We want to remedy that possible omission on our part starting today," he said. "You have nothing to fear from us."

The church announcement of increased publicity plans holds true to what several of the city's witnesses predicted the sect would do in response to the adverse publicity created by the hearings.

The church will offer a free introductory audit "to those who would like to experience auditing firsthand," Wilhere said.

After the brief conference, a church minister and member provided an E-meter demonstration for the press, inviting reporters to take part but finding no takers.

"Oh, it won't hurt you," one member told a reporter.

Church members on Sunday celebrated the 32nd anniversary of Hubbard's book, "Dianetics: Mod-

ern Science of Mental Health." The church has made the book available at all "major bookstores in Clearwater and surrounding areas," Wilhere said.

Full-page advertisements featuring five separate Hubbard essays are scheduled to appear in the *Clearwater Sun*, Wilhere said.

"In short," Wilhere said, "we like Clearwater just like you and . . . plan to remain here and make this our home."

Meanwhile, commissioners at City Hall heard from Boston attorney Michael Flynn, who summed up the hearings by advising the city on possible ways to curb alleged deceptive trade practices by the church.

Flynn, hired by the city to bring the 16 hearing witnesses, said he will meet today with city officials "tying up a lot of loose ends."

He said he has been in contact also with Clearwater Police Chief Sid Klein "concerning specific areas of examination and actions which could be brought on behalf of the city."

Klein said Monday his department has been investigating a possible unreported death of a two-year-old child at the former Fort Harrison Hotel, 210 S. Fort Harrison Ave., the sect's downtown Clearwater headquarters.

Lavenda Van Schaick testified Saturday that a child was killed in the hotel parking lot while she was living there in 1979. Klein said if the incident indeed occurred, it was not reported.

Klein said his department will review the entire transcript of the five days searching for "any incidents that were reported to have occurred in our jurisdiction and examine those incidents in regard to the statute of limitations and proceed accordingly."

"A lot of the areas discussed pertained to health, safety and welfare," Klein said.

Sect attorney Johnson criticized the city for dealing with issues not within its jurisdiction and which should be turned over to the State Attorney's Office for investigation.

Pinellas-Pasco State Attorney

James T. Russell was not available for comment Monday. Pinellas County Sheriff Gerry Coleman said his department would be interested in any investigations that may result from hearing testimony, but Clearwater activities of the church were not in his jurisdiction.

Commissioners said they were pleased with the outcome of the hearings and some said they were surprised by some of testimony.

"I never knew it was so widespread and that so many were working something like 18 hours a day for \$9.60 a week," Mayor Charles LeCher said of the testimony. "I had never suspected the kids had no education in schools."

He said he was surprised to hear allegations of overcrowded living conditions, people sleeping in the hotel garage, an hotel epidemic of hepatitis in 1977 and that nearly all of Hubbard's church-reported background is fictitious.

"I didn't have anything (about the church) before the hearings," LeCher said, adding much

of the publicized church activities occurred before he became mayor in 1979. "What I had heard I was hesitant to raise in public because I didn't know if it was true."

"Now we'll have to gather it all up and look at various ways to enact legislation," he said.

Commissioners agreed to pursue the evidence and voted unanimously to retain Flynn to do a legal analysis of the hearings.

Commissioner Rita Garvey said she believes the witnesses told the truth.

"I can't believe anyone would say those things if they were not true," she said. "My basic impression was the hearings really confirmed the rumors and stories" about the church.

She said she was curious about how the witnesses could have stayed with the church for so long.

"Everyone who was there testified about experiences and dedication they had to an organization that I would have perceived as destroying me," she said.