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Section D

Tide turning

Scientologists may be losing battle with Clearwater

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CLEARWATER — A poker-faced doorman bows slightly at the entrance of the Fort Harrison and motions visitors to the lobby, where a crowd waits at the front desk and dozens of guests rush up and down the marble staircases beneath the crystal chandeliers.

A larger-than-life portrait of L. Ron Hubbard, the reclusive founder of Scientology, stares down upon his followers from high on the wall. Many of them wear the sea merchant uniform that is part of their code. Most criss-cross the lobby of the aging hotel in the quickened footsteps of someone with a mission.

It is Florida's most unusual place of worship. Or is it?

Between a controversial new city ordinance and an age-old tax case, the Church of Scientology's struggle for legitimacy — perhaps even survival — in this immaculate Gulf Coast city is failing.

Inside the 11-story monolith that dominates the city's downtown, the church formed around the counseling methods and self-betterment theories of Hubbard thrives at a pace that could make the nearby Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians envious. But outside on the streets of Clearwater, residents have remained unconvinced that the group with its checkered past is a religion at all.

So when ordinance 3091-83 came up for a final vote earlier this month, only one city commissioner opposed the law that gives Clearwater strong investigatory powers over all charitable organizations — but that church members believe will be used against them

"It has happened for ages," said Rev. Hugh Wilhere, the former probation officer who does most of the talking for the church. "The Baptists got run out of Massachusetts. It's happened to the Catholics, the Mormons. In one place or another all through history, somebody's been going after someone else."

In modern-day Clearwater, even the church's milder critics admit they would like history to repeat itself once more. The lone dissenter on the ordinance vote conceded residents have made themselves clear when it comes to Scientologists.

"The people want you to do anything and everything," said Commissioner Jim Berfield, "to get them out of town. It's as simple as that."

But in fact, the feud between the city and church isn't simple at all; For years, both have offered almost a textbook case on how not to get along. Local politicians have accused the church of everything from devil-worship to profiteering. The church, in turn, claims the city has been discriminatory, bigoted and has passed unconstitutional laws.

The ordinance is a 12-page document that gives the city the power to probe the church ledgers to halt what city officials claim has been a history of improper fund-raising by the church. The Scientologists say the charges are groundless. But a cloak of secrecy has enveloped the organization since it arrived in Clearwater in 1975 and bought the Fort Harrison under a disguised corporate name for \$2.3 million cash.

A wing of the church called the Guardians managed to slip members into jobs at the po-

lice department and the Clearwater Sun and plotted to pressure local officials — even try to frame a mayor with hit-and-run charges — with the help of a network of amateur spies, according to members' confessions and court documents.

Today, the church says such zealous moves were foolish and have long since been halted. "We made some mistakes," said Rev. Wilhere. "Hopefully, we've learned something from all this."

To help make amends, the church set up a new public affairs office and began to build a case for why Clearwater needs the Scientologists. They counted up what they compute to be a \$10-million annual contribution they make to the local economy. They painted and cleaned up their buildings and started paying calls on civic leaders.

They've also instructed their followers to be more pleasant. "Smile," reads one sign in a downtown Scientology building. "This is the friendliest place in the whole world."

The campaign has had only limited success. The owners of many of the newer stores in downtown Clearwater have found church members to be a boon to business. "They've never even been given a first chance," said Elaine Narcolis, 28, the manager of a downtown boutique.

But merchants who've been there since the early days are not so forgiving. Says Dixie Robinson, who runs a printing shop across the street from the Fort Harrison: "I've had people

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