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Local sect members protest jury decision

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CLEARWATER—Local members of the Church of Scientology took to the streets Saturday night to protest a \$39 million jury award to an Oregon woman who claimed she was defrauded by the sect.

Approximately 300 Clearwater Scientologists mounted a candlelight vigil to protest the Portland jury's Friday action in favor of disgruntled former church member Julie Christoferson Titchbourne. The Scientologists paraded from their headquarters at the former Fort Harrison Hotel through downtown Clearwater to the Coachmen Park area, where they listened to church speakers.

Passing motorists ignored the 40-minute long procession. The only police in sight stayed in

the background and ensured the peacefulness of the march. There was no violence.

Rev. Hank Billings, a minister of the Clearwater branch of Scientology, read from the sect's prayer for total freedom, which included a plea for the "freedom to do and the freedom to have."

In addition to the candlelight vigil, which was confined to sidewalks since the participants had no parade permit from the city, 300 local Scientologists left Clearwater by chartered aircraft Saturday. According to sect spokesman Ludwig Alpers, they intend to join "tens of thousands of Scientologists headed to Portland to express their outrage at the jury verdict."

Of the \$39 million award, \$20 million was entered against Sci-

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* Sect

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entology founder L. Ron Hubbard by Multnomah Circuit Court Judge Donald H. Londer. Londer issued a default judgment against Hubbard because he failed to respond to the suit. Asked why Hubbard did not respond, Alpers asserted that Hubbard was not an official or manager of the church, and had not been since the 1960s.

Alpers said Mrs. Titchbourne's fraud claim (she allegedly said that the church had promised to improve her eyesight and to make her more intelligent) was not the central issue of the 10-week Oregon trial.

"There were weeks of testimony about the Church of Scientology. Religion was on trial," Alpers said. "That," he added, "is unconstitutional."

In the press release put out Saturday by local Scientology headquarters, Alpers described the Portland jury decision:

"A small local court has decided that religion as practiced by Scientologists is not protected by the guarantee of religious freedom as stated in the first amendment of the United States Constitution. This is not



Sun staff photo by DAVID SIGLER

Scientology members march through downtown Clearwater Saturday night.

the first time we have been attacked for our stance for religious freedom. Those who fight

us are against freedom—that is why they attack us." Saturday afternoon, before

the vigil, the church spokesman said the Oregon decision would be appealed.