

Ex-Scientologist risks jail to speak against church

By Craig Dezern

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

TAMPA — You shouldn't be reading this story.

The tale of Margery Wakefield vs. the Church of Scientology is supposed to be a secret. Church officials say so. So does a federal judge.

In fact, Wakefield could go to jail for talking about the 12 years she spent as a member of the cult, which has its spiritual headquarters

in Clearwater.

Wakefield, 41, is talking anyway, braving the threats of Scientology lawyers and testing the patience of a U.S. district judge.

"What do you do when you know something like this?" Wakefield asks. "I tried to walk away from it. For three years, I tried."

In 1982, Wakefield sued the Church of Scientology. Four years later she settled out of court and agreed never again to talk about her time in the church.

She agreed never to reveal to anyone but her immediate family that Scientology offi-

cials paid her \$200,000 for her silence. She also said she would never repeat publicly her charges in the suit that Scientologists held her captive, committed fraud, broke their promises to cure her mental illness and practiced medicine without a license.

U.S. District Judge Elizabeth A. Kovachevich in May reinforced the settlement, forbidding Wakefield to break the gag rule.

This month, though, Wakefield has defied that order with a vengeance, calling radio talk shows, local newspapers and television stations to offer interviews. She has distributed

internal church documents and damaging magazine stories. By her own account, she has broken the rule at least a half a dozen times.

Wakefield wanted to force a confrontation, and she quickly got one.

Paul B. Johnson, a Tampa lawyer for Scientology, has asked Kovachevich to find Wakefield in criminal contempt 10 times, punishing her for each offense with six months in jail or a \$500 fine. He also asked that Wakefield be held in civil contempt and fined \$240,000 for

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Margery Wakefield,
former Scientologist

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damages against the church.

The file in the case is supposed to be sealed, but Wakefield supplied copies of Johnson's motions to the media. Neither Johnson nor a Scientology lawyer in New York would comment on the case. To do so would violate the settlement agreement, the New York lawyer said.

Wakefield's lawyer, Ford Greene of San Anselmo, Calif., would not comment on the case either.

"We don't want to incur any judicial wrath," said Greene, who has represented former Scientologists and Unification Church members (Moonies) in lawsuits claiming that the cults brainwashed them. Wakefield "is in hot water, and she doesn't need her lawyer to get in hot water too."

No hearing has been scheduled.

Church spokesman Bill Daugherty dismissed the ruckus Wakefield has caused.

"This one gal," he said, "she's not really any concern. She's an unstable person — she's been in and out of mental hospitals. I don't know what her deal is."

It's simple, Wakefield said, Scientology is a dangerous cult, based on occult practices and mind control. It stole 12 years of her life and pulled her away from the psychiatric help she really needed.

Wakefield believes she must speak out, whatever the consequences.

"I'm prepared to go to jail. In fact, it may not be the worst thing," Wakefield said. "It would be an act that would get a lot of attention, and my purpose is to raise the awareness of people in this area about this church."

Unlocking secrets of life

Scientology is the creation of L. Ron Hubbard, who wrote pulp science fiction. His 1950 book, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*, became a best-seller and the bible of the Church of Scientology.

Hubbard, who died in 1986, called Scientology "applied religious philosophy." In his book, *Scientology, The Fundamentals of Thought*, Hubbard wrote that the practice could increase intelligence, better behavior and unlock the secrets of life.

For the initiate, Scientology can seem a practical approach to solving problems. Using an "E-meter," a sort of crude lie detector, a follower is "audited" by a church counselor. He is questioned incessantly about painful events in his life (or lives because the church believes vigorously in reincarnation).

By recalling and reliving these events, known as "engrams," the follower can free them from his mind and eliminate the aberrant behavior they cause — at a cost of \$200 or more an hour.

As followers continue along the Scientology path of enlightenment into the once-secret upper levels, Wakefield said, the religion enters a twilight zone that seems straight out of a Hubbard science fiction novel.

About 75 million years ago, Hubbard claimed, an evil being named Xenu ruled the 90-planet Galactic Confederation. Faced with a crisis of overpopulation, the cruel Xenu sent many beings to a small planet called Teegeeach, which would later be known as Earth.

Xenu buried them under volcanoes and dropped hydrogen bombs on them, killing their physical bodies but releasing their spirits, or "thetans." The thetans were gathered into clusters that are implanted into each human being today and create misery.

Only Scientology, Hubbard said, could rid humans of their "thetan" guests. It's not cheap. The *St. Petersburg Times* reported that auditing at this level costs \$6,500, and the church takes in up to \$2 million every week through auditing and other enterprises.

An easy target

Wakefield, who has curly blond hair and a wide smile, said she was an easy target for Scientology back in 1968. She was a confused freshman at the University of Michigan, away from her family and recovering from a nervous breakdown.

"All they had to say was they could help me," Wakefield said.

Willingly, she grasped the two tin cans that are hooked up to the E-meter. Her problems were severe, the "auditor" told her. She needed help only the church's California facility could give.

She packed up and left with only \$500, which the church quickly took from her. She became a counselor herself and began "auditing" children to pay for her own "auditing" sessions.

"You become an addict," Wakefield said. "You always have to have the next level."

From the beginning, she said,

she was hypnotized and brainwashed by the church. Scientology gained control of her mind and will during hours-long sessions in which she would repeatedly answer questions, stare at an everyday object or perform routine tasks again and again.

Told to earn \$20,000 for her fees, Wakefield left the church for several years and worked for IBM. By 1980, she had saved the money, which she paid to the church for advanced "auditing" sessions in Clearwater that introduced her to the secret "thetan" levels.

"They tell you these are the levels where you'll become a super-human person," she said. "You either think it's really weird and you leave or you say, 'Is that possible?'"

Wakefield thought it was, but something went wrong.

Instead of a new awareness and sense of freedom, Wakefield suffered intense headaches, paranoia and nightmares. "I started just going down the tubes," she said.

Scientology leaders feared that she was a suicide risk, Wakefield said, and feared she could bring bad publicity.

They locked her in a room for two weeks, she said, with guards outside the door at all times. Finally, they took her to the airport, told her to pick a destination and put her on a plane. She went back to her family in Madison, Wis.

In 1981 three Scientologists tracked her down. They took her to a motel and held her there for three days, she said, forcing her to sign an agreement promising not to sue the church in exchange for a \$16,000 check. She used the money to repay her father, who had lent her money for "auditing" sessions.

Wakefield said she made those allegations in a lawsuit filed in 1982, after she returned to Clearwater. At the request of Scientology lawyers, the court file in the case has been sealed from the public.

Life after the church

Since leaving the church, Wakefield had been in and out of mental institutions 14 times in four years, mainly for depression. She blames the false promises of Scientology for keeping her from the psychiatric care she really needed.

In 1986 the church settled Wakefield's case and three others out of court. Wakefield said she received \$200,000. By accepting the money, she agreed never to speak against the church again. However, she now says that she believed the money was for damages, not for her silence.

She broke the gag rule for the first time in 1987 when she gave a television interview at a conference about cults. The Scientologists filed for a federal order to prevent Wakefield from speaking against the church again, and it was granted this May.

"I can't live with it," Wakefield said of the ruling. "I just decided I wasn't going to follow it."

Wakefield works with the Cult Awareness Network. The national, not-for-profit group uses her to warn potential Scientologists away from the church.

Cynthia Kisser, executive director of the network, said the firsthand knowledge of Wakefield and other former members is vital.

"It can help people who are on the verge of joining," Kisser said.

None of Wakefield's charges against the church are new.

Scores of books, newspaper articles and magazine stories have portrayed Hubbard as a liar, a satanist and a tax cheat who had to live at sea to avoid the Internal Revenue Service. Scientology was never a religion, the articles said, but a cynical business driven by mind control. Top church officials have been convicted of breaking into government offices to steal information damaging to their cause. In Spain the president of the international church is one of 11 defendants facing charges of coercion and fraud.

Scientologists counter that they are the victims of religious persecution and the millions of members they claim to have can't be wrong. (Others report membership in the tens of thousands.)

Although there are many other critics of Scientology, Wakefield thinks she knows why the church considers her a threat that must be silenced.

"One of their real fears is that all of the disgruntled ex-members will get organized," Wakefield said. She is working toward that goal.

She already has started a support group for former members, and with the help of her family and the Cult Awareness Network, she wants to contact former Scientologists across the country. The group can then compile sworn statements to be used by local, state or federal authorities to investigate the church.

"My biggest hope," Wakefield said, "is that something can be done about Scientology so that other people don't have to go through what I've gone through. It's been a horrible experience."