

Scientology Church feud with anti-cultists heats up

By Daniel J. Lehmann
Religion Writer

A festering dispute between a nontraditional religion and an anti-cult group has escalated to the point where each camp is accusing the other of using Nazilike tactics.

Chances of a truce between the Church of Scientology and the Cult Awareness Network appear slim. Each denies the other's allegations of employing techniques that fleece victims of money and inflict psychological damage.

The two have been at odds for at least a decade. The faceoff heated up in a recent solicitation letter from Chicago-based CAN and the "Religious Freedom Project," supported in part by Scientologists.

CAN distributed an endorsement by Gabe Cazares, former mayor of Clearwater, Fla. Cazares says he has been harassed by Scientologists because he opposed the church's Flag Service Organization, a retreat housed in a former hotel.

Church recruits, Cazares said in the letter, "are brought to Clearwater's infamous Scientology communes where they live under controlled conditions similar to those that existed under Nazism and Stalinism. . . ."

Around the same time the letter was being circulated, the Church of Scientology was setting up the Religion Freedom Project to counter attacks by CAN.

The project is led by Jonathon L. Nordquist, a former Hare Krishna turned cult deprogrammer who worked "in association with" CAN, and now denounces it. Nordquist charges that parents hire high-priced CAN "exit counselors" (deprogrammers) to abduct cult members. The deprogrammers, he claims, rely on physical and sexual abuse to break members' wills.

Nordquist, in a press release that listed the Church of Scientology as media contact, called CAN "a hate-mongering terrorist group as ignorant in its motives as the Nazis who wiped out Jewry in Germany."

CAN was founded 12 years ago as an information service on "destructive cults," according to Cynthia S. Kisser, its leader. A destructive cult, she said, is one that engages in unethical and deceptive recruitment and indoctrination of members.

Kisser denied that any elected, appointed or paid staff member of CAN participates in involuntary deprogramming. But she admits they do help sect members who agree to counseling.

Interest in the group is strong. In 1989, it fielded 15,000 phone inquiries, said Kisser, and is holding at that level this year.

The popularity of the Church of Scientology also remains strong.

The late L. Ron Hubbard founded it in 1954. The onetime science fiction writer gained fame in 1950 with his book *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*. From that sprang the church, an "applied religious philosophy" for personal development.

By the 1980s, Scientology was beset with lawsuits, most settled

spokeswoman for the Chicago church at 3011 Lincoln.

"I think when you have something different and new and not the norm, and it's successful, you'll hear people screaming about it."

Brookes said "there's no way to answer" the allegations of manipulation by the church and other accusations leveled by CAN because "it's so insane."

Kisser said her group would back off its assault on Scientology when "reports of deceptive practices stop reaching our ears."

Brookes answered that CAN is an "anti-religious" organization that wants sanctions against Mormons, Hare Krishnas and fundamentalist sects, among others.

"When you start to take rights away from one religion, all religious rights are being eaten away," said Brookes.

Old adversaries are accusing each other of Nazilike tactics

out of court. Some former members claimed information obtained in church counseling sessions was used to blackmail them. Others said they were bilked by Scientology self-help classes.

Locally, Scientology leaders say CAN is upset with the church's success.

"We've been expanding a lot lately. We're more in the community, through national campaigns such as Lead the Way to a Drug-Free U.S.A.," said Carol Brookes,