

Scientologists Win a Battle in Long War

■ **Religion: Judge says Cult Awareness Network must let church members attend L.A. convention. But conference organizers fear longtime foes will disrupt activities.**

By JIM NEWTON
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Members of the Church of Scientology won a court victory over a longtime foe Friday, clearing the way for a group of Scientologists to attend the Cult Awareness Network's national convention in Los Angeles next week.

The ruling in Los Angeles County Superior Court is the latest development in an

escalating feud between the two organizations. The battle erupted in mid-1991 and has resulted in dozens of lawsuits. On one day alone, Scientology members filed 21 lawsuits against the network in various state and federal courts, according to network officials.

"There appears to be a concerted effort by the Church of Scientology to litigate CAN to death," Cynthia Kisser, the network's executive director, said Friday. "It's become a terrible situation for us."

Friday's ruling means that eight Scientologists will be allowed to attend next week's conference, which is being held at a Ramada hotel. But it does little to resolve a titanic legal and public relations battle being waged between Scientologists and the network.

Founded in 1978, the nonprofit Cult Awareness Network provides callers and

media representatives with information about Scientology and other groups, and it suggests ways of evaluating any organization to determine if it is a destructive cult. Some network literature refers to Scientology as a cult, though Kisser said the network does not officially label that organization or any other.

Scientologists say they are a religion, not a cult. They accuse the network of "supporting violent, criminal activity," including the kidnaping of Scientologists—a charge that network officials vehemently deny. The Scientologists have launched a national campaign to "reform" the network and show no signs of relenting.

In addition to the lawsuits filed by its members nationwide, the Church of Scientology has peppered Los Angeles religious leaders with letters urging them to withdraw their support of the network. Scien-

tologists have also repeatedly picketed the network's Chicago office. Scientologists also filed suit against the hotel where next week's conference will be held, and pickets have appeared outside the hotel every week for the past month.

Scientology officials said that its members—and not the organization—are filing the lawsuits.

"We believe that the [network] seriously needs to be reformed," said church spokeswoman Lisa Goodman. "They plan kidnapings and other things that we very, very strongly oppose."

Goodman said Scientology leaders have been told that the network discusses criminal activities such as kidnapings during its conferences. Scientologists say they want to attend the event to urge the network not to commit such crimes.

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"We want to engage them in a dialogue, and the only way to do that is to be there," Goodman said.

Network officials dismiss those allegations as absurd, fearing that the Scientologists' real motivation is to disrupt the conference or intimidate participants. Many of the 350 or so people who plan to attend the conference are former cult members. Some are former Scientologists—and network officials said they worry that those people might be frightened by the presence of Scientologists.

Insisting they want to attend the conference only to participate in its discussions, eight Scientologists who paid the network's \$30 membership fee filed suit in Superior Court on Oct. 5. Two weeks ago, they asked for an injunction to force network officials to allow them to attend.

Despite the network's objections, Judge Thomas C. Murphy granted that request.

"These are eight members of CAN who were being denied their right to attend this conference

because of their religious beliefs," said lawyer Steven L. Hayes, who represented the Scientologists. "This is four ladies and four men. They're not a trained SWAT team."

Murphy's order prohibits the network from "denying or refusing admittance to plaintiffs to a convention of Defendant Cult Awareness Network." In comments from the bench, Murphy also told both sides he expected them to behave at the conference or risk being called to appear before him again.

Despite Friday's ruling, the litigation between the network and the Scientologists is certain to continue. Lawyers for the Scientologists and the network are scheduled to be in federal court Monday, where they will argue a similar case before a federal judge.

In cases filed elsewhere, Scientologists argue that they are being discriminated against by the network. As in the case decided Friday, many of those actions involve Scientologists who have paid the network's \$30 membership fee and then argued they are entitled to

privileges as network members.

In one suit, Scientologists argued that they should be allowed to volunteer at the network's Illinois headquarters. Other cases involve Scientologists who want to form their own affiliates of the network, a move that network officials believe is an attempt to subvert the organization.

Under network rules, each affiliate gets to vote for network board members. Leaders of the organization fear that the Scientologists would use the affiliates to elect their own board members and then dissolve the network. Scientologists say they merely want to participate as full members.

Although the Cult Awareness Network has prevailed in nearly all of the cases that have been resolved, they acknowledged that Friday's ruling was a setback. Still, they pledged to obey it and move forward with their conference.

"We certainly will comply with the court's order," Kissler said. "If the plaintiffs attend the conference, we trust that they will behave."

HIGHLIGHTS

FEUD CONTINUES: Members of the Church of Scientology won a court victory over a longtime foe Friday, clearing the way for a group of Scientologists to attend the Cult Awareness Network's national convention in Los Angeles next week. B1