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Cult awareness group being sued



Raymond Watt/Glendale News-Press

"This brings the total of lawsuits by Scientology against CAN to 13. I personally am involved in six," says Priscilla Coates of the Cult Awareness Network as she holds some of the litigation filed against her.

By Gabor Komaromy
Glendale News-Press

Seven self-professed "parishioners" of the Church of Scientology have filed religious discrimination lawsuits against the Cult Awareness Network and five members of the group, including a Glendale resident, in Glendale Superior Court.

In the lawsuits, filed Friday and Monday, the plaintiffs allege that they have been denied access to the Cult Awareness Network's national convention, to be held in November, on grounds of their religious beliefs.

The seven lawsuits — practically identical except for the plaintiffs' names — claim that the "plaintiffs wrote to (the Cult Awareness Network) asking them to clarify within 10 days, whether or not (they) could attend the CAN convention."

It is alleged that the plaintiffs "had been told that even though (they were) members of the CAN, because (they were) parishioners of the Church of Scientology, (they) would be refused admittance to the convention," according to the lawsuit.

The plaintiffs apparently "made clear that if they didn't receive an answer within 10 days," they would assume the "answer was no." They allegedly received no reply.

Priscilla Coates of Glendale, one of the five defendants named in the suits and director of the local chapter of CAN, said that the plaintiffs — Charles Van Breemen, Vicki J. Dries, Gary Gum, Bob L. Nielson, Bob Schuch, Patricia Ross and Sandra Woodard — never applied to attend the conference.

"To attend the convention, one has to fill out an application and send in the money," Coates said.

"There is at least one member of the Church of Scientology who applied to attend and will be there. These seven have not turned in applications."

"My clients sent off for information but they never received anything," said Steven Hayes, the attorney representing the seven plaintiffs. "They were not provided with the necessary forms to apply to attend the convention, even though they expressly requested these forms."

Coates said that the applications were available to all members at the same

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time.

"The forms were included with the August edition of our monthly newsletter and all members received a copy," she said.

A lawsuit, similar to the ones filed in Glendale, was filed in Los Angeles Federal Court by Donna Casselman. Her attorney, Michael Stoller, said the applications were not available at the time his and Hayes' clients wrote the letters.

"These individuals wanted to open up a dialogue with CAN to exchange ideas about religious beliefs," he said. "Their requests to attend the convention were ignored.

"This is plain discrimination, like the blacks were discriminated against in the '60s, only this time it's against Scientologists."

Coates said she never saw the alleged requests. "I don't recall receiving any letters about attending the convention from these people," she said.

"But I'm not surprised that they sued us about it. This brings the total of lawsuits by Scientology against CAN to 13; I personally am named in six."

Coates said that to become a "member" of CAN, one only needs to send \$30 to the Chicago headquarters to receive the newsletter. To become a voting member, a so-called "affiliate," there are other requirements.

"I have heard from some of these people (who filed the suits) — received from them letters demanding that I admit them as affiliates," she said.

The complaints filed in court also contain sweeping allegations about CAN.

"(CAN), despite its purported goals . . . is actually engaged in unlawful and evil conduct, in 'mind control' and hired persons with criminal backgrounds to kidnap, sexually abuse, mentally abuse, intimidate and coerce persons by depriving them of food and water and forcing them to take drugs against their will, all under the guise of educating them about their religious freedoms."

Coates dismissed these allegations as ridiculous. "The Church of Scientology has a 'fair game' policy: anyone who speaks out against them is a fair game to be harassed, sued or destroyed in any way possible," she said. "These suits are just another examples of this attitude."

Cynthia Kissler, of Wonder Lake, Ill., executive director of CAN, was also named as a defendant in the suits. She said she hadn't seen the complaints and could not comment on them.

Also named as defendants in the lawsuits are Rachel Andres, national board member of CAN and executive director of the Commission on Cults and Missionaries for the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles; Corey Slavin, a member of the Commission on Cults and CAN; and Herbert Slavin, a member of CAN's convention committee.