

Man sues church for fraud, emotional harm

■ Macomb resident contends he was duped while attending vocational school.

By Brian Murphy
Staff Writer

PONTIAC — Former Scientologist Linda Hostetler isn't the first metro Detroiter to hold a financial and emotional grudge against the Church of Scientology of Michigan.

Since the Detroit branch was founded in 1969, at least 14 lawsuits have been filed against the church, according to circuit court records.

Of the 14 cases, which sought damages ranging from \$10,000-\$60,000, six have been filed since the church moved to Royal Oak in the mid-1980s. Four suits were settled out of court and two were dismissed after the plaintiffs dropped charges.

The most compelling case, however, is still pending before Oakland Circuit Court Judge Fred Mester. Michael Burns of Macomb County sued the Church of Scientology, Royal Oak, in 1991. Also named in the suit were Robert Dennis and his

employer, the Recording Institute of Detroit Inc., an Eastpointe vocational school.

Burns is suing on six counts of fraud and emotional distress. He is seeking damages that resulted from a three-year association with Dennis and the church.

Burns was a teen-age student at the recording institute in June 1988.

He alleges that Dennis, while representing the school, duped him into taking a "How to Study" course offered by the institute in order to enroll. The suit claims the course was a front for religious indoctrination into the Church of Scientology, of which Dennis was a member.

After a month in the class, a bewildered Burns said Dennis instructed him to enroll in several expensive courses and counseling sessions at the Royal Oak center in order to complete the "How to Study" course.

The suit said Burns, unable to grasp the church's "obscure study techniques," was encouraged to take several other courses and counseling which would "cure his inability" to understand the doctrine.

All of which, the suit claims, led a confused Burns to drop out of the Recording Institute of Detroit to concentrate on Scientology instruction.

**It's totally secular.
There is no
Scientology doctrine in
the course.**

— Wendy Bellinger
**Scientology
spokeswoman**

sever emotional and financial ties with his family and enter into a working contract with the church for 2½ years to pay off his rapidly accruing debt.

Burns said he feared leaving the church because of Dennis' ties to Scientology and the institute.

The suit claims he was afraid that should he leave he would be declared a "suppressive person" and would be "neutralized economically, politically and psychologically" because embarrassing details elicited by Dennis and others during intense counseling could be used against him later as blackmail or testimony.

The suit says Burns "developed numerous psychological and physi-

cal symptoms ..." as a result of his association with Scientology, rendering him "incapable of exercising his own will and judgment."

Four years, two plaintiff attorneys and hundreds of court documents later, the suit is still mired in an evidentiary dispute that was being mediated as late as March 22, records indicated.

Burns' second attorney Mark Daane, who took over for Constance Cumbey in 1993, said he expects the case to come to trial next fall.

Cumbey, who has consulted 10 former Scientology members, said Burns' friends described him as still dazed from his ordeal.

"It's like coming out of surgery; you're not sure what to believe," Cumbey said. "They swallowed up several years of his life. He and his family felt terribly violated."

Scientology spokeswoman Wendy Bellinger would not comment directly on the pending suit. She did, however, defend the "How to Study" course.

"It's totally secular. There is no Scientology doctrine in the course," Bellinger said. "The course is designed to improve someone's ability to grasp material he or she is studying."

THE DAILY TRIBUNE

93rd Year, No. 96

The Daily Tribune is published daily except Saturday, Christmas Day and New Year's Day by Independent Newspapers Inc. at 100 Macomb Daily Drive, Mt. Clemens, 48043. Second-class postage paid at Mt. Clemens, Michigan.

(ISSN 1041-9977)

Postmaster: Send address changes to The Daily Tribune, P.O. Box 3008, Royal Oak, Michigan 48068.

ROYAL OAK