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Ministers oppose schoolchildren's essay contest

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HCISD board member distributes material with Scientologist links in classrooms

By KATE MEWHINNEY

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A coalition of Harlingen ministers has taken a stance against an essay contest for schoolchildren based on a book written by Church of Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard.

The Harlingen Ministerial Alliance, which is made up of representatives from about 12 churches in Harlingen, said it is opposed to the distribution of *The Way to Happiness* booklets as part of the essay contest.

"If this group is permitted in classrooms, then it opens the door to any other group, cult or church," reads the alliance's statement, which was issued earlier this month.

The decision came after Juan Villarreal, a Harlingen dentist and vice president of the Harlingen school board, and his dental partner, Vivian Teegardin, spoke to six members of the Ministerial Alliance last week.

This year, Villarreal and Teegardin, both Scientologists, have donated copies of *The Way to Happiness* to almost 5,000 children in more than 80 schools from Laredo to Brownsville. The Way to Happiness Essay Contest and the Set a Good Example Contest are based on *The Way to Happiness* booklet, written by Hubbard in 1981.

Teegardin and Villarreal say the contest is a positive step to instill values in the lives of schoolchildren.

"I feel strongly that this is our future community, our children, our future leaders here," Teegardin said. "I just don't want kids to grow up without any morals."

Villarreal, who has served on the Harlingen school board since 1988, has been involved with *The Way to Happiness* Essay Contest for the past six years and the Set a Good Example Contest for two years. But this is the first year

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concerns about the contests have surfaced.

"Nobody formally has come to the board or the superintendent to my knowledge," said George McShan, school board president.

But some members of the community have questioned the ties between *The Way to Happiness* Foundation and the Church of Scientology.

The Rev. Charles Palmer, pastor of the Treasure Hills Presbyterian Church and president of the Ministerial Alliance, issued a personal statement against *The Way to Happiness*.

"Membership recruitment to the Church of Scientology, I believe, may be cleverly disguised within the Way to Happiness Movement," Palmer wrote. "Dr. Villarreal and Dr. Teegardin claiming to be Scientologists reinforces my reservations."

But Villarreal denies any association between *The Way to Happiness* and Scientology.

"It is not a part of the Church of Scientology," he said. "It was written as a non-religious common sense guide by the author."

"The author was L. Ron Hubbard. But it has nothing to do with the Church of Scientology."

However, Kathy Norman, the director of special affairs for the Church of Scientology, said there is a distant relationship between the church and the booklet.

"You can find *The Way to Happiness* booklets in the church," she said. "I'm not going to say there's no correlation between the two."

The Way to Happiness Foundation does receive some funds from the Church of Scientology, Norman said, as well as through private donations, but does not send

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funds to the church.

Critics of the Church of Scientology, however, say *The Way to Happiness* is a front organization for the church.

"The Way to Happiness is part of the Church of Scientology. It is part of the church plan strategy," said Craig Branch, regional director for Watchman Fellowship, a Christian ministry that focuses on cults and intervention. Branch is based in Birmingham, Ala.

Sections of *What is Scientology?*, one of the church's guidebooks, has a chapter devoted to explaining *The Way to Happiness*.

The Way To Happiness book appears non-controversial. Throughout the book, there is no mention of a higher being.

Each of the 21 chapters in the 95-page booklet is based on a "moral precept" such as "Don't Use Harmful Drugs," "Flourish and Prosper" and "Don't be Promiscuous."

"Be faithful to your sexual partner. Unfaithfulness on the part of a sexual partner can heavily reduce one's survival," reads the section about promiscuity.

Villarreal said a group called the Concerned Businessman's Association orders and distributes books and mailers to the schools. The Concerned Businessman's Association is described in Scientology materials as a charitable educational organization that sponsors the Way to Happiness Essay Contest.

Villarreal said he pays for the mailers and books that are sent to teachers and principals in an area spanning from Brownsville to Laredo. The teachers and principals then decide whether to enroll students in the contest.

"They generally find that the contents of the book are simply common sense and align with most of the traditional moral val-

HOW THE CONTESTS WORK

Students who compete in the essay contest write on a pre-selected theme.

Teachers are encouraged to review chapters from the book, *The Way to Happiness*, to help students understand the concepts, according to contest rules. Students then choose a precept from the book or use the entire book to illustrate the pre-selected theme.

The theme of this year's essay

contest is "Creating a Better World." First place winners receive \$100 and a hardback copy of *The Way to Happiness* book.

In the Set a Good Example Contest, groups or classes of students choose one of the chapters from *The Way to Happiness* booklet and create a project to demonstrate the chapter they have chosen.

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ues and standards of behavior favored by mankind over the past several thousand years," Villarreal said.

A statement on the back of the book describes it as "a non-religious moral code ... Any individual distribution of it does not infer connection with or sponsorship of any religious organization. It is, therefore, admissible for government departments and employees to distribute it as a nonreligious activity."

Despite the disclaimer, some believe its use in schools violates church-state separation.

"I think Dr. Villarreal, as a school board member, should not be showing favoritism and be spearheading an effort to distribute material to students in the public schools," Palmer said in a written statement.

But Villarreal said his involvement in *The Way to Happiness* program is independent of his position on the school board.

"I've done it as a private enterprise through my business," Villarreal said. "I don't do the program through the board or the schools. It's sponsored by myself and Dr. Teegardin."

Villarreal and other school board members emphasized that *The Way to Happiness* contest is not a part of the school district's curriculum.

"It is independent from our school district," said McShan, the school board president. "In no way, shape or form is it part of our policy nor do we endorse or support that view."

Any contest must be approved by the school board before it can be publicized in the schools, administrators said.

"Just because there's some contest sponsored by some organization doesn't mean we as a school district support the organization," said Jesús Chavez, schools superintendent.

Villarreal defended his right to endorse *The Way to Happiness* material as a private citizen.

"I'm not just a school board member. I wear a lot of different hats," he said.

Private schools also have received materials from *The Way to Happiness*.

Rosemary Courtney said she was upset when she found out *The Way to Happiness* material had been distributed in her daughter's sixth-grade class. Courtney's children attend St. Alban's Episcopal School, a private school in Harlingen.

"It's not appropriate at a church school," she said. Elizabeth Johnson, principal at St. Alban's, said the school no longer participates in the contest. However, she doesn't believe *The Way*

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to *Happiness* booklet warrants much concern.

“I still don’t think they (Scientologists) have come in and infiltrated the school or brainwashed the kids,” she said.

But Cynthia Kissar, national executive director of the Cult Awareness Network in Chicago, said Hubbard’s writings are considered scripture to Scientologists. She compared the use of *The Way of Happiness* to using the Bible in the classroom.

Kissar said an early introduction to the Scientology philosophy lays the groundwork for acceptance later in life.

“The problem is that it creates a positive association of L. Ron Hubbard to young children,” she said. “They’re not getting both sides of the picture. It creates an unfair situation for children.”

Others worry about the effects of Scientology on children.

“I hate to see Scientology get a foothold in the schools without parents knowing,” Courtney said. “Young minds, young people are impressionable.”

Despite the criticism, McShan said he doesn’t believe Villarreal has hidden motives.

“I have no reason to believe otherwise than what he said,” McShan said. “He has never given me an impression that he has an agenda for that.”

WHAT IS SCIENTOLOGY?

Scientology had its beginnings in 1950, with the publication of L. Ron Hubbard’s book *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*.

In his book, Hubbard said that people could improve their life and better understand themselves and others through a “workable technology of the mind.”

Scientology is a religious philosophy based on the writings and recordings of Hubbard, which are considered the scriptures of the religion.

Scientologists recognize the existence of a supreme being, but do not worship such a being, nor do they have a specific doctrine concerning God. They believe a person comes to his own awareness of God.

In addition, Scientologists believe that man is an “immortal spiritual being whose experiences extend beyond one lifetime.”

Despite the church’s acknowledgment of past lives, it does not believe in reincarnation — being born again in

a different life form.

According to the church’s *Reference Guide to the Scientology Religion*, “Scientology is a religion in the most traditional sense....

Scientology holds in common with all great religions the dream of peace on Earth and salvation for man.”

In keeping with other religions, Scientologists also hold Sunday church services, and conduct naming ceremonies, which are similar to baptisms, weddings and funerals.

Scientology has taken a strong stance against the use of illegal drugs and any mind-altering psychiatric drugs. Most recently, the Church of Scientology has challenged the use of Prozac, a drug often prescribed to treat depression, and Ritalin, a drug prescribed to calm hyperactivity.

Several Hollywood celebrities are Scientologists, including Kirstie Alley, Tom Cruise, John Travolta and Kelly Preston.

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