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Religion

Cult Fighters' Future in 1

■ Lawsuits: Group with controversial ties to deprogrammers files for bankruptcy and may be forced to shut down in wake of \$1.1-million judgment.

From Religion News Service

Plagued by numerous lawsuits from religious groups and fighting a \$1.1-million judgment against it, the Cult Awareness Network has filed for bankruptcy under Chapter 7 of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code.

"How we will operate or if we will continue to operate in the short term, I don't know," said Cynthia Kisser, executive director of the 12-year-old organization, known for its aggressive campaigns against groups it considers to be harmful cults.

Critics have questioned the network's tactics, particularly its relationship to professional "depro-grammers" who use forceful who use forceful methods to persuade individuals to leave cults or religious groups.

The network does no deprogramming itself, but offers information to people seeking to retrieve friends or family members, links them to deprogrammers and operates support groups for former cult members.

The Cult Awareness Network has frequently locked horns with such groups as the Unification Church and the Church of Scientology. Scientologists have sued the network about 50 times since

Kisser said the Cult Awareness Network's financial difficulties are the result of a September 1995 verdict in which the organization was ordered to pay \$1.1 million to a man who alleged that the network helped his mother wrest him from his church.

A jury awarded Jason Scott of Bellevue, Wash., more than \$4 million in damages after finding that there was a conspiracy to deprive him of his civil rights when his mother sought to have him deprogrammed of his religious beliefs. Scott was a member of a conservative Pentecostal church that his mother believed was manipulative and abusive.

Defendants in the case included the Cult Awareness Network, deprogrammer Rick Ross of Tucson and his two assistants.
"The Scott case

Scott case virtually brought deprogramming to a halt in this country," said religion scholar J. Gordon Melton, head of the Institute for the Study of American Religion at UC Santa Barbara. "What this judgment does . . is cut the communication lines that allow deprogramming to go

he Cult Awareness Network's 1 appeal in that case is pending in the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, but organization officials say a ruling on the appeal will probably not come in time to keep the group from shutting down.

The group had originally filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, asking for time to reorganize its finances without the threat of lawsuits from

But Kendrick Moxon, a Los Angeles lawyer who represented Scott in the Washington state case. filed a motion in Bankruptcy Court seeking the dismissal of the group's Chapter 11 reorganization plan,

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and that motion was granted last

week."
"They had a Chapter 11 plan that they were trying to push through that was going to basically result in Mr. Scott getting less than 1% of his judgment," said attorney Laurie Bartilson, who worked with Moxon in the Scott case.

Bartilson said she expects the group to be forced to close.

Moxon, who has represented the Church of Scientology in numerous cases, said in a statement released by the church that he considers the Cult Awareness Network "a hate group that promoted religious intolerance.

The Cult Awareness Network's Kisser said the group is trying to protect its assets by filing for. bankruptcy.

'We are privy to confidential information about thousands of people," she said. "In order to make sure that we were properly representing the constitutional rights of

our members, our donors and the families that have called us . felt that we needed to go under the protection of Chapter 7.