

CLEARWATER SUN

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## Scientologists sue Clearwater newspaper

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**CLEARWATER** — The Church of Scientology filed a \$250,000 damage suit in Tampa Wednesday against Tom Coat, assistant city editor of the Clearwater Sun, and Clearwater Newspapers Inc., publishers of the newspaper, charging that Coat violated the "privacy and confidentiality" of the church by "joining" it under false pretences and then taking part in its "advanced training."

Announcement of the suit, filed in Hillsborough Circuit Court, was made at a news conference in the former Fort Harrison hotel, now owned and occupied by the Scientologists. Explaining the suit was Rev. Bruce Harrell, who was identified as director of the Tampa mission of the Church of Scientology of Fort Lauderdale.

**THE SUIT** charges that Coat enrolled for a Scientology seminar in

Tampa on or about Feb. 25; applied for church membership March 3, listing his employment as a free lance photographer; and attended seminar sessions "on various dates" between March 3 and March 18.

Clearwater Sun executive vice president Al Hutchison, asked to comment about the suit, said "We do not feel it would be appropriate to comment at this time since the matter is in the hands of the courts." He said the Sun would comment "at a more suitable time."

Harrell said Coat was recognized by church officials "within two days" after he joined the class "but he was given the benefit of the doubt" that his intentions as a student were sincere.

**HE SAID** Coat was not confronted with the fact that his true identity was known until March 18, after another Clearwater Sun reporter "let the cat out of the bag when he inadvertently told Rev. Fred Ulan (head of Scientolo-

gy operations in Clearwater) that a series of articles on Scientology was in preparation and would be launched that next Sunday."

Harrell said that revelation exposed "the bare intentions" of the newspaper "to proceed covertly, behind the scene, hidden, secret, to manufacture a series of stories."

In a press release, the church labeled the series, now appearing in the newspaper, as "muckraking yellow journalistic articles, viciously (sic) attacking the Church of Scientology and its tenets." The series has not included anything about Coat's class.

**THE SUIT** charges that the presence of Coat in the Tampa seminar constituted an "unwarranted and surreptitious intrusion and invasion of plaintiff's private areas."

It says that other new members of the church "divulged highly personal confidences and communications to defendant Coat and in his presence."