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Clergy Protests 'Spying' Upon Religious Groups

BY JOHN DART
Times Religion Writer

One hundred ministers, priests and rabbis in the San Diego area Monday presented a petition to a San Diego newspaper, declaring that "spying or deceitfully obtaining membership in a religious organization is unethical" and violates religious freedom.

The petition, launched by the Church of Scientology of San Diego, was prompted by a two-part series on Scientology last month in the San Diego Union by reporter Leigh Fenly.

Two Scientologists filed a \$10,000 invasion-of-privacy suit in San Diego Superior Court Aug. 9, five days prior to the publication of the articles. The suit alleged the reporter obtained information on the church and its members while attending "private religious seminars" under a false identity.

The 57-word statement on the petition, however, made no reference to reporters, the Union or Scientology.

The Rev. George Walker Smith, a pastor who is current president of the San Diego Board of Education, said he would not have signed the petition if he had been told who organized the petition drive or the petition's planned use.

"I signed solely because I believe in religious freedom," Smith said.

Editor Gerald Warren of the Union said, "We found that the secretive nature of Scientology forced us to take this action to get the facts to inform our readers.

"It would be as foolish to call it spying as to think that one should have to give name, address, phone number and occupation before entering the house of the Lord," Warren said.

Episcopal priest Herbert Lazenby, president of the San Diego Ecumenical Conference, who was aware of the petition's background, said, "Abusive journalistic practices being used on clergy and parishioners . . . will not be tolerated by the religious community in the future."

Msgr. John R. Portman, a Catholic priest, said he knew of no other instances of reporter misrepresentation. Portman said he signed because he agreed with the general principle that journalists should be honest in their dealings.

The Rev. Ross Bartlett, founder-pastor of the Oak Park Baptist Church and national chairman of the Alliance to Preserve Religious Liberty, was among the four clergymen

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presenting the petition and a cover letter to the Union.

"The press is more than welcome to go through our books or anything," Bartlett said, "but to come in a disguise I feel is wrong."

Asked if he thought the Church of Scientology is as open as other churches, Bartlett said, "I don't know much about them. The men I've met seem like fine men."

John Spagnola, Scientology minister of public affairs, said the application of Scientology's religious philosophy is "very private" and its counseling sessions are comparable to the Catholic confessional.

In an unrelated matter, James Delaney, chief counsel for the state Board of Equalization, said Monday that the agency has denied welfare-tax exemption status to six Scientology churches and missions.

The Board of Equalization advised county assessors in a letter Aug. 22 that "in light of the manner in which the Scientology churches promote and conduct the religious training, we believe that they are operated for profit and, hence, ineligible for the welfare exemption."

Scientology chapels and counseling areas are still eligible for religious exemption from property taxes. But to

qualify for welfare exemption on the basis of charitable or religious activity in buildings not used for worship, Delaney said, the organization must be nonprofit.

The six Scientology applicants "have a relatively large net income," Delaney said.

Churches seeking religious exemptions do not need to submit financial statements but they do if they seek a welfare exemption.

The three-year-old Riverside mission of Scientology, whose welfare application was denied, reported taking in \$1.3 million in 1976 and ended the year with \$91,078 in net income. Among fees charged by the mission were \$625 for 12½ hours of "auditing" and \$3,000 for 12½ hours of "introspective rundown."