

Scientology SAVES?

The science of selling salvation

BY LEAH SAMUEL

Is the Church of Scientology a religion, or a multimillion-dollar corporate cult? Some former Scientologists have spoken of spending thousands of dollars or working long hours without food or sleep to pay off debts to the church. The church characterizes itself as misunderstood and persecuted, emphasizing testimonials and community outreach activities, while attempting to discredit critics.

"Scientology is a racket," says Bloomfield Hills attorney Constance Cumbey, who has handled four Michigan lawsuits against the church. "That's not to say that everyone in it is trying to rip you off. Some are true believers, and they work out of a sense of dedication. But the only ones getting rich are the ones at the top."

"Scientology is not like other religions," says Wendy Bellinger, director of special affairs for the Church of Scientology of Michigan. "It is applied religion. Scientology is the science of knowing about things related to improving your life."

Bellinger says many of Scientology's critics have connections to "anti-religious groups," and that the church can prove it.

"Give me the names of the people saying these things," she says. "And I can give you documented data on them."

The Church of Scientology was recognized as a tax-exempt religious organization last October, ending a 40-year battle during which the Internal Revenue Service scrutinized the church's financial practices.

The organization started after science fiction author L. Ron Hubbard wrote "Dianetics," a book billing its subject as "the modern science of mental health." Today, the Church of Scientology claims 8 million members worldwide, including 3,000 in Michigan.

Spreading the church's philosophy earns big bucks for the religious concern. According to documents turned over to the IRS, the church pays six-digit salaries to its most successful recruiters and fundraisers, and spent \$7 million on nuke-proof doors on a storage vault to hold the \$7 million titanium capsules for Hubbard's papers.

The documents also listed \$275 million in church assets in 1992. The money comes mostly from the sale of books, tapes and life improvement courses, as well as a form of counseling called "auditing."

It's the selling, and the millions

the church gets from it, that has earned the church its critics. In 1991, Time magazine reported that the church was a global racket posing as a religion. The church took the magazine to court, charging libel and other crimes. A thick church booklet cites what it calls various falsehoods in the Time report.

THE GOAL of Scientology is to "clear" a person of "the reactive mind"—that part of the mind that stores bad experiences. The basic tenet is that past negative experiences create present-day turmoil, and must be eliminated through the application of Scientology. The process consists of having an individual, or "pre-clear," take courses and read books designed to improve various aspects of life.

Auditing is a method of assessing how close to being clear a pre-clear is after using Scientology materials. The process consists of holding two metal cylinders attached by wires to something called an electropsychometer, or E-meter. The machine releases about 1.5 volts of electricity through the cylinders, into the body and then back into the machine. This is supposed to record and measure "charge," or negative energy, when the subject has a thought.

Auditing generally is done after one has taken a Dianetics course or courses. The courses and auditing are required to advance on the Bridge to Total Freedom. On this

bridge, there are about 30 levels of progression under two categories—"training" and "processing." Various levels require at least one Scientology course and auditing session, along with tapes, books and "extension courses."

And it gets expensive. A course costs up to \$150; auditing can cost up to \$400 an hour. How much a person spends depends on how much improvement a recruiter or auditor decides is needed.

The church calls the fees donations; there is no price list or consistent cost formula, says Bellinger.

Recruiters try to sell potential Hubbardites copies of "What is Scientology?" and possibly "Dianetics"—books costing about \$25 each. Recruiters pitch them as an introduction to the religion.

"We provide people with highly trained people and techniques to improve their lives," says Bellinger, who is also an auditor. "And we do it one-on-one. It makes our operating costs higher."

As for how much employees are paid, Bellinger calls the payroll system "cooperative."

"You see how much money comes in a particular week. Some is taken out for expenses, and out of what's left, everybody gets a share, depending on what their post is and how many people are working in that office. It's figured based on the value of a person to the organization."

Says one recruiter: "We're paid based on the amount of people we have on services. People don't think that we should get money that way,

The church office in downtown Royal Oak: The sign promises a free personality profile, but after that the bill can grow quickly.





From "What is Scientology?," a book sold by the church

but we don't have thousands of years collecting tithes like other churches. It's just the way we've always done it, since the 1950s."

Eleven lawsuits have been filed against the church in Michigan since 1990. Most come from the Royal Oak church. There is also a church in Ann Arbor and a Scientology mission in Flint.

In 1993, Mark Lewandowski got back \$8,000 that he'd paid to the church in Royal Oak for books and auditing.

"You go there, you take some lead-in classes, and they convince you that you need some additional classes," says Cumbey, who represented Lewandowski. "They convince you that some miraculous thing is gonna happen. Nothing miraculous happened, so Mark wanted his money back." Bellinger says church policy is to refund money when someone asks.

Michael Burns, whose case is scheduled for trial next spring, is suing the church for fraud and for violating federal employment laws, among other charges.

Burns, a musician, wanted to re-enroll for classes at the Recording Institute of Detroit. He says Robert Dennis, the school's director, told him to take a study course as a con-

functions within the organization.

"But when someone ~~leaves~~ before they fulfill their side of the agreement, they've gotten a lot of free services, which they then have to pay for," she adds. "They've signed a contract. If you signed a contract to pay for a car, you couldn't just decide not to pay it."

"The lucky ones have the money," says Cumbey, who represented Burns before Ann Arbor attorney Mark Daane took the case. "The unlucky ones get written up as having 'freeloader debt.' They end up working for the church, in turn recruiting others."

Long hours, as well as food and sleep deprivation are the fate of these workers, says Cumbey. "You're literally in a cult," she says.

"We all get a good night's sleep and we all eat well," says Bellinger, who adds that lawsuits come from people who are just not cut out to be Scientologists.

"People with negative influences are not going to do well in Scientology," she says. "They could be connected with someone who doesn't want them to improve. Or if people are unethical, then it will be hard for them to do well in the church. The fact that we refund donations leaves us