

Religion splits 'Back to Basics'

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EDUCATION: Organizer of a conference being held today is a Scientologist, and that worries some in the school-reform group.

By JOHN GITTELSON
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ORANGE — Leaders of Orange County's "back to basics" education movement are split over attending a conference tonight because the chief organizer belongs to the Church of Scientology.

Orange County Department of Education board member Ken Williams said he withdrew from the "Back to Basics Education Crusade" because of discomfort with its organizers, not because of disagreement over the crusade's goals.

"I have decided not to be involved in the 'Back to Basics' conference because I am concerned with the motivation and involvement of this new political group who is organizing the event," Williams said in a statement.

Conference organizer Clay Bock, co-founder of Concerned Parents of Garden Grove, denied that the conference or his group has a Scientology agenda.

"I've been a Scientologist for 20 years," he said. "I don't make it a secret. But this has never been about that. I have two kids in public schools. I have a right to speak out on that."

Founded in 1954 by followers of science-fiction author L. Ron Hubbard, the Church of Scientology blends Eastern religion and modern psychology in a systematic plan to help members attain mental health. The church,

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which claims 5 million members worldwide, including movie stars John Travolta and Tom Cruise, has been criticized for aggressive recruiting and demands for cult-like loyalty.

Recent efforts to bring Hubbard's secular concepts to California schools have hit dead ends. In September, a state Department of Education panel found textbooks published by the church unsuitable for use in schools.

"Back to Basics" has become a common rallying cry among a range of education groups. Some advocate using phonics to teach reading. Others oppose federal education programs. Others favor abstinence-only sex education. Still others oppose the power of teacher unions.

Tonight's conference addresses how parents can protect their children in the public school system. So-called threats include school psychologists, math programs that fail to teach arithmetic and federal school-to-work programs, Bock said.

School board members from Anaheim, Garden Grove, Newport-Mesa and other Orange County districts plan to attend along with candidates for the Orange Unified School Board.

The master of ceremonies is Eric Woolery, elected on a ticket with Williams to the Orange County Department of Education board. Woolery said he saw no reason to shun the conference because of Scientology.

"They're my constituents. I didn't ask about their religious affiliation," he said.

The keynote speaker is Carolyn Steinke, founder of Palm Desert-based Parents Involved in Education, who will warn that the federal government's School-to-Work program is a thinly veiled attempt to force all children to choose careers in elementary school.

Steinke received a 1995 award from the Scientology-supported Citizens Commission on Human Rights. But her work has no affiliation with the church or any other religion, she said.

"I am personally a Christian, but our mission statement is not based on religion," Steinke said. "Our message is for anyone with a child."

Gary Krep, founder of the U.S. Justice Foundation, a legal-action group based in Escondido, said he withdrew from speaking at tonight's meeting after "information was provided to me." Krep declined to elaborate on his decision.

"I don't say negative things about other organizations," he said.

Viola Floth, head of Parents Who Care, a back-to-basics education-advocacy group in Westminster, said she would skip the conference because of religious concerns.

"I'm Christian-based," she said. "I don't do business with Scientology."

Williams also identifies himself as a Christian, but said he separates religion from his education work. He worried that attending tonight's conference would violate that separation.

"I have never and will never seek to implement a theocracy or to force my religious beliefs upon anybody. Forcing one's religious ideas and beliefs onto anyone is against any Christian doctrine," Williams said.

The "Back to Basics Education Crusade" will be held from 6 to 9 p.m. at the Doubletree Hotel, 100 City Drive, Orange. Admission is \$5.