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Opponents fight to protest outside Church of Scientology

Church officials say they want to be left alone

By Manya A. Brachear, Tribune reporter

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A Chicago judge will decide this month whether a city code prevents protesters who oppose Scientology's teachings from expressing their discontent any time the church's doors are open or only during its conventional Sunday worship service.

Alex Hageli, a north suburban lobbyist and one of many opponents who insist the Church of Scientology isn't upfront about its teachings, was cited in October with violating a city code banning pickets from houses of worship.

The code, drafted years ago, precludes anyone who "pickets or demonstrates on a public way within 150 feet of any church, temple, synagogue or other place of worship while services are being conducted and one-half hour before services are to be conducted and one-half hour after services have been concluded." Peaceful labor protests are exempt.

Last year, when protesters showed up outside Church of Scientology of Illinois headquarters at 3011 N. Lincoln Ave., church leaders posted a sign in the window announcing services from 9:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.

"Can Scientology claim to have services all day long to keep protesters 150 feet away from their door front?" said Hageli, a lawyer by training who attends Harvest Bible Chapel in Arlington Heights. "I'm 100 percent confident that they can't do that."

But Rebecca Cusano, a church spokeswoman, said the Church of Scientology doesn't stick to the Christian definition of a worship service. Self-improvement is at the core of the church's teachings, Cusano said, so counseling and study sessions also qualify as services.

"I think the ordinance is pretty well written," Cusano said. "We can prove without a doubt that we have services going on in the building. ... Whether it be a Catholic church or a synagogue, (protests) distract from the spiritual enlightenment they're trying to attain."

Jennifer Hoyle, a spokeswoman for the city's law department, said that in preparation for the hearing, the city is examining the factors that led to the citation as well as the wording and intent of the ordinance.

The debate is the latest chapter in Scientology's quest for religious protections. Founded in 1954 by science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, the church teaches that men and women can better their lives by learning more about themselves and one another. Self-examination takes places during spiritual counseling sessions known as auditing, which employ electronic devices called e-meters. "Dianetics," Hubbard's book explaining the root of irrational behavior, is considered scripture.

Scrutiny of the organization started in the 1960s, when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration seized the church's e-meters on suspicion that the church was practicing medicine without a license.

Hugh Urban, an Ohio State University religion professor who is writing a history of the religious movement, said church leaders "basically recast auditing as a spiritual practice analogous to confession so they could avoid scrutiny from the FDA." A 26-year battle with the Internal Revenue Service ended in 1993 with the church being declared a tax-exempt religious institution.

Opponents, including Hageli and a group called Anonymous, claim the church overcharges for spiritual counseling and literature and hides its beliefs regarding humanity's origins and afterlife until someone has shelled out thousands of dollars for auditing sessions.

Cusano said that the church's teachings build upon one another and that the more confidential teachings are shared only when Scientologists are ready.

"Everything in Scientology is on a gradient of learning," Cusano said. "It's helping other people. There's nothing disingenuous about that."

In addition to courses, spiritual counseling and community outreach, the church also holds conventional Sunday services during which a minister reads aloud the church's creed along with literature and lectures by Hubbard.

Hageli said protesters do not show up during those services, adding that they protest for three hours once a month, usually on Saturdays.

"I don't think we're disruptive," Hageli said. "We're just trying to present to them the truth. ... If protesters showed up at Harvest, I would approach them to find out what they were protesting. If I agreed with it, I would take action. If not, I would walk away and say it's their right to protest."

Introduced in Illinois in 1974, the local Church of Scientology is expected to move into a restored seven-story brick building in downtown Chicago's historic Printer's Row soon.

Cusano anticipates the fortress-like facility will shield Scientologists from protesters but said she hopes they back off instead.

"We're hoping this group, Anonymous, comes to their senses," Cusano said. "They're crying freedom, but they're protesting religious freedom. I hope they become aware of this themselves. If not, we have ordinances to instill that in them."

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