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LIBEL:BANKRUPTCY FILING DELAYS SUIT

BANKRUPTCY FILING DELAYS SECT'S LIBEL SUIT

On the eve of the trial in a libel suit brought against it by an international Christian sect, a small evangelical research group in Berkeley, Calif., filed bankruptcy papers, saying it cannot afford to defend itself in the case. At the same time, the group, Spiritual Counterfeits Project, said such legal action endangers small religious organizations that attempt to publish critiques of the teachings and practices of new religious movements. "Some Christian groups are afraid to speak out," said Kirk Bottomly, spokesman for the Berkeley group. "Legal action has the effect of gagging us." The plaintiffs, the so-called Local Church, and its 80-year-old prophet-leader, Witness Lee, of Anaheim, claimed in their 1980 libel suit that it had been defamed in "The God-Men," a book researched by members of Spiritual Counterfeits Project. Trial had been set for March 4.

Spread to Taiwan

Founded in China in the 1920s, the Christian group spread to Taiwan and put down roots in this country in the 1960s. Each of its congregations takes the name of its host city--the Church in Los Angeles, the Church in Anaheim and so forth. In its book, the Berkeley group said the Local Church deviates from orthodox Christianity and uses psychological fear to keep members loyal--allegations the church denies. The Berkeley group, saying it owes \$200,000 and that its attorney would no longer extend credit, was able to delay the start of court proceedings when it filed a bankruptcy petition. A spokesman said the group could not hope to raise an additional \$150,000 or more in trial costs. Formed in 1975, the group has published a number of articles offering a "biblical perspective," mainly about Eastern-oriented cults and other non-Christian religious movements. A staff of 10 answers telephone inquiries about cults from concerned parents and members of the news media. The Local Church, which has been estimated to have about 7,000 members in U.S. congregations, has been quick to respond to alleged false descriptions in print, sometimes winning concessions from religious publishers. But the Berkeley research group contends that legal action is an attempt to stifle critical appraisals--in their case from an evangelical Protestant viewpoint.

A 'Chilling Effect'

Just as small- to medium-size newspapers and magazines warn that growing numbers of libel suits have a "chilling effect" on their willingness to engage in investigative reporting and frank analysis, so do backers of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project claim that the costs incurred by lawsuits will ultimately inhibit critical review of ten secretive religious movements. "I think people should know what they're getting into before they are greatly involved in a sect," Bottomly said. Ronald Enroth, chairman of the Sociology Department at Westmont College in Santa Barbara and a trustee of the Berkeley group, said the larger problem "is the freedom to evaluate other religious groups." Enroth said he mentioned the Local Church in "seven or eight paragraphs" in a book he authored, "The Lure of the Cults," in 1979. After the publisher, Christian Herald Books, was threatened with legal action, it pulled back existing copies from stores and removed all references to the Local Church in a revised edition, Enroth said.

Settlement reached

Another 1979 book, "The Mind Benders," by Jack Sparks, a former Spiritual Counterfeits Project writer, included a chapter on the Local Church. After lawsuits were filed against publisher Thomas Nelson of Nashville, an out-of-court settlement was reached, which included an agreement to cease distribution of the book. Also settled out of court was a \$4.8-million lawsuit filed against Moody Press over a brief critique of the Local Church published in its Moody Monthly magazine in 1979. The evangelical magazine made no retraction but did agree to delete mention of the church in reprints of the article. Another evangelical publisher, Tyndale House in Wheaton, Ill., is currently engaged in "lengthy correspondence with the Local Church" regarding material in one of its books, "Larson's Book of Cults," by Bob Larson, according to a spokeswoman. The libel suit brought against Neil T. Duddy, author of "The God-Men" and the Spiritual Counterfeits Project is actually focused on the German translation of the manuscript, which originally was written in English. The English-language book, published by InterVarsity Press, is now out of print. (The title comes from a line attributed to Witness Lee: "To be a Christian simply means to be mingled with God, to be a God-man.")

Comparison Cited

The complaint says that the book compares Witness Lee to Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple sect leader who persuaded 911 followers to engage in a mass murder and suicide in 1978. Bottomly said such comparisons were made only in advertising for the German book, adding, "We would say Witness Lee is not a Jim Jones; he's not as dangerous or religiously aberrant as Jones was." Nevertheless, Charles O. Morgan Jr. of San Francisco, attorney for the Local Church, said he has never seen another religious group so "mishandled by the media." Morgan contended that most of the "misleading, unfair and ugly things that they write" comes from the Spiritual Counterfeits group. "We will attempt to get the stay lifted (on the start of the trial) because we want desperately to get the truth out in this situation," he said. Morgan said he will file a motion to that effect next week in Alameda Superior Court. Another evangelical research group that has been critical of the Local Church's teachings but has not been sued is the El Toro-based Christian Research Institute. In contrast to Spiritual Counterfeits' annual budget of less than \$500,000, the Orange County organization has a \$3-million budget and a larger full-time staff. Christian Research Institute Director Walter Martin, who said he interviewed Witness Lee for three

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hours once in the 1970s, critically analyzed Lee's church on a series of radio programs and was answered by lengthy Local Church advertisements in an Orange County newspaper. Martin also included a chapter on Witness Lee in his book, "The New Cults." "But they have never threatened me with a lawsuit," he said. Martin expressed concern that if the Local Church wins its suit against Spiritual Counterfeits Project, it might "go after" other detractors and that other cults might be influenced to file similar complaints.

PHOTOGRAPH: Cover of "The God-Men," book that spawned libel suit.