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# CLEARWATER TIMES

AN EDITION OF THE  
St. Petersburg Times

THURSDAY ■ FEBRUARY 22, 2001

## Judge takes Scientology, critics to task

■ The feud burdens taxpayers, says the judge, who fines two critics but finds no evidence to rule on dozens of individual allegations.

By DEBORAH O'NEIL

Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — After listening for eight long days to allegations between the Church of Scientology and its chief

critics, Circuit Court Judge Thomas E. Penick spent nearly 90 minutes Wednesday admonishing the church, its adversaries and even the Clearwater Police Department.

To the church, Penick said there is no need for Scientology agents to continually stick cameras in critics' faces.

To the keepers of the Lisa McPherson Trust, he demanded they stop taunting Scientologists and fined two of them.

To the Clearwater police, Penick said he sympathizes with their struggle to maintain order in downtown Clearwater

but warned, "They are coming very dangerously close to becoming a private security force for the Church of Scientology."

In the end, Penick said, the ongoing feud burdens taxpayers and the public. Pinellas County sheriff's bailiffs were paid overtime to be at the St. Petersburg Judicial Building the weekend of Feb. 10, when the hearing began. Clearwater had to pay a number of police officers who were called to testify.

During eight days of testimony in which each side accused the other of violating a court injunction that was or-

dered Nov. 30, Penick said what he heard was "much to do about nothing."

"Unfortunately, a lot of it was adult nursery school antics," Penick said. "This calls for a professional nanny, not a judge."

The judge found no evidence to rule on dozens of individual allegations. The injunction orders church members and critics to stay 10 feet from each other and delineates where each can picket. But he said two critics crossed the line.

Robert Minton, founder of the Lisa McPherson Trust, was fined \$500 and given six months' probation for waving a

10-foot retractable pole with a copy of the injunction hanging at the end outside the windows of a Scientology building. Minton waived "The Threep" on Jan. 6 as he stood in a no-picket zone.

As part of the hearing, the contraption was entered into evidence. Trust attorney John Merrett asked the judge if the trust could have it back.

Former Scientologist Tory Bezzian, who left the church in July, was fined \$100 for walking in a no-picket zone Dec. 7 carrying two protest signs.

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Using the phrase "spy cameras," Penick expressed bewilderment at the level of surveillance that goes on in downtown Clearwater. Church members and critics regularly can be seen on public sidewalks toting video cameras. And the church has more than 100 cameras trained on its properties, all of which feed live into a room in the Fort Harrison Hotel, where they are monitored by church security staffers.

"I'm missing the point here," Penick said. "I hope someone will let us know when the great invasion is coming."

The judge said all of this gave him a greater understanding of what Clearwater police officers face every day as they try to mediate the tension. But, he said, officers also confused people by giving conflicting information about the injunction.

"There was far too much street justice being meted out by either off-duty or on-duty Clearwater police officers," Penick said.



Penick

He went on to address the off-duty work officers have been doing for the church. The church pays the officers.

"Something that's good for the masses, the chance for the officers off-duty to make some extra money — and they're trying to do their job," Penick said. "But it's become obvious to me they're getting a little more help than they need from the people that are paying their bills."

Police Chief Sid Klein said his department has worked hard to enforce the injunction fairly. Since the conflict results in a steady stream of police calls, it's better for Clearwater taxpayers if someone else foots the bill for the officers' time, he said.

"We're getting it from both sides and now the judge," Klein said. "It's a losing situation for everybody."

Merrett said the hearing was worthwhile.

"Scientology came in here believing they could finally create their little corner of the world where their rules can silence the law," Merrett said. "Judge Penick is in their way."

Clearwater lawyer F. Wallace Pope, who represents the church, said the hearing showed that the injunction has numerous holes that will be addressed as a permanent injunction is drafted.

"If they're going to picket, do it peacefully. Don't do it with a lot of ridicule," Pope said. "Just follow the orders provided in the injunction."