

Former members sue religious group leader

By DAVID WHITNEY
of The Oregonian staff

Two former members of a religious community known as the Center for Truth have filed suit against their former spiritual leader, Portland restaurateur Harvey Freeman.

They alleged fraud, the exercise of undue influence and breach of a confidential relationship that resulted in Freeman's unjust enrichment.

Larry Hurwitz and Grant Sawyer, in a Multnomah County Circuit Court complaint filed Monday, named as defendants Freeman, his wife, Nancy, the Center for Truth, the Shanti Das Elementary School and the Garden Food Restaurant that Freeman opened last December at Southeast 29th Avenue and Powell Boulevard.

The lawsuit said Shanti Das Elementary School was incorporated in September 1977 but "has not operated as an elementary school."

Sawyer and Hurwitz said they, along with their wives, became members of the Center for Truth in July 1974 and October 1975, respectively. The purposes of the center, they said, "were religious and guidance . . . conducted on a regular basis by Freeman based on Easter(n) and Western religious teachings."

In order to become members, the men's complaint said, they were required to turn over to the center all their possessions. Sawyer alleged that his were worth \$3,000 and Hurwitz valued his at \$4,000. Ultimately, they and their wives were made members of the center's board of directors.

"The plaintiffs accepted Freeman as spiritual master and were devoted to his teachings," their court complaint said. "Plaintiffs were obedient to Freeman's wishes and commands."

The center operated the Center Family Restaurant in Portland and, in

April 1977, opened Center Family Pizza. The plaintiffs contended they were required to manage these two restaurants without pay.

Sometime after April 1977, however, the plaintiffs said they began to doubt Freeman's "sincerity and purity." In November 1978, their suit claimed, Freeman ordered the plaintiffs to resign from the center's board and to leave the Clark County, Wash., ranch the center operated as its communal home.

The lawsuit contended that the ranch and restaurants were sold in 1978 and that Freeman's new restaurant was opened using funds derived directly from the assets of the center.

Freeman "intentionally and fraudulently misrepresented to plaintiffs the true nature of the center, his own 'divine' inspiration and the ultimate use to which center funds would be used," the court complaint said.

"In reliance on Freeman's fraudulent misrepresentations, plaintiffs were induced to selflessly labor for (the) center's enrichment without remuneration and to give Freeman the fruits of their labor," the document added.

Sawyer and Hurwitz seek a court order to enjoin the defendants from disposing of any of the center's money, the appointment of a receiver, a declaration that the center was a sham and that its assets be held in trust for them, the return of their \$7,000 in donations, \$142,000 in back pay and \$75,000 in punitive damages and attorneys' fees.

Freeman declined comment on the suit. "I don't know anything about that," he said Tuesday.

In a story about the Garden Food Restaurant that was published in Tuesday editions of The Oregonian, however, Freeman said he decided to disband the religious community in 1979 and that the restaurants were sold.

Cult leaders sued by ex-members

By JANN MITCHELL
Journal Staff Writer

Two disillusioned ex-members of a Washington religious group running restaurants in Portland have filed suit in Multnomah County Circuit Court.

Former members Larry Hurwitz and Grant Sawyer want back money that they turned over to the church and earned managing restaurants run by Harvey and Nancy Freeman, leaders of the Center for Truth in La Center, Wash.

The two men and their wives are seeking return of the \$7,000 they turned over to the center when they joined in 1974 and 1975, accepting Freeman as "divinely inspired . . .

with a direct personal relationship with God" whom they accepted as their "unquestioned and exclusive spiritual master."

Hurwitz, who also is Freeman's son-in-law, also seeks \$82,024 and Sawyer also wants \$66,000 the two couples say they earned while working free at Freeman's Portland restaurants, the Center Family Restaurant at 1233 SW Morrison St. and the Center Family Pizza, 1227 SW Morrison St.

The suit alleges that the restaurants were sold in 1978, along with the 900-acre La Center ranch, and the plaintiffs were asked to resign from the center's board of directors.

The plaintiffs charge that the Freemans now operate the Garden Food Restaurant at 2929

SE Powell Blvd. with proceeds from the above sales.

They are asking the court to restrain the Freemans from further use of the assets while an accounting is made and a receiver appointed. Hurwitz and Sawyer also seek \$75,000 in punitive damages and \$54,674 in attorney's fees.

They want the court to declare that the non-profit Center for Truth and Shanti Das Elementary School are both a "sham."

The suit states that the followers "began to doubt" Freeman's "sincerity and purity of religiousity" when he allegedly induced several female members of the group to have sexual relations with him.