

Birnbaum file

OUTsted From Church in Southland

Los Angeles Times

Followers of 'Free-Sex Guru' Ousted

By GORDON GRANT, Times Staff Writer

Followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, known in India as "the free-sex guru," have been ousted from their center at the Church of Religious Science in Laguna Canyon, which they took over last year.

Almost 100 members of the Church of Religious Science, who appeared unannounced at a meeting of the Rajneesh center's board of directors Thursday night, demanded and received resignations of the board members.

Legal records and bank and checking accounts also were obtained.

The face-off between the guru's devotees, some bare-footed, clad in orange, red and plum-colored clothing, and the church group, many of them white-haired, was marked by occasional emotional outbursts.

"We built this church and we want it back," one elderly man shouted. "Your Bhagwan is a communist from India and ought to be sent back."

And the president of the board, Norm Ecke, whose *sannyasin* (follower) name is Sarveshwar, said, as he agreed to resign: "My orange underwear is going I don't know where. We have places to go and money to get there. Oregon or Lucerne Valley."

He was referring to a report published in The Times last Sunday that Rajneesh is moving his encampment, or *ashram*, from Poona, India, to Antelope, Ore. The group owns another center in Lucerne Valley.

Rajneesh has been called India's most controversial guru, a man of great wealth whose organization has bought more than 100 square miles of land in central Oregon.

Never Repress It

Rajneesh's disciples in Montclair, N.J., placed ads in several national magazines shortly after he arrived in the United States, ostensibly on his way to Oregon. He is believed to be in New Jersey now.

"Sex. Never repress it," one of the ads said. "Never be against it. Sex is just the beginning, not the end. But if you miss the beginning, you will miss the end also."

The takeover of the church on Laguna Canyon Road by Rajneesh followers several months ago was described by one church member as "an insidious kind of thing that happened almost without us knowing it."

The church, founded in 1934, had about 500 members who, about four years ago, became upset with the parent church in Los Angeles, claiming they were being dictated to.

Their minister, Dr. Henry Gerhard, came upon a book, "The Mustard Seed," written by Rajneesh, was impressed and traveled to the Rajneesh *ashram* at Poona, where he became a disciple. When he returned, church members said, he wanted to change the religious

direction of the church to conform with Rajneesh's teachings.

Cards were sent to church members to sign and "re-enroll" as the changeover progressed.

Some signed, but many refused and instead began attending Church of Religious Science services in other parts of Orange County.

But many of them had helped build the church and had donated heavily to construction and maintenance funds. Their resentment grew.

The Rajneesh center's minister, Swami Amitabh (Robert Birnbaum), holder of a doctorate in psychology from the University of California, Berkeley, said at the church group at Thursday's meeting: "You've been sitting on a pressure cooker. Dr. Gerhard went through changes and took something away from you, and you've been sitting on it."

The take-over of the meeting was conducted largely by Harry Barber, a Mission Viejo businessman who had served on the Religious Science church's board of directors and as treasurer, and Sueanne Lewis, a Mission Viejo attorney and church member.

"As representatives of the older members, and be-

cause of the surge of circumstances and certain financial questions, we are asking that your board of directors resign, and we'll take the church back," Barber said.

Barber and Lewis referred to The Times article, which they said contained "disturbing statements, especially about finances."

They quoted a portion that said Rajneesh's disciples had been told to "... earn as much money as possible," to help finance the new headquarters (in Oregon).

Barber asked what the cash position of the center is now, saying it had been \$200,000 last December.

He was told that as of July 31, it was \$156,664; that the center's board had voted about \$50,000 to make property improvements.

Lewis presented a resolution calling for no further expenditures for Rajneesh, for no money to be sent to Oregon, for resignation of the board and for the group to leave the premises.

When Amitabh said quietly, "If you wish us to leave, we will leave," church members stood and applauded.

Later, Lewis was elected executive director and minister pro tem of the church.