

'Truth Is Holy' Crusading Group Alleges Network Of Aid To Contras

The suit, which was filed in May of last year, is the most extensive day case that attorney's ever filed...
— Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord (Ret.), to the Iran-Contra Committee, May 1, 1987.
"These are damned abominable these people will burn at Hell for."

By Charlotte Grimes
Post-Dispatch Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON
WASHINGTON ATTORNEY GENERAL Edwin Meese reported to a microphone in the White House press room last Nov. 25 and mentioned that some tapes from the just-revealed secret arms deal to Iran might have gone to the Contras fighting in Central America, the ground beneath a green house in a suburb northeast about 20 blocks away almost literally began to tremble.

Meese's bombast touched off a stampede of news reporters to knock on the green door, pound through the windows, and cause tripwires from congressional tongues — the Christie Institute had filed a civil lawsuit in a Miami federal court, accusing all but the now-famous Lt. Col. Oliver L. North of running a vast illegal network of, among other things, providing gene-freight to the Contras.

The confession of publicity and official attention is seen as a vindication for the suit, one of Washington's most unusual activist groups.

The institute, named for a Jesuit priest's philosophy, moves now with a self-conscious optimism and processes a determined optimism, complete with a constant focus and the same optimism about the enemy war. Though some critics dismiss them as conspiracy hawks, the institute has a record of championing unpopular causes, like the Karen Hillwood case and other winners.

But in the case of the Contras for three years the Christie Institute was a voice crying in a wilderness of disbelief. Now, the group had achieved part of its goal, to become a force — a significant word in the Christie Institute — on the edges of a national foreign policy debate.

"I have no question that the hearings have made us more visible," said Sara Nelson, executive director of the Christie Institute. "It would have been harder for us to reach as many people without them."

In the last six months, since the hearings began, the institute has grown rapidly: the staff has gone from 12 to 33, says 18 investigators, it has opened a new office in Los Angeles, new private donations are up to around \$200,000 a week, and it has drawn a steady flow of new converts from St. Louis, San Francisco and Iowa.

The institute's case, outlined in its complex lawsuit, reads like the plot of a Robert Ludlum thriller.

For the past 35 years, the institute alleges, a "Secret Team" of Irish-born, former American intelligence agents, military men, government officials and anti-Castro Cuban revolutionaries have formed an alliance with drug smugglers to make money and fight communism — first in a secret war in Southeast Asia and now around Nicaragua.

Proceeding from new generations — like baby-faced Robert Owen, Contra check-casher for North — the team, according to the institute, has used violence, assassination, importation of cocaine into the U.S. and suppression of democracy to carry its goals.

Once it even plotted, says its lawsuit, to kill Louis Tausch, then American Ambassador in Cuba. Tausch, said, is an intercepter who smokes the Contras, planted the bomb that in 1983 killed three journalists and wounded others at a press conference in distant Contra leader Edelberto Torres, commander Tony Alvarez, and his aide, Martha Honey, have been major contributors to the institute's investigation and are the plaintiffs in the lawsuit seeking close to \$50 million from 28 defendants.

Thanks to the official Iran-Contra investigation, some of those defendants are now household names: Owen, Gen. Richard Secord and John Singlaub and Secord's business partners in the Iran arms deal, Albert Baklan and former CIA officials Thomas Clines and Theodore Shackley, as well as Contra leader Adolfo Calero.

Christie Institute leaders and members are aware that if their charges come across in future. Much of case remains unproven by outsiders. But their work has struck enough of a chord that two congressional subcommittees are investigating related allegations. And



Sara Nelson, executive director of the Christie Institute, and Daniel Sheehan, her husband and the institute's chief counsel, at their offices in Washington.

Christie leaders believe that more and more of their case will be accepted as others get the pieces of the puzzle that they say they've already collected.

"They will press their suit, as one member put it, until 'the woodwork falls down.'"

That is a distinct possibility in the row house that the institute occupies in a poor section of Northwest Washington. Paint hangs in layers from the ceiling. Carpets are stained and frayed, the furniture is chipped.

But the atmosphere is one of cheerful urgency. Young volunteers and lawyers in T-shirts and jeans scurry up and down steep sagging stairs. On the dingy walls and shelves are photos and testimonials.

A poster for "Sanctuary — an evening of music, theater, politics and film" featuring Jackson Browne and Holly Near. Bumper stickers proclaiming "Rescue Karen" and "Defend Our Constitution — Stop the Secret Team." A row of books on "The Killing of Karen Silwood" scrunched from an old painting showing the outline of a woman's face and asking "Who Killed Karen Silwood?"

Silwood, who died under mysterious circumstances in 1975 while trying to expose negligence in the handling of plutonium by her employer, is almost the creative spirit of the Christie Institute. It was founded in January 1980 by lawyers and investigators who decided to stick together after winning a \$10.5 million judgment against the Oklahoma-based Kerr-McCree Corp. for Silwood's injury.

At the heart of the group were and remain three people, known to all as Sara, Danny and Billy.

Sara Nelson, the executive director, comes from the feminist and trade union movements, leading the National Organization for Women's labor task force. She played a major role in coordinating support for the Silwood case from unions, civil liberties and environmental groups.

Daniel P. Sheehan, her husband and the institute's chief counsel, was the main lawyer for the Silwood suit. Before, employed and Harvard-trained, he had also worked at the Catholic order's Office of Social Ministries and with F. Lee Bailey, the widely known criminal lawyer.

Sheehan and the institute have worked on behalf of the Sanctuary movement seeking help for Central American refugees. And under his legal guidance, the institute has won a \$40,000 judgment against the Rio Rico Klan, the American Neo-Nazi Party and Citizens, N.C. police over the killing of conscientious objectors in 1975.

William J. Davis, a Jesuit priest, was chief investigator in the Silwood case and formerly directed his order's Office of Social Ministries. He remains with Christie Institute, with his order's blessing, as its Central American coordinator and sort of unofficial spiritual father. When he is in town, he lives at the group's communal home and often orientates Mass for those who want to come.

Sitting on the floor of a temporarily vacated cubicle, Davis pours a journal of the Christie Institute as a "religious public policy" group that sees the law as a "strategic force" for bringing about a social order based on harmony, ethics and doing God's work on earth.

He takes strong exception to charges from critics like U.S. Sen. Robert Dornan, R-Calif., who links the Christie Institute to a hub of liberation theology that borders on heresy.

"I know a little about liberation theology," says Davis, the priest. "But most people have known almost nothing about it and are out at all influence by it."

Instead, says Davis, "There is a common understanding among us that this kind of work has to be motivated

by something beyond anger. It has to be motivated by something beyond hostility." They believe in an "absolute truth," says Davis.

"And that pursuit of truth," he adds, "is a holy thing. It is that spiritual element that gives the Christie Institute a distinctive flavor. Much of it is Catholic. The institute takes its name from Ferdinand de Chirico, the late Jesuit philosopher and theologian who described a 'Christian force' at work in the universe in being about harmony and unity."

Many of its members come from Catholic backgrounds, although some say they have abandoned the church's dogma while keeping its values, and others still find comfort in its forms and practices.

But members are of many kinds to cross their convictions. The institute has Jewish and Protestant members, and at least one who Davis called "hip-hoppan Christian." What they cherish, say institute staff members, is their common human values, rooted in various religions.

This spirituality, energized by the Contra lawsuit, is the magnet drawing many of its workers.

Dennis Henderson, a 35-year-old lawyer who graduated from St. Louis University law school, came here by way of a Catholic Worker community in Los Angeles and dreams of building social justice until urban despair is work as the gospel. She thinks she's found much more than a job.

"It's important that our faith action isn't limited to a church function of a church building," says Henderson, who wears a scarlet and oakleaf beret-very religious.

Mary Dunbar, another St. Louisan who has joined forces with the institute, says the suit is a culmination of her longtime peace work for Central America. She has spent three years in Nicaragua and has worked for the St. Louis Archdiocese's Human Rights Office.

She opposes the Reagan administration's support of the Contras, fighting the Nicaragua government and hopes that the lawsuit's allegations that the Contras have paid for some of their supplies by smuggling drugs into the U.S. will strengthen public opinion against the policy.

"This is where the Nicaraguans have come to us, when the drugs are in our high schools and our Constitution is at stake," says Dunbar.

Far from Reagan's promises to Congress, their lawsuit has not been ignored out of court but press coverage. Indeed, as Secord acknowledged in Congress, it provoked him to spend \$10,000 of the Iran arms proceeds to fight the suit, for fear that it would weaken the secret Contra supply operation.

But the suit has become its own kind of goal and means for the institute. It sets up about 10 percent of the group's earnings, and institute members say. The growth of the institute's staff (division to change its financial existence, forcing its members into a struggle against becoming an overused bureaucracy).

On the other hand, it has helped the Christie Institute forge alliances with 12 other groups, issuing them the Union of American Hebrew Communities, the Methodist Board of Global Ministries and American for Democratic Action. Its traditional financial support comes from religious and public interest groups like the Lutheran Youth Program and the J. Paulson's MacArthur Foundation in Illinois.

But above all, its new visibility gives it a pulp forum which to preach its particular social-political-religious sermons. It wants, as executive director Nelson put it, to create "national dialogue" that would get people to talk about what a legal, moral, effective foreign policy would look like.