

Christian Publishers Defend Harvest House in Legal Battle

Christian publishers, broadcasters and civil liberties groups have come out in support of Harvest House Publishers in its fight to have a multimillion-dollar libel action thrown out of court.

More than 20 companies and organizations were involved in filing or supporting “friend of the court” briefs backing Harvest House against the Local Church movement and its publishing arm, Living Stream Ministry (LSM). The briefs-submitted in October to the Court of Appeals for the First District of Texas in Houston by The Rutherford Institute, The Inspirational Network, the Pacific Justice Institute and the National Religious Broadcasters-argued that a ruling against Harvest House would threaten press freedoms under the First Amendment.

Among those named as interested parties in the actions were Moody Publishers, Kregel Publishers, Gospel Light/Regal Books, Rose Publishing and the USA Radio Network. The appeals court also heard oral arguments over Harvest House’s appeal of an earlier rejection of an application for summary dismissal of the lawsuit. A decision is expected soon.

Local Church congregations and LSM took Harvest House to court in 2001, seeking more than \$100 million on the grounds they were libeled by their inclusion in the 1999 John Ankerberg and John Weldon book Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions, which Harvest House published. Founded in China in the 1920s by Watchman Nee and later brought to the U.S. by Nee’s

disciple, Witness Lee, the Local Church claims 25,000 members in 300 churches nationwide and more than 250,000 members in 3,000 churches internationally.

Though cult-watchers have long said LSM has never sufficiently distanced itself from questionable teachings on topics such as the Trinity or the nature of the church, it was accepted into the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association in 2002.

In its submission, The Rutherford Institute argued that “nothing in the book singled out the Local Church as promoting or engaging in behavior that the book attributed to some sects or cults or individuals.” The appeals court’s decision that the action should go to trial threatened the “vigor” of public discussion on religion “and raised a danger that the press will censor itself because [of] ... uncertainty” over First Amendment protections, the brief added.

LSM and the Local Church said in a statement that the Rutherford brief “mischaracterizes the nature of the conflict.” The case “is not just about the freedom of speech or the right to publish,” it said. The case was “about abuse” of First Amendment rights, “not about freedom.”

LSM spokesman Chris Wilde added that freedom to publish under the First Amendment was abused “when someone can make false charges of criminal and abhorrent behavior without bearing any responsibility to substantiate them. The brief seems to argue for unrestricted freedom, without responsibility. That’s an unusual position for Christians to take these days.”

Andy Butcher