

Scientology foe digs in for fight

■ A trust formed by millionaire Robert Minton will set up offices near the church in Clearwater.

By THOMAS C. TOBIN
Times Staff Writer

CLEARWATER — An opposition group to the Church of Scientology said Saturday it is well-financed and "here to stay" with plans for a variety of activities, from speaking to school children and civic groups to counseling Scientologists about leaving their church.

The group is called the Lisa McPherson Trust Inc., named for the 36-year-old Scientologist who died in 1995 while in the care of church staffers. Its intentions were made public during a "Scientology/Clearwater Relations Conference" at a local hotel.

Also Saturday, about 40 anti-Scientology activists picketed in front of Scientology buildings in downtown. Later, more than 60 people, including McPherson's family from Texas, gathered to remember her at an evening vigil.

Robert Minton, the New England millionaire who formed the new trust, said its offices would be a "safe zone" for Scientologists and others who find fault with the church or have questions that only its critics would answer.

"We will be encouraging people to think for themselves, and we will be offering people any information they want to listen to," Minton said as he waved and held a picket sign at downtown's main crossroads, Cleveland Street and Fort Harrison Avenue.

On his sign was a swastika with a Scientology cross at the center. It said: "Stop Scientology's Hate, Lies and Bigotry."

Responding to Minton and the other pickets, Mike Rinder, a top Scientology official, said: "The only ones spreading fear and hate in Clearwater are those people."

He called the Lisa McPherson Trust "a hate group set up for profit and for the personal benefit of Bob Minton."

Rinder added, "I don't think anybody in this community wants them around."

When the trust registered with the state in October as a for-profit corporation, church officials said it was a scheme by Minton to recoup the \$2.5-million he has spent so far on anti-Scientology causes.

But Minton, a 53-year-old retired investment banker, said Saturday that if his motivation was money, he wouldn't be giving it away so readily to anti-Scientology causes. He said he registered the group as a for-profit to avoid the open financial reporting requirements of non-profits and to prevent Scientology from harassing potential donors.

A full-time staff of six will operate the trust in a building that Minton says he has contracted to buy in downtown. The building is said to be adjacent to church property, but Minton is waiting to disclose the location.

At the anti-Scientology conference, a small audience of the activists heard from several speakers, including Peter Alexander and David Cecere.

Cecere, a Scientologist from 1975 to 1992, will be the trust's executive director. "We're here to



Times photo — JILL SAGERS
Lee Skelton, left, and Ann Carlson carry candles during a vigil Saturday in Clearwater in memory of Lisa McPherson, their niece.

stay. We're here for the long haul. We're here to see the truth come out," Cecere told the group. "We're going to be busy."

Alexander, a former Scientologist, said he spent \$1-million on Scientology over 20 years and last year moved his business from Clearwater to Tampa to get away from the church. As one of the trust's 23 board members, he tried to find office space for the group but was met, he said, with resistance from downtown landlords fearful of Scientology.

Alexander said the new trust would be "the force that people can get behind so they won't be afraid any more."

Rinder, the church official, said

it is Minton's group that is "trying to create a threatening environment." When landlords turned them away, it was "an indication that the people of Clearwater aren't interested in their message or in being involved with them, either," he said. Minton said, the group plans to provide information and "exit counseling" for Scientologists and speak with local groups.

Rinder said "exit counseling" is a euphemism for "deprogramming," the practice of causing people to abandon a rigid commitment to certain beliefs.

"We don't hate Scientology," said Ann Carlson, one of McPherson's aunts. "We just want them to change their methods."