



STATEMENT DE035

Eckankar Building Its First Church Near Minneapolis

Residents of Chanhassen, Minnesota, have been rallying against Eckankar in a bid to prevent the Eastern/occultic sect from building its first church in the suburban Minneapolis area.

But on May 22 the Chanhassen City Council ruled to issue a conditional use permit, which would allow Eckankar to build an 850-seat step pyramid-shaped church on the sect's 174 acres. If built, it will mark the first time in Eckankar's history that it has constructed a church on a specific site. According to a sect spokesman, they have rented offices and other facilities until now.

Based in New Hope, Minnesota, Eckankar has been headed by Sri Harold Klemp (the reputed *Eck Master*) since 1983, according to literature published by the sect. The group claims to teach "the ancient art of soul travel."

In the words of a sect publication, *ECKANKAR: A Way or Life*, "The ECK is spirit. It is the force that sustains and supports all life throughout the worlds or SUGMAD (God)...In ECKANKAR, contemplation is the spiritual exercise that opens the door to expanded awareness. And the Inner Presence of the Living ECK Master [Sri Klemp] is the Spiritual Guide." According to founder Paul Twitchell, an Eck Master is "omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent."

Eckankar claims to be mankind's oldest religion, Klemp being the 973rd Eck Master. But cult experts disagree. David Lane, perhaps the foremost authority on the sect's history, argues that Eckankar cannot be traced further back than 1967. In an interview with the *Christian Research Journal*, Lane said that before founding Eckankar, Twitchell was a one-time member of Self-Realization Fellowship, the Ruhani Satsang Yoga group, and then Scientology, where he eventually became the late L. Ron Hubbard's press secretary. As a result, Eckankar became a "rehash of yoga" and other elements, he said. Lane added that portions of the 1939 book, *The Path of the Masters*, also became Eckankar dogma after Twitchell plagiarized it and worked it into his own books and teachings.

Eckankar has a large following throughout the U.S., and is found in portions of Europe and Africa. An Eckankar spokesman would not say how many followers it has, but Lane estimates its strength at 40,000 to 60,000 members.

Dave Pedersen of the *Chanhassen Villager* said that after the sect moved its headquarters from Menlo Park, California, to the Minneapolis area in 1986, there was immediate controversy. Eckankar bought the 174 acres in Chanhassen and tried to place a business campus on it. The community beat back those efforts when the City Council refused a rezoning request. Pedersen said there are about 400 Eckankar members in the Twin Cities area, many of whom work in the sect's headquarters.

When the sect announced plans to build the church, "there were a few very vocal people who were able to gather a lot of support," Pedersen observed. "[But] opposition from the religious community was conspicuously absent."

Eckankar has not said how much their new complex will cost. At press time construction had not begun.

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