



STATEMENT DC375

Financial Crisis Rocks Christian Science

Surrounded by charges of financial mismanagement, poor administration, and questionable editorial practices, the First Church of Christ, Scientist has accepted the resignation of its chairman, reorganized its leadership, and shut down its cable TV network. Since 1987 the church has spent close to \$500 million in an attempt to create a secular media empire, and as of March 1992 it was reportedly running at a deficit of \$6.5 million per month.

In 1879 Mary Baker Eddy founded the First Church of Christ, Scientist (also called the "Mother Church") in Boston and established her book, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, as its "pastor" alongside the Bible. On the basis of her own healing experiences, and influenced by metaphysician P. P. Quimby, Eddy developed a meditative healing technique that entails renouncing the very existence of disease — a technique Eddy called "Christian Science." Today her followers are estimated at 150,000 worldwide.

In the mid-1980s the sect's board of directors decided to move into 21st-century communications in a big way. Building on the reputation of the daily *Christian Science Monitor*, its Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper, they launched a 24-hour news, culture, and public affairs cable network called The Monitor Channel; WQTV, a Boston UHF television station; a monthly news magazine, *World Monitor* and a shortwave radio system, *The World Service of The Christian Science Monitor*.

But by 1988 this ambitious expansion had taken an increasing financial toll, forcing the last in a series of cutbacks on the *Christian Science Monitor* and prompting the departure of more than 60 people, including the paper's senior editor and three associate editors. Each year thereafter, the church has had to draw upon restricted funds to subsidize its media expansion, with some total estimates reaching as high as \$500 million.

The sect's most expensive venture by far was the Monitor Channel, which reportedly cost more than \$125 million to operate during its 11-month lifespan. Christian Scientists expressed as much concern about the network's direction as they did about its cost: since the channel's only religious program was a five-minute broadcast at 5 A.M., many worried that their church was becoming "secularized."

Another crisis began unfolding in 1991 when, to qualify for a \$97 million bequest, the church decided to publish *The Destiny of the Mother Church* by Bliss Knapp as "authorized Christian Science literature" and prominently display the book in "substantially all" of its 2,600 reading rooms (see the Winter 1992 CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL). But according to historian Stephen Gottschalk, the publication of the controversial book, written in the 1940s, demonstrates "a crisis of authority" since it "virtually deifies Mrs. Eddy," placing her on a par with Jesus. Because Eddy herself rejected this notion on several occasions, many church members question the decision to publish and distribute *Destiny*, which seemed to put money above principle.

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Soon after Knapp's book was published the four editors who jointly produce the sect's religious periodicals resigned, issuing a terse public statement: "In good conscience, we are unable to continue serving as editors under present board policies." Worse still, on February 24 Stanford University and the Los Angeles County Museum — the bequest's default beneficiaries — obtained a 90-day delay in hopes of demonstrating that the sect has not lived up to the terms of the will.

Historically, the Mother Church has certain "restricted" funds, such as endowments, which Christian Science officials have repeatedly said were not used for the church's day-to-day operations. However, on December 31, 1991 the church ran out of general operating funds and elected to borrow from these restricted funds to meet its operating expenses. After borrowing \$5 million from the Trustees Under the Will of Mary Baker Eddy and \$21.5 million dollars from the pension fund in January and early February of 1992, the board borrowed an additional \$20 million on February 28 to repay an earlier loan from the Christian Science Monitor fund. The \$41.5 million in transfers from the pension fund reduced it to just over \$60 million — half the \$120 million it contained only three years ago.

Almost immediately an unnamed church official leaked the news of the pension fund transfers to the Boston Globe, a disclosure which brought tremendous pressure upon the board of directors. Many church members expressed shock and disappointment on hearing news of the highly irregular loans. Amid questions surrounding the transfers, Harvey W. Wood, a 15-year member of the five-person board, resigned as chairman and was replaced by board member Virginia S. Harris. Simultaneously, the Monitor Channel — then losing about \$4 million a month — was put on the market, with plans to dissolve the network on April 15 if a buyer was not found. The church's bureaucracy was also reorganized in a return to the cabinet-style government used in its early years.

Despite the church's financial turmoil, spokesman J. Thomas Black expressed confidence that Harris is fully capable of bringing the movement through this difficult period. "Everyone who knows her sees her as intelligent, gracious, and very much a listener, but also very decisive and authoritative," he said.

Nevertheless, it is doubtful that any change in leadership will reverse the sect's general decline. Not only has its newspaper's circulation dropped (from 240,000 in the 1960s to 100,000 today), but church membership itself has plummeted from an estimated 268,000 in the 1930s to some 150,000. (According to the March 14, 1992 *New York Times*, "There are more Roman Catholics in North Dakota than Christian Scientists in the United States.") And beyond concerns of dwindling membership and financial pressures, many Christian Scientists feel their church has not dealt with its underlying identity crisis, fearing that the recent leadership shuffle hasn't altered a much deeper trend towards secularization.

Some former Christian Scientists view the current leadership shakeup as a watershed in the movement's history. "I think this is the beginning of the end of institutional Christian Science as we know it," said Randall Childs of Boston. "These media projects will die, one by one — the daily *Monitor* last of all. Eventually we will see a corporate implosion, and we will see a small, aberrant cult, no longer prestigious, a shadow of its former image."

— Keith Edward Tolbert