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Dispute Between O.C., Christian Group Heats Up

By Claire Luna, Times Staff Writer

For all of the legal scuffles that the Piecemakers — the quilt-making, soup-cooking, tea-sipping Christian commune in Costa Mesa — has faced in its 30 years, no member had ever seen the inside of a jail.

But that changed Wednesday when seven members — including the sect's 84-year-old founder — were arrested on suspicion of assault and obstruction of justice after interfering with Orange County health inspectors trying to enter their kitchen.

Piecemakers operates a popular craft shop of the same name, and members of the sect — many who met decades ago for Bible readings on the beach — live communally in a nearby neighborhood.

The court-ordered inspection of Piecemakers Country Store followed more than five years of the group's refusal to allow inspectors into its facility, said Health Care Agency spokesman Howard Sutter.

That refusal isn't out of disregard for food safety, said founder Marie Kolasinski, but because members think code enforcement violates their rights.

“Our best inspectors are our customers,” she said. “If the customers don't like what you're doing, they stop coming.”

Kolasinski and the six others arrested Wednesday morning were bailed out that afternoon for \$5,000 each. They returned to the store Thursday seemingly undaunted by the experience.

Customers gathered in a quilt-lined room off the craft shop to eat the group's pumpkin-sausage soup, caramel apple pie and cranberry muffins, all made in the kitchen that morning.

Lorna Drake, 59, is a Northridge woman who teaches weekend doll-making classes at Piecemakers and comes at least three times a week for lunch. “No one would eat here if it wasn't nice food,” Drake said, pushing away her soup cup. “They should just be left alone.”

Piecemakers Country Store

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The shop's front door, its glass painted with fall leaves and pumpkins, bears a sign to that effect: "Under protection of the 4th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, all government inspectors are prohibited from entering these doors."

Piecemakers started almost three decades ago, when a group of Orange County Christians who read the Bible together on the beach and quilted in their garages decided to form a commune. Its 25 members live in a few houses near the Adams Avenue store and restaurant.

Kolasinski and the other members contend the county is smothering them with laws. They fight back with profanity and threats, they said, because that's the kind of language that makes an impact.

Piecemakers has long been at loggerheads with the government.

In August 2002, after dubbing two county code inspectors "rapists," "Martian reptiles" and "Gestapo whores" in a newspaper ad, the group settled a libel lawsuit for \$20,000. In 1997, it fought a misdemeanor charge of failing to acquire a permit after staging a musical in the store's parking lot.

And in 1995, the FBI investigated the commune after members sent a letter to county officials that was sprinkled with salty language and included a reference to the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building. Agents concluded that the group did not represent a serious threat.

Its most protracted battles, though, have been over health inspections. Members say code requirements are overly strict — they say they have been cited because their sink is 6 inches too short and a drain must be installed in the kitchen's floor.

Sutter said Piecemakers has been authorized to sell only prepackaged food items. Inspectors on Wednesday observed that "they may be operating outside what their permit allows," he added, which could result in the revocation of the group's permit.

Health inspections are typically conducted two to three times each year at businesses that serve food. During inspection attempts since September 2000,

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Sutter said, commune members swore at staff members and ordered them to leave the property.

After another failed attempt Oct. 6, a judge authorized Health Care Agency officials and police to carry out a warrant to inspect the facility.

“Staff members could not recall another organization where we’ve had to go to these measures to conduct an inspection,” Sutter said.

The arrests followed years of health-code violations, said Susan Kang Schroeder, a spokeswoman for the district attorney’s office. Customers had complained of food sitting out in the heat and a server who blew her nose, then wiped her hands on a dirty rag, Schroeder said.

“Everybody has to follow the same laws,” she said. “You don’t get a pass because you belong to a religious organization or because you’re older.” Piecemakers members, though, say that no matter how many times they are arrested they will not change their beliefs.

Kolasinski said she has already planned what she will say to the judge when she and the other six members arrested appear in court Nov. 28.

“We are in here because we stood up for our rights and the Constitution,” she said. “Now you tell me if I’m guilty.”