

The Savvy Philanthropy and an In-Your-Face Style, Dr. Gene Scott Has Generated a Lavish Lifestyle, Powerful Friends in Los Angeles and a Fiercely Loyal Global Following

By: Glenn F. Bunting; staff writer for The Times

ON ANY GIVEN NIGHT, MILLIONS OF weary souls plop down on the family-room couch, pick up the remote and scan the airwaves in search of infotainment. They skip past snap shots of Roseanne raiding the refrigerator and the Bundys swapping insults until a close-up of *The Face* flashes on the screen.

Partially obscured by cigar smoke, the face appears puffed with rage and ready to explode. Piercing blue eyes stare through half-framed reading specs and gold-rimmed shades, worn one on top of the other. A mouthful of perfectly aligned, pearl-white teeth sneers behind a wispy beard. Shocking white hair stands out each night from under assorted head wear--a Stetson, a Stanford cap, a crown, even a sombrero.

This bizarre visage lures television viewers to Dr. Gene Scott, pastor and supreme leader of the Los Angeles University Cathedral. But it is his provocative, profanity-laced monologues that keep them tuning in. Scott's eclectic broadcast mixes high-voltage Scripture and obnoxious solicitations (for money, naturally) with taped footage of his church's world-champion American saddle bred show horses prancing to the tunes of Sanatra and Springsteen. Toss in heavy doses of call-in hero worship from South Africa to Santa Barbara along with amusing commentary on current events and the result is a sort of religious Rush Limbaugh.

"Nuke 'em in the name of Jesus!" Scott ranted during the Gulf War, boasting that he was the only minister urging President Bush to bomb Iraq. Recently, after three years of extensive dental work, Scott joked to his congregation that "there'll be fewer weeks in 1994 that I come here wanting to kill. So, get on the telephone!"

"Get on the telephone!" is Scott's favorite bark. It's his way of ordering the faithful to send cash. And send they do, more than \$1 million a month, according to some estimates. Through the years, the collections have helped support Scott's lavish lifestyle-- chauffeured limousines, Lear jet travel, a Pasadena mansion, 'round-the-clock bodyguard protection and scenic horse ranches in Kentucky and the San Gabriel Valley.

At first blush, w. Eugene Scott, as he spells his name, seems miscast as God's renegade salesman. The 64-year-old preacher's son holds a Stanford Ph.D., fancies himself an intellectual, a philosopher, an avid bibliophile and philanthropist. But a closer look reveals a fascinatingly complex character: Scott has no formal education in theology, an enormous ego, eccentric personality and extraordinarily diverse interests. He is a world-renowned stamp collector, an equestrian, painter and hunter, and a saxophonist who pokes fun at "honkers" like President Clinton. He has been lampooned on "Saturday Night Live" by comic Robin Williams, profiled in the documentary "God's Angry Man" and feted by some of California's prominent personalities.

Scott is hailed by some community leaders for reviving the Christian spirit in the City of Angels. While crime, homelessness, graffiti and the stench of the inner city have pushed other congregations to the outer suburbs, Scott relocated his Glendale church Downtown in 1986. Every Sunday he attracts hundreds of worshipers from all over Southern California to hear his message in the historic United Artists Theater at Broadway and Olympic. His church spent \$2 million to renovate the classic Spanish Gothic theater, established in 1927 by Hollywood luminaries Mary Pickford, Charles Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks, and today, the cathedral rooftop carries the same neon red "Jesus Saves" signs that for decades towered over the city's skyline a few blocks away on Hope Street.

For all his achievements, Scott remains misunderstood and the subject of much ridicule. His wealth and notoriety, coupled with his spirited defense of the Resurrection lead skeptics to dismiss him as just another greedy, Bible-thumping televangelist. But

nothing infuriates Scott more than to be lumped with the likes of Jerry Farwell, Jim Baker and Jimmy Swaggart.

"In every way possible within the boundaries of God's word, I have tried to separate from the television evangelists' image," Scott tells his congregation. Television evangelist "has become a word that can only become analogized to nigger, kike, beamer and other epithets designed to demean and create a perceptual set of a lesser-quality being."

Few quarrel with Scott's insistence that he occupies a planet all his own in the universe of electronic ministry. Within the mainstream of religious broadcasters, largely made up of conservative evangelicals like the Rev. Billy Graham, Scott is regarded as unique. Indeed, he is unusual even among the many zany characters who operate on the fringe of televangelism. Who else spreads God's word so fervently while smoking a fat cigar and cursing his rivals? Or advises his followers that they don't have to go to church on Sunday to be a Christian? Now that his church's broadcasting enterprise--the University Network--spans the globe, Scott claims the world as his parish.

It comes as no surprise that Scott attracts more than his share of critics. They portray him as a paranoid, vindictive iconoclast who leads a flock of rebellious followers. Scott, they are quick to point out, is accountable only to himself, tolerates zero dissent and exerts a frightening level of control over his followers.

"He refuses to put himself in a position where he can be criticized," says David Gill, a professor of Christian ethics at North Park College in Chicago, who has observed Scott. "Instead, he surrounds himself with all these sycophants and weaklings who are just looking for somebody to submit to."

Scott provides a form of drive-by religion for the '90s to a transient population that needs only to watch television and send in cash to be counted among the faithful. But Scott preaches no easy gospel; the fiery pastor guides his congregation each Sunday through two hours of intense analysis that focuses on his own distinctive

interpretation of Scripture.

"I came to town 18 years ago and said I'm looking for the uncommon man or woman," Scott explains. "I'm not here to transplant saints. If you just want an ordinary church, pick up the Yellow Pages and find the closest one to you."

ON A GORGEOUS FEBRUARY AFTERNOON, NINE top officials from the Glendale Adventist Medical Center arrive at a lavish estate in Pasadena with no idea what awaits behind the heavy iron gates. Upon entering the meticulously landscaped grounds, they are screened by a guard who carefully checks each of their names against a formal guest list.

Scott is entertaining the Adventists to show his appreciation for the care his 82-year-old mother received after falling and breaking both wrists and a leg. The hospital staff had accommodated Scott's daily midnight visits and his entourage of security men, personal physicians and other aides.

During the next three hours, Scott conducts a tour of his church's "Sistine Chapel" an underground, climate-controlled museum that includes an original Rembrandt and Monet displayed among the pastor's own paintings. The visitors are treated to an exquisite five-course luncheon catered and served by trendy Marino's of Melrose Avenue. They are left speechless when Scott offers to contribute \$20,000 to a hospital fund-raising drive to obtain new surgical equipment. They are dazzled by Scott's riveting life story, witty charm and encyclopedic mind, later describing him as "sensitive," "urbane," "humorous," "thoughtful" and "humble." For some guests, it is difficult reconciling this version of Scott with the same personality who appears so wacky on TV.

"People started walking away feeling they had been in the presence of a Renaissance man," extols David R. Iglar, a hospital vice president. "It was kind of like being with a Leonardo da Vinci. I don't think I've ever had an encounter or experience like that in my life."

Iglar offered to recount his impressions of the visit at the request

of L.A. City Councilman Richard Alatorre, a close friend of Scott and a loyal supporter. "Have you talked with him?" Iglar inquired, the amazement in his voice suggesting that I, too, would be in awe after meeting the Renaissance man.

For months, I had tried to interview Scott. I had called his church's toll-free hot line to make a mandatory reservation for his Sunday service. A volunteer, called a "Voice of Faith," answered, and she noted my name and asked for my "King's House" number, which identifies all dues-paying members. She also asked whether I had ever attended Scott's service. When I told her I had no ID number and that I had never been before, she apologized and said it was unlikely a visit could be arranged. (But others have easily made reservations.)

I drove to the University Cathedral anyway, parking in a vacant lot across the street from the rear of the church. I couldn't help but notice several middle-aged men in polyester suits with worried looks painted on their faces and two-way radios plugged into their ears. They were members of the church's vaunted security detail, which includes off-duty Los Angeles cops paid to protect Scott, his congregation and their Downtown property. The heavy security is necessary, Scott contends, because the church "has a lot of valuables, including my life."

Within minutes, one guard retrieved a pair of binoculars and began looking my way. Another guard walked up to my car and jotted down the license plate number. A third, with long red hair tied in a ponytail, approached and stood within a few feet of the driver's side door, watching over me.

I left my car and walked around the block to the front entrance of the cathedral, where I encountered the same ponytailed guard, arms crossed and chest expanded. I kept walking. The church's lawyer had cautioned me against sneaking into the cathedral if I wanted to land an interview with Scott.

On a subsequent Sunday, the security crew threatened a photographer who showed up outside the church to take

photographs for this article. Police were called to the scene when one of the guards repeatedly shouted obscenities.

I never did get to meet Scott, shake his hand or pose a question in person despite repeated attempts. "Gene Scott has no intention of responding to any questions regarding church finances and Dr. Scott personally," the pastor comments. All the quotations from Scott in this article come either from taped broadcasts of his programs or written responses passed through a church lawyer.

At my request, Scott furnished five references for me to interview. All were certifiable big shots who used superlatives to describe Scott while glossing over his idiosyncrasies. A "brilliant fellow," raved Lodwick Cook, the ARCO chairman. "Extraordinarily bright," glowed Mark Pisano, executive director of the Southern California Association of Governments. "He is a very, very bright, intelligent man," lauded Los Angeles City Councilman Joel Wachs. "He is caring. He is committed to the city. He is honest," praised Alatorre.

None could top the gushing of California Assembly Speaker Willie Brown: "I think he is one of the most interesting public figures in California. He is an extraordinarily brilliant person. His skills at communicating are probably equal to anybody that we currently know and may ever know."

Each of the five men had been exposed to Scott's charm and witnessed his extreme generosity. When Cook helped lead the "Save the Books" campaign after the Downtown Central Library fires, Scott organized a telethon that raised \$2 million in pledges. As a fellow director of the Rose Bowl Aquatics Center in Pasadena, Pisano appreciated Scott for rescuing the nonprofit swim facility with cash donations exceeding \$430,000. When Wachs wanted to rally support for his mayoral candidacy last year, Scott arranged for him to address his congregation on television. Whenever Alatorre needs a contribution to a worthy cause in his district, Scott is "always there" to chip in. And when Brown's VIP friends visit Los Angeles, Scott gladly furnishes a church limo.

A relentless self-promoter, Scott adroitly uses his church's

charitable contributions and his association with personalities to boost his ministry. Compliments from Cook and former L.A. Mayor Tom Bradley, among others, have appeared in full-page newspaper ads touting the minister and his church. When Scott wanted to establish his good character during a 1990 court battle, he did not hesitate to drop the names of Bradley and others in legal papers.

Scott maintains that his church contributes only to charities that city officials recommend for the community good. Asked whether he uses friends in high places to help legitimize his church, Scott responds: "The question is an insult to me, the (church) and my friends. We were never illegitimate."

Nonetheless the hard sell does not make a believer of everyone. The Rev. Dale O. Wolery became acquainted with Scott in 1985 before the Church of the Open Door, of which he was assistant pastor, sold its historic Downtown cathedral to Scott's congregation for \$23 million. Wolery had spent a good deal of time in Scott's company. But after Scott reneged on the deal, involving the church in protracted lawsuits, Wolery came to view Scott as a manipulator and a showman.

"I don't like what he stands for," concludes Wolery, currently senior pastor at North Community Church in Yorba Linda. "A side of him is engaging, warm. He knows how to make you feel good. He is dangerous primarily because he really comes off as a straight shooter. He is the ultimate hypocrite."

AT AN EARLY AGE, SCOTT BECAME WELL VERSED IN THE HIGHER POWER OF religion. The son of a traveling preacher and his teen-age wife, he was born on Aug. 14, 1929, in Buhl, Ida. When Scott was 6, his mother gave birth to premature twins, and the girl died within hours. The following month, the baby boy was asleep and young Gene was suffering convulsions when their mother had a vision of angels coming.

"I saw a stairway begin to roll down from heaven and come right down to the side of my bed," Inez Leona Graves Scott recalled in a 1980 interview. "Two angels walked down and they stopped in

front of Gene. I said, 'Oh no, Lord, you can't take Gene!' and they just went around him and picked the baby up."

The infant died but Gene was spared. From then on, his parents knew their surviving child was special. Shortly thereafter, the family moved to the Northern California town of Gridley when W.T. Scott agreed to head an Assemblies of God church. He succeeded a pastor who crucified himself on a tree trying to imitate the marks of Christ. "At that time, the people like my dad were the cults, the kooks and the nuts," Scott once told an interviewer.

In elementary school, Scott proved to be an exceptional student. Accompanying a straight-A, seventh-grade report card was a teacher's note to his parents: "Do you know you have a genius for a son?" He played on the high school basketball team, though his father's congregation did not approve of the boy exposing his legs in public. The caption under Scott's photo in the 1947 Oroville Union High School yearbook read, "Always a good-natured fellow."

Scott married his high school sweetheart, Betty Ann Frazer, in the early 1950s. They had no children and were divorced 23 years later. On his program, Scott has portrayed her as the "devil's sister. I hate her. If I go to heaven and she's there, I'm going to another planet." Scott's second wife, Christine E. Shaw, a stunning woman 20 years his junior, can be seen nightly on his program riding the church's champion show horses. Trained in ballet for 16 years, Shaw shares Scott's passion for art, stamps, coins and other collectibles.

A pivotal point in Scott's life came when he enrolled in a doctorate program in philosophy of education at Stanford University. One professor was a leading disciple of Reinhold Niebuhr, and Scott's dissertation on the American philosopher left an indelible mark on him. Quoting Niebuhr, Scott described his life's goal: to "descend from the anthill of scholastic hair-splitting to help the world of men regulate its common life and discipline, its ambitions and ideals." Like Niebuhr, Scott believed that this could not be accomplished without religion.

At Stanford, Scott stood out as a loner who was almost single-minded in his quest to excel academically. After earning his doctorate in 1957, he taught briefly at a Midwestern Bible college, helped Oral Roberts establish a university in Tulsa, Okla., and joined the Assemblies of God movement, a fundamentalist Christian denomination, where he quickly established himself as a rising star. Scott traveled all over the world preaching salvation to rapt audiences and designed a Sunday school curriculum that significantly boosted church membership.

"He had one of the sharpest, keenest minds of anyone I have ever known," recalls the Rev. William Vickery, superintendent emeritus of the Assemblies of God Northern California and Nevada District. But it was only a matter of time before the restless Scott would "go free in order to be creative and relevant to today's world."

In 1970, Scott resigned his Assemblies of God credential in good standing and returned to Oroville to launch his own ministry with his father. Today, Assemblies of God officials are stunned by what they see and hear on Scott's program. "I just can't imagine someone with his brilliance and abilities allowing his energies to be diverted the way they have been diverted," says a perplexed Vickery. "I don't understand it. I think it is such a waste."

It was while serving his Oroville ministry that Scott was approached about taking over the 45-year-old Faith Center Church in Glendale along with its four broadcast stations and \$3.5-million debt. Scott, who also had established himself as a shrewd entrepreneur, agreed to serve as Faith Center pastor provided that church leaders resign and approve a reorganization plan that gave him control. To Scott's amazement, the church accepted.

Faith Center since has expanded and prospered. A congregation that numbered 500 when Scott took over in 1975 has mushroomed to more than 15,000 members in the Los Angeles area, according to church estimates that are difficult to confirm. The church acquired the ultimate power address: P.O. Box 1, Los Angeles. And in 1983, the University Network launched 24-hour-a-day broadcasts of Scott sermons via satellite to North America and much of Mexico and the

Caribbean.

But soon after, Scott endured two financial disasters that would have placed most pastors in peril of losing their jobs. In 1983, the Federal Communications Commission stripped the church of three broadcast stations, worth approximately \$15 million, after Scott refused to turn over financial records as part of an investigation. (The church sold the fourth station.) In 1987, the church lost a \$6.5-million deposit when Scott sought unsuccessfully to renege on a deal to buy the historic Church of the Open Door building in Downtown Los Angeles, which was later demolished after its owners sold it to developers. The church then pumped more than \$2 million into renovating its current location, the United Artists Theater.

The setbacks only made Scott more determined to succeed. After the church lost its broadcast licenses, Scott continued to air his program by buying time on local and cable TV stations locally and nationally. Scott's church not only offered programming to an already-established network of outlets, but continued to air its program on some of the same stations that were taken away by the FCC. The church also beamed its programming nationwide via satellite. By 1990, it reached 180 countries. Two years later, his ministry could be picked up anywhere in the world in four languages on medium- and short-wave radio. (His program is now seen nightly in greater Los Angeles on cable.)

Scott claims that he did not seek out an electronic ministry, but happened to rescue the first church in the nation to own a Christian TV station. In a three-piece suit, the clean-cut Scott looked the part of the stereotypical televangelist when he first hit the airwaves. But it did not take long for him to realize that he needed a shtick. Enter the long hair and beard, crazy hats and cigars. "The cigar lets you know I ain't no Jimmy Swaggart," he howls.

He quickly earned a reputation as a colorful preacher whose blunt tactics both attract and offend his audience. He bragged over the air that he could "probably teach Hugh Hefner a thing or two"

about sex and told those who refused to send money to "vomit on yourself with your head up in the air."

This unconventional approach, while widely chastised in religious broadcasting circles, impressed people like the Rev. Jess Moody, a Baptist minister and pastor of Shepherd of the Hills church in Porter Ranch. Moody is an unabashed Scott admirer who wishes he had such nerve.

"The man is not a fool, but he acts like one from time to time," Moody observes. "That, I think, is designed to get attention from people he wants to reach. Apostle Paul said, 'I am all things to all men that I might win some.' Gene is trying to win people to Christ, and he is not doing it in the standard way."

To attract new viewers, Scott later decided that his church needed a TV sports franchise, something comparable to Ted Turner's Atlanta Braves. Enter the equestrian team. "There are so many horses' asses on television that I wanted to show the world what a whole horse looked like," Scott is fond of saying.

Using proceeds from the sale of his art prints, Dr. Gene Scott Inc. acquired the Silver Oaks Ranch in Bradbury, valued at \$11 million in 1989, and a stable of more than 100 show horses that are now believed to be worth millions.

First-time viewers "stop to see the horses because they are a class act," Scott told viewers in January. "And before they know it, this cigar-smokin' preacher is talkin' about something a little different than a rantin'-and-ravin', hellfire-and-brimstone hypocrite preacher. And they stop to see the horses and end up hooked on the teachin'. That's it. All you get on this network is me and the horses and the music. Clear?"

"Clear!" his volunteers shouted obediently from behind studio phone banks.

"Just thought I'd say that. Get on the telephone!"

In response, callers from around the globe phone in to applaud

their pastor. Scott delights in selectively reading the laudatory messages aloud.

"From Manchester, Ohio: I love the teachin', the horses and the music. It's the best on TV. Apple Valley, Calif.: Pastor, God's word, you and the horses are all I need. Klamath Falls, Ore.: We got the No. 1 pastor smokin' the No. 1 cigar on the No. 1 television program showin' the No. 1 horses."

IN JANUARY, 1991, MEMBERS OF THE LOS ANGELES University Cathedral received an urgent appeal in the mail. Their pastor needed them to dig deep for a special fund-raising drive so critical to the church's future that it could not be revealed how the money would be spent.

It was not the first time. Scott has instructed his followers to give generously to anonymous fund-raisers on at least six other occasions. This one, called "Secret V," was the church's most ambitious fund-raising mission yet. By Easter, Scott wrote, his ministry had to receive \$10,000 apiece from 700 followers and a minimum \$1,000 apiece from 3,000 supporters, for a total of \$10 million.

Estimates vary on the total amount of money Scott brings in. During a recent sermon, he claimed that his members set "the world record in per-capita giving" by donating \$350 per person per month. He also has said that his weekly budget of \$300,000 does not come close to meeting the rent, payroll, broadcasting and other operating expenses.

Scott insists that he only accepts financial support from individuals who respond to his sermons. "People are taught to give based on what they think the teaching they receive is worth," he stresses.

The price of membership is steep. For starters, Scott expects the usual 10% of his followers' income in weekly tithings. Since 1988, at the start of each year, Scott has reminded his followers that he is collecting "firstfruits" above and beyond weekly donations. Firstfruits, according to Scott, is spelled out in Scripture as "the

firstfruit of the new year belongs to the Lord." The firstfruits check includes the first returns on any form of income--an investment, a pay raise, a second job, a tax refund, even Lotto winnings. What if you're out of work? "Well then, you give the first week's unemployment check," Scott advises.

For non-givers, Scott warns: "If you get too smart with God, He might let you live this next year without Him so you can see the difference."

While raking in uncounted millions, Scott refuses to open his church's books to the scrutiny of independent auditors or follow accounting safeguards required by the 700-member National Religious Broadcasters, a group Scott derides as "Not Real Bright" for inviting as a speaker televangelist Jimmy Swaggart, who was disgraced by a sex scandal in 1988. Such devastating scandals had cast a pall over televangelists nationwide, but the industry appears to be on the rebound. Former NRB chairman David Clark says he is encouraged by recent trends in religious programming that emphasize ministry and teaching in place of "glitz, glamour and hype."

"This year marks the end of the televangelist scandals and the impact from them is basically over," Clark says. A recent study of religious programming found that on-air fund-raising and promotional activities have fallen to the same levels as before the Swaggart scandal.

Scott, like a number of other televangelists around the country, is not rushing to join the NRB, which requires organizations to undergo independent financial audits annually, publish a yearly report of income and expenses and disclose total compensation packages of top church officials. He is, says Clark, one of a fading breed. "I see a move away from the entrepreneurial, Lone Ranger guy like him (Scott). I think the next generation will be pastors of mega-churches with thousands of members and budgets of \$8 (million) to \$10 million a year, minimum."

Still Scott thrives, with a church he says is accountable to God, his

congregation, a board of directors he declines to identify and the Full Gospel Fellowship of Churches and Ministries, of which he was president. Such lax financial accountability--combined with Scott's lifestyle--has, in the past, attracted the attention of state and federal investigators.

The California Attorney General's Office in 1978 investigated allegations of fraud at Scott's church and 11 other religious organizations. The probe, launched after complaints by church members, was dropped in 1980 when the state Legislature passed a law preventing the attorney general from prosecuting cases of civil fraud against tax-exempt religious organizations.

In 1977, the Federal Communications Commission opened an exhaustive investigation after former employees accused Scott of diverting donations of cash, furs, jewelry, stock and other valuables for his own use and concealing assets in Swiss bank accounts. The allegations were never proved, and Scott adamantly denies any improprieties.

He stymied repeated attempts by the federal government to scrutinize his church's financial operation by directing contributors to sign pledge slips that specifically stated Scott could spend the money however he pleased. This arrangement did not appear to affect the church's flow of funds.

"He can do anything he wants with the contributions I send him," allows Mike Parker, the former mayor of Tacoma, Wash., who has been watching Scott for a decade and donates weekly. It is virtually impossible to know how financial resources are divided among Scott, the church and their many corporations. The church's financial empire consists of a complex web of dozens of interlocking companies, among them Bishop Dr. Gene Scott Corp., Dr. Gene Scott Inc., Dr. Gene Scott Consultants Inc., Gene Scott Travel Inc., W. Eugene Scott, Ph.D., Inc., Gene Scott Evangelistic Assn. and Wescott Christian Center.

Scott's second wife, for example, received a \$190,000 finder's fee when Dr. Gene Scott Inc. purchased the Silver Oaks Ranch in

Bradbury. At the time, Christine Shaw's personal fortune included several million dollars worth of horses, stamps, art and vintage cars--the same items accumulated by Scott and his church.

For his part, Scott maintains that he has no property, investments, stocks or bonds and that everything he owns is in the name of the church. His contract calls for a \$1 annual salary, plus unlimited expenses.

"God knows how much money he has raised over the years soliciting funds," complains Chuck Dziedzic, the FCC administrator who spearheaded the investigation of Scott's church. "We never came close to finding out. I don't think anybody knows but him."

RON CAREY REGULARLY ATTENDS CATHOLIC MASS AT CHRIST THE KING Church in Hancock Park. But the 58-year-old actor, known best for his role as Levitt in the television sitcom "Barney Miller," often attends services on Saturday evenings. That's because Sundays belong to Gene Scott.

"I have learned more from him than anybody," Carey says. "He is probably the authority on St. Paul. We just read the Bible and look at it. He will go right down to the word. This is interpretation. This is knowledge."

Like Carey, many of Scott's followers belong to other denominations. They assert that no one on the religious scene today approaches Scott's intellect and expertise when it comes to interpreting God's word. His analysis of Scripture relies heavily on Greek, Hebrew and German studies to clarify inaccuracies in the English translation. This is evident on Easter Sundays, when Scott presents a defense of the Resurrection that is rich in detail, well researched and supported by historical facts, followers say.

Scott's quarrel with those who deny the Resurrection is that they don't spend enough time looking at it. "If this is true, this is the central fact of history!" he fumes. "You gotta be a fool among all fools of mankind to not think it's worth at least 30 hours of study in your whole life. That's why I'm doing this."

During his Sunday sermons, Scott often admonishes his congregation not to seek God's blessing from a priest, the Pope or a place of worship. "And you're sure not going to get it from a motel with Jimmy Swaggart," he cracks. Rather, these blessings flow through God's word as interpreted by Gene Scott. His is a "word-based church" offering intelligent Christianity, Scott emphasizes.

In February, Times reporter Ralph Frammolino visited the University Cathedral for a glimpse into Scott's appeal.

No expense has been spared in restoring the historic theater. The lobby, with gold-backed mirrors and a vaulted ceiling finished in fresco murals, is half a block long. The massive auditorium, almost medieval in appearance, features large murals depicting the motion picture industry. Onstage, a huge curtain bears the letters "UA" in a coat of arms with the words "The Picture's The Thing"--a fitting slogan for Scott's television ministry.

Reservations are required to enter the cathedral. "I ain't beggin' converts," Scott scolds. "You don't get in here without a pass. I don't want anybody in here that doesn't have an appreciation for that smallest hunger in your heart to pursue the revelation of God's word."

First-time visitors like Frammolino are escorted into the auditorium, assigned a seat and closely observed by the church's security force. A buddy system within Scott's congregation also keeps a watchful eye on strangers. "We want to make sure our pastor stays alive," whispers one follower from Orange County, who identifies himself only as Duane.

The 2,000-seat theater is filled with people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Dressed in casual attire, the churchgoers look as if they could just as easily be going to Dodger Stadium or a Sunday matinee. No one under age 12 is in attendance; children of churchgoers ride air-conditioned buses every Sunday to one of 43 museums within a half-hour of the cathedral. "We don't lock our kids in a little cubbyhole and teach them to hate God until they get

the first chance to leave the church," Scott says.

When the curtain begins to rise, congregation members leap to their feet and cheer wildly. Before them appears their master, clad in a priest's collar, a teal-and-black windbreaker and gray slacks, seemingly unmoved by the adulation. After several seconds of enthusiastic applause, a rock band belts out praise to Jesus as Scott sits impassively on a blue-cushioned stool until the singing ends. Among the tunes Scott occasionally orders up is "Kill a Pissant for Jesus."

Scott strives to conduct his service as if it was a postgraduate lecture in religious studies. He is fond of boasting that his congregation consists mostly of college graduates. Unlike most university courses, though, there is no room for discussion of any kind in Dr. Scott's classroom. With the exception of not-so-spontaneous laughter at Scott's one-liners, not a peep is heard from members during the teaching, not even an "Amen" or a "Hallelujah." Scott insists that his two-hour service goes uninterrupted and gets angry if people seated in the front get up, even to go to the restroom.

As he delivers his message, Scott pauses every few seconds to allow an interpreter to repeat his words for the benefit of dozens of Spanish-speaking members in the audience and others listening worldwide. He illustrates the day's lesson on a glass rectangle with the intensity of an agitated football coach marking Xs and Os at halftime.

While reading aloud scattered verses in Ephesians, Scott scribbles Greek words on the glass. Hagyois is for sainthood, Dike for righteousness and Logos for the word. He writes in red, blue, green and black felt pens, using the different colors to strike previous markings instead of using an eraser.

Within an hour, the board is streaked with arrows, circles, lines and indecipherable words that become nearly impossible to follow. The lecture suddenly is reduced to a mind-numbing blur of Greek nuances that virtually force the class to accept a relentless

tightening of the instructor's ecclesiastical monopoly.

But the underlying message of "basic Christianity" is clear. While other pastors denounce homosexuality, abortion, adultery, profanity and drinking, Scott refuses to condemn such sinful behavior. He leaves worshipers free to make their own choice without coercion.

"I don't ask you to change when you come here," he instructs the congregation. "I take you as you are, as God takes me as I am." Scott preaches that, if people listen to him and start practicing faith, "God is going to change you in spite of yourself."

He finishes his sermon and vanishes offstage without shaking a single hand or meeting his congregation. Herein lies a startling contradiction: Scott promotes himself as a friend to sinners who have been shunned by other churches, yet his cathedral doors are sealed off to the general public. Even highly devoted followers are not permitted to approach him in the name of security. Scott's retort: "I am more accessible and contactable than the Pope."

Most worshipers seem not to care that they are prohibited from seeing their pastor in the flesh. They can tune him in 24 hours a day, seven days a week, reveling in the rediscovery of their faith under the guidance of a shepherd who acts like a rebel and still is elected by God.

Frank Anderson, a middle-aged aircraft mechanic who sports an unkempt gray beard, is a typical Scott devotee. He attended church as a child but eventually strayed from religion. That was before he became hooked on Scott's television program while working the night shift at Northrop. Now he and his wife, Tracy, drive in every Sunday from Torrance to hear Scott.

At first, Anderson found Scott "exasperating" because the minister jumps from subject to subject during his lectures. But the teachings began to fascinate him, especially the anti-religious-Establishment thread of Scott's message. "He teaches that we're free," Anderson notes. "We've been made free and people who are teaching that you are not supposed to do this (and) not supposed

to do that are voiding that freedom."

Wes Parker, the former Dodger first baseman, recalls the day in 1980 that he first listened to Scott on television. Within 20 minutes, Parker was on his feet, pointing at the screen and screaming, "He's right! My God, this guy is right!" The next day, Parker plunked down \$500 for Bible study materials and has been a regular supporter since. "This man has saved my life," Parker exclaims. He readily admits that some of his friends don't hold Scott in such esteem. "They don't like a two-hour service. They don't like that he occasionally uses a swear word. They don't like the fact that he gets angry. They don't like that he spends a lot of time railing against people on his staff that he doesn't think are doing a good job. Some of those things I don't like either, but it is worth it to me to sit through to get the message."

GENE SCOTT WAS LIVID. AFTER successfully courting the vote of flamboyant City Councilman Gilbert W. Lindsay to prevent the Church of the Open Door from being demolished in 1987, Scott sensed that he was about to be double-crossed.

Lindsay, a religious man whose district included the church site, had assured Scott's congregation one Sunday that "hell's gonna freeze over" before the building, which Scott's church had moved into, would be torn down. But when Lindsay began to waver about preserving the 72-year-old church, Scott did not hesitate to remind viewers that Lindsay, then 86, was in his "senior years" or "16 years past the biblically appointed allotment"--three score and 10.

"Now if you've had an illustrious career, and you're in your eighth decade, do you want to meet your Maker saying, 'I decided to do one in for you, God?' " Scott thundered. "Gilbert Lindsay ain't dumb enough to face his Maker reneging on a sacred commitment in a platform of a church before 5,000 people and an onlooking nation."

In the end, Lindsay got religion and supported the project. He died at age 90, presumably at peace with the Lord for keeping his word to Scott's church. But Scott could not keep the wrecking ball away.

After he'd unsuccessfully tried to renegotiate his deal for the property, its original owner sold it to developers. Scott lost his \$6.5-million down payment, but acquired the church's "Jesus Saves" signs. He then moved his church to the United Artists Theater.

Scott's willingness to invoke the wrath of God against Lindsay demonstrates the lengths he will go to intimidate an adversary. Friends say Scott is a fierce street fighter who strives to obliterate an opponent, be it Satan or a competitor. At horse shows, Scott is not content when his equestrian team captures a medal. He wants a sweep of all the top places.

Nowhere has Scott incurred more battle scars than in the courts. Since coming to Southern California, his church's far-flung enterprises have been tangled in more than 100 lawsuits. At times, Scott and his lawyers have drawn criticism for their litigation tactics. A federal judge in 1987 called a desperate bid by Scott to retain the Church of the Open Door a "reprehensible" abuse of the legal process. In 1990, in a lawsuit on behalf of the American Horse Show Assn., attorneys for the O'Melveny & Myers law firm accused Scott of hiding behind corporate fronts to overturn his suspension by the association.

In that case, Scott was banned from competition for calling a judge a "prejudicial, incompetent nincompoop" on his television program after one of his horses lost a competition. Scott argued in legal papers that his suspension should be overturned because the horses were owned by Gene Scott Inc., which he contended was not run by Gene Scott.

While the suits do not always succeed in court, apparently they are effective in helping to intimidate Scott's adversaries. Dozens of people refused to speak about Scott for this article because they expressed fear of being sued.

Over the years, Scott's followers occasionally have resorted to verbal threats and physical violence to defend their minister. In 1985, a musician in Scott's band who criticized the preacher

reported to officials that he was jumped, punched and tossed through a plate glass window by two church followers. The musician, Donald Vladimir Nicoloff, was treated for facial and leg cuts.

In the months leading up to a trial on assault charges against his alleged attackers, Nicoloff claimed he received harassing, late-night phone calls from Scott's disciples, some threatening bodily harm. The trial against the two church followers ended in a hung jury when the key witness, the church's former head musician, fled to Tennessee because he feared reprisals from Scott's disciples, prosecutors maintained.

Glendale police were so concerned about a potential outbreak of violence by Scott's devotees that the prosecutor assigned to the case, Los Angeles County Deputy Dist. Atty. Herb Lapin, was issued a gun permit and assigned a police officer for protection during the trial.

"I'm not going to call his followers fanatics or lunatics," Lapin says. "But whenever you have a group that has strong followers, I find they are easily led by their leaders, whether they are good or bad."

ADMIRE HIM OR DESPISE him, Gene Scott has attained the kind of fame, lifestyle and influence that most people only dream about.

"Only in America," sighs Clark of the National Religious Broadcasters, "can people like this get on television, attract an audience and collect enough money to stay on television."

And only in Southern California, it seems, can a long-haired, loud-mouthed preacher pack a cavernous movie house each Sunday with followers eager to hear the word of God from him. In a city that attracts people seeking the good life, a pastor with a free spirit, a stable of horses, a chauffeured limo and an answer for everything can be an attractive role model.

"Gene Scott offers you all the advantages of Christianity with none of the inconveniences except tithing," says Rabbi William Kramer,

a religious studies professor emeritus at Cal State Northridge and an admirer of Scott. "You don't have to put that in cellophane to sell it."

Yet others feel strongly that Scott has no business preaching in a church. The Christian Research Institute, an international religious center based in Irvine that monitors controversial religious movements, goes so far as to advise Christians not to attend Scott's services.

"During the last few years, Scott has become more and more outrageous and offensive," a CRI analysis concludes. "His language is crude, abusive and profane, clearly violating God's standards for Christians."

Such condemnation drives Scott up a wall. At a recent service, Scott grouched that he is fed up with outsiders who have the nerve to question his conduct.

"They never stop!" Scott protested to loud applause.

Excerpted from *Spiritual Helpline (Helping people on their Spiritual Journey)*

<http://www.angelfire.com/pa3/holytestament/scott.html>