

Witch: 'We try to break the occult bubble'

► Continued from H1

ey were served while the high priestesses read from a whimsical child's book about a little boy who lived down the hall from a witch.

Complaints that the Ravenwood witches' gatherings violate DeKalb County zoning laws recently escalated into accusations of devil worship. And when pets in the community turned up missing, neighbors accused the group of animal sacrifices.

The witches follow an old variety of the Wiccan religion they say dates back 800 years to the Celts. They are among a handful of covens in metro Atlanta, Lady Sintana said.

"Atlanta, and the Southeast, has quite a large pagan population," she said. "I think a lot of people are very goddess-oriented today."

The religion resembles all nature-based faiths, reflecting the cycles of nature and seasons.

The Wiccans say they do not worship the devil. They say the devil is a Christian belief. And, they say, they believe in love and peace, just as many religions do. They also believe in reincarnation, magic and psychic power, teaching followers that faith

Wiccan services stir controversy

To the Wiccans, full-moon gatherings in a back yard are no more extraordinary than a Bible study at a private home.

But nearby residents have claimed Lady Sintana, the high priestess, is operating a church at her residence, and that is a violation of zoning codes.

Some 350 showed up when the issue was heard this summer by the DeKalb County Zoning Appeals Board.

On Aug. 11, the board denied Lady Sintana a zoning variance, and now the matter will be heard by the County Commission Tuesday.

If the decision goes against her, Lady Sintana said, she plans to take it to a higher court.

should be based on knowledge, Lady Sintana said.

Sometimes the priests carry ritual knives that they say they use to channel energy. But they insist they do not use them for sacrifices.

"We try to break the occult bubble," Lady Sintana said. "The superstitious pagan of years ago was controlled by their beliefs, and we see that alive and well in society today. We do not teach those at Ravenwood. We teach spirituality. Rather than teach spells and chants, we teach the-

ory. We don't believe in controlling a person against their will."

Distrust of the Wiccans apparently is widespread. A Christian group recently walked out of the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions to protest participation by Wiccans.

Many of the Ravenwood witches keep their faith to themselves for fear they would lose face — and their jobs — if the truth were known.

Like many preachers, Lady Sintana is responsible for teaching, initiations, the blessing of

children, marriages, last rites hospital duty and counseling.

She is supported by pledges and donations from followers, many of whom have been with her for years.

Sometimes 50 people are invited to the full-moon gatherings and up to 100 for the eight annual Wiccan festivals.

Before the recent full-moon worship began, Lord Gothwen, high priest and Lady Sintana's husband, denied the group performs animal sacrifices. As a falconer and licensed wild animal rehabilitator, he said the suggestion that he would kill an animal was upsetting.

Like church services, this one included healing, a step of faith made famous by television clergy, which detractors of Wicca probably would call a spell.

The witches grouped around a fellow member suffering from cancer. Focusing together, they tried to thrust their energy into his body with outstretched arms.

A tear slipped down the man's cheek as they kissed him and held him close.