

Critics slam racist 'church' - 'Religion for and by sociopaths,' observer says

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EAST PEORIA, Ill. - It styles itself as a religion, but the World Church of the Creator - to which alleged racist killer Benjamin Nathaniel Smith once belonged - has no altar and no place of worship.

Its leader is a skinny 27-year-old who reaches dues-paying members mainly through an Internet site dripping with racism and maintained from a swastika-adorned room in his parents' East Peoria home. An Israeli flag serves as his doormat.

All that's needed to join the church is \$35 (U.S.). For that, members get a 25-page manual offering loyalty oaths and a glossary of terms like "Rahowa" - an acronym that stands for "Racial Holy War" and is used as a greeting by members.

Followers also can read an Internet newsletter in which Smith, 21, was profiled last November as "Creator of the Month" for his efforts to distribute racist literature.

To its critics, the church amounts to a loosely connected - but dangerous - group of racists and hate-mongers. Mark Potok, a researcher with the Southern Poverty Law Center, said yesterday that the church is thought to have 46 chapters and several hundred active members. "This is a religion for and created by sociopaths," Potok said.

Hatewatch.org, which monitors hate sites on the Internet, says the church has the fastest-growing Internet presence among racist groups.

The group dates back to 1973, when it was formed by Ben Klassen, a Florida real estate man and politician who became wealthy after inventing an electric can opener.

Before he committed suicide in 1993, Klassen wrote tracts of explosive racism, urging whites to push blacks, Jews and other "mud races" off the face of the planet.

Hate-group monitors say they believe the church has grown under new leader Matt Hale's recruiting efforts from East Peoria and with his use of the Internet. Since Smith's death, the Web site has been shut down. According to Hale, Smith joined in 1998, but allowed his one-year membership to lapse in May.

Potok and others believe the World Church of the Creator is responsible for encouraging violence like the two-state shooting spree that left two dead and at least eight wounded, and ended in Smith's suicide late Sunday in Salem, Ill.

While the church's Web site included a note saying it does not condone violence, it also called for a racial holy war and extermination of non-whites. Members have been convicted of murder, beatings and conspiracies to bomb NAACP offices and black churches.

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