

Supremacist Group Grows Nationwide - Hate Crime Monitors Horrified By Spread Of Organization Linked to 1999 Rampage

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The white supremacist group that inspired a deadly three-day shooting rampage targeting blacks, Jews and Asians in Illinois and Indiana last July Fourth weekend has nearly doubled the number of its chapters nationwide, according to a new study by a group that monitors hate crimes.

In the year since college junior Benjamin Smith, 21, gained national headlines by killing two men, including former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong, and wounding nine others before committing suicide, the little-known World Church of the Creator has used its newfound notoriety to build one of America's most violent and fastest-growing hate groups, the Center for New Community said.

The center, based in suburban Oak Park, said the East Peoria-based World Church has become a "magnet for young, volatile white supremacists." It is particularly effective in recruiting violent inmates in prisons across the country, the center said.

The Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala., which tracks hate groups, also said World Church had expanded, recruiting heavily among neo-Nazi skinheads and enlarging its Internet presence.

Since the July 1999 killing spree, World Church has expanded from 41 to 76 chapters, or "contact points," in 25 states and five foreign countries, the Center for New Community said. Its prison affiliate groups have increased from three to 16, according to Devin Burghart, author of the report.

World Church also has created a niche for female white supremacists by forming two new groups, the Sisterhood and the Women's Frontier, which together have grown from five to 10 chapters in the last year, the center said.

Burghart said that although it was difficult to estimate membership, affiliated groups range from several members to a few dozen, with a total active membership of several hundred. This is far fewer than the 10,000 to 30,000 that the World Church's self-described pontifex maximus, Matthew Hale, has claimed.

Although their numbers may be small, the level of activity of the members has been rapidly increasing and their message has become increasingly violent, the center and other groups that monitor the hate movement say.

Burghart said his study found that Hale's followers had staged 20 rallies and public events in the last 12 months and had conducted "literature drops" in 28 communities in 11 states. He said the group was planning a nationwide "Ben Smith literature blitzkrieg" for Tuesday to mark the first anniversary of the hate killer's death.

Some hate crime experts said that the rise in the number of World Church of the Creator affiliates is not necessarily the most important measure is assessing the group's threat to society.

"What troubles me more is the increase in the level of inflammatory and vitriolic rhetoric that has escalated and the comfort level that Hale and people like him have reached in espousing violence," said Richard Hirschhaut, director of the Midwest branch of the Anti-Defamation League.

Hirschhaut said Hale reached a crescendo of violent rhetoric Tuesday after the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear his appeal of a decision by state bar officials to deny him a license to practice law. In an interview with the Peoria Journal Star, Hale said he would not be responsible for any violence that resulted from the decision because "when people are kicked around like dogs, sometimes the dog bites back."

In a telephone interview today, Hale denied he was advocating violence but said: "It's true, the law license decision increased the amount of anger among our people, and sometimes that anger spills out in violence as we saw last July in Benjamin Smith's actions. . . . My people could end up changing the way they conduct themselves." Hale has claimed that Smith's rampage was triggered by the bar association's decision to deny Hale a law license.

Hale, 28, said he had been successful in recruiting prison inmates because "white people in prison are more apt to become racially conscious because often they are the victims of criminal acts there and they turn to the World Church of the Creator for spiritual and physical help." The physical help, he said, came from "white people banding together in prison to defend one another" from blacks.

When asked how many members his group has in prisons and on the outside, Hale said: "I'm the only one who knows that, and I'm not saying."

Illinois Corrections Department spokesman Brian Fairchild said prison administrators had intercepted World Church of the Creator literature on a few occasions and were monitoring the group as a "prospective security threat." But Fairchild said he did not want to call attention to Hale by possibly overestimating the size of his group.

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