

Gunman once hailed by group - White supremacist '98 member of year

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A man who killed two people and wounded several others before committing suicide as police closed in Sunday night had been named member of the year by his white supremacist church.

Benjamin Nathaniel Smith, 21, led officers on a slow-speed chase late Sunday after he ditched his blue Ford Taurus and carjacked a minivan at gunpoint at a gas station in the southern Illinois town of Ina, Marion County Sheriff Gerald L. Benjamin said.

Shortly after entering Salem, Mr. Smith shot himself under the chin. The minivan then went off the road and hit an abandoned building. Mr. Smith refused officers' orders to put his hands up, so several entered the van. As he struggled with sheriff's deputies and police officers who tried to subdue him, Mr. Smith shot himself in the chest and leg.

The sheriff said none of the officers fired their weapons and Mr. Smith didn't appear to have shot at them. He was still combative even after being handcuffed and put in an ambulance but said nothing, police said. He bled to death from the chest wound a short time later in a hospital.

"I'm glad it's over," Sheriff Benjamin said. "I feel sorry for his parents and the victims and their relatives. I don't know what caused this, but it's very sad."

Mr. Smith was a member of the World Church of the Creator, a white supremacist organization, and distributed anti-minority and anti-Semitic literature while a student at Indiana University in Bloomington.

He was named the group's "1998 Creator of the Year" for his skill in wooing potential converts. Experts who monitor hate groups said Monday that he was only following church doctrine to its logical end when he launched a mini-racial war of his own over the Fourth of July weekend, killing two people and wounding seven others before shooting himself.

The World Church of the Creator, with several hundred members, is one of the fastest-growing hate groups in the nation, according to those who monitor white supremacist organizations. It boasts at least 46 chapters across the country, up from just eight in 1995. It aggressively recruits on college campuses. And it reaches out to children with a "kiddie Web page."

They hate Jews most of all. But they hate Christians, too. They hate blacks and Asians and gay people; they hate the government and the media. They hate public schools. They despise low IQs. And they have nothing but contempt for whites who ignore their call for a racial holy war that will prove their own supremacy.

Though the group's leader, Matthew Hale, insists he does not promote or condone violence, he teaches that whites must one day wipe all other races from the planet.

"While [church leaders] are not building the bombs, they are certainly building the bombers," said Mark Potok, editor of the Intelligence Report on the radical right published by the Southern Poverty Law Center. "This is a religion for and by sociopaths, and the killings in Illinois and Indiana are merely the latest reflection of it."

As they are riled up by church doctrine and the constant calls for a racial holy war, Mr. Potok added, followers like Mr. Smith "feel they can murder anyone who doesn't look like them."

Two people were killed during the weekend drive-by spree, including former Northwestern University men's basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong, who was black, and a Korean-American graduate student in Bloomington, Ind. At least eight others were wounded, one seriously.

Authorities said they believed Mr. Smith began his drive-by killing spree in Chicago on Friday by wounding six Orthodox Jews leaving a synagogue. Within an hour, Mr. Byrdsong was shot to death in nearby Skokie and two Asian-Americans were shot at, but not hit, while driving in Northbrook.

The shooter also fired at Asians and black people in two Illinois cities on Saturday, seriously wounding one man, before the Bloomington shooting on Sunday.

Authorities believe the gunman also wounded a black minister in Decatur, Ill., on Saturday, but they were waiting for ballistics tests to confirm that.

A .22-caliber handgun and a .380-caliber handgun found with Mr. Smith were consistent with the guns used in the shootings. Authorities were trying to trace the source of the weapons.

Mr. Potok and others have linked World Church of the Creator members to half a dozen hate crimes over the last few years, including the bombing of a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People office in Washington, the beating of a black veteran in Florida, a planned attack on synagogues in Portland, Ore., and a plot to bomb the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles.

Law enforcement authorities in Sacramento, Calif., have also said that the World Church of the Creator, known to be active in the area, is among the groups whose followers are being looked at in connection with three synagogue arsons in the city last month that injured no one but left more than \$1 million in damage.

"We have not ruled out that the Church of the Creator may be involved here," Paul Seave, U.S. attorney in Sacramento, said Monday. But federal authorities and the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles said Monday there is no known link between Mr. Smith and the synagogues case.

The activity of its members raises doubts about the church's peaceful claims. "Hale is trying to dissociate himself from the violence, but that's a baldfaced lie," said Devin Burghart, who monitors hate groups in the Midwest for the Center for New Community. "It's the logical outcome of his hateful rhetoric."

That rhetoric reflects a militant us-against-the-world view that holds the white race (except Jews, Christians, gay people and others perceived as deviant) responsible for "all that which we call progress on this Earth," as the church Web site puts it.

Clean-cut and well-spoken, the 27-year-old Mr. Hale - who supports himself as a violinist when he's not serving as the church's "pontifex maximus" - has raised the group's profile dramatically since taking over four years ago. The church, in fact, had been on the verge of collapse after its founder's suicide when Mr. Hale stepped in to re-energize it.

By all accounts, he has had remarkable success. From his base in East Peoria, Ill. - where he lives with his father, a retired police officer - Mr. Hale has set up chapters all over the country, building special strength in California and Florida.

"He's articulate, he's got a bit of charisma and he's a veteran hater. He's been doing this for well over a decade," said Mr. Burghart, who has tracked Mr. Hale since he began distributing neo-Nazi literature as a teen-age political science major at Bradley University in Peoria.

"He's also very media-savvy," Mr. Burghart said. "He knows controversy sells, and he looks for it at every opportunity. When he finds it, he jumps into the fray with great gusto."

Mr. Hale made his biggest splash in defeat, when the Illinois State Bar refused to let him practice as an attorney - though he had passed the bar exam - because of "gross deficiency in moral character." Mr. Hale parlayed that rejection into nationwide exposure for the church, announcing his Web site and address every time he was interviewed.

Though unmistakably neo-Nazi, Mr. Hale's World Church of the Creator differs from other supremacist groups in philosophy. Those differences, analysts say, have helped fuel the group's rapid expansion. Mr. Hale claims the church has 7,000 members, but outsiders peg membership at several hundred.

Most notably, the church is virulently anti-Christian as well as anti-Jew. Other neo-Nazi organizations, including Aryan Nations, promote their ideology as a Bible-based Christian Identity. But Mr. Hale's group shuns Christianity as part of a worldwide Zionist conspiracy.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Caption: MAP(S): (DMN) Deadly Trail.

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