

CHURCH'S FOLLOWERS HAVE VIOLENT HISTORY

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Disciples of the World Church of the Creator, a white supremacist group that nurtured the ideas of alleged spree shooter Benjamin Smith, for years have waged attacks against minorities around the country, according to civil rights groups and police.

The World Church, based in East Peoria, is well known to those who monitor hate groups and to law enforcement agencies that have investigated crimes they say were committed by church members.

Followers of the church have been linked by police and civil rights groups to the 1991 murder of an African-American sailor in Neptune Beach, Fla.; the 1993 fire bombing of the NAACP's branch office in Tacoma, Wash.; the 1997 beating of a black man and his son in Sunrise, Fla.; and the 1998 beating and robbery of a Jewish businessman in Hollywood, Fla.

In all four instances, authorities said, members of the World Church of the Creator were convicted or have pleaded guilty; the group's state director for Florida is awaiting trial in the Sunrise case.

Church leader Matthew Hale has insisted that his group does not promote violence, and neither he nor the organization has been charged with wrongdoing in connection with any of the incidents. In at least one case, in Tacoma, he said authorities have inaccurately attributed violence to church members.

But the Anti-Defamation League, one of the country's leading civil-rights organizations, has requested that the U.S. Department of Justice begin a full-scale investigation of the church and Hale.

Distributing pamphlets containing hate has been a trademark of the World Church, with its members often targeting high schools to recruit members. Some church members allegedly have moved from words to action, said Richard Hirschhaut, Chicago regional director for the Anti-Defamation League.

"There is a composite picture of hate that is worthy of a Justice Department investigation," Hirschhaut said. "Hale is disingenuous when he attempts to distance himself from Smith's actions."

Police believe Smith, who Hale said had left the church by May, began a three-day shooting spree last Friday in which two minorities were killed and nine others wounded. The targets of his shooting spree in Illinois and in Indiana included Orthodox Jews, African-Americans and Asians.

Smith, 21, shot himself Sunday night during a police chase in Downstate Salem, authorities said.

Smith often had distributed and helped finance racist literature for the World Church, led since 1996 by Hale. Smith and another individual had been arrested in April for littering after distributing anti-Semitic literature on front lawns in Wilmette, Smith's hometown.

Hale, who estimated the church has 3,000 to 4,000 members nationwide, has said he did not know of Smith's plans for violence, or of the violent acts other church members allegedly have committed against minorities.

Each time the World Church's name crops up relating to a hate crime, Hale has said his group practices non-violence.

Hale was asked whether his group had any role in a series of synagogue arson fires in Sacramento last month. Hale told the Sacramento Bee newspaper that his church was not involved, adding, however, that he had no sympathy for the fire victims.

Police have said they are investigating whether World Church members played a role in the fires, nobody has been charged. Church literature had been distributed outside one of the synagogues two months before the fires, police said.

Hale said the church member in Neptune Beach acted in self-defense. Hale said he had no knowledge of the Sunrise and Hollywood incidents.

But Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate groups, said Hale was trying to mislead the public into believing the group was peaceful.

The World Church, Potok said, has, since its inception in 1973, talked about a racial holy war and establishing a white world.

"This is a group that has led a trail of blood across the United States for 26 years," said Potok, editor of the organization's Intelligence Report. "This is a dangerous group."

Caption: PHOTO GRAPHIC

PHOTO (color): Authorities are probing whether church members played a role in fires last month at three Sacramento synagogues. AP photo. GRAPHIC (color): Violent acts linked to World Church of the Creator - Authorities say several race-related crimes have been linked to members of the World Church of the Creator. - (Chronology) Sources: Anti-Defamation League Center for New Community, the Southern Poverty law Center and news reports. Chicago Tribune. - See microfilm for complete graphic.

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Page: 1

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