

Growing grass-roots groups help locals weed out hate - Events such as last week's shooting spree in Midwest drive more

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Paul Shively is a foot soldier in the information war against hate.

When the white supremacist World Church of the Creator dropped a load of literature on the citizens of Missoula, Mont., last year, Mr. Shively organized a counterdrop, exposing the organization as a "hate" group. Indeed, last weekend one of its followers went on a racially motivated killing and shooting spree in Illinois and Indiana.

While Shively claims only modest success for his efforts, membership in his organization - the Montana Human Rights Network - is steadily growing. Now, he says, at least "the word is out and people are educated about who these folks are."

According to national and regional anti-hate groups, grass-roots organizations like Shively's are growing across the United States. Galvanized by violent crimes in their neighborhoods or reacting to ones that capture national headlines, thousands of local communities are exploring more active ways to fight hate.

"There is a blossoming of activity," says David Goldman, director of HateWatch, an online group that tracks hate crimes around the nation and the world and tries to help individuals organize locally.

Greater interest

Since the Fourth of July weekend - when white supremacist Benjamin Smith killed a black and a Korean, and wounded nine other Jews, Asians, and blacks before killing himself - HateWatch has been flooded with electronic traffic, says Mr. Goldman. "We've received hundreds of e-mails: 'I've seen what happened. What can I do?'"

His answers are specific, with many of them involving the Internet, since that has become a powerful propaganda tool for about 250 hate groups.

First, he says, people can find out if their Internet server allows hate-spouting Web sites. (HateWatch lists the servers that do not.) Second, people should report hate traffic to their servers. And third, he says, people can start their own antihate Web page. Several national antihate spokespeople got their start from humble, personal Web pages, he says.

To help individuals with this, HateWatch is developing free software that will beef up Web sites to better serve visitors.

Goldman says he's thrilled to get e-mails from Net surfers who tell him they're glad an organization like his exists. But "while it makes me feel good, it absolves them of responsibility on their end," he says. "This is Civics 101. People have to take responsibility."

That is always the challenge for any grass-roots movement, activists say. Although a new nationwide poll by the Pew Research Center indicates that 71 percent of Americans say cultural diversity is a major reason for the success of the US, the difficulty is to push that sentiment beyond mere public opinion, they add.

That task appears especially daunting in the face of sophisticated movements such as the World Church of the Creator.

Considered to be anti-black and anti-Jewish, it is one of the fastest growing white-supremacist groups in America, with some 41 chapters in 17 states.

Unlike many other such groups, the World Church recruits educated college students and targets women. Its Web page, which disappeared from the Internet this week, includes a kiddie page aimed to lure children through a coloring book and crossword puzzle that used racist symbols and clues.

Moreover, the group's leader, law-school graduate Matthew Hale , presents himself as a calm voice of reason. "We must be legal. We must be peaceful," he said in an interview with CNN this week.

One way to combat groups like Mr. Hale's is with facts, says Mark Potok, editor of the Intelligence Report, published by the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala. "We're in an information war," he says.

Countering hate groups

While Hale claims his group doesn't promote violence, Mr. Potok cites evidence linking his members to violent acts.

Other members of antihate efforts agree. "For them to claim that they are nonviolent is a total fabrication," says the Rev. David Ostendorf, director of the Center for New Community, which counters far-right and antidemocratic groups in the Midwest.

The reverend says he laments the lack of funds and staffing that hinders the growth of regional and national groups such as his - one of about 10 in the country. But like Goldman, he agrees that much more is happening these days at the grass-roots level.

"Locally, thousands of community, civic, and religious groups are working to counter hate," says Mr. Ostendorf. "And that's the most effective."

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