

A Dozen Hate Groups Call Maryland Home, Organization Reports - Ku Klux Klan Is Most Prominent Racist Outfit

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Maryland is home to a dozen white supremacist "hate groups," according to a watchdog organization, and they include the World Church of the Creator--which counted among its members an Illinois man who police say targeted minorities during a deadly shooting rampage this month.

The Ku Klux Klan is the most prominent racist outfit in the state, with six chapters or factions that were active in 1998, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, a Montgomery, Ala.-based civil rights group that compiles annual state-by-state reports of "hate group activity" in the United States.

The National Alliance, a neo-Nazi brotherhood based in West Virginia, has three Maryland chapters in Cumberland, Hagerstown and Baltimore, the report said.

In comparison, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported that 10 white supremacist groups were active in Maryland in 1997. Experts said the number of extremist organizations usually fluctuates from year to year as some groups split into competing factions, reorganize under a different name or become inactive for a period of time.

In general, white supremacist groups in Maryland have no more than a few dozen members each and keep a low profile, although they are constantly on the lookout for recruits, said Brittanie Zelkind, associate director of the Washington office of the Anti-Defamation League, an organization that monitors anti-Semitic behavior.

"When it comes to these groups, it's usually a small number of people," she said. "They have a little more of a voice than they had 10 years ago because of the Internet, but they're still pretty small. They don't have many followers."

The World Church of the Creator has appeared only intermittently in Maryland and is thought to have just a few loyalists, authorities said.

But the group has attracted renewed attention recently, after one of its followers allegedly went on a shooting spree in Illinois and Indiana that left two people dead and nine injured. All of the victims were members of religious or racial minorities. The suspect, 21-year-old Benjamin Nathaniel Smith, killed himself July 4 when police tried to arrest him. The "church" calls for a "Rahowa," or a Racial Holy War, between whites, minorities and Jews.

Maryland State Police said they have received two reports this year of World Church of the Creator sympathizers distributing leaflets in Carroll County. In February, group members placed racist pamphlets on car windshields at Westminster High School and at Western Maryland College. And last week, two residents in the small Carroll County town of Finksburg--near the Baltimore County line--told state police that someone had stuffed the group's literature in their newspaper boxes.

The fliers were copies of racist screeds that have been published on the group's Web site, said Lt. Terry Katz, commander of the state police's Westminster barracks. "We're almost certain they downloaded them from their Web site and then distributed them," he said.

In the February incident, security guards at Western Maryland College caught two teenagers and an adult passing out the church leaflets in a parking lot. The three "picked up their stuff and left" after receiving a trespassing warning, Katz said.

Zelkind said the same group has handed out white supremacist literature at nearby colleges in Pennsylvania.

The World Church of the Creator has had a presence in Maryland since at least 1991. In November of that year, Howard County police reported that copies of the group's newspaper, Racial Loyalty, were distributed anonymously to about 50 houses in Columbia. The same newspaper was handed out again in another Columbia neighborhood in January 1992.

The anti-Semitic group has a history of ties to the National Alliance, which Zelkind described as "the group we've targeted as the most dangerous neo-Nazi organization." The National Alliance is led by William Pierce, a West Virginia resident, former American Nazi Party officer and the author of "The Turner Diaries," an extremist fantasy novel that is said to have inspired Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.

The National Alliance chapter in Baltimore was founded in 1997 by a former member of the World Church of the Creator, Zelkind said. Prominent white supremacists in other states also have belonged to both outfits at one time or another, she said.

"There definitely exists a lot of cross-pollination in the extremist movement as a whole," she said.

Other active hate groups in Maryland include the Hammerskin Nation, a skinhead fraternity in Abingdon; and an Edgewater group known as the SS Regalia, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The most visible white supremacists in Maryland in recent years have been members of the Ku Klux Klan, although authorities consider their influence to be on the wane.

The oldest Klan group in the state is thought to be the Invincible Empire Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, which has chapters in Frederick and Washington counties and is led by imperial wizard Roger Lee Kelly. Over the past decade, the group has held periodic marches in Annapolis. It announced in January that it was planning to hold a rally on private property in Howard County sometime this summer.

Another Klan faction, the American Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, has chapters in Clinton, Timonium and Rising Sun, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center report. Members held a rally on the steps of the State House in Annapolis in February 1998.

But both Klan groups are finding it hard to retain support, let alone recruit new followers, said Katz, of the state police.

"They're dinosaurs," Katz said. "They're dying out and don't even know it."

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