

COMMUNITY BRACES FOR SUPREMACIST VISIT - POLICE, RELIGIOUS LEADERS MAKING SEPARATE PLANS

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While police prepare a major security effort for Saturday's visit by a national white supremacist leader, Wakefield religious leaders and residents are planning to take a tough stand against racism.

In response to a 1 p.m. speech by Matthew Hale, leader of the World Church of the Creator, at the Beebe Public Library, a grass-roots group has organized a rally across town called "Love Lives Here." Billed as a celebration of tolerance and diversity, the event will be held from 1 to 3 p.m. at the Wakefield-Lynnfield Methodist Church on Vernon Street.

The rally will include a mix of speeches, songs, prayers, and expressions of patriotism that organizers hope will denounce Hale and his followers. The World Church of the Creator, based in Illinois, promotes white supremacy and intolerance against Jews, blacks, and other minority groups according to its Web site.

"We're attacking the message, not the group," said the Rev. Katharine C. Evans, rector of Emmanuel Episcopal Church. "Wakefield is a very caring, tolerant community. The irony is that an outside group is coming here to proclaim a message that is the antithesis of what the community stands for."

Said Wendy Dennis, a longtime resident, "We envision this [rally] to be a celebration of what we see Wakefield as, a town striving to be a diverse, tolerant community."

However peaceful organizers want the community response to be, Hale's visit has clearly rocked Wakefield. The town of 24,804, according to the 2000 US Census, is 96.9 percent white. Although it was the scene of a fatal office shooting two years ago, the town is relatively peaceful, local officials said.

Hale's appearance at the library is not sanctioned by the town. He was invited to speak by one of his followers, William West Jr. of Saugus, who booked a public room at the library. West said he chose Wakefield because it is predominantly white and has good access to Route 128. He expects 100 to 150 World Church of the Creator followers to attend Saturday's meeting, he said.

"I've heard from some people as far away as Wisconsin and North Carolina," said West, 29, who joined the group six months ago. "This is not a hate group. This is a pro-white group, but if you're pro-white in America, people call you a hater."

When word spread about Hale's visit last summer, a debate erupted over free speech in town. Some people questioned if a public library should host an avowed racist. The town sought legal opinions, but concluded that Hale's visit could not be stopped, since the right to free speech and assembly are basic constitutional rights.

"Libraries are public buildings and open to all," said Sharon Gilley, the library's executive director. "While we exist at the pleasure of the taxpayers, we wouldn't exist at all if there wasn't a First Amendment guaranteeing rights to free speech and assembly." Because they are supported with state and federal funds, local libraries are open to everyone, Gilley said.

Both the library trustees and the Board of Selectmen issued statements denouncing Hale's visit. "Just because we're recognizing [Hale's] First Amendment rights to free speech doesn't mean that we endorse the message," Gilley said.

Other community leaders have joined the chorus of criticism. "Wakefield might not be racially diverse, but it is ethnically diverse," said Robert Hooker, a Wakefield resident. "I buy my subs and pizzas from Greeks. We have Thai, Italian, and Mediterranean restaurants in town. This is not a closed community."

Said the Rev. Samuel Johnson, a minister at the Wakefield-Lynnfield Methodist Church, "They do have a right to free speech, but so do we. We can rally people in the community to stand together against hate."

Wakefield police plan a major presence for the Hale event. The library will be closed to the public, but open to anyone who wants to attend the meeting. Hale's appearance in town is believed to be the first time he has visited Massachusetts. His speeches in other American cities have sparked angry protests. At a speech last spring in York, Pa., Hale followers and protesters clashed in the streets, resulting in 23 arrests, law enforcement officials said.

Wakefield Police Chief Stephen Doherty declined to discuss specifics about the town's security plan, saying only, "We're making all preparations, based on what we know or can reasonably anticipate about them. We're going by what we see on their Web site and what we know has happened in other communities."

Police also are concerned about the timing of Hale's visit. Saturday is the day before the start of Yom Kippur, the most sacred day of the year for Jews. It also follows the distribution of racist and anti-Semitic literature between January and July, carrying the church's name, to homes in Swampscott, Marblehead, and Saugus.

In July, the World Church of the Creator's Massachusetts leader, Tony Menear, 26, was returned to Concord state prison for violating terms of his parole on an armed robbery charge. He violated two rules, including failure to conduct oneself as a responsible citizen and associating with people who have criminal records, according to information released by the state parole board. Don Giancioppo, a spokesman for the board, said Menear was originally sentenced to six to 10 years in state prison.

The World Church of the Creator has long maintained a Peabody post office box as a local mailing address. Hale's appearance is the surest sign yet that the group is trying to recruit new members in Massachusetts, according to a race relations specialist.

"They're trying to establish themselves here," said Jack McDevitt, director of the Institute for Race and Justice at Northeastern University. "Particularly since the jailing of their leader, Tony Menear. They see this as a place where they need to send a message. They don't want to meet in a place with a lot of diversity, so they pick a town like Wakefield."

West said Hale is expected to talk about the incarceration of Menear, and the group's pro-white agenda. "I've heard that a lot of people are not happy that he's coming to speak. I would tell them to come and listen," West said. "Don't judge a book by its cover."

Caption: PHOTO

(From left) Wendy Dennis, Bob Hooker, Sam Johnson and Katharine Evans plan a counter rally to a white supremacist's visit. / GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / MARK WILSON

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