

On the Web, allies of Hale cheer slayings

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There isn't much left of Matthew Hale's organization, experts say, except a legacy of hate and a small group of unpredictable, angry sympathizers.

Monitors say the group formerly known as the World Church of the Creator has fallen apart since Hale was jailed in 2003 and convicted for plotting to kill Judge Joan Humphrey Lefkow.

But on white supremacist Internet sites Tuesday, some Hale sympathizers were cheering the slayings of two Lefkow family members--even as they criticized the rush to associate Hale or his group with the deaths.

Police confirmed that they are focusing their investigation on the Hale connection but cautioned that no evidence has been found linking the slayings to him or his followers.

Lefkow has been a target of vitriol for white supremacists ever since she became involved in a trademark suit against Hale's organization. Several groups even publicized the family's address, mistakenly stating that they are Jewish.

Even though Hale's group now boasts about 10 chapters, only a tenth of the number from its peak in the late 1990s, experts are still wary because they noticed that the anger against Lefkow intensified after Hale was convicted last year for plotting to kill her.

"The verdict was an indicator to the membership that the system was stacked against them and that it needs to be acted upon," said Devin Burghart, a researcher at the Center for New Community, which tracks hate groups.

According to watchdogs, the organization started in 1973 under the leadership of Ben Klassen, a white nationalist who preached that Adolf Hitler was a prophet and that members should prepare for "RAHOWA" (racial holy war).

The group slowly grew to include chapters in 20 states, according to an analysis by three anti-hate groups. But the leadership began collapsing in the early 1990s until Klassen committed suicide in 1993.

Hale, a graduate of Southern Illinois University Law School, led a resurgence after he was appointed the group's leader, the "pontifex maximus," in 1995. He moved the group's headquarters to central Illinois.

The group gained national prominence in 1999 when member Benjamin Smith went on a rampage across the Midwest against minorities, killing former Northwestern basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong and Indiana University student Won-Joon Yoon.

Federal authorities investigated Hale's role, but he was never charged.

The World Church's troubles started when Hale was sued for trademark infringement and eventually jailed for plotting to kill Lefkow, who was handling the trademark infringement case.

"This group was always more of a cult of personality around Matt Hale," said Mark Potok of the Intelligence Project at the Southern Poverty Law Center. "The [movement] is now more like a decapitated monster."

But Potok cautioned that the membership remains especially violent, "the gutter of the gutter" among white supremacist groups.

Russell Hale, Matt's father, disputed that description and said in an interview Tuesday that his son's organization was "totally nonviolent." While Russell Hale acknowledged that his son attended inflammatory rallies, he doesn't believe white supremacists had any involvement in the deaths.

Hale's group, now generally known as the Creativity Movement, has been relatively quiet.

In Hale's home base of East Peoria, Ill., city officials say they have heard no activity from the group in about two years. Before, Hale and supporters frequently would pass out racist fliers or hold boisterous rallies.

In Montana, once one of the group's hotbeds, membership essentially consists of one activist living in a rural shack, said Travis McAdam, research director for the Montana Human Rights Network in Helena.

"Actually, the shack has burned down so he's out there in a trailer," he said.

But while researchers say the group is in tatters, many sympathizers have joined other organizations, including the West Virginia-based National Alliance, which promotes "Aryan values," and the National Socialist Movement, a pro-Nazi group based in Minnesota.

And experts warned that sympathizers still celebrate violence.

A purported member of Hale's group from Palatine posted this message Tuesday on the Vanguard News Network message board: "While I certainly understand that we are not supposed to be advocating illegal activities, there is nothing illegal or harmful in being happy about this incident. I can barely contain my glee."

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