

Countering hatred: Neglect is not benign

by [David L. Ostendorf](#) in the [September 8, 1999](#) issue

In a nine-state area of the Midwest, 272 far-right-wing organizations—including Christian Identity, Christian Patriot, neo-Nazi and Ku Klux Klan groups—ply their racist and anti-Semitic ideologies. Hundreds of other groups are known to operate nationally, involving tens of thousands of true believers and their followers. Violence can and does erupt from their ranks, as was evident in August when former Aryan Nations security officer Buford Furrow went on a shooting rampage at a Jewish day-care center in Los Angeles and then murdered a Filipino-American postal worker.

Religion-based hatred is the engine of the violent far-right; dreams of a white Christian homeland, free of the despised "Zionist Occupation Government," is its volatile fuel. Most of these groups have roots in the racist and anti-Semitic ideology of Christian Identity, a Christian heresy that grew out of 19th-century British Israelism. (An exception to this pattern is the World Church of the Creator, organizational home of Benjamin Smith, who in July went on a shooting spree in Illinois and Indiana, targeting minorities.)

British Israelism was advanced in the U.S. by Henry Ford and given its peculiar American twist by Wesley Swift, who founded the Church of Jesus Christ Christian in 1946. William Potter Gale, a Swift convert, shaped the racist tenets of the ideology and helped birth the Posse Comitatus, the violent arm of the movement. Another protégé, William Butler, established the Church of Jesus Christ Christian-Aryan Nations in Idaho in 1979. At 82 he still wields power and influence over the white supremacist movement.

But a new generation of Identity leaders has emerged in Butler's shadow, and is advancing the racist and anti-Semitic ideology far beyond the Aryan Nation compound. In congregations scattered across the country, and in homes and other gathering places, Identity believers worship as the "true Israel," the chosen white race. A core group of Identity pastors, including Pete Peters of LaPorte, Colorado,

has spread the message of the movement. In 1992 Peters gathered some of the nation's leading white supremacists and neo-Nazis at Estes Park, Colorado, for a meeting that launched the militia movement.

Because the white supremacist movement is organized in countless communities, its opponents need to be organized. One example of an effective response to white supremacist activity is the work of clergy in Quincy, Illinois. Quincy is a Mississippi River town of 41,000 that serves as a center of commerce for the region. This past February, when clergy learned that Pete Peters was planning a March "Scriptures for America" seminar in Quincy, the ministers met to plan their response.

Immediately after the meeting, a small delegation of clergy went to the motel where the seminar was scheduled to be held. The ministers told the motel managers about the nature of the event. The managers were shocked and immediately canceled it. While the motel suffered a financial loss, its owners and managers were adamant about not providing a place for racism and anti-Semitism to be brazenly taught.

The Quincy Ministerial Association did not stop there. It organized a Sunday afternoon education event, "From Hate to Community," and held it at the same motel Peters had intended to use. Participants in this seminar were encouraged to have dinner at the motel dining room as a show of support and appreciation for the managers' actions. Seventy-five religious and community leaders participated in the seminar, which was widely advertised in church bulletins and by local media.

Standing up to white-sheeted Klansmen is one thing. It can be much more difficult to counter white-shirted Identity or neo-Nazi leaders. These may be, after all, the folk with whom we work and worship, folk who are not blatantly racist and anti-Semitic, whose stance on government or guns may seem within the realm of mainstream politics. They may not even know that their movement is rooted in the ideology of Christian Identity.

It is, in any case, a serious mistake to ignore white supremacist activity, hoping that it will simply go away. The argument that "they will just get more press if we openly oppose them" does not hold up and has costly consequences.

Media *will* report on white supremacist activity, regardless of how the community responds. Media will also report—and hunger for—the story of how a community organizes its responses. When communities do not respond, the likelihood of repeated or increased white supremacist activity escalates. Failing to build public,

moral barriers against hate is an open invitation to hate groups. The key to diluting its expansion and appeal is naming names, and fully exposing this racist and anti-Semitic movement to the light of day.

Kansas church leaders have practiced this kind of intervention for years, and have recently pooled their experience and commitment in a coalition with civic organizations in Kansas City and Topeka. The Kansas Area Conference of the United Methodist Church has been particularly outspoken in countering Christian Identity and the militia movement in rural areas of the state. Kansas Ecumenical Ministries is an important partner in this effort. In cooperation with the Mainstream Coalition, Concerned Citizens of Topeka and the Jewish Community Relations Bureau, a longstanding ally in the struggle against organized hate group activity in Kansas, religious and civic leaders are exploring new strategies to curtail this movement.

Churches and church leaders must take this movement seriously, particularly given its religion-based ideologies that promote hatred and violence. The need is all the more urgent as movement leaders become adept at recruiting youth through music and other entry points. White supremacist bands travel the country, and their compact discs can be found in suburban record stores. Their links to the National Socialist movement are now complete with William Pierce's acquisition of Resistance Records, the nation's largest distributor of white supremacist music. Pierce, a neo-Nazi, is the author of *The Turner Diaries*, the book that inspired the Oklahoma City bombing.

When responding to hate groups, communities should remember these rules: Document the problem, expose the group, and stay informed about its local activities. Create a moral barrier against hate by speaking out and by organizing counterresponses. Build coalitions and seek to keep those coalitions together for the long haul to counter racism, anti-Semitism, bigotry and scapegoating. Assist the victims. Reach out to the constituencies targeted for recruitment. Target the entire community, including youth, for education and action. Remember that hate groups are not a fringe phenomenon. Seek to address broad social, economic and racial concerns.

Several years ago a friend participated in a peaceful protest that directly confronted a white supremacist group. Until that point the city leaders had decided to stay as far away from the group as possible. They held a unity rally and then hoped that the haters would be ignored.

Following the protest my friend, an experienced labor organizer, called me up and in an unusually subdued voice reported that she had never in her life felt the presence of evil as she did that day. She had looked around for moral support and counsel from the religious community, but found no one. No religious leaders were present to stand with her and others against the evil.

Anastasis. Resurrection. To stand against the forces of death. That's what we are called to do in the face of this hateful and violent racist movement, which often offers a twisted version of the Christian faith.