

Responding to the Westboro Baptist Church

The Westboro Baptist Church, a small virulently homophobic, anti-Semitic hate group, regularly stages protests around the country against institutions and individuals they think support homosexuality or otherwise subvert what they believe is God's law. Targets include schools the group deems to be accepting of homosexuality; Catholic, Lutheran, and other Christian denominations that Westboro feels are heretical; and funerals for people murdered or killed in accidents like plane crashes. The organization also became well known, starting in 2005, for picketing the funerals of soldiers killed during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While Westboro has protested against Jewish institutions over the years, they were not a major focus of the group until April 2009. Starting that year, Westboro targeted dozens of Jewish institutions, from ADL offices to Israeli consulates to synagogues to JCCs, around the country and distributed anti-Semitic fliers to announce planned protests at these sites. Westboro has also sent volumes of faxes and emails, with anti-Semitic and anti-gay messages to various Jewish institutions and individuals. Westboro's protests at Jewish institutions began to die down a few years later but these institutions remain a target of the group.

WHAT IS THE WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH?

Based in Topeka Kansas, Westboro considers itself an "Old School" (or "Primitive") Baptist Church. The group has no official affiliation with mainstream Baptist organizations. Most Westboro congregants are related to the group's late founder Fred Phelps. Several of his children and his grandchildren constitute the majority of its members. Over the years, a number of the Phelps family members have left the group and denounced its hateful views. Westboro is now led by a male board of elders made up of Phelps family members and others outside the family who joined the group.

The primary goal of Westboro appears to be garnering publicity for itself and its message. For this reason, the group holds its protests at events that attract heavy news coverage, such as the funerals of people killed in well-publicized accidents or shootings, as well as the funerals of famous people. Westboro also holds protests at other venues, such as high schools and colleges, which often attract large counter-protests, which themselves generate increased media coverage.

AREN'T THE ACTIONS OF WESTBORO ILLEGAL?

The First Amendment limits the right of government bodies and officials to restrict speech. No matter how distasteful and offensive, people are legally permitted to protest on public space. There may be some legal limitations related to time, place and manner, but any restrictions made must be based on compelling reasons and not on the content of the speech. The government cannot criminalize sending a fax message to a recipient based only on the fact that it is offensive.

Several Westboro activists are attorneys and they are adept at knowing where to draw the line between protected hate speech and criminal action. Westboro pushes the envelope and may bait groups to take action against them which, in turn, could result in the group bringing lawsuits against towns that they believe did not offer them adequate protection.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO RESPOND EFFECTIVELY?

Resist directly engaging with Westboro.

A primary goal of Westboro is to garner publicity and to spread their message through tactics that grab media attention. The group has a “loud bark,” but communities should resist directly engaging with it.

Spread messages of tolerance and respect throughout the community.

The antidote to hate speech is good speech. Spread positive messages of tolerance and respect throughout the community. Discuss openly how hateful speech can poison a community. While we do not recommend holding counter-protests or educational events at the same location or close to a Westboro protest, there are many positive ways a community can respond to a protest.

Take positive steps to counter the group's message.

- Hold an event (away from the Westboro protest) that demonstrates the diversity and unity within the community. Many targeted Jewish institutions, for example, have invited various community groups to events that celebrate Jewish culture through song, dance, and food.
- Hold a fundraiser and give money to a group of your choice. A number of targeted institutions have raised money for every minute the group stands outside their institution, whole not engaging Westboro directly.
- Write a letter to a public official in support of anti-hate or anti-discrimination legislation.

SECURITY ADVICE

We know of no situation in which Westboro has been violent. However, for those institutions that may be picketed, ADL has a guide called "[Protecting Your Jewish Institution](#)," which contains helpful information on dealing with protests at institutions.

REACH OUT TO US

ADL monitors the WBC and other groups year round. It is very helpful for us to document their tactics and strategies. Please provide us with copies of the e-mails and faxes and any other information about these activities in your community. Please feel free to reach out to your Anti-Defamation League Regional Office for further information, programming ideas, or other help.

TALKING TO KIDS

ADL's Web site also offers considerable resources for discussing this matter with kids. Some examples:

- [Empowering Children in the Aftermath of Hate](#)
- [Discussing Hate and Violence with your Children](#)

MORE INFORMATION

For more information on Westboro Baptist Church, as well as ADL's educational programs and security guidance, please visit our website at www.adl.org.

PROVIDED BY: Civil Rights Division