



## **Creating Positive from Negative**

**A "How-To Guide" for Congregations and Communities responding to the Westboro Baptist Church**

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### **Introduction**

We are pleased to provide this comprehensive set of resources to assist your congregation and community in responding to protests by the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC). We can minimize their influence and raise our voices in an effective and impactful way by organizing peaceful responses.

In short, rather than engaging directly with this group or similar groups, we encourage you to create programs and opportunities that inspire positive change in your community. Please feel free to contact [Michael Namath](#), RAC Program Director or [Marc Friend](#), RAC Eisendrath Legislative Assistant at (202)387-2800 for more information.

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### **Westboro Baptist Church: An Introduction**

The Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), sometimes known as the "God Hates Fags" church, is a small virulently homophobic, anti-Semitic hate group, led by Fred Phelps. They regularly stages protests around the country, often several times a week, 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 the WBC feels are heretical; and funerals for people murdered or killed in accidents like plane crashes. Since 2005, the WBC has also been protesting at funerals for American soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While the WBC has protested against Jewish institutions over the years, they were not a major focus of the group until April 2009. Since then, the WBC has targeted dozens of Jewish institutions, from ADL offices to Israeli consulates, to synagogues, to JCCs around the country. They have distributed anti-Semitic fliers to announce planned protests at these sites. The WBC has also sent volumes (in some cases dozens over the course of a week) of faxes and emails, with anti-Semitic and anti-gay messages to various Jewish institutions and individuals. In addition, in April 2010, the group began mailing a virulently anti-Semitic DVD to Jewish organizations and leaders.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From <http://www.adl.org/media/pdf/Responding-to-the-Westboro-Baptist-Church.pdf>

## How to Respond: Alternative Methods

### The Religious Action Center discourages directly engaging with WBC

The WBC's main objective is to attract press and to garner publicity. That is why they frequently choose to picket at sensitive locations. They are a small group of individuals, with a disproportionately loud voice. To minimize their impact, it is best not to directly engage with them, but to find alternative ways of minimizing their impact and instead create programs for social change.

**Here are some examples of alternative methods others have used in response to WBC to spread messages of tolerance and respect throughout the community:**

#### 1. Host an Interfaith Dialogue Against Hate

<http://njewishnews.com/article/statewide/jcc-talks-tolerance-as-a-church-preaches-hate>

More than 100 people of multiple faiths and backgrounds gathered at a JCC in New Jersey for a civil, interfaith "dialogue" against bigotry.

#### 2. Create Angels to "Block Them"

<http://eatromaine.com/1/laramie-angels.html>

*Excerpt:*

When Romaine arrived at St. Marks Church in Casper, Wyoming for Matthew's Memorial service she was shocked by what she found outside standing across the street. It had been said that, due to the massive media attention Matthew's death had garnered, there were going to be protests at the service. No one could have prepared Romaine for the hate she would see that day.

As the snow fell and people crowded around the church, Romaine couldn't take her eyes away from the neon colored signs that stood out in bright contrast to the snow. A baptist minister by the name of Fred Phelps led the small group of protesters holding signs reading, "God hates Fags", "Matt in hell" and "AIDS cures Fags" among many others. On a day of mourning, Romaine was only reminded of the hate that took the life of her dear friend.

In early April, 1999 the trials for Matthew's accused killers began. Upon hearing the rumor that Fred Phelps intended to protest outside the court house, Romaine came up with an idea. She founded Angel Action a peaceful protest in order to share a message of peace, compassion and love in a time where everyone was focused on the issue of hate.



Fred Phelps showed up in Laramie with a dozen "God Hates Fags" picketers, but he was quickly silenced when Romaine's angels showed up at the court house. Phelps and his group were surrounded by a dozen counter-demonstrators in flowing white angel costumes with 10-foot wingspans rising seven feet high. The angels turned their backs on Phelps, smiled and silently blocked him from the view of passersby at that time. The impact that the angels had on the residents of Laramie would not be felt until much later when the angels started getting requests for "do it yourself" angel kits to be used all over the country.

### **3. Have a Fundraiser for Peace**

<http://www.forward.com/articles/116261/#ixzz1568mPSy6>

*Excerpt:*

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum actually sent a thank-you note to Fred Phelps after Westboro picketed Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, a predominantly gay synagogue in New York's West Village, in June. That's because the congregation's supporters pledged money for every minute the Phelps family parked outside their temple holding hateful signs. The protest lasted 47 minutes, and the congregation raised \$13,500. Kleinbaum also led a peaceful prayer vigil outside the synagogue.

"I come from an activist background, and I do believe that voices of hate, even if they're marginal, need to be responded to," Kleinbaum said. "I personally believe it's a mistake just to ignore them. We have to stand up to evil now, and we have to do so in a way that's creative and focused and non-violent."

Kleinbaum held a meeting for congregants before the prayer vigil, to train them in how not to react in anger to the protesters. A peaceful, loving response doesn't come naturally when people are confronted with 'God Hates Fags' and 'God Hates Jews' rhetoric, she said. 'The knee-jerk reaction is to lash out.'"

<http://media.www.gwhatchet.com/media/storage/paper332/news/2010/10/21/News/Group.Seeks.To.Make.Protest.Positive-3947796.shtml>

Similarly, here is what two George Washington University students did:

*Excerpt*

The controversial church that protests military funerals is staging a demonstration on campus next month, and instead of greeting the demonstrators with signs and jeers, a group of students is seeking to turn the protest into a human rights fundraiser. Freshman Daniel Wein and junior Daniel Reade created the organization [Transcend Hate](#) in early October in an effort to collect money to donate to the groups the Westboro Baptist Church targets.

### **5. Organize a "Sing Away Hate" Concert**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEiwBCpiA0E&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEiwBCpiA0E&feature=player_embedded)

Students at Gunn High School decided they could not sit quietly, so they organized a concert against hate during lunch when the church was protesting the school because of its acceptance of diversity, in particular its active Gay-Straight Alliance.

### **6. Organize an Israeli Folk Music Dance-a-thon**

[http://sfist.com/2010/01/29/lowell\\_hs\\_students\\_counter\\_protest.php](http://sfist.com/2010/01/29/lowell_hs_students_counter_protest.php)

Lowell High School students, Jewish and non-Jewish, wore yarmulkes to school and held an Israeli folk dance party in the school's front courtyard. Groups of students from other high schools arrived, carrying signs and wearing T-shirts with peace slogans, as their schools ended for the day.

*This is just a small list of the many types of programs that can be created to help take the power away from the WBC and create positive change. The Religious Action Center is available as a resource if you need more ideas or resources.*

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## **Programmatic Resources**

### **Looking Back: Skokie 1978**

Below is a scenario from *Jewish Dimensions of Social Justice: Tough Moral Choices of Our Time* by Rabbi David Saperstein and Albert Vorspan. Following it are related questions and text that can be used to facilitate a discussion on freedom of speech.

#### **Skokie, 1978**

##### *A Real Dilemma: Should Nazis March in Skokie?*<sup>2</sup>

Skokie, Illinois is a suburb of Chicago that in 1978 had a population of approximately sixty thousand persons, including some forty thousand Jews (of whom seven thousand were survivors of Nazi concentration camps). To America—and perhaps to much of the world—Skokie is remembered as the place where American Nazis sought to organize a protest march in 1978 “to combat Jewish control of America.” City officials refused to grant a license for such a demonstration. The Nazis went to court, asserting that their First Amendment right to march publicly in Nazi uniform and to express their ideas had been violated.

The American Civil Liberties Union went to court in *support* of the right of the Nazis to march. Opponents argued that, just as one cannot yell “fire” falsely in a crowded theater because of the harm it would do, American Nazis displaying swastikas and yelling anti-Jewish obscenities should not be allowed to inflict emotional harm on concentration camp survivors. Leaders of the Jewish Defense League (JDL), a militant right-wing Jewish group that advocated using force to protect Jewish interests, announced that, whatever the courts held, the JDL would forcibly prevent the Nazis from marching. Mainstream Jewish organizations had to respond both to the Nazis and to the JDL.

#### **Related Text**

1. First Amendment, United States Constitution –“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or **abridging the freedom of speech**, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”
2. "When a person refrains from speech, the ideas die, the soul stops, and the senses deteriorate," said Moses ibn Ezra, insisting on respect for honest differences of opinion (Shirat Yisrael 12c).

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Vorspan, Albert, and David Saperstein. "A Real Dilemma: Should Nazi's March in Skokie." *Jewish Dimensions of Social Justice: Tough Moral Choices of Our Time*. New York, NY.: UAHC, 1998. Print.

3. “Rabbi Chofetz Chaim wrote that the prohibition against speaking *loshon hara* – evil speech – is the most important commandment for a Jew to keep in the face of modern culture.”<sup>3</sup>
4. “And God created man in God’s Image, in the image of God, God Created him; male and female God created them.” (Genesis 1:27)

### Related Questions

1. What should the Jewish community of Skokie have done?
2. How do you think the Union for Reform Judaism responded?
3. Is hate speech protected under the first amendment?
4. What are appropriate responses to hate speech? Is confrontation necessary?

### *Response*

While most Jewish organizations agreed that Nazis have freedom of speech, even for their repellent message, the Jewish community split on the substantive issue: Do the Nazis have the right to bring that noxious message to a specific neighborhood where it would cause pain to a particular group (e.g., the Holocaust survivors of Skokie)? The URJ, while continuing efforts to have the location switched, decided not to express formal opposition to the march for substantive and tactical reasons. First, in our view, the effort to block them had given this tiny crew of misfits millions of dollars worth of publicity. Second, most decent Americans oppose Nazi ideology, and this should not be Jews vs. Nazis but Americans vs. Nazis. Finally, we were doomed to lose in the courts, and it would be better to get the march over with and off the network news.

In the end, as the danger of violent confrontation reached a fever pitch, the Nazis relocated their planned march from Skokie to Marquette Park in Chicago, where it passed with only minor disturbances.

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### Looking Ahead: Supreme Court Case *Snyder v. Phelps*

Below is a look at the current Supreme Court case that involves the WBC, freedom of speech and some related questions. The texts listed above can be used to bolster your conversation.

On March 10, 2006 the Westboro Baptist Church picketed outside the funeral of Marine Lance Cpl. Matthew Snyder, who was killed in Iraq, with signs like "America is doomed," "You're going to hell," "God hates you," "Fag troops," "*Semper fi* fags," and "Thank God for dead soldiers." Following this event, Albert Snyder, Matthew’s Father, sued Fred Phelps, the leader of the WBC, on a number of counts including emotional damage inflicted by such protests.

The Supreme Court is considering whether the freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment trumps the freedom of religion and peaceful assembly; and whether an individual attending a family member’s funeral constitutes a “captive audience” who is entitled to state

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.kentlaw.edu/ilh/Mstone.pdf>

protection from unwanted communication. Or, more simply, does the First Amendment protect protesters at a funeral from liability for intentionally inflicting emotional distress on the family of the deceased?<sup>4</sup>

The Supreme Court heard oral arguments on this case on October 6, 2010 and will issue its decision before the end of the June 2011.

### **Related Questions**

1. What parallels exist between the Skokie situation and this case?
2. Does it matter who the WBC targets? Is a protest at a funeral different from a protest at a school/church/event?
3. Do funerals count as a sacred place? A private place?
4. How do you think the Supreme Court will decide this case?
5. What can we do to support those people who the WBC attacks?

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.scotusblog.com/case-files/cases/snyder-v-phelps/?wpmp\\_switcher=desktop](http://www.scotusblog.com/case-files/cases/snyder-v-phelps/?wpmp_switcher=desktop)