



Anti-Defamation League Responding to the Westboro Baptist Church

Introduction

The Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), a small virulently homophobic, anti-Semitic hate group, 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 and 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.

What is the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC)?

Based in Topeka Kansas, the WBC considers itself an "Old School" (or "Primitive") Baptist Church. The WBC has no official affiliation with mainstream Baptist organizations. Most WBC congregants are related to the group's leader Fred Phelps; several of his children and dozens of his grandchildren appear to constitute the majority of its members. The primary goal of the group appears to be garnering



publicity for itself and its message. For this reason, the group directs its efforts at events that attract heavy news coverage, like the deaths of soldiers killed in wars or the victims of well-publicized accidents, or at venues, such as high schools, that often attract large counter-protests, which themselves generate increased media coverage.

Aren't the actions of the WBC 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 lands. There may be some legal limitations related to time, place and manner, but any restrictions made must be based on compelling reasons and may not be based on the content of the speech. The government cannot criminalize the sending of a fax message to a recipient based only on the fact that it is offensive.

Several WBC activists are attorneys and they are adept at knowing where to draw the line between protected hate speech and criminal action. The WBC 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 WBC.

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

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 WBC 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 WBC 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 the WBC 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 WBC has been violent. However, for those institutions that may be picketed, ADL has a guide called “Dealing with Protestors at Your Institution,” which contains some thoughts about dealing with protests at Jewish

institutions. It, along with our comprehensive security manual, can be found at www.adl.org/security.

If you have received the DVD being circulated by the WBC, do not play the disk in your computer since it—like any other unsolicited disk—may not be safe for your computer.

ADL: Here to Help

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 local 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: Guidelines for Educators and Families:*
<http://www.adl.org/guide/>
- *Discussing Hate and Violence with your Children:*
http://www.adl.org/issue_education/Hate_and_violence.asp
- *Talking to your Child about Hatred and Prejudice:*
http://www.adl.org/issue_education/hateprejudice/Prejudice1.asp

More Information

ADL has been monitoring and exposing the WBC and other hate groups to public scrutiny for decades. Learn more about the WBC at http://www.adl.org/special_reports/wbc/default.asp

Learn about ADL’s educational programs:
www.adl.org/education

Learn about ADL’s security programs:
www.adl.org/security