NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Fred Phelps' hateful legacy may be the opposite of all he intended

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Analysis Washington

Fred Phelps, the 84-year-old founder of Westboro Baptist Church and media-master of hate speech campaigns, died Thursday after devoting decades to damning Americans for tolerating homosexuality.

"God Hates Fags" was the Westboro philosophy, detailed in vile slogans on signs that a tiny band of relatives toted to 40 sites a week around the country. All told, the church in Topeka, Kan., claims to have staged some 53,000 protests.

Whenever there was a newsworthy death -- be it Matthew Shepard, the gay teen murdered in 1998, or a soldier killed in action, a movie star, or an innocent child victim in a mass murder -- Westboro would add it to the church's picketing calendar.

But by the time of his death, Phelps had lived long enough to see American public opinion soar in exactly the opposite direction -- in favor of gay rights, including marriage.

The message he spread across the country never took root, and in fact helped galvanize the gay rights movement and put other Christians on the defensive. The image of Christianity he painted was a hateful, judgmental collection of rabble-rousers -- an image that, paradoxically, did more to help his targets than it advanced his message.

Experts say Phelps' ultimate legal and social impact on the American religious landscape will be a footnote. Religious leaders lament the damage they say he did to Christians who preach God's love and mercy.

Free speech icon

Born on Nov. 13, 1929, in Meridian, Miss., Phelps reportedly quit West Point to study at Bob Jones University and became an ordained Southern Baptist minister in 1947. But he left the SBC for a more fundamentalist theology and launched the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka in 1955. While once considered a champion of civil rights, Phelps turned to focus lifelong enmity toward gay rights and began his notorious picketing campaign in 1991.

In 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 8-1 that Westboro's picketing was "free speech however hateful," said Steven Shapiro, legal director for the American Civil Liberties Association, which filed a friend of the court brief on Wesboro's behalf. Free-speech advocates uncomfortably embraced Phelps' cause, if not his message.

"That's how protest buffer zones and picket pens" came about, Shapiro said. They allow for free speech so long as protesters do not impede the event or harass the mourners. Phelps' lasting legal impact may be the 2006 Fallen Heroes Act and similar laws in 20 states that drastically limit where, when and how people can protest at military funerals.

Kansas acted years earlier. In 1991, Westboro began daily picketing at a city park that was reportedly a hot spot for gay meet-ups. In 1992, state legislators passed laws against funeral picketing and banned stalking and outlawed telephone and fax harassment -- early tactics of the church, said Mark Potok, senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate groups.

Phelps and his congregation of "mini-me people just as vicious as he was" claimed to picket 40 sites a week. But it was the 1998 Westboro presence at the funeral of Shepard that brought the church to the national spotlight, said Potok.

The cascade of outrage stories continued in 2001 when Phelps said the 3,000 victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks deserved to die. He called a co-pilot of one of the planes hijacked on 9/11 the "filthy face of fag evil."

"He specialized in being impossible to ignore in the modern media climate," Potok said. "No one could pretend if he was ignored he would go away, not when they showed up at funerals of little girls killed in a school bus crash.

"Still, I think his lasting impact was on the other side of the debate. He turned people off from the far right to the far left."

A skewed gospel

Yet Phelps drew no new followers to Westboro's ways and he lost generations of children and grandchildren. According to *The Topeka Capital-Journal*, Phelps had 13 adult children, nine of whom remain in the church and four of whom left, along with about 20 of his grandchildren. His son Nathan, who first told news media last weekend that Phelps was dying, became an outspoken atheist.

Ties of Christian faith were no stronger than family ties for Phelps as fellow Christian faithful -- mainline, evangelical or Catholic -- faced his wrath.

Ed Stetzer, president of LifeWay Research, made a souvenir of the time Westboro picketed Lifeway's Nashville offices. His desk nameplate is taken from a sign calling Stetzer a "Lying whore false Prophet."

On Thursday, Stetzer called for people to do "the opposite of Fred Phelps and love the people that we don't like -- and tell them (or better yet, show them) God loves them too."

The Rev. Ann Fontaine, a retired Episcopal priest and an editor and writer at Episcopal Cafe website, recalled that delegates to her church's General Conventions "would have to walk through a gantlet of his people on the way to our meetings. And yet, he did more to move Episcopalians towards gay rights and rites than many. People were sure they did not want to be Freds."

When the Episcopal church voted in 2003 to accept its first openly gay bishop, "no one wanted to be seen as agreeing with his views. People who were on the fence about marriage equality and gay priests realized they had to make a decision and many moved on the spectrum toward support," she said.

When openly gay Bishop V. Gene Robinson was formally installed, Phelps' band of picketers came out in force, and Robinson wore a bulletproof vest beneath his vestments.

The Rev. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., and a leading evangelical voice, said, "Phelps was so engaged in denouncing sin that the good news, the grace and mercy of God in Christ, was never made clear in his message."

By making religion appear hateful and intolerant, Phelps actually served as "an effective agent for the normalization of homosexuality," Mohler said. In fact, LifeWay Research found that Americans who called homosexual behavior "sinful" slid from 48 percent in 2008 to 37 percent by 2012.

"He made it easy for people to point to him and say theological opposition to homosexual behavior was rooted in nothing more than animus and hatred," Mohler said. "He will be held accountable for a massive misrepresentation of the Christian faith, the Christian church and the gospel of Christ. He single-handedly committed incalculable damage by presenting an enormous obstacle to the faithful teaching of the gospel."

Predicting the future for the Phelps franchise is complicated, said University of Kansas religious studies professor Tim Miller, who has tracked Westboro through the years.

"They have one terrible problem in succession. The one very capable, smart, educated, technologically adept person to take over is a woman. Shirley Phelps-Roper is a very effective and capable leader but she told me their theology teaches that women can't be ministers," said Miller.

Earlier this year, Phelps-Roper, who represented the church along with her sister, Margie, in the Supreme Court arguments, was reportedly exiled from a leadership role by current Westboro church elders. A church spokesman, Steve Drain, told *The Topeka Capital-Journal*, "We don't discuss our internal church dealings with anybody."

Source URL (retrieved on *11/28/2015 - 07:05*): http://ncronline.org/news/people/fred-phelps-hateful-legacy-may-be-opposite-all-he-intended