

Big-dollar verdict won't stop Phelps's antigay crusade: \$10.9 million jury award

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It's going to take more than a \$10.9 million jury award to stop pastor Fred Phelps and his Kansas church from picketing military funerals with antigay signs. In fact, his daughter said November 1 that the verdict will only push them forward.

"We are the No. 1 story on Google around the world," said Shirley Phelps-Roper, daughter of Westboro Baptist Church's pastor. "You can't buy that kind of advertising, even with \$10.9 million."

The Topeka congregation was sued by Albert Snyder, whose son was killed in Iraq, after members picketed at his son's funeral in March 2006. On October 31, a federal jury awarded Snyder \$10.9 million in damages.

Members of Phelps's church, who believe that God is punishing the United States for its acceptance of homosexuality with the deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan, routinely picket military funerals. They hold signs with slogans like "Thank God for dead soldiers" and "God hates fags."

Phelps-Roper, just returned from Baltimore, where the case was decided, expressed joy at the "huge door of utterance" that has been opened to her church's cause.

"We have told this nation faithfully that there is a God . . . who expects obedience, and if you won't obey you get the curses," Phelps-Roper said.

Baptist leaders have expressed dismay that the Topeka congregation identifies itself as Baptist, yet has no known affiliation with any Baptist fellowship or association.

Mel White, president of Soulforce, a gay rights organization based in Lynchburg, Virginia, said his group receives frequent visits from the picketers, but their presence doesn't discourage him.

“Every time Fred Phelps comes to harass us . . . I am delighted, because his extremism makes us look like loving angels,” he said.

White, who once met Phelps and spent a couple of hours talking with him, said that though Phelps is fully convinced of what he believes, both the secular world and the mainstream church community think he’s “crazy as a bedbug.”

Some, like Gary Glenn of the Michigan chapter of the conservative American Family Association, think that both Phelps and gay groups are wrong. “We . . . condemn Fred Phelps’s rejection of the Christian gospel of redemption and his expressly hate-motivated attacks . . . on individuals ensnared in the homosexual lifestyle” and “on American military personnel and their families,” Glenn said.

The Anti-Defamation League called the jury’s verdict a rejection of the church’s “hateful ideology.”

The verdict “sends a strong message to those who would use their bigotry and hatred to threaten and intimidate others that there can be serious consequences for their actions,” said ADL national director Abraham H. Foxman. *-Religion News Service*