

**WHEN THE FOUNDER DIES:
WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH IN THE
AFTERMATH OF PASTOR FRED PHELPS' PASSING**

An interview with Dr. Rebecca Barrett-Fox



Fred Phelps, the founder of Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) was born in Meridian, Mississippi in 1929. He reports having been called to God in 1946 and soon became an ordained minister. He had spoken out against homosexuality at John Muir College in 1951, but it was only forty years later, in 1991, that he gained national notoriety for leading his church's public denunciation of homosexuality. In the intervening years, Phelps founded Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas in 1955 and went on to earn a law degree at Washburn University in the early 1960s, in part because his position as pastor was unpaid and in part because of what he, son of a suspected Klansman, identified as a commitment to a racial justice in the wake of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.. Both church and law, too, gave Phelps an opportunity to have a public voice in Topeka and, eventually, across the country. Westboro Baptist began public opposition to homosexuality in the form of picketing on a local level in 1991 but garnered widespread national media coverage in 1998 when church members picketed the funeral of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student beaten to death in Wyoming. Although Westboro Baptist never had more than about 100 members, most of whom were Phelps' relations, the church gained a high public profile nationally for its virulent condemnation of homosexuality and picketing of military funerals. In a legal case that reached the Supreme Court, the church's right to picket funerals was affirmed, although the courts also affirmed time, place and manner restrictions on picketing. Phelps left his role of church leader more than a year before his death on March 19, 2014, having served the church for nearly 58 years and having shaped the theology and activism of a church often labeled a hate group. Though members claimed to anticipate the return of Jesus prior to Phelps' death, they had been cultivating new leadership for some time, and the church remains stable and active.

Dr. Barrett-Fox, welcome to the WRSP Forum!

WRSP: Dr. Barrett-Fox, you wrote your doctoral dissertation on Westboro Baptist Church (WBC). One of issues confronting scholars who engage in participant observation research is gaining access and a stable role during the research process. Why did WBC grant you access? What role agreements did you negotiate with WBC? Did they accept you as a potential convert or a researcher? What areas of church activity were you allowed access to and from what areas were you excluded?

Barrett-Fox: When you speak about or write about WBC, you are going to state their central message: God hates people (gay people, Catholics, Jews, and virtually everyone else who does not adhere to WBC's theology). If you say that message, even if you aren't espousing it, you are preaching the word of God, according to WBC. God can use the "foolishness" of my dissertation (which explains their message but doesn't endorse it) to reach the elect, the ones who need to hear it and will respond to it by joining the church, as well as the damned, who will hear the words of WBC, quoted by me, and reject this message and thus prove that they are hell-bound. (Perhaps I should have warned you of that at the start of this interview!) In that way, WBC wants me to write about them, because even if I write, "These awful people believe that God hates you," you have heard (or read) their central message. Now *you* are responsible for acting in obedience to the word of God.

For theological reasons, then, WBC wants to work with outsiders, though those relationships are often rocky. I heard many journalists and others receive nasty responses to their questions, in large part because the questions really were rude, provocative, or uninformed. I think I have retained a positive long-term working relationship with church members (and now ex-members) because I do have respect for the effort they put in to learning their theology. Hyper-Calvinism, a term I use with no pejorative connotation, is a tough concept to understand and apply. Across the board, WBC members really work at understanding what they believe. They asked me to do so, too, recommending books and Bible commentaries. And I read them. I think that taking their beliefs seriously, rather than belittling them or dismissing them, was key. As a researcher, I think that's how all research on religious subjects should occur, but it is harder for "less loved" groups, especially ones that are genuinely hurting people you love.

I had relatively free access to the group. Each Sunday prior to their own worship service, members picket other churches in Topeka. I attended many of these pickets, as well as Sunday services and after-church events like potlucks and music rehearsals. I once even volunteered in the nursery, playing with children while the adults were in a meeting. I also attended pickets, both in Kansas and out-of-state. But not all parts of WBC were open to me. Membership meetings are private. Other than that, I was welcomed as a guest—and very hospitably! When we traveled to pickets, I was always well taken care of—someone always packed an extra water bottle for me, just in case I forgot mine, and reminded me to put on sunscreen and things like that. And I participated in some parts of church life, like bringing dishes to share at potlucks.

And I often left interviews with some kind of small gift—a jar of freshly canned salsa, for example. And I saw that others the church worked with, like journalists, were treated with similar respect, provided that they were engaging respectfully with the church.

WRSP: The WBC has claimed to be Calvinist and Primitive. What has been the reaction of representatives of those traditions to WBC claims?

Barrett-Fox: Calvinists, of which Primitive Baptists are one kind, don't always appreciate the differences across their own groups, so it is not a surprise that they are hostile to WBC. Though a few Primitive Baptists indicated to me that while they agree with WBC's theology, they don't like the church's tactics, especially the picketing of military funerals. Calvinists believe in the predestination of salvation—that is, that God choose, either before or after the Fall in the Garden of Eden, depending on your theology, who was going to heaven and who was not. WBC teaches that God doesn't just actively choose who is going to heaven but also who is going to hell; that is, God created some people in order to send them to hell (double predestination). They also believe that God predestines not only salvation but all parts of life—God doesn't just foreknow that, for example, you will fail 8th grade algebra or get breast cancer but actively makes those things happen—from the most trivial to the most important parts of our lives (absolute predestination). Not all Primitive Baptists adhere to both double and absolute predestination, so that immediately marks WBC as different. Additionally, WBC does not adhere to all of the traditions of Primitive Baptists, including the prohibition against musical instruments or, more importantly, the belief that all Primitive Baptist pastors must have been themselves baptized by a Primitive Baptist pastor. So those differences would be enough for a rift between any two groups claiming to be Primitive Baptist.

WRSP: Aside from its teachings on homosexuality, how does WBC doctrine differ from that of other mainstream, conservative Christian churches?

Barrett-Fox: Many mainstream conservative churches also teach that gay people go to hell, though they don't argue that God hates gay people. (For WBC, the idea that God would love people but send them to hell anyway doesn't make sense. Hell is for people God hates and heaven is for those God loves.) Other conservative Christians believe that God loves people but hates same-sex contact and that they, too, should love people attracted to others of the same sex but should hate homosexuality, which is often expressed as "love the sinner but hate the sin." WBC looks to Romans 1, a text that many conservative Christians invoke to prove that God hates homosexuality, but WBC argues that God doesn't hate people because they are gay; instead, people are gay because God hates them. Their belief in double predestination means that they believe that God decided, before any of us were born, that he hated us. Because he hates us, he lets us go on our own way, which is often evil. Romans 1 says about the unrighteous that "for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him...." As a consequence, "God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies...[,] to degrading passions," which WBC, like most conservative Christians, believe describes same-sex contact. In the end, both conservative Christians and WBC believe that God hates homosexuality and that God sends unrepentant gay people to hell.

WBC just argues that God does it because he hates them, while other groups argue that God loves them but sends them to hell anyway. If you are gay, I am not sure that this distinction matters.

In other ways, WBC shares a lot of the concerns of other conservative churches. For example, they preach against abortion and divorce and remarriage. But the church is also different in significant ways. The women never cut their hair, and they wear a head covering during the church service. However, while everyone at the church is to dress modestly to some degree, women are not required to wear dresses and can wear sleeveless shirts. Like other Primitive Baptists, they do not celebrate religious holidays as they (correctly) understand these to be derived from pagan or Catholic traditions. Because they believe that God hates America, they do not participate in civic holidays such as the 4th of July, nor do they say the pledge of allegiance or sing the national anthem. Thus, though they are anti-gay, they cannot be said to be part of the Christian Right because they reject much civil religion.

In some ways, WBC is more liberal than many conservative churches. For example, while they obviously prohibit same-sex sexual contact as well as pre-marital sexual contact, they view all sex “within the marriage bed” to be acceptable. Thus, while some conservative churches have prohibitions against certain sex acts, like oral sex, WBC does not, though birth control is unacceptable.

WRSP: One element of Westboro Baptist theology apparently was an expectation that Christ would return during Fred Phelps’ lifetime. What has been the impact on church members of this failed prophecy?

Barrett-Fox: They are unbothered by it. Though WBC claimed to expect Jesus’ return, church members did not calculate it or depend on it. Indeed, for a few years now, they have been cultivating leadership within the church to replace Fred Phelps. They still believe that Jesus’ second coming will be soon.

WRSP: WBC theology is completely predestinarian. So, members’ picketing activity cannot contribute to their salvation. How do WBC members then describe the purpose of their protest activity?

Barrett-Fox: Picketing won’t save them, and it won’t save anyone who listens to them. God alone saves people. But it could be that God chooses to save some through WBC picketing. This is one reason why church members began picketing at Jewish synagogues and community centers: they believe that God is going to save 144,000 Jews, and they are trying to preach to those Jews. It rarely works, but there are some converts. Or, rather, as the church would say, some of God’s elect (since you cannot convert, since that implies that you changed yourself) hear God’s voice through WBC’s words.

WBC also has to picket because they are faithful to God. While we cannot know who God has elected, since even people who are doing the right thing, according to WBC, won’t get into

heaven just because they are doing it, we can know who *isn't* elect. People who are doing the wrong thing do so because God hates them. If God loved them, he would have predestined them to do the right thing. (God can, of course, predestine a damned person to do the right thing. Thus, we cannot even know that all the members of WBC are going to heaven.) So you are definitely going to hell if you aren't picketing, and you might be going to hell even if you are. But the picketing doesn't make you go to heaven or hell—it just reveals if you are going to hell or if you have a chance of going to heaven.

WRSP: WBC has a small membership base and is composed primarily of Fred Phelps' offspring, along with their spouses and children. There appear to be few converts. Does WBC have any formal policy on birth control or does it encourage large families to expand the faith?

Barrett-Fox: Church members are not to practice birth control, and the large family sizes indicate that they don't. Like the Quiverfull movement, WBC believes that children are a blessing from God. Why would you want to stop God from blessing you? What is really remarkable is that, within that social structure, the majority of women still work outside the home. This requires a vastly supportive community, and children, overall, feel very, very loved. This is confirmed even by people who have left the church in recent years. The members share in the challenges and burdens of child-rearing, and this includes men. Fathers are very involved in parenting, including in the church setting, such as caring for a child who might be struggling to behave properly during the church service. Fathers will distract children or remove them to help them refocus. I've often seen fathers alone with their children at the church service while the mother is home ill or traveling.

WRSP: When Fred Phelps' children have married, it appears that the spouses have accepted the church. Is there any information on how members select mates and what the church expects of new spouses?

Barrett-Fox: It would be impossible for a church member to marry someone who was not a member. If they met someone outside of the church setting, that person would have to join the church and could only then be considered eligible for marriage to a member. The church has addressed the matter, to a degree, by encouraging young people to focus on the work of the church. That said, members do marry. When the church formed, it included more than one family, and some of those families stayed in the church even after it began its anti-gay picketing. This has provided a source for some spouses. And there are new members from outside the Phelps family, some of whom have come as whole families or married couples who then renounce birth control, providing a new pool of marriageable people. In the last few years, people have moved to Topeka from England, California, and Florida to explore membership; a number have stayed. They are not obligated to marry anyone in the church, of course, but they are also not able to marry anyone outside of the church, so if they wish to become or stay members, they will either be single or marry within the church. That's a lot of pressure, of course—but it is easier than finding a potential mate and then convincing him or her to join!

WRSP: How does WBC handle the issue of divorce and child custody in the event that one spouse leaves the church?

Barrett-Fox: WBC would permit separation in cases of spousal abuse, but no church member should pursue divorce. If they find themselves facing a spouse who wants a divorce, there is little they can do to prevent an eventual divorce. In that case, church members would have to adhere to any custody arrangement worked out in court. The law, though, cannot discriminate against a parent based on religious belief. Children reared in WBC tend to come from very loving relationships—there is a lot of affection, a lot of tenderness and support among the young adults and children in the church now, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Fred Phelps. So it would be hard to make a case that a church member should not have access to their own child in the case of a divorce.

WRSP: At many of the WBC protest events, women seem quite prominent. Does WBC have gender role expectations with respect to behavior, dress, or leadership?

Barrett-Fox: While women cannot preach from the pulpit, lead prayer during the worship service, or serve as an elder, they are very active in WBC in other ways, and no role is reserved for women. That is, no task is seen as “beneath” men. Women teach in Bible studies, preach on the street, organize pickets, write blogs, record “talking head” style news videos, and do everything else in the picketing ministry of the church. Indeed, the church was represented by two women at the Supreme Court! Men are seen as the heads of their households, but this does not mean that every man has authority over every woman. Instead, men have a spiritual responsibility to guide their families, which includes not abusing that role. One older man in the congregation was quick to point out to me that this did not mean that women were to “fetch slippers” or do other work that a man could just as easily do himself. Instead, men are to lead at home in part to prepare themselves for leading in church. In fact, a man cannot be an elder in the church unless he is married because marriage is seen as such good preparation for other kinds of leadership, the core of which is care and, to a lesser extent, correction, which must be done within the context of community and at the lowest level of authority (for example, the parents of a child) first. But all members of the church, men and women, have the responsibility to care for each other, and you see this throughout the community: shared gardens, shared yards, shared babysitting. One member of the church told me that women have to be active in the church, citing 1 Chronicles 12: 1-2, which tells of how King David’s warriors were ambidextrous and could “shoot arrows and sling stones with either the right or the left hand.” Similarly, the church needs all available hands in its war. Among churches that subscribe to any gender distinctions, WBC is rather progressive!

WRSP: Do the religious beliefs of WBC members influence the kinds of clients that the Phelps law firm will represent?

Barrett-Fox: Yes. The Phelps family law firm will not represent clients seeking a divorce in their first marriage. (If you are divorcing for a second or third time, though, the church will represent you since these marriages are already invalid.)

Many people might be surprised to learn that Fred Phelps was well-known as a civil rights litigator. In fact, he had already earned a place in the Kansas State Historical Society for his civil rights work before he became infamous for his anti-gay preaching. In the 1980s, he won the Omaha Mayor's Special Recognition Award for his civil rights work, an award from the Greater Kansas City Chapter of Blacks in Government, and an award from a local chapter of the NAACP. The family law firm repeatedly represented racial minorities and women in litigation. For many years, a member of the church served on Topeka's Human Rights Commission, which investigated claims of discrimination in housing, a position that became untenable when the law expanded to prevent discrimination against people based on HIV status.

Fred Phelps' arrival in Topeka, where he had been offered a pastoral position, from the Southwest, coincided with the Supreme Court's *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, which outlawed segregation in public schools. Phelps said he felt that timing to be providential, that God was calling him to do serve African Americans in Topeka. His own father may have been a Klansmen, and, certainly, growing up in Meridan, Mississippi made him aware of violence and discrimination against African Americans. Others, including his son Nate, who left the church decades ago, argues that his father was actually a racist himself and simply saw civil rights as a profitable field of law. For example, in addition to his work on the behalf of African Americans, he also won the first "reverse discrimination" case in the state, and he filed one on behalf of two of his children when they were denied entrance into law school at Washburn University in Topeka (a case he lost). But the church today includes a few non-white participants, and Fred Phelps, when he ran for governor of the state, included an African American as lieutenant governor on his ticket.

Many people see church members' advocacy on behalf of African Americans and other racial minorities as at odds with the church's anti-gay work. Church members disagree, saying that race and sexuality are different, that race is immutable, whereas sexual behavior is a choice and that "God never said 'thou shalt not be black'" but does forbid homosexual contact. This opinion is not unique to WBC and might even be one of the reasons why many black churches initially stood by WBC in the early days of their protest, though every church abandoned WBC once the church began picketing military funerals.

WRSP: Most of the WBC members appear to live in a residential neighborhood enclave. What kinds of relationships do they have with neighbors, members of other churches, and other Topeka residents?

Barrett-Fox: All of the houses on the block where the church is located are owned by church members, so the church occupies a lot of space. For the rest of the neighborhood, having the church there is a burden. It has been vandalized in the past with lewd graffiti and has been the target of arson. That presents a danger and a denigration to the whole neighborhood. But mostly the challenge is the distraction of WBC. The church, for example, hangs huge banners proclaiming things like "God Hates America" on its building and flies the American flag upside down. On national holidays, the church flies dozens on the perimeter of its tall privacy fence.

That tends to offend the neighbors! Many of them display U.S. flags themselves—right side up, of course.

In 2013, a group called Planting Peace purchased a house across the street from WBC—really, close enough that you could easily toss a baseball between the two. They call the house Equality House and, with the help of volunteers, including ex-church members, painted it in rainbow colors. It has been a center for pro-gay inclusion in the community. So the opposition to WBC starts on their very own street.

WRSP: What is your best estimate of WBC membership size in 2014? Does WBC actively proselytize in any way beyond its protest events?

Barrett-Fox: Participants member in the upper 60s or lower 70s. Membership is smaller as only those who have reached an age where they can understand the core of WBC theology can join. Additionally, if you are an adult wishing to join the church, there is a long process of observing you to make sure that you are truly committed. There are some who have attended for years but are not members yet. Church members consider all of their activities—picketing, running websites, fax campaigns—to be preaching. In general, people who are not reared in the church find their way to it via the internet. WBC members are very patient in answering questions about people who are genuinely seeking spiritual guidance. Conversations can go on for many months, but there is not pressure to move to Topeka and join the church. In fact, it would be burdensome to the church to have too many people who are curious but not committed around.

To join the church, you need to be in full agreement with its theology and mission. Interestingly, the church probably gets more queries from people who are anti-gay than people who share their theology, and they have to guide these people away from them. Church members would say that they are not “homophobic”—and there is some evidence that they are not personally against gay people. I’ve seen church members treat gay people with great hospitality, and I’ve never heard them use anti-gay language outside of a theological context (for example, using an anti-gay slur when someone cuts them off in traffic). Of course, the church actively works against gay people and gay rights. But they are also quick to say that this is not because of a personal dislike or distaste for homosexuality. The problem, for them, isn’t that same-sex contact is “gross”—it’s that it is a sign of one’s damnation. That can be a bit hard to see in the spectacle of their pickets, so it’s understandable that they would attract people (mostly young men) who are anti-gay because they are uncomfortable with same-sex sexuality or have some other beef with gay people. For WBC, that’s not a reason to join the church, and, in fact, these would-be WBC members might even be destabilizing.

WRSP: There have been a number of notable defections from WBC in recent years. What has been the impact of these defections on the church?

Barrett-Fox: Several young people have left the church in the past few years, including Megan Phelps-Roper, who served in several high-profile roles, especially on social media. Megan was

also her mother's right hand, having forgone a career outside of the church to work on picketing and other church activities full time. That is a practical loss for the church, because Megan was very active and very vocal. She has been moderate in her criticism of the church since she left, whereas another ex-member, Lauren Drain, has spoken out about psychological abuse within the church in interviews and in a memoir. Overall, ex-members have found a warm welcome in the outside world, though they still miss their family members who remain in the church. Some remain in the Topeka area, but others have gone further from home. Some, like Nate Phelps, are atheists, while others are still figuring out their religious beliefs outside of WBC.

For those who remain, the defections are, theologically, irrelevant. That is, they do not expect everyone within WBC to remain. God only saved 8 people, including Noah, when he destroyed the world by flood, they think, and while they hope that everyone who is a part of WBC is heaven-bound, they don't believe that being part of WBC will get you into heaven. However, not being part of the church is pretty good evidence that you are going to hell. So they may, at moments, miss their siblings and children, they don't see a problem with leaving. Leaving just means you recognize that you aren't part of the elect, and they wouldn't expect a damned person to stay.

It's hard to predict what the numbers for WBC will look like in the future. Because families are so large, even if half the children in any family leave—say 5 out of 10 siblings—a lot of people remain. As long as the church gets a few new members each year, introducing new options for marriage, it could last a long time. Already, many of Fred Phelps' grandchildren who are of a marriageable age are, in fact, married, and they, too, will have large families. There are at least 75 more years of people in the church already.

WRSP: Do the WBC church services and rituals have any distinctive qualities? Do they have the same themes as the protest activities?

Barrett-Fox: The church service opens and closes with songs, accompanied by piano and organ, taken from a Baptist hymnal, often songs by the great hymnist Isaac Watts—songs sung in congregations all across the US each Sunday. The sermon, which lasts about 30-40 minutes, is the focus. Communion is taken regularly, though all members need to be present for it to occur, and is comprised of wine and unleavened bread. The sermon is generally proof-texted—that is, the speaker (always a male elder) selects a theme and then chooses Biblical texts, sometimes dozens of them, to support that point.

A few details will stand out: the women don't cut their hair, and they wear a head covering during the service, but, while they dress with relative modesty (no exposed midriffs, no Spandex shorts), they do not have to wear skirts, and they can even have exposed shoulders and arms.

What will be most different, though, is the content of the service, from the opening and closing prayers to the content of the sermon. The words very often work to distinguish between the outside world, which is hopeless and damned, and the world inside the church, which is

reminded to be obedient. Many times, I have heard the opening prayer start with words such as, "God, thank you that we are not like those outside of this church, who have no hope." They also spend considerable time encouraging each other to be strong in the face of persecution from the outside world. There are often specific references to recent pickets or other events that have brought the church into contact with the world, all used to demonstrate how the church has stood strong in spite of attacks from outsiders.

WRSP: Since WBS has expected an imminent endtime scenario, there must be strong expectations for children in preparation for those events. Are there distinctive features of child rearing in WBC?

Barrett-Fox: As I understand it, child-rearing techniques in the past included much more violence, which Nate Phelps, who left the church a generation ago, has spoken about extensively. Indeed, the violence he reports experiencing inspired his desire to speak publically about religiously-justified child abuse. Today, while parents would likely reserve the right to spank children, I never saw a child being physically mistreated, nor have ex-members who have recently left reported violence. The world is watching, of course, for signs of abuse that would justify a social services intervention; indeed, in 2007, Shirley Phelps-Roper was arrested in Nebraska for contributing to the delinquency of a minor when she allowed a child to stand on the U.S. flag during a protest, and her son was temporarily removed from her custody. Notably, the Supreme Court decision *Johnson v. Texas* protected her right to stand on the flag and to allow her child to do so, so Nebraska had to drop its charges and pay her court costs. You cannot remove a child from the home based on ideological reasons, including religious reasons, but you can remove them, of course, for suspicion of abuse or neglect. I think the church is very careful to avoid even the appearance of mistreatment of children for this reason.

Which is not to say growing up in the church is easy! Children attend public school and engage in a range of activities that bring them into contact with people outside the church, from athletics to after school jobs. But they are also different from their peers, and it isn't possible to form deep relationships with people outside the church, in part because church life organizes so much of their time. But they are, overall, very smart, engaged, respectful students, and their parents are active in their schools. They also believe that, by their very presence, their children share their message. If a child from the church is your classmate or your student, you don't need them to wear a t-shirt proclaiming that God hates gay people; you automatically remember the message when you see them.

WRSP: WBC claims to have engaged in several tens of thousands of protest events across the United States. The cost of staging those protests must be substantial. How doe WBC finance itself and its activities?

Barrett-Fox: The church spends about a quarter of a million dollars traveling each year, which is self-funded for adults in the congregation. The church has relatively low overhead as all church leaders are bivocational and unpaid for their church work. The church has had to go to court over the tax-exempt status of some of its property, such as a truck that the church used during

protests, but those issues have been long-settled. Today, the church itself operates on a relatively small budget and makes very effective use of a highly talented volunteer staff. In fact, church members are encouraged to pursue careers that will benefit the church itself—a generation ago, law, now media and computer science. Many of the younger members have also pursued careers in health care and nursing. Nearly all the adults are employed, most in professional jobs and some by the state of Kansas. Imagine if every congregant in a typical church gave at least 10% of their income to the church! While WBC church budget figures aren't public knowledge, I think church members give generously, financially, to the organization that they give so much energy to.

There is a myth that the church provokes lawsuits in order to win money to finance their travel. This is not true, though Fred Phelps, when he practiced law, was known for filing questionable lawsuits. Today, the church does file lawsuits when they believe that their right to free speech has been violated, but they also work to avoid such lawsuits. For example, when Shirley Phelps-Roper was arrested in 2007 in Nebraska, she informed the attending officer, prior to her arrest, that he was in violation of the law. He arrested her anyway—to the cost of \$17,000 to the state of Nebraska, which then had to pay her legal fees. But she was right—he shouldn't have arrested her, and it was only fair that she not absorb the legal cost of that battle. Similarly, the church initially lost a tort brought against them by the father of a fallen Marine, with initial settlement set at nearly \$12 million, which the judge quickly reduced. The appeals court reversed the decision and the Supreme Court upheld the reversal in *Snyder v. Phelps* (2010), which meant that the father of the fallen Marine had to pay the church's court costs. This might seem outrageous to those who believed that the father had been harmed by the church's picket of his son's funeral, but, in the court of law, this is how such things work. WBC didn't take Albert Snyder to court—he took them to court, so he took the risk of having to pay their court costs.

WRSP: Rumors surfaced before Fred Phelps' passing in 2014 that he had been displaced as formal leader of WBC, but details are sketchy. What is known about these internal politics and leadership restructuring?

Barrett-Fox: Fred Phelps had stopped preaching more than a year before his death, though it remains somewhat unclear about his status in the church at that time. What I do know is that he was buried by church members, who express gratitude for the service and leadership he provided. They did not hold a public funeral, in keeping with the church's relatively new argument that funerals are idolatrous because they keep people focusing on the dead rather than on the present and future. (The church had previously held funerals, though no one within the church had died since the 1980s.) That said, they speak fondly of their father, grandfather, and great-grandfather and recognize, especially for Fred Phelps' wife, grief is natural—they just argue that they should not lionize anyone. Fred Phelps passed away in hospice care, where church members visited him throughout the dying process. So he remained someone they had a lot of affection for and whose leadership they appreciated. After his death, church members collected his body and buried it promptly at an undisclosed location. As one church member told me, he was sure that Fred Phelps would have been delighted at the thought of anti-WBC

activists “dancing on his grave,” but they have kept the location private out of respect for the caretaker of the burial place and the families of others who are interred there. In other words, while they claim not to care if Fred Phelps’ gravesite was vandalized, they understand that such activities would likely affect others who use the cemetery. All of that does not sound like, to me, that he ended his relationship with the church in a negative way, but one recent ex-member, Fred Phelps’ grandson, has said that he thought his grandfather had a major change of heart at the end of his life and felt that the church had become too extreme and had been removed from the church, a story that was repeated in many respectable journalistic accounts. The church has refused to address this, claiming that membership details are private.

The church has always been relatively democratic. Church members may have specific roles—such as media contact, for example—but all church members are expected to be active in church life. According to church doctrine, the church must have at least one elder/pastor/overseer and can have a deacon, who focuses more on pastoral care and less on preaching. WBC currently has eight elders and no deacons. The elders do not organize as a board, and they do not have special disciplinary roles. As Fred Phelps grew more ill, the church moved from a system with one elder to one with eight in part because the church’s activities had expanded, and they saw their mission as more complex. As one member shared, the church is “engaged in warfare so vigorously” that more people were needed to serve as elders. An elder must be married, with a family and household that is “orderly,” not because he needs to “rule over” it but because he will need to have practice for the challenges he’s likely to face as an elder, which involves spiritual leadership and care as well as preaching from the pulpit. Everyone in the church, though, has the same duties to preach, discern, and care. “We are all servants, but we [the elders] are particular members of the church” because of an additional burden of caring for the church by preaching in the pulpit and being spiritually responsible for the community, one elder told me. “That’s the thing about that role [of elder]. It’s servitude. It’s labor,” shared one of the younger elders. But decision-making is democratic and local, with no “chain of command,” and men and women equally responsible and invested.

This leadership structure is more flexible than previously and allows more men in the church to develop preaching talents; it also insures that younger men have leadership roles as the current composition of the group of elders includes men across two generations. It also means that the church can easier absorb the loss of one of its preachers. Because the elders include men who are *not* Phelps, including Steve Drain, a high-profile member who joined the church while filming a documentary about them, the new structure also deflects criticism from those who want to dismiss the church as merely members of a single family. Finally, the balance of eight people means that it is more difficult for one person to emerge as the single voice of the church, though Steve Drain is highly visible because of his role as media contact, a role formerly held by Shirley Phelps-Roper.

WRSP: Based on your research and the journalistic reports available, what is your assessment of the likely future of WBC in the post-Fred Phelps era?

Barrett-Fox: Many people were hopeful that the church would flounder or fall apart with the loss of its leader, as many small churches do. And, of course, Fred Phelps wasn't merely the pastor but also the father, grandfather, and great-grandfather of so many members, so he may have served to hold the group together in several ways. He was, by all accounts, very loved by his grandchildren and great-grandchildren in particular, and he always showed himself, in my presence, to be very tender toward them and interested in them. He spent a lot of time with the children of the church individually. So one concern was that they may have been part of the church because they loved him, not because they shared the church's mission or beliefs; thus, they would have seen his death as an opportunity to exit. That did not happen. Nor was there a high-stress bid for power. The new system of multiple elders had been in place for some time, so the church was prepared for his passing.

The church has had a number of people leave, some of whom had converted in, stayed for a bit, and then left. Others had been reared in the church. But even if half of the young adults leave, the families are so large that a good number remain. The rate of natural growth remains high, and each year, a few new people join. That's enough to keep the population growing for another generation. What might be harder is maintaining the energy for pickets without new audiences and new messages. A church member told me, disingenuously I think, that they did not expect the public reaction to their military funeral pickets. I don't know that the church has to "top" that in order to continue, but a new challenge can energize a group by providing it with a new enemy against which to define itself. WBC has, since the change in leadership, declared a kind of war on media, but that is unlikely to draw the kind of attention that WBC has seen in the past. Then again, I would not bet against this church's ability to hurt, offend, and incense huge groups of people.

Dr. Barrett-Fox, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

Rebecca Barrett-Fox is a visiting assistant professor of sociology at Arkansas State University, where she teaches courses in sexuality and religion, which are also her areas of research. Her writing can be found in *The Journal of Hate Studies*, *Radical Teacher*, *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas*, and *Religion and Popular Culture*, as well as, most recently, *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film, and Television: Twenty-First-Century Bust Culture* (Lexington 2013). She is also the co-chair of the Religion and American Culture Caucus of the American Studies Association.

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