

Westboro Baptist Church set to make unwelcome appearance at Arizona funerals

by [Bob Allen](#)

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TUSCON, Ariz. (ABP) -- Arizonans are up in arms over plans by Westboro Baptist Church to picket the funerals of six people gunned down in Tuscon Jan. 8.

Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan., a small independent congregation notorious for showing up at military and celebrity funerals with inflammatory signs including "God hates fags," [announced](#) in a flier Jan. 8 plans to protest this week at the funerals of victims killed in an assassination attempt of a congresswoman at a town hall meeting outside a grocery store.

The [flier](#) said the 18 people shot by suspect Jared Lee Laughner -- including critically injured Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and slain federal judge John Roll -- were God's judgment on America's sins.

Arizona lawmakers [rushed](#) to pass emergency legislation to keep Westboro protestors away from the funerals, including one of a 9-year-old girl, while local groups organized to shield picketers from the mourners' view by wearing 8-by-10 foot "[angel wings](#)."

Starting with a 1991 demonstration at a Topeka park known to be frequented by gays, church members, mostly extended-family members of founding Pastor Fred Phelps, have held thousands of peaceful protests against homosexuality.

The group gained national prominence in 1998 when it picketed the funeral of Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student whose murder brought national attention to the issue of hate crimes.

Westboro Baptist Church went largely unnoticed by the general public as members picketed events like performances of *The Laramie Project*, a play based on Shepard's life, and meetings of religious groups including the [Southern Baptist Convention](#).

That changed in 2005, when church members started showing up at funerals of fallen American soldiers and proclaiming that casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan are the result of God's wrath against America for tolerating homosexuality. A number of states responded with laws regulating protests near funerals.

Recent protests included the [funeral](#) of Elizabeth Edwards, the estranged wife of former presidential candidate John Edwards, who died in December from cancer. Other targets of protests have included entertainer Lady Gaga, television preacher Jerry Falwell and even [Santa Claus](#).

Phelps, a disbarred lawyer who briefly attended Bob Jones University, has led Westboro Baptist Church since 1955. Phelps was ordained as a Southern Baptist minister in 1947, but the church isn't affiliated with any religious denomination.

While it is routinely labeled a hate group, the congregation calls its protests "love crusades."

They view the notion popular among Christians of "hating the sin while loving the sinner" as a lie, turning to Bible verses like Psalm 5:5, "The Lord will abhor the bloody and deceitful man." A 94-page [PDF](#) file on the God Hates Fags website lists 701 passages intended to prove "God's hate and wrath for most of mankind."

Embracing a strict Calvinism, they read "for God so loved the world" in John 3:16 as referring only to the "elect," those with the capacity to believe.

While most people regard "fag" an offensive term, Westboro members use it as a contraction of the word "faggot," which means a firebrand used for kindling and is a metaphor for homosexuality fueling the wrath of God.

Asked about why they show up at public events that have nothing to do with homosexuality, they say they need to be "timely" and "topical" in order to get their unpopular message across.

In October the church argued before the U.S. Supreme Court that their protests are protected by the First Amendment. A ruling is expected this summer.