

Megan Phelps-Roper's fresh start

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Ordinarily I don't like to write about Fred Phelps and his family. When a group's main goal is to say hateful things and draw attention to itself, I don't want to help out with that project in any small way.

But Megan Phelps-Roper, Phelps's granddaughter, is another story. She and her sister Grace recently left Westboro Baptist, ending contact with their family. [Their statement](#) is this week's must-read. Some might find it insufficiently remorseful, a politician's apology:

We know that we've done and said things that hurt people. Inflicting pain on others wasn't the goal, but it was one of the outcomes. We wish it weren't so, and regret that hurt.

We know that we dearly love our family. They now consider us betrayers, and we are cut off from their lives, but we know they are well-intentioned.

What I hear is the two sisters struggling with what to think of their entire lives up to this point. They're sufficiently convicted of Westboro's sins to accept being cut off from their family. And yet, they continue, they "will never not love them." It reads as a sort of mournful conversion—a conversion from, not to, a religious community. And it's not clear where this conversion is taking them, what will fill the empty space where the family they still love used to be.

[Jeff Chu's sensitive article](#) on Phelps-Roper's decision to leave begins with her recent visit to a mainline congregation in New York—her first time at any church other than Westboro. What did she think of it?

"It just felt really different. I didn't think it was bad," she says with a shrug. "It's literally so very different that it is hard to compare them."

Phelps-Roper speaks to Chu with honesty and clarity about her path. After feeling increasingly uncomfortable about some of Westboro's more extreme slogans,

she started to question another Westboro sign, "Fags can't repent." . . . "It didn't make sense. It seemed a wrong message for us to be sending. It's like saying, 'You're doomed! Bye!' and gives no hope for salvation."

Whether at the church she visited or at some other, I hope Phelps-Roper finds grace and welcome. "We know that we can't undo our whole lives," the sisters say in their statement. "What we can do is try to find a better way to live from here on." As they do this, they'll need a community to embody God's forgiveness and to remind them of the hope for salvation.