

Westboro Baptist Church: the right to free speech?

In 2011, the US supreme court ruled in favour of the anti-gay church's right to protest at military funerals, writes Casey Selwyn.



The Westboro Baptist Church is a small, independent church based in Topeka, Kansas, led by the America pastor Fred Phelps. The church espouses extremist views, and has become well known for picketing military funerals and claiming that soldier casualties are the God-sanctioned consequence of a war aimed at punishing the "evil nation" of the US. Its website, godhatesfags.com, claims that the WBC conducts "peaceful demonstrations opposing the fag lifestyle of soul-damning, nation-destroying filth". The church held its first service in 1995, and began its demonstrations in 1991. It claims to have conducted 48,341 pickets to date.

Despite its small size, the church has sparked interest and ignited controversy, and was the subject of the 2007 Louis Theroux BBC documentary entitled [The Most Hated Family in America](#). In 2011, the family of an American serviceman whose funeral had been boycotted attempted to sue Phelps in the case of *Snyder v Phelps*, but the US supreme court [ruled](#) eight-to-one in favour of Westboro on appeal. This case provoked [debate](#) among scholars and the general public, as people questioned whether limits to free speech might be appropriate when applied to such demonstrations.

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