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LOCAL

Westboro church protests at Baltimore City churches

By Jason Flanagan
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As parishioners filed in and out of the Baltimore Basilica early Sunday morning, a handful of people stood across Cathedral Street with signs that said "fag church" and labeled the priests as rapists.

A strong show of Baltimore City police officers kept the peace between passers-by and members of the Westboro Baptist Church, who were there to preach against what they believe is the Basilica's — as well as the nation's — pro-gay stance.

"It's a demonstration of two American rights," said Mark Potter, executive director of the Basilica Trust. "Over there, you have the freedom of speech, and we deal with it, no matter how repulsive it is. And over here, you have the freedom of religion."

SIGNS OF THE CHURCH

Members of the Kansas-based church were in Baltimore City last week for a court date, but also took time to protest various churches in the city. Their message: God hates the United States for embracing homosexuality.

That message is sent through signs and chants that many deem vulgar and inappropriate, but the group sees as gospel.

"Churches are at the front line of our nation's morality ... and these

churches have failed," said church member Shirley Phelps-Roper.

The signs they carried had slogans such as "God Hates Fag Enablers." As motorists passed by the group at the Basilica, many showed their disgust, though Phelps-Roper said some people saluted the group.

"We stand on the street, and we're put on trial for our beliefs," Phelps-Roper said.

Phelps-Roper and the police said there were no confrontations, though the group said one police officer made disparaging remarks about the protesters.

FAMILY TRADITION

It is the same technique the church has used throughout the country, including in their hometown of Topeka. Every Sunday morning, the church sends out 12 groups to various other Christian churches to protest, albeit at the distance prescribed in restraining orders.

Westboro Baptist Church was formed in 1955 by now 77-year-old Fred Phelps, and consists mostly of his family of 13 children and 52 grandchildren.

Phelps began his public crusade against homosexuality more than 15 years ago by posting anti-gay signs in a local park.

POWER OF PRAYER

The protesters missed most of the Basilica's early Mass, but the late morning service of the Church of the Redeemed of the Lord on Old

York Road got the full brunt of the protest.

The protesters stood with the same signs and singing the same hymns as the 6,000-member congregation filed in for the 11 a.m. service. And, as at the Basilica, police were in force. "Our members are disappointed, but we're praying for them," said Church of the Redeemed member Erika Cole.

"We follow the Bible, which says that God hates the sin, not the sinner. We know they are here to stir up wrath, but we have responded with prayer."

MISSION IN MARYLAND

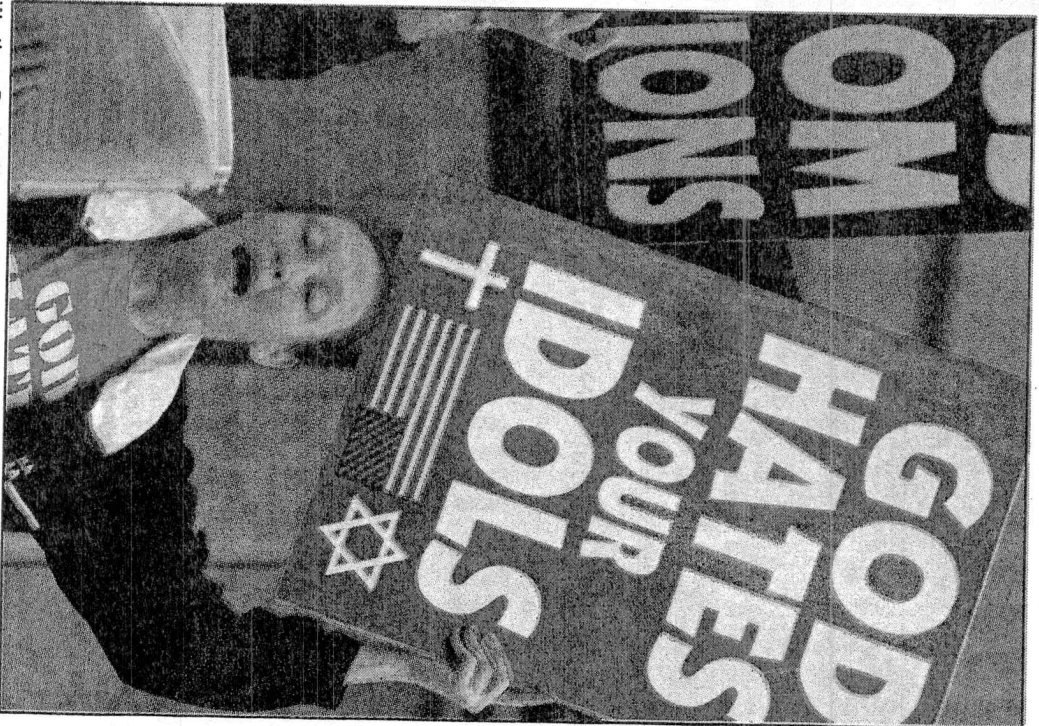
Sunday wasn't the first time the church has protested in Maryland.

In 2006, the church protested at the funeral of Marine Lance Cpl. Matthew Snyder in Westminster. Last week a federal court threw out claims of defamation. The church goes to court again this week for other civil lawsuits.

In 2002, the church protested at University of Maryland, College Park, for its inclusion of "The Laramie Project," a play about the murder of gay Wyoming student Matthew Shepard, whose funeral the group protested. In the play, Phelps is depicted as an antagonist.

Even though their views are in the minority, the church doesn't care — it's a greater power they are answering to. "We're on an eternal mission," Phelps-Roper said.

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Westboro Baptist Church member Abigail Phelps, of Topeka, Kan., protested Sunday morning at the Baltimore Basilica in Baltimore City with her family.
- Arienne Starnes/Examiner