



# Father of Marine Killed in Iraq Sues Church for Cheering Death, Appeals to Public Online for Help

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## FOX NEWS

The family of a Marine killed in Iraq has sued a Baptist church for picketing their son's funeral and is turning to the Internet to drum up support.

Albert Snyder, the father of fallen Lance Cpl. Matthew Snyder, took the stand this week in the Baltimore trial against the Westboro Baptist Church and testified that protesters waving signs at Matthew's burial made him nauseous. He'd wanted a private service for his son.

"They turned this funeral into a media circus and they wanted to hurt my family," Snyder said on the stand Wednesday. "They wanted their message heard and they didn't care who they stepped over. My son should have been buried with dignity, not with a bunch of clowns outside."

The Snyder family's suit against the church — whose members have picketed the funerals of military personnel killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, claiming the deaths are punishment for the country's tolerance of homosexuality — could cost close to \$100,000, the law firm representing them said. That's why Albert Snyder is asking for the community's help on the Web site [www.matthewsnyder.org](http://www.matthewsnyder.org).

"This would be a significant financial drain on them," George Werner, a spokesman for the Barley and Snyder law firm (no relation to Matthew Snyder's family), told FOXNews.com. "They're looking for support both emotionally and financially to fund the case against the church. The family concluded that reaching out to the public would help in both ways and be very beneficial."

Werner said it isn't known how much the litigation will cost but estimated it will be somewhere under \$100,000. If the trial drags on or there are appeals, it could be more.

"Any excess money will go to benefit veterans returning from the war in the form of a scholarship. No donations will be paid to me," Albert Snyder writes on the Web site. "Your money will be put to good use."

The result to date has been good, said Werner — in part thanks to the Web campaign — though he couldn't provide specific numbers in terms of donations and traffic to the site.

"It's another way of getting their message out," he said. "From a very broad perspective, (the response) has been very, very encouraging."

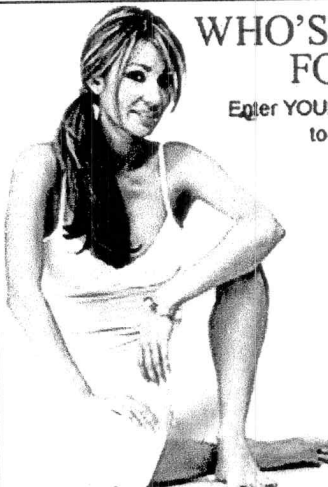
Albert Snyder, of York, Md., is seeking unspecified monetary damages for invasion of privacy and intent to inflict emotional distress as a result of the Topeka, Kan., church's protest at his son's funeral in Westminster in March 2006.

The church's protests have inspired several state laws and a federal law about funeral protests, but the Maryland suit is believed to be the first filed by the family of a fallen serviceman.

Matthew died March 3, 2006, at age 20 from a non-combat-related vehicle accident in Anbar province, Iraq. His father said in press interviews at the time that his son was killed when the Humvee he was traveling in rolled over. He'd served with the 1st Marine Logistics Group in the Marine Expeditionary Force in Twentynine Palms, Calif.

Asked Wednesday about a sign that read "Thank God for dead soldiers," Albert Snyder said he thinks about it daily.

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"I see that sign when I lay in bed," Snyder said.

Asked about statements issued by the group that his son was raised to support the "Roman Catholic monstrosity" and then sent to fight for the "United States of Sodomy," Snyder said "they have no right to do this to people they didn't know."

During cross-examination, defense attorney Jonathan Katz focused on obituaries and death notices and questioned Snyder on whether they said the funeral services were private. Snyder replied that the notices said friends and family were welcome, but admitted that he did not know all of the 500 or so people who attended.

The case tests the limits of the First Amendment right to free speech.

U.S. District Judge Richard Bennett instructed jurors at the start of testimony Tuesday that the First Amendment protection of free speech has limits, including vulgar, offensive and shocking statements.

Bennett said the jurors must decide "whether the defendant's actions would be highly offensive to a reasonable person, whether they were extreme and outrageous and whether these actions were so offensive and shocking as to not be entitled to First Amendment protection."

Church members said they are motivated by the fear of God and their need to warn America about its moral decay, rather than a desire to hurt anyone.

Katz told jurors Tuesday the protests took place 1,000 feet away from St. John Catholic Church, where the funeral was held, down a hill and out of sight and hearing from participants.

Snyder said American military personnel are in Iraq fighting for freedom of speech; "they're not fighting for hate speech." One photo showing a child holding a sign at the funeral protest was particularly disturbing, the father said.

"I pray for their children. Their children need help. To be brought up with that kind of hatred," Snyder said.

"My God is a loving God," Snyder said, adding later, "I don't look for hatred in the Bible."

The church's founder and pastor, Fred Phelps, took the stand after Snyder and prompted a strong admonition from Bennett when the pastor said he had not considered whether children would see a sign carried by protesters with the words "Semper Fi Fags" and two stick figures that appear to be engaged in sodomy.

"No, it's an irrelevancy," Phelps said.

Bennett then interjected sharply.

"Just answer the question, sir. Don't determine what's relevant or not relevant. You just answer the question," Bennett said.

Phelps said he chose to use the term "fag" in the group's signs because it comes from scripture, but could also have used Sodomite or dog. When asked by Katz why the group made a "Semper Fi Fags" sign, Phelps said it was in response to the need for a warning to the country "that your wicked ways are going to be your doom shortly."

*FOX News' Catherine Donaldson-Evans and The Associated Press contributed to this report.*

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