

# Founder of Westboro Church in Kansas Excommunicated, on Deathbed

The founder of a fundamentalist church known for picketing military funerals and political events with anti-gay signs was excommunicated last year and is near death in a Kansas hospital, his son said on social media on Sunday.

Fred Waldron Phelps Sr., who launched the Topeka-based Westboro Baptist Church in the 1950s, “is on the edge of death at Midland Hospice house,” his son, Nathan Phelps, wrote on his Facebook page.

The younger Phelps, one of several members of the family to have parted ways with the church, also said his father was excommunicated by his own church last August, but did not say for what reason.

“I’m not sure how I feel about this,” he said. “Terribly ironic that his devotion to his god ends this way. Destroyed by the monster he made.”

The Westboro Baptist Church did not respond Sunday to an email seeking confirmation that Fred Phelps had been excommunicated.

Phelps had long been pastor of the church, which is best known for carrying anti-gay signs and picketing events including military funerals, gay rights rallies, political gatherings and mainstream Christian events.

The protests reflect the Westboro church’s view that God is punishing America for tolerance of gays and lesbians.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil rights organization, has called the church “arguably the most obnoxious and rabid hate group in America.”

Though the church has been sued in the past, it has successfully defended its right to free speech in court.

Nathan Phelps and some other members of the family have left the Westboro group in recent years. He has spoken out on behalf of gay and lesbian groups.

In his Facebook post, he said family members who had parted ways with the church were not allowed to visit Fred Phelps in hospice.

“I feel sad for all the hurt he’s caused so many. I feel sad for those who will lose the grandfather and father they loved,” he wrote. “And I’m bitterly angry that my family is blocking the family members who left from seeing him, and saying their goodbyes.”

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*Reporting by Victoria Cavaliere in New York; editing by Scott Malone and Matthew Lewis*

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