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Westboro church agrees not to take protest to shooting victims' funerals

The extremist Westboro Baptist Church of Kansas, known for protesting at military funerals, agrees not to demonstrate outside the funerals of Christina Green and Judge John Roll. In exchange, it gets radio airtime.

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Reporting from Tucson — An extremist church has agreed not to protest outside the funerals of Christina Taylor Green and Judge John M. Roll in exchange for airtime on two radio stations.

Margie Phelps, a lawyer for the Westboro Baptist Church, said the decision was not based on outside pressure but rather on how much publicity the church could receive.

"It's how many ears we can reach," she said. "That is our job, that is our goal."

The Kansas congregation is known for demonstrating at the funerals of U.S. soldiers, arguing that their deaths are retribution by God for America's acceptance of homosexuality. The group announced it would protest at the funeral of 9-year-old shooting victim Christina Green, scheduled for Thursday, because her family was Catholic, and at Roll's funeral, scheduled for Friday, because he was a federal judge and the church felt his colleagues on the bench had acted against the church.

They also had planned to picket at the shopping center where Saturday's deadly rampage took place.

Arizonans immediately condemned the planned protests, with the Legislature passing emergency measures to prohibit protests within 300 feet of any funeral services and hundreds of Tucson residents making plans to physically shield the victims' families from seeing the protesters.

"That's great news, actually, that's awesome," said Trevor Hill, a University of Arizona junior who was trying to coordinate groups that formed in the aftermath of Westboro's announcement of planned protests, referring to the cancellation.

He said it was unfortunate that the church's members would get a platform to broadcast their views but said the tradeoff was worth it, and he thanked the radio stations.

"The Steve Sanchez Show" in Phoenix and the nationally syndicated "Mike Gallagher Show" out of New York both offered what Phelps called "substantial airtime" to the church. About six other stations did as well.

Sanchez told the Topeka Capital-Journal that as a Christian he disagreed with the church's viewpoints but believed giving a church spokeswoman 30 minutes of airtime to keep picketers away from Christina's funeral was a worthwhile sacrifice.

"Of course she wants her platform," Sanchez said. "I looked at it this way: I'm a grown man, and I can stand 30 minutes of her."

Phelps said the group had made no decisions about whether it would picket the four other victims' funerals.

"This trip is off," she said. "That doesn't mean a future trip isn't on."

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