

Westboro Baptist Church Protest at Georgetown University
04/27/2015
D.C. Peace Team Reflection

When students were beginning to organize against the Westboro Baptist Church, I was uncertain about how I would become involved. Initially, I was hesitant to join the counter-protest due to my own beliefs about how to respond to the Westboro Baptist Church. Since the Westboro Baptist Church wants people to pay attention to their pickets and to listen to their hateful words, a large counter protest would seem to be the best way to respond. Thankfully, I was able to take advantage of the opportunity to attend the protest on behalf of the DC Peace Team. Attending the protest with this nonpartisan group provided me with insight that I would not have received if I simply stood on the corner as they continued to shout and sing.

Before the protest began, I had some expectations about what would occur. I anticipated that there would be a good turnout from students, but they would not become incredibly hostile. Since so many people at Georgetown are involved in social justice work, I thought that there would be some revelry but that nothing the students said incredibly dehumanizing. In addition, I had thought that it would be challenging to encourage any meaningful dialogue between students and the members from the Westboro Baptists Church. The protest was located in an awkward location—confined by the three-way intersection—and the sidewalks were narrow. Furthermore, the police officers constantly kept us out of the street, so real conversation was difficult.

When we first arrived at the protest, I was able to make a few observations. The protest was well attended liked I had expected. There were also a few more members of the Westboro Baptist Church than we had initially expected. However, the police presence was much greater than I had anticipated, which made the experience seem much more controlled. Both the Georgetown Police Department and the Metro Police Department were actively patrolled both

sides of the protest, directed traffic, and kept both sides apart. After we discovered that we couldn't actively engage with the members of the Westboro Baptist Church, we decided to work our way into the crowd to talk with students. In talking with some of my friends and some of the other students at the protest, I was able to better understand their motivation for coming out to the event. They weren't experiencing much anger with the Westboro Baptists Church or confusion about why they came to Georgetown. Most were encouraged by the outstanding show of support by the students and were not incredibly eager to talk with the members of the Westboro Baptist Church. They were satisfied with remaining at a distance and letting the music drown out their hateful chants.

I found this experience to be both exciting and challenging. I was eager to apply the skills that I had learned in my time here at Georgetown. It was interesting to see how these practices can be applied in actual situations in order to diffuse potential conflicts that may arise in protests. However, this particular protest was challenging for me in several different ways. Since the police officers were keeping the two sides apart, it was difficult to do anything beyond talking with students. Because the students were so closely packed together on the sidewalk, I was really only able to focus on the few people I recognized and some people standing on the edges of the crowd. I almost felt as if it was better to let the students hold up their signs and occasionally yell instead of actually trying to promote dialogue. Like we had discussed the day before, what was said was not incredibly dehumanizing so it probably better to let them say what they wished. If the Westboro Baptist Church had not requested to be kept separate, maybe this would have been different. However, I do feel as if the conversations I had were very productive. I was able to understand why they decided to come out to the protest and to estimate their response to the

Westboro Baptist Church and the actions organized by the students. Overall, I believe that the experience was very rewarding and I would not hesitate to participate again in the future.