



Standing on the Side of Love

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Fred Phelps and his clan from the Westboro “God Hates Fags” Baptist Church, centered in Topeka, Kansas, plan to protest Clayton High School Monday, Feb. 6th. But this time when they hold up signs stating “Fags Burn in Hell,” and “Thank God for AIDS,” they will also be raising money for the Gay Straight Alliance, a student group that promotes awareness of gay and lesbian issues for students at Clayton High School. First Unitarian Church of Alton, Illinois, has organized a peaceful way to speak back to messages of hate. They have created a way to accept donations based on the number of minutes that the Westboro Church appears outside Clayton High School. All funds generated will be donated to the Gay Straight Alliance student group at the school. On Monday, for every minute that the Westboro Church protests outside of Clayton High School, the donations increase.

“Our congregation is dedicated to social action and social justice,” says Rev. Khleber Van Zandt, minister of First Unitarian Church of Alton. “It is unconscionable that statements of hate go unanswered.” And yet Van Zandt understands that counter-demonstrations, although important, often bring more publicity to the messages of hate and intolerance. In addition, counter protests themselves can turn ugly, especially when it is in response to a group skilled at inciting deep passions. Therefore, beginning today, individuals may participate in a peaceful demonstration of support and caring by donating an amount of money for every minute Westboro Church targets Clayton High. “In so many ways, it is not about the money,” continued Van Zandt. “It is about transforming something hateful into something that demonstrates care and concern for our community.”

“We want to show Clayton High School students that they are cared for and cared about,” Van Zandt admits. “By making a donation, people know they are showing our kids that love is stronger than hate.”

First Unitarian Church is located in downtown Alton, Illinois, and welcomes all people regardless of creed, color, ethnicity, or sexual orientation or expression. To learn more about First Church of Alton and “Just Love Wins” pledges, visit: www.khleber.com/justlovewins.