



▶ Santa Rosa doesn't hate

Neighbors shield church members from angry picketers

A telephone call from a local reporter in June delivered some upsetting news to John Cushman, pastor of Church of the Roses, a PC(USA) congregation in Santa Rosa, Calif. An anti-gay group from Kansas planned to picket in front of the church the next Sunday morning. Afterward the group would stage a protest in the cemetery at the memorial service of a 21-year-old Army Ranger from Santa Rosa who had been killed in Afghanistan.

The protestors were from Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kans., a fundamentalist sect founded by Fred Phelps in the 1950s with the mission of condemning gays and lesbians. The group has gained national attention for protesting at military funerals and claiming that the soldiers' deaths are God's punishment for America's

tolerance of homosexuality.

Hate-filled messages on the Kansas group's Web site indicated they would be picketing in front of four Santa Rosa churches. The reasons for targeting the churches were not clear.

After a story about the upcoming protests appeared in the newspaper, a man who lives across the street from the church told Cushman, "We don't like to see our neighborhood church treated this way. You've done a lot of good things for our community."

On Sunday morning a local Baptist pastor dropped by Church of the Roses and told Cushman he would pray for the congregation during worship. As he was leaving, families from nearby homes began to gather in front of the church. By the time the picketers arrived, about 20 neighbors stood hand in hand on the grass, forming a silent

LOVING THEIR NEIGHBORS: About 20 people formed a buffer between anti-gay protestors and people arriving for worship at Church of the Roses.

buffer between the Phelps group and church members arriving for worship. They carried hand-made signs saying "Love" and "Santa Rosa doesn't hate."

Inside the sanctuary, Cushman says, "people were moved to choking back tears as they thought about the symbolism of what had just taken place on our front lawn."

Cushman says he is proud to live in a community that doesn't hate. "That's where I want to live, and that is where I would like to bring my friends and family."—*Eva Stimson*

Reprinted with permission from *Presbyterians Today*, 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, KY 40202-1396. If you enjoyed this article, why not subscribe? Individual subscriptions are \$19.95 (10 issues/year). To order call 1-800-558-1669. Terms of Use: *Presbyterians Today* grants one-time-only permission for individual use or to churches and other not-for-profit entities to reprint articles (maximum 100 copies). Must be distributed free of charge. No resale permitted. Reprints to be used for educational purposes only.