

# NEWS RELEASE

**For Immediate Release**

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## **Hate Speech, Freedom of Speech, and the Westboro Baptist Church: A Mock Supreme Court Argument**

Sunday, Sept. 26, 4:00-5:30 p.m., VCU Commons Theater, 907 Floyd Ave.

Margie Phelps, attorney for and member of the Westboro Baptist Church, will go up against Richmond attorney William H. Hurd, a former Solicitor General of Virginia and a partner at the law firm of Troutman Sanders LLP, in a mock Supreme Court argument of the controversial hate speech case, *Snyder v. Phelps*. The Richmond community will have the opportunity to preview this highly publicized case.

The forum on Sunday, Sept. 26, 4:00-5:30 p.m. in Virginia Commonwealth University Student Commons Theater at 907 Floyd Ave., is free and open to the public. John Douglass, Dean of the University of Richmond School of Law, will introduce the case and take questions from the audience, and Richmond law students will preside over the hearing.

*Snyder v. Phelps* addresses the free speech rights of the Westboro Baptist Church, which holds public protests to draw media attention to its claim that God kills soldiers in war as punishment for America's tolerance of homosexuality and for the presence of gays in the U.S. military. The case was brought by Albert Snyder, father of Lance Corporal Matthew Snyder, a U.S. Marine who was killed during active service in Iraq in 2006. Westboro Baptist Church pastor and founder, Fred Phelps, and members of his congregation picketed Matthew's funeral, holding signs expressing anti-gay and anti-American slogans, including "God hates you" and "You're going to hell."

Snyder sued Phelps for intentional infliction of emotional distress. The jury awarded him 10.9-million dollars in damages. The trial judge reduced the award to 5-million dollars. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit overturned the ruling holding that the Phelps' speech, while repugnant, is constitutionally protected by the free speech provision of the First Amendment. The Supreme Court will hear the case on October 6<sup>th</sup>. Attorney Margie Phelps is the daughter of Fred Phelps.

This event is the first in a series of public presentations, *Exploring Issues Vital to Religion, Public Policy and the Law*, hosted by a partnership of the First Freedom Center, the Religious Studies Program and L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs of Virginia Commonwealth University, and the University of Richmond School of Law. The purpose of the series is to inform and engage the public in important religion and public policy issues that are in the headlines nearly every day.

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### **About the First Freedom Center**

The mission of the First Freedom Center is to advance the basic human rights of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. The Center is a politically and religiously neutral 501(c)(3) organization. For more information, visit: [www.firstfreedom.org](http://www.firstfreedom.org).

### **About the VCU Religious Studies Program**

The Religious Studies Program in the School of World Studies is guided by the idea that becoming knowledgeable about humanity's Religious traditions is vital to promoting global understanding, cooperation, compassion, and community. Through academic teaching, scholarship, study abroad programs, and public engagement, Religious Studies faculty and students are building bridges to a socially just and sustainable world. For more information, visit: <http://www.has.vcu.edu/wld/academics/majors/relstudies>.

### **About the VCU L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs**

The Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs, one of the largest schools of its kind in the Southeast, provides students with the knowledge, skills and experience necessary for success, whether in public service careers or in advanced study. For more information, visit: <http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/gov>.

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