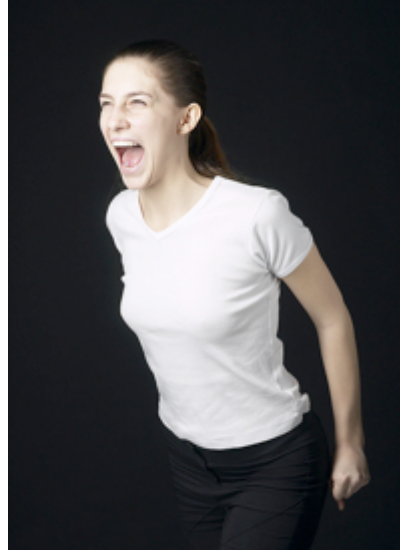




Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on March 30, 2012

Mo. Bill Targets “Rude” Disturbances Outside Church Services

According to the [Associated Press](#), the bill, which has passed the state Senate, “would make it a misdemeanor to intentionally disturb or interrupt a ‘house of worship’ with profane language, rude or indecent behavior, or noise that breaks the solemnity of the service. The crime would be punishable by as long as six months in jail and a \$500 fine, with repeat offenders facing increasingly harsher penalties.”



State Senator Robert Mayer, chief sponsor of [S.B. 755](#), said he introduced the measure because of the increased incidences of individuals and groups disturbing worshipers as part of protest activity. “It’s something that you wouldn’t think you’d have to come forth with,” Dexter said of the proposal. “But we’re getting some protests at mosques and synagogues and churches and even outside the church buildings on the actual church property. It’s something that’s not that rampant and not frequent right now, but certainly this would be helpful to keep this from happening in the future.”

St. Louis’ [Riverfront Times](#) reported that the bill was inspired in part by the actions of the notorious Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) of Wichita, Kansas, which sends out small troops of aggressive protestors to disrupt the funerals of fallen soldiers and others, including the memorial service for Christina Green, the nine-year-old girl killed in the attack on Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords.

However, as reported by [The New American](#), in March 2011 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of WBC’s First Amendment guaranteed right to free speech, even when the expression is angry, offensive, and intended to emotionally hurt others. “The case reached the Supreme Court after the father of fallen Marine Matthew Snyder [sued](#) the church, contending that the protests amounted to harassment and an intentional infliction of emotional distress,” reported *The New American*. “Protesters from the church appeared at the 2006 funeral of his son, where they voiced their opposition to government policies that promote homosexuality.... Protesters bore signs that read ‘Thank God for Dead Soldiers,’ ‘God Hates Fags,’ and ‘You’re Going to Hell.’ No arrests were made.”

In the high court’s opinion for the Westboro “church,” Chief Justice John Roberts wrote: “Speech is powerful. It can stir people to action, move them to tears of both joy and sorrow, and — as it did here — inflict great pain. On the facts before us, we cannot react to that pain by punishing the speaker.”



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Since the WBC protestors have mostly been careful to express their offensive and incendiary messages through signs rather than loud and disruptive speech, the proposed Missouri measure would likely not prevent them or other like-minded groups from protesting at worship at churches. The *River Front Times* noted that S.B. 755 wouldn't "actually outlaw any protests at a church," but would merely make "illegal any noisy protest during a worship service. So protestors can stand outside a church with their signs and shout, but they can't engage in 'profane discourse, rude or indecent behavior or making unreasonable noise' once the service begins." Nonetheless, while some other states have enacted similar measures, legal observers predict that such laws could ultimately be challenged on First Amendment grounds.

Additionally, some Missouri lawmakers questioned the need for a law that outlaws "rude" behavior. "This is serious business because we're creating a crime for being rude," said State Senator Rob Schaaf. "What's rude to one person might not be rude to another."



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