

***Unfollow* by Megan Phelps-Roper**

Discussion questions from South Dakota Humanities Council

1. If you were aware of the Westboro Baptist Church and its religious extremism before you read this book, did your perception of the group change in any way? If so, explain how.
2. The Westboro Baptist Church membership was relatively small, yet it was able to make a relatively significant impact on U.S. culture. What factors went into their ability to rise to prominence?
3. Consider the education of the Phelps family members. How did this contribute to their group's success as protesters?
4. What do you think was the biggest factor in Phelps-Roper's departure from the church? Do you think there could have been factors influencing her decision that she did not describe in the book or that she did not realize were at play?
5. If you were in Phelps-Roper's situation (belonging to a group that practiced religious extremism you no longer believed in), would you leave, like she did, knowing you'd be ostracized from the group? Or would you remain active in the group in the interest of maintaining your relationships? If you were to leave, how would you handle your departure?
6. After her departure, Phelps-Roper struggles to come to terms with the ways she has hurt other people through pickets, interviews, and other Westboro activities. To what extent does she bear responsibility for this pain? Who/What else might be responsible? And, as a friend asks her on p. 242, does it really matter?
7. What was your reaction to Fred Phelps' behavior near the end of his life? Did it change how you viewed him?
8. Did this book lead you to learn anything about yourself and your interpersonal relationships? Do you see ways it could affect how you approach conflict?
9. Have you ever, like Phelps-Roper, changed or challenged an idea you were raised to believe in wholeheartedly? If so, how and why did that happen, and how did it affect your life?
10. Until she left the church, Phelps-Roper never questioned "the idea that agreement was a prerequisite for friendship" (p. 247). Do you have any friends with whom you have significant religious, political, or other disagreements? If not, why do you suppose that is? If so, how do you handle the areas of disagreement?
11. Phelps-Roper argues that "the root of Westboro's ideology – the idea that our beliefs were 'the one true way' – is not by any means limited to Westboro members. In truth, that idea is common, widespread, and on display everywhere humans gather" (p. 275). Why do you think such certainty appeals to people? What are its effects, both positive and negative?
12. Could the ideas in this book be used to support civil discourse in the United States as it pertains to the current political and ideological polarization? If so, how?
13. In her viral TED Talk (available here: www.meganphelpsroper.com/media), Phelps-Roper suggests four actions that "make real conversation possible": • Don't assume bad intent • Ask questions • Stay calm • Make the argument. Do any of these suggestions seem especially useful to you? Do any seem especially challenging?

14. Partly because Phelps-Roper began questioning her own beliefs after interacting with strangers on social media, she argues that banning any kind of speech, no matter how hateful, from public platforms is “a fundamentally flawed strategy” (p. 277). Do you think sites like Twitter and Facebook should restrict the content that appears on them in any way? If so, how?
15. If you had to teach one lesson from this book to others to positively impact their lives, what would it be?