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Fred Phelps' protest falls flat in Charlotte

by Marni L. Grant
Special to Q-Notes

CHARLOTTE — The Reverend Fred Phelps from Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, who airs negative views on homosexuality via his website www.godhatesfags.com, is no fashion statement, but he shows up in predictable fashion. On Wednesday, April 25, he came to Charlotte to protest Bank of America's non-discrimination and domestic-partnership policies.

Phelps stood at the corner of Trade and Tryon Streets with his wife and four middle-aged white men holding signs condemning homosexuals, Matthew Shepard and Hugh McColl, Bank of America's recently retired CEO.

Phelps made front-page headlines nationwide in 1998, when he showed up at Shepard's funeral waving signs indicating that Shepard deserved to be murdered and was going to burn in hell because he was gay.

Phelps' visit to the Queen City was timed to coincide with Bank of America's annual shareholders meeting, where McColl passed the baton to his successor. Outside the Bank of America Plaza in the cold wind, Phelps donned a pair of white gloves before holding a sign that read, "God Hates Fags" on one side and "Thank God for AIDS" on the other. His wife's signs read "Matt — Two Years in Hell" and "Fag Family Values," the

latter showing two stick figures engaged in what appeared to be anal sex. Phelps' other companions held signs with similar themes. Only one pedestrian walked up to the

turn the company over to the homosexuals."

Noting statistics from the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, Susan Shackelford of Meck PAC said in a prepared statement, "Nondiscrimination and domestic-partnership policies help organizations attract and retain the best employees [and show] a nationwide trend. As of last August, more than 1700 US companies, colleges and universities, state and local governments and federal agencies had nondiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation. More than double that number — over 3500 — offered domestic-partner health insurance."

Local businessman James Funderburk agreed that offering domes-



Fred Phelps (r) organizes his followers in downtown Charlotte.



GLBT supporters rally in support of Bank of America's policies.

Phelps' group to shake hands and one passing car honked in support of Phelps. Meanwhile 25-30 GLBT community members and straight allies stood quietly behind the Phelps' group collecting signatures to support the Matthew Shepard Memorial Act currently before the Senate Appropriations Committee. At least 15 additional individuals approached the Meck PAC/gay-friendly group and offered donations.

Three members of the Charlotte group Uniting People to Resist Injustice and Seek Equality (UPRISE), stood in solidarity with the GLBT supporters. Leanne Finnigan, a founding member of UPRISE, said that she found out about Phelps' plan to protest Bank of America on his website. "We don't want them here," she said. "They are no better than the KKK and the Nazis."

Phelps countered, saying that the purpose of the protest was to "stand up for America and the Bible and what we believe. We are opposed to the wickedness of sodomy, and we are trying to tell brother Hugh not to

tic partnership benefits is the right thing to do. "As owner of TONIC and Urban Evolution, I make sure that all of my employees have fair and equal access to benefits."

Although Fred Phelps' appearance and the GLBT counter-presence were non-violent and non-confrontational, several police officers were on hand. Charlotte Police Captain Terry Sulk gave MeckPAC's Connie Vetter his card and said, "My office investigates hate crimes and hate-related incidents." One activist commented, "The Police have really learned a lot in the last few years about how to work with the community."

Though Phelps preaches hate in the name of God, Reverend Tonya Rawls of Unity Fellowship Church of Charlotte offered a different view: "I hope that Fred Phelps will grow to understand that while some in the world may discriminate, God won't." She added, "I commend Bank of America's leadership role at a corporate level in standing up for the rights of all of their employees, including LGBT employees." ▼

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Pride Committee of NC unveils official emblem for PrideFest 2001



The 2001 International pride theme is "embrace diversity." NC PrideFest 2001 has chosen the artwork of Durham artist Shawn Lorraine to represent the ideas and feelings associated with this year's theme. A watercolor rainbow is embraced by arms in her artwork.