



*Abortion protestors hold a prayer vigil on the lawn of Wichita's city hall, summer 1991. Courtesy of the Wichita Eagle.*

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# The Untold History behind the 1991 Summer of Mercy

*by Jennifer Donnally*

“**W**hen Operation Rescue National first arrived in Wichita on July 15, at the invitation of local pro-lifers, no one had any idea of the impact they would have on the community or the tremendous success they would have,” wrote Ann Tilson in 1991. In September she marveled at the 2,753 arrests of 1,781 individuals, daily rallies attended by thousands, and press coverage that brought antiabortion activists from nearly every state in America to participate in the “Summer of Mercy.” Tilson herself would be changed profoundly by the events of that summer. Wichita police arrested her on July 8 for blocking the gates of Wichita Family Planning Center in an attempt to “save the baby” of a pregnant woman entering the clinic. She was arrested as one of 321 people including 84 pastors for trespassing on clinic grounds that day. A woman who was blocked from entering the clinic to terminate her pregnancy later contacted an antiabortion crisis pregnancy center and decided to bring her pregnancy to term. As a result, those who participated in the clinic blockade believed they had saved a life. Kansas antiabortion activists, along with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Wichita, to which Tilson belonged, made her a local celebrity during her 1992 trial after she refused to pay a \$1,000 fine for trespassing on clinic grounds. The judge ruled in Ann Tilson’s favor; her trespass was justified because she had saved a life.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Peggy Bowman, *Fetus Fanatics Memoir: When Government Collaborates with Anti-Choice Zealots* (Lexington, KY: BookSurge, 2005), 49; “Wichita Experiences ‘Summer of Mercy,’” *Wichita Rescuer* 1 (September/October 1991), 1, David Gittrich Papers, private collection (hereafter cited as Gittrich Papers); Ann Tilson, “Operation Rescue National Comes to Wichita,” *Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, July/August 1991, 1; Beth Ruark, “Tilson v. Wichita Could Be a Landmark Case,” *Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, July 1992, 6; “Local Pro-Lifer Wins Landmark Case,” *Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, September 1992, 9; Gayle Mercer, “KS Supreme Court/Tilson Update,” *Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, May 1993, 1. Articles cited here were found in Gittrich Papers.

While Operation Rescue National leader Keith Tucci credited God for the revelation that he should target Wichita for a national protest in 1991, Ann Tilson and her fellow local activists can point to newsletters and communications from December 1990. They had invited Tucci to the city to participate in one of their clinic sit-ins outside Dr. George Tiller's Women's Health Care Services. Once he arrived, Tucci observed a strong Wichita alliance of evangelical churches, a staunchly antiabortion Roman Catholic bishop and diocese, the presence of four crisis pregnancy centers, the election of an antiabortion city mayor and state governor, and a political movement poised to effect change through an emerging conservative profamily sentiment. Most important, Tucci discovered a fact that local activists had used to gain national attention since 1983: Dr. George Tiller was only one of three providers in the United States who performed third-trimester pregnancy terminations. In January 1991 Tucci proposed Wichita as the city for Operation Rescue's next large-scale protest and persuaded the organization's executive board to back it. Local antiabortion activists had worked hard since 1979 to make Wichita a perfect protest site and paved the way for the political firestorm that would be the Summer of Mercy in 1991.<sup>2</sup>

Journalists and scholars rarely mention local antiabortion activists' role in the Summer of Mercy, and when they do, they pick up the story after the 1991 event. In the words of political commentator Thomas Frank, "The push that started Kansas hurtling down the crevasse of reaction was provided by Operation Rescue, the national pro-life group."<sup>3</sup> In these accounts, Operation Rescue leaders were outside agitators—they invaded local communities, turned the world upside down, and departed after taking credit for all of the political and social upheavals that followed in their wake.<sup>4</sup> Operation Rescue national leaders promoted this narrative in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a way to fund-raise, recruit new members, and then use expanding membership lists and donations to increase their influence with the national media. Abortion rights supporters also characterized Operation Rescue demonstrators as agitators who upset local community values. Peggy Bowman, president of

the Pro-Choice Action League in Kansas, told reporters in 1991, "These people are outsiders who do not care that they cost citizens thousands of taxpayer dollars to defend and protect clinics and patients against their violent behavior." Reverend George Gardner, the founder of Religious Leaders for Choice, charged, "The city was being held hostage." At the time there was abundant evidence to support these outside-agitator charges against Operation Rescue.<sup>5</sup>

Kansas was a pro-choice stronghold throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Republican majorities passed legislation in 1969 that made Kansas one of fourteen states to reform its criminal statute allowing for abortion in cases of rape, incest, threats to maternal health, and fetal deformity. Women from surrounding states with greater restrictions began to come to Kansas to have abortions. The Kansas Medical Society, the Kansas Psychiatric Society, the Kansas Public Health Association, the Kansas Council of Churches, the Kansas Association for Mental Health, the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas, the Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs, and the Kansas Association for Retarded Children then worked to repeal the 1969 abortion reforms and legalize elective abortion. A federal court in Kansas City then ruled that Kansas's criminal reform statute was unconstitutional in 1972, significantly broadening legal access to elective abortion in the state. By 1974 the rate of legal abortions in Kansas was three times the rate in Nebraska, seven times the rate in Missouri, and twenty-five times the rate in Oklahoma.<sup>6</sup>

After *Roe v. Wade*, a significantly higher percentage of Kansans supported elective abortion than the general American populace. An October 1973 poll found that 54 percent of Kansans believed abortion should be permitted "based on a medical decision reached between a woman and her doctor," and 21 percent responded that abortion should be allowed "upon demand." Only 25 percent favored an antiabortion position. Of that 25 percent, 5 percent responded that the state should "never" allow

2. Ann Tilson, "Wichita Rescue Movement Holds 9th Operation Rescue," *Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, January 1991, 2.

3. Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), 91.

4. Patricia Baird-Windle and Eleanor J. Bader, *Targets of Hatred: Anti-Abortion Terrorism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 157–60.

5. Bowman, *Fetus Fanatics Memoir*, 15; Reverend George Gardner, quoted in Bard-Windle and Bader, *Targets of Hatred* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 158.

6. Biddy Hurlbut to Mrs. Lee Gidding, June 30, 1969, National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) Records, carton 3-2, folder "KS 1969-70," Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University Library (hereafter cited as NARAL Records); Robert Wuthnow, *Red State Religion: Faith and Politics in America's Heartland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 274.

abortions, and 20 percent believed that the state should permit abortion “only to save the life of the mother.”<sup>7</sup> In contrast, a January 28, 1973, Gallup poll showed that as many as 45 percent of Americans opposed legal abortion access compared to the 46 percent of Americans who favored it.<sup>8</sup>

According to former Kansas congressman William R. “Bill” Roy, state Republicans and Democrats also did not want abortion to be an electoral issue; it was too volatile. State politicians had learned from Roy’s own political demise. In 1972 he won a second term in the U.S. House of Representatives as a Democrat and remains the only obstetrician, gynecologist, and abortion provider to have served in Congress. In 1974 Roy challenged Republican Robert J. Dole for his Senate seat. Antiabortion organizations were pivotal in Roy’s defeat in the election when Dole won 50.1 percent of the popular vote compared to Roy’s 49.9 percent. In the days and weeks before the election, antiabortion activists handed out pamphlets asking, “Bill Roy, how many babies have you aborted?” Following the 1974 campaign, state legislators on both sides of the aisle abided by an unwritten agreement to table or kill abortion legislation because if state politicians did not vote on abortion, their positions would not be easily obtainable by antiabortion organizations. Democratic governor John Carlin later recalled that “abortion was never an issue” in his 1978 and 1982 campaigns. As a result of politicians’ resistance, Kansas was one of three states that had no state regulations of second- and third-trimester pregnancy terminations in 1989, and NARAL Pro-Choice America had voted Kansas the ninth-most supportive state for abortion rights in America.<sup>9</sup>

In 1989 few could have predicted that Kansas would become a pro-life stronghold by 1996 or how a Christian right would use issues of education, family,



Former Kansas congressman Dr. William R. “Bill” Roy (right), pictured here in 1979 with governor John Carlin and President Jimmy Carter, remains the only obstetrician, gynecologist, and abortion provider to have served in Congress. In 1972 he won a second term in the House of Representatives as a Democrat, and challenged Republican Robert J. Dole for his Senate seat in 1974. Antiabortion organizations were pivotal in Roy’s defeat in that election.

and sexuality to swing the state Republican Party to the right between 1990 and 2000. What better explanation for the upheaval following the Summer of Mercy than the radical organization Operation Rescue National? This article challenges that narrative by focusing on the Kansas antiabortion movement in the decade before the 1991 Summer of Mercy and arguing that these local and state antiabortion activists were more responsible for the Kansas Republican Party’s turn to the right than was Operation Rescue National. Kansas antiabortion organizations built a diverse, fractured, and dynamic grassroots movement between 1979 and 1991. Political divisions between organizations over strategies and resources propelled the movement’s growth in the 1980s and the state antiabortion movement’s turn toward nonviolent direct action. Outside abortion clinics, Kansas activists found common ground in their attempts to save fetal life in the here and now. That common ground laid the foundation for the 1990s conservative revolution in state politics.

In 1979 a group of young antiabortion activists gathered in Wichita to transform Kansas from a pro-choice stronghold into a pro-life stronghold. Though distraught over the increasing rates of abortion nationally, they were most concerned about abortion rates in Kansas, the more than twenty-three abortion providers in the state, and especially the four abortion providers in their native Wichita. Harry Blitz and his wife, Melanie, David Gittrich,

7. Bob Dole to Mr. and Mrs. Brown, March 12, 1974, folder Legislation—Abortion 1974 2 of 4, Constituent Issue Mail, Subject Health (Ed)—Health (General), Robert J. Dole Papers, Robert J. Dole Archive and Special Collections, University of Kansas, Lawrence. Stephen Singular cited a similar survey in *The Wichita Divide: The Murder of Dr. George Tiller and the Battle over Abortion* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011), 28.

8. “Poll Reports Abortion Gains in Public Favor,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1973.

9. Dr. Bill Roy, Interview by Jennifer Donnally, March 2008; Elizabeth Kolbert, “Abortion, Dole’s Sword in ‘74, Returns to Confront Him in ‘96,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1996; Wuthrow, *Red State Religion*, 281; “Profiles of the Fifty State Legislatures,” folder NARAL 1988, carton 6, Mass Choice Records, Collection 89-M44, NARAL Records; Kent Linnebur to Pro-Life Friends, June 5, 1987, reprinted in *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, June 1987, 1-2.



Gayle Beuke, Robert O'Connor, and Alan Weldon were among the founders of Life Issues Fund for Education, Incorporated (LIFE, Inc.). Their first goal was to bring the antiabortion message to Kansans through a speakers' bureau and in particular to show films of abortions to local churches and Christian schools. At the time the Catholic Diocese of Wichita included more than 100 churches, 30 schools, and over 100,000 parishioners. Sedgwick County, in which Wichita is located, had more than 300 Protestant churches totaling approximately 150,000 members. More than 30,000 of those Protestants were Southern Baptists, and an additional 20,000 belonged to Assembly of God, Evangelical Free, Nazarene, or nonaffiliated conservative churches such as Central Christian; most of these churches had taken at least a tentative antiabortion position by 1980.<sup>10</sup>

David Gittrich became an early dynamic leader of LIFE, Inc. A devout Roman Catholic and native of Wichita who had grown up in the diocese's parish schools, Gittrich left Wichita to attend Rockhurst University in Kansas City for two years in the early 1970s. He returned from Rockhurst to patch together a series of jobs, including a post as a police dispatcher and a longer stint as a grocery-store clerk. In 1979 he was a bachelor, a status he maintains today. In a 2009 interview, he remembered that he was always opposed to abortion, and if someone asked him about it, he would promptly end the discussion by saying, "Abortion is murder." Yet he was not passionate about abortion and resisted Catholic friends' attempts to recruit him to the antiabortion movement throughout the 1970s. Finally a friend from his Catholic school days took him to a screening of an antiabortion propaganda film that included footage of two second-trimester abortions: a saline-solution abortion and a vacuum-aspiration abortion. After seeing the film and what he recalled vividly as "two dead babies," Gittrich found his life's work: "Nobody says, 'Oh I had an abortion the other day,' like you had an appendectomy or tonsillectomy or any other -ectomy. Those are easy. Nobody ever complains about them, nobody denies that they happened. Nobody is ashamed of it. . . . But they don't talk about abortion because abortion does kill a baby. If you had one, you

know you killed a baby, and you don't want anybody else to know it either. Nobody talks about it, except for me."<sup>11</sup>

After seeing the film, he took a month to clear his schedule and resigned from all other boards and volunteer organizations in which he participated. At the next antiabortion meeting, Gittrich told the other attendees, "Okay, I'm ready. Let's do something. What do you want me to do?" They said, "How about fund-raising?" and he said, "How about education?" Gittrich then went to the yellow pages and created a list of every church in Wichita and Sedgwick County. Between 1980 and 1990 he expanded the list to include up to 3,500 churches in Kansas. Due to his own mobilization experience, Gittrich relied upon films and especially *Assignment Life* and *Silent Scream*, antiabortion propaganda films released in 1984. Both films drew on the new technology of sonograms to show abortions in real time while drawing on a longer history of antiabortion literature that centered on an imagined fetal experience.<sup>12</sup>

Gittrich and other LIFE, Inc. Speakers Bureau members would show these films and, if possible, team with members of Wichita's chapter of Women Exploited by Abortion (WEBA) to explain abortion from the point of view of the other presumed victim: the woman. Nancyjo Mann, a singer in the Christian hard-rock band Barnabas, founded WEBA in 1982. She had an abortion in 1974 at the age of twenty-one, when she was pregnant with her third child and her second husband had walked out on her. She came to regret her abortion deeply and founded WEBA to serve "as a refuge and a source of spiritual and emotional healing for women who have had abortions" so that WEBA volunteers could then "speak publicly of their experience in an attempt to educate the general public, and young women in particular, about the physical, emotional, and psychological side effects of abortion." Only women who had come to regret their abortions could join WEBA. Wichita had a chapter of WEBA by 1984, and its members were in high demand at antiabortion speaking events across the state. LIFE, Inc. averaged between seven and

10. "Booth Committee" and "Study Group," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, August 1982, 2-3; "President's Letter," January Rally and "Film Showing," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, November 1983, 1, and 8-9; "Help Wanted," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, June 1984, 3; "Speakers Bureau Films," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, October 1987, 7; Wuthnow, *Red State Religion*, 292.

11. David Gittrich, interview by Jennifer Donnally, December 10, 2009.

12. Faye Ginsburg, *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 103-104; Johanna Schoen, *Abortion after Roe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 144-5; Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, *Abortion and Woman's Choice: The State, Sexuality and Reproductive Freedom* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), xiv; Carol Mason, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 20.

ten antiabortion speaking events a month between 1980 and 1989.<sup>13</sup>

Targeting a larger audience, LIFE, Inc. also began a “signature ad” campaign to publish in the *Wichita Beacon* on the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. Activists and office volunteers set up tables in local malls and shopping centers where they collected donations and the names and addresses of local residents who agreed to publish their names in the paper as community members who supported a fetus’s “right to life.” Donations were minimal and never ran over \$1 unless people wanted to give more. It was a brilliant strategy. Signees’ names and addresses were then added to LIFE, Inc.’s mailing list, and the small donations covered the costs of the advertisement. LIFE, Inc. published the names in small font and used the remaining space to publish essays on a fetus’s right to life and antiabortion protests of *Roe v. Wade* in the upcoming week. In its first year, the signature ad and January activities expanded LIFE, Inc.’s mailing list from 1,986 monthly newsletters to 4,500.<sup>14</sup> By 1991 the signature ad had collected over 10,000 names and had become a special twenty-page tabloid segment that reached 122,436 homes at the cost of \$16,987.<sup>15</sup>

Leaders of LIFE, Inc. also branched off into nonviolent direct action by 1983. David Gittrich worked with Robert Clearly to lead demonstrations outside three women’s health clinics and the Wesley Medical Center in Wichita. Gittrich and Clearly created a demonstration phone tree in Wichita to organize prayer vigils and pickets outside abortion providers’ buildings, to arrange for sidewalk counselors who could persuade women not to terminate their pregnancies, and to oversee the creation and distribution of antiabortion signs for clinic picketers. They also joined members of Right to Life of Kansas, who called for more direct-action protests. Like WEBA, Wichita activists connected their local nonviolent direct action efforts to

national efforts. Members of LIFE, Inc. and Right to Life of Kansas coordinated protests to participate in National Days of Rescue with Pro-Life Action League in Chicago and People Expressing a Concern for Everyone (PEACE). For example, activists held a national day of rescue on September 17, 1983, on the Jewish high holiday of Yom Kippur in order to beg forgiveness for “the great national sin of abortion.”<sup>16</sup>

Nonviolent direct action by antiabortion activists had a longer history dating back to a 1975 clinic protest in Takoma Park, Maryland, that resulted in the arrests of six women for illegally occupying a clinic’s waiting room. The women argued that the trespass was legal because they had a compelling motive: they wanted to save the potential lives of fetuses. The sit-in, arrest, and trial of the six women caused a sensation in antiabortion circles. Activists who participated in nonviolent direct action called attention to the fact that for them there was no difference between a fetus and a live baby. “If I saw a child in the street whose life was endangered even though it would be a risk to myself, I would have to take the risk to save the child,” stated Jeannette Reinecker of the Takoma Park, Maryland, sit-in. “I don’t see any difference between the born and unborn child.”<sup>17</sup> The next year, antiabortion activists in Cleveland founded PEACE, a dedicated core of activists who became leaders in the burgeoning nonviolent wing of the antiabortion movement. PEACE tracked how many women its members convinced to bring their pregnancies to term and thus how many lives they saved. The saves justified the tactic when compared to other antiabortion organizations that focused on education and the political process, many of which could show little for their efforts in the 1970s. Persuaded by the arguments and successes, Illinois Right to Life leader Joseph Scheidler broke from the mainstream National Right to Life Committee to found Pro-Life Action League in 1980. “Pro-life activists cannot wait for the legislative and judicial process that will make abortion illegal,” wrote Scheidler. “The activist has to save lives now.”<sup>18</sup>

On July 15, 1983, Right to Life of Kansas invited Joseph Scheidler to lead a protest outside Dr. George

13. Schoen, *Abortion after Roe*, 146, and Nancyjo Mann, foreword to David C. Reardon, *Aborted Women: Silent No More* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987), xxiii; “Announcement for Kansas Christian Convention,” *Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, November 1983, 3; “President’s Letter,” *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, November 1983, 1.

14. Mike Farmer, “President’s Letter,” *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, February 1984, 1; “On the Amount,” *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, February 1984, 2.

15. “19878 Signature Ad,” *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, December 1986, 1; “Speaker’s Bureau,” *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, May 1984, 3; Ann Tilson, “More than 10,000 Sing Annual Signature Ad,” *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, February 1991, 3.

16. “July 15, 1983 Demonstration” and “Non-Violent Direct Action,” *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, August 1983, 7 and 4.

17. Burch Balch, quoted in Jim Risen and Judy L. Thomas, *Wrath of Angels: The American Abortion War* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 61.

18. Joseph Scheidler, “Introduction,” *Closed: 99 Ways to Stop Abortion* (Lake Bluff, IL: Regenery Books, 1985),



*The protestors seen here during the 1991 Summer of Mercy were not the first to block the entrance to Dr. George Tiller's clinic. On July 15, 1983, Right to Life of Kansas invited Illinois Right to Life leader Joseph Scheidler to lead a protest outside Dr. Tiller's Women's Health Care Services. One hundred twenty people showed up from across Kansas to picket and pray outside the clinic while a handful of activists occupied the waiting room. Courtesy of the Wichita Eagle.*

Tiller's Women's Health Care Services.<sup>19</sup> One hundred twenty people showed up from across Kansas to picket and pray outside the clinic while a handful of activists occupied the waiting room. Scheidler and Right to Life of Kansas had chosen the protest location carefully. Dr. Tiller had opened Women's Health Care Services in 1975 after discovering that his father, who was also a physician, had performed abortions during the criminal era. Dr. George Tiller became an outspoken advocate of women's health after one of his father's patients explained to him the negative impact of poverty, abuse, alcoholism, and drug addiction on family life, all within the context of her own decisions to terminate three pregnancies. Dr. Tiller concluded, "I am a woman-educated physician in every aspect of my understanding about abortion and about responsibility of women in the family, both socially and financially." By 1983 Dr. Tiller had become one of three physicians in the United States who terminated third-trimester pregnancies.<sup>20</sup>

Here, language becomes important. Antiabortion activists claimed that Dr. Tiller performed "late-term abortions." In medical literature an abortion is the removal of a fetus or an embryo prior to viability. Viability is the point when a fetus's independent life outside the womb becomes possible. Exactly when viability occurs in a pregnancy has been an issue of contention between physicians because medical advancements have moved viability to earlier stages of gestation, and each fetus has a different development cycle. For example, if a premature baby survives at sixteen weeks' gestation but is dependent on medical technology to breathe and function, should viability be set for all pregnancies at sixteen weeks? In 1983 most physicians placed viability at the earliest between twenty-two and twenty-four weeks' gestation, whereas the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision placed viability at twenty-four weeks' gestation. Any procedure postviability is not an abortion but a labor induction, a hysterotomy (a mini-cesarean delivery), or a pregnancy termination. Antiabortion activists have used and continue to use "late-term abortion" to collapse the differences between second-trimester abortions and third-trimester pregnancy terminations and to give the impression that abortions

19. "Non-Violent Direct Action," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, August 1983, 4.

20. Singular, *The Wichita Divide*, 15–16.

performed after the first trimester occur late enough in the pregnancy to result in the loss of a fully developed fetus that closely resembles a newborn infant. Dr. Tiller insisted that he never terminated a viable fetus. Instead he terminated second- and third-trimester nonviable fetuses for women who discovered through genetic tests and medical scans that their fetuses had severe health problems.<sup>21</sup>

Dr. Tiller drew clients from all fifty states because he was one of only three physicians who terminated third-trimester pregnancies. By 1983 he also sought referrals to his practice by advertising in medical journals and at medical conventions. Out of consideration for female patients, he listed prices for the different procedures. Third-trimester pregnancy terminations were the most expensive because they were the most difficult, dangerous, and time intensive. Dr. Tiller worked to bring the cost down for his patients by negotiating discounts with local hotels for their stays and, on occasion, offering his own home to women who could not afford a hotel. His activities brought Women's Health Care Services to the attention of national antiabortion activists. Dr. Joseph Stanton, a prominent national antiabortion leader from Massachusetts, published a letter from Dr. Tiller to physicians notifying them of his services in the August 1983 newsletter of his national education organization, Value of Life Committee, Inc. Dr. Stanton included his own editorial comment: "How pitiful, how awful that the larger the baby—the higher the price."<sup>22</sup> All activism streams of the antiabortion movement rallied against Dr. Tiller, whether it was crisis pregnancy centers established on the same street as his clinic on East Kellogg, education efforts, legislative efforts, sit-ins, or more violent tactics such as arson.

The July 15 protest against Dr. Tiller and the decision to target so-called late-term abortion providers revealed much about internal antiabortion dynamics in 1983. The antiabortion movement was heavily fractured in Kansas and the nation, and activists were trying to seek common ground by finding a shared enemy. At the time, some activists strongly criticized clinic sit-ins and illegal activities. Others thought attempts to pass legislation trying to overturn *Roe v. Wade* had proven to be futile. Divisions multiplied between mainstream activists who

focused on education, elections, and passing legislation and those who broke the law to trespass on clinic grounds and/or a more radical fringe of the movement that damaged clinics by gluing doors shut or destroyed clinics through arson and bombs. Further compounding these differences in strategy was the religious diversity of the movement. Historians Neil Young and Daniel Williams have pointed out that there was a healthy mistrust among Mormons, Orthodox Jews, Roman Catholics, and Protestant denominations that participated in the antiabortion movement, especially when activists tried to evangelize each other.<sup>23</sup>

The main difference between antiabortion activists in 1983, however, was over what type of legislation they should prioritize. Patricia Goodson of Right to Life of Kansas articulated the divide as early as January 1974: "Many things have been suggested which might diminish in some way the effect of the Court's decision. Legislation to ensure that no one is coerced (such as welfare patients) or forced to perform or assist at abortions, or to pay for abortions through taxes. In my judgment, at this time the cause of the unborn will be better served, and the rights of all human beings better safeguarded, by expending our efforts in a rigorous campaign to pass the Human Life Amendment to the Constitution."<sup>24</sup> As Goodson noted, the root of the division resided in the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* decisions. One passage in particular alarmed some antiabortion activists. The opinion read, "The word 'person,' as used in the Fourteenth Amendment, does not include the unborn"; thus, the court "need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins."<sup>25</sup> To many right-to-life activists, a fetus was a person from the moment of conception, and abortion was murder, no exceptions. These activists became known as purists and they believed that the only way to remedy the Court's decision was to pass a Human Life Amendment that would, from the moment of conception, grant fetuses the rights of Americans already

23. See Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Neil Young, "We Gather Together: Catholics, Mormons, Southern Baptists and the Question of Interfaith Politics" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2008).

24. Patricia Goodson to Right to Life Affiliates of Kansas, January 19, 1974, folder Abortion, January and February 1974, Robert Bennett Papers, Kansas Collection, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence (hereafter cited as Bennett Papers).

25. *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973). For more on divisions between incrementalists and purists, see Mary Ziegler, *After Roe: The Lost History of the Abortion Debate* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

21. Schoen, *Abortion after Roe*, 22.

22. Joseph P. Stanton to Michael Farmer, August 11, 1983, as reprinted in *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, November 1983, 4-6.





*Protestors utilized numerous tactics during their demonstrations against Dr. Tiller's clinic. As shown in this photograph, one such tactic involved protestors using their bodies as obstacles by blocking or laying directly under cars attempting to enter the clinic. Courtesy of the Wichita Eagle.*

born. Fetal personhood from the moment of conception not only was a revolutionary legal concept that a majority of Americans had never encountered but also had far-reaching consequences beyond abortion. A Human Life Amendment would possibly restrict the use of fetal tissue in medical research, prohibit intrauterine devices because they prevented the implantation of a fertilized egg, and transform criminal cases that involved pregnant women because those crimes would potentially have two victims: the women and the fetus.<sup>26</sup>

Another set of antiabortion activists observed that a set of issues beyond fetal personhood had informed Americans' opposition to abortion during the criminal era and would continue to inform opposition to abortion in the legal era. Many Americans had supported criminal abortion statutes because they ascribed some rights to fetuses at different stages of development and/or believed that such statutes prevented undesirable

behaviors such as sexual promiscuity. This contingent of antiabortion activists focused on *Roe v. Wade*'s division of pregnancy into trimesters, each with a different set of regulations. Due to this trimester framing, the Court opened the possibility that state legislatures could continue to restrict abortion access at different stages of a pregnancy much as they had in the criminal abortion era. If antiabortion activists pursued such restrictions, some movement leaders argued, they could test the limits of the court decision. These activists came to champion an incremental strategy.<sup>27</sup>

Divisions between incrementalists and purists first erupted in the National Right to Life Committee between state affiliates. On one hand, Kansas Right to Life Affiliates championed a purist approach and lobbied the Kansas legislature to pass a memorial to Congress urging it to ratify the Human Life Amendment in 1974. Two Protestants and two Roman Catholics had founded Kansas Right to Life in

26. Cynthia Gorney, *Articles of Faith: A Frontline History of the Abortion Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 163; "Poll Reports Abortion Gains in Public Favor," *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1973.

27. *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

1968, and in 1973 it reincorporated as Kansas Right to Life Affiliates. By June 1974 Kansas Right to Life had fourteen chapter affiliates across the state. In 1981 the organization reincorporated again as Right to Life of Kansas and set up headquarters in Topeka. On the other hand, Kansas's neighbor Missouri Citizens Concerned for Life chose the incremental approach. Missouri Citizens Concerned for Life passed parental and spousal consent laws and statutes restricting abortion postviability.<sup>28</sup>

These strategy divisions between states played out within the National Right to Life Committee because its fifty-five-member board included a representative from each state affiliate and five at-large members from national antiabortion organizations. In 1974 a contingent of incremental Protestants broke from the National Right to Life Committee to form American Citizens Concerned for Life. At the time Roman Catholics constituted about 72 percent of the National Right to Life Committee's membership base, and the national organization joined the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in prioritizing a Human Life Amendment that held a purist line. The National Right to Life Committee fractured again in 1978. This time a group of purists led by Roman Catholic Judie Brown broke away to form the American Life League. This fracture occurred in part because the National Right to Life Committee board had begun to champion incremental strategies at the local and state level while contemplating revisions to a Human Life Amendment that would allow for exceptions in cases of rape or incest.

Divisions between incrementalists and purists came to a head again in 1981. Republican senators Jesse Helms and Orrin Hatch proposed two competing bills. On the one hand, Jesse Helms introduced a Human Life Bill. The legislation defined the start of "actual human life" at conception and granted all rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment to fetuses beginning at that point. Helms argued that the Supreme Court's declaration in *Roe v. Wade* that it "need not resolve the difficult decision of when life begins" had left it open for Congress to define when life and personhood began. The Human Life Bill

appealed to purists even though a number of legal scholars thought such a statute would be unconstitutional. On the other hand, Orrin Hatch proposed a compromise "States' Rights" constitutional amendment: "A right to abortion is not secured by this Constitution. The Congress and the several States shall have the concurrent power to restrict and prohibit abortions."<sup>29</sup> Incremental leaders argued that if Americans ratified the Hatch Amendment, the movement could advocate for a federal criminal abortion statute while also outlawing abortion in states where the pro-life movement was strong. After recriminalizing abortion and stopping the approximately one million legal abortions a year, the antiabortion movement could then turn its attention to establishing fetal personhood.<sup>30</sup>

The Hatch Amendment infuriated purists, who saw it as a betrayal of the movement. "The states' rights position on abortion is based on the premise that the unborn child is a nonperson," stated a Right to Life of Kansas pamphlet. "The key issue, as it has always been, is personhood." Patricia Goodson, Right to Life of Kansas's representative on the National Right to Life Committee board, worked to ensure that the National Right to Life Committee also came out against the Hatch Amendment. Goodson sympathized with the seventy-two pro-life and pro-family organizations that purist Judie Brown of the American Life League had recruited to form the Human Life Statute Coalition in the summer of 1981. As one of its first acts, the organization lobbied President Ronald Reagan to support only legislation that defined life as beginning at conception. Members of the Human Life Statute Coalition then took the unprecedented step of lobbying against the Hatch Amendment in 1982. When the Pro-Life Congressional Caucus met with Reagan at the White House in January 1982, the president wondered why antiabortion leaders were "half in favor of one thing and half in favor of another and they are tearing at each other's throats."<sup>31</sup>

28. Ellen Meyers, interview by Jennifer Donnally, December 8, 2009; Patricia Goodson to Right to Life Affiliates of Kansas, January 19, 1974, folder Abortion, January and February 1974, Bennett Papers; Pat Goodson, "Baby Killing and the Public Domain," *Profile Pipeline: The Official Publication of the Right to Life of Kansas*, 10, no. 3 (July-August 1989), 5, found in Gittrich papers.

29. "Hatch Introduces New Federal Amendment," *National Right to Life News* 8 (September 28, 1981). *The National Right to Life News* is the official newspaper of the National Right to Life Committee and has a national syndication.

30. Jack Wilke, "HLA—a New Idea," *NRL News* 8 (August 24, 1981); "AP Says Hatch to Push Compromise Amendment," *NRL News* 8 (September 7, 1981); Jack Wilke, "Step One, Hatch or Federalist Amendment," *NRL News* 8 (September 28, 1981).

31. Jack Wilke, "The Hatch Amendment: A Time for Study," *NRL News* 8 (October 26, 1981); Jack Wilke, "Musing on Hatch," *NRL News* 8 (November 9, 1981); Jack Wilke, "The Hatch—What if?" *NRL News* 8 (November 23, 1981); "To Senator Helms," April 19, 1982, box 9, folder "American Life Lobby (2)," and Senator Tom Eagleton, "News



Meanwhile, Dr. Jack Wilke, the executive director of the National Right to Life Committee at the time, worked behind the scenes to ensure that his organization would endorse the Hatch Amendment in 1983. He urged Kansas incremental activists to launch a coup against Patricia Goodson and Helen DeWitt, the purist leaders of Right to Life of Kansas. In 1983 Alan Weldon and Harry Blitz founded Kansans for Life of Sedgwick County and incorporated its state affiliate, Kansans for Life, in 1984. Alan Weldon ran an advertisement in the LIFE, Inc. newsletter to explain the merits of Kansans for Life's approach over that of Right to Life of Kansas. For those who "say that nothing short of total prohibition is an acceptable solution," he offered a series of recent Gallup poll statistics on abortion. Published in the Roman Catholic weekly, *Our Sunday Visitor*, the poll showed that 23 percent of the general American public believed abortion was wrong under all circumstances, 58 percent believed it was wrong under some circumstances, and 16 percent believed it was never wrong. Incrementalists such as Weldon wanted to work with the 58 percent to reduce the numbers of abortions and the circumstances in which they were legal. His sense of urgency and frustration spilled out in the advertisement. He wrote, "While pro-lifers debate whether or not [to] wait until we can save all babies before we save just a few... babies are dying at a rate of about one every four seconds. They are being torn apart, cut into pieces, and being sucked up by suction aspirators!"<sup>32</sup> In 1984 Kansans for Life replaced Right to Life of Kansas as the state affiliate of the National Right to Life Committee, which endorsed the Hatch Amendment. Right to Life of Kansas then joined Judie Brown's American Life League. Due to the internal schisms within the national antiabortion movement and the American public's lack of political will to pass either legislation, the Hatch Federalism Amendment and the Human Life Bill failed in 1984.

The animosity that resulted from the schism between Kansas Right to Life and Kansans for Life continued throughout the 1980s and limited the antiabortion

movement's power to pass legislation at the state house. Peggy Bowman, the president of the Kansas Pro-Choice Action League, wrote in her memoir that antiabortion groups in the 1980s "were splintered. They could not work effectively together in Topeka."<sup>33</sup> For example, in 1985 Kansans for Life lobbied for a Post-Viability Child Protection Act. The bill sought to outlaw pregnancy terminations past the eighteenth week of gestation and specifically targeted Dr. George Tiller's practice. Because leaders of Kansas Right to Life could not support legislation that allowed for any type of abortion, they joined activists from the Kansas National Organization of Women, Kansas Planned Parenthood, and the Kansas Civil Liberties Union in letter-writing campaigns against the Post-Viability Child Protection Act. The bill failed to make it out of the Kansas House Ways and Means Committee. In 1986 Kansans for Life then proposed a parental consent bill mandating that any woman under the age of eighteen had to have consent from both of her parents to have an abortion. Eventually Kansans for Life lowered the consent age to sixteen and required only one parent's consent. Kansans for Life also linked parental consent to local campaigns against Planned Parenthood–authored sex-education material that a number of Kansas school districts adopted. Alan Weldon of Kansans for Life argued, "To give pro-abortion counselors greater standing in the abortion decision of a minor infringes upon the rights of parents, hence the right of the family." The tactic worked, and the Kansas legislature passed a parental-consent law in 1986. But to the great frustration of Kansans for Life supporters, Kansas Right to Life proposed a parental-notification bill that almost scuttled their efforts. Moreover, the organizations rarely united behind an antiabortion politician through endorsements or money. Weldon argued in 1988 that, "we do not need representatives in Topeka who vote to undermine the viability of the family."<sup>34</sup> What was left unanswered was how a voter could determine whether or not a candidate was pro-family if he or she voted for parental notification but not parental consent. In 1991 a Kansans for Life activist

from Senator Tom Eagleton," October 3, 1982, box 13, folder "Pro-Life (Continued - #2) (1)," Morton Blackwell Papers, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California.

32. "Kansans for Life-Sedgwick County Ad," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, February 1984, 7. For a discussion of Jack Wilke's internal power plays, see Phillip Moran interview by Jennifer Donnally, September 20, 2010; Alan Weldon interview by Jennifer Donnally, December 9, 2009; and Mark Gietzen interview by Jennifer Donnally, December 8, 2009.

33. Bowman, *Fetus Fanatics Memoir*, 9.

34. "Legislative Alert," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, February 1986, 3; "SB 225 Needs Help," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, April 1987, 2; "Oppose SBC's," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, April 1987, 3; "Parental Consent in Committee," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, January 1988, 2; Alan Weldon, "Editorial," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, May/June 1989, 4; "Parental Consent Barely Alive," and "Parental Consent Killed In Committees," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, March 1988, 1; Wuthnow, *Red State Religion*, 283-84.



*The move to direct-action protest and the political failures of the Human Life Bill and Hatch Amendment helped radicalize the antiabortion movement. In 1986 evangelical minister Randall Terry founded Operation Rescue to organize clinic blockades. Terry, pictured here leading protestors in prayer during the Summer of Mercy protests, sought to gather hundreds of activists willing to risk arrest in the hopes of shutting down an abortion provider for a day, a week, or however long Operation Rescue could maintain a siege. Courtesy of the Wichita Eagle.*

summarized the political context this way: “Pro-life firing squads always form a circle!”<sup>35</sup>

Political divisions between Kansans for Life and Right to Life of Kansas in some ways fueled the growth of grassroots antiabortion sentiment and nonviolent direct action. Fed up with a failed political process, a number of movement veterans turned to direct-action protests to save as many fetal lives as possible in the present. Direct-action protests also helped to recruit a new influx of antiabortion activists: fundamentalist and evangelical Christians who

were drawn to the prayer circles, public displays of faith, and what they described as the spiritual war being waged outside clinics. Once outside clinics, antiabortion activists forged bonds not only across organizations but also across religious denominations, laying the groundwork for the political mobilization of a broad coalition of conservative Christian churches. Clinic protests also led to victories at the local level. For example, between 1983 and 1985 direct-action protesters targeted Wesley Medical Center in Wichita. Sometimes as many as 800 antiabortion activists prayed, chanted, and carried graphic signs outside the hospital entrance. Due to pressure stemming from these protests and the hospital’s inability to compete with the prices from Wichita’s three other abortion providers, the Wesley Hospital board changed its abortion policy in

35. “Parental Consent in Committee,” *Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, January 1988; Paul Rosell, “LifePax: Goals, Directions and Little Audrie,” *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, April 1991, 2; Wuthnow, *Red State Religion*, 283–84.

1985. The hospital would perform abortions only if the pregnancy threatened a woman's health.<sup>36</sup>

The move to direct-action protest and the political failures of the Human Life Bill and Hatch Amendment also radicalized the antiabortion movement. In 1985 Joseph Scheidler published *Closed: 99 Ways to Stop Abortions*, in which he gave detailed instructions in how to shut down clinics by destroying property and occupying clinic rooms. In the same year, 85 percent of abortion providers in the United States reported some form of antiabortion protest and harassment, and incidents of clinic bombings and arsons had increased from four in 1982 to twenty-six in 1984.<sup>37</sup> In 1986 an antiabortion sympathizer, who remains anonymous, pipe-bombed Women's Health Care Services in Wichita. The bomb damaged two-thirds of the building and caused \$100,000 in damage. Three days after the bombing Dr. Tiller planted a sign outside the building: "Hell no! We won't go!"<sup>38</sup> The bombing likely caused some friction within local antiabortion circles. Some activists may have rethought chanting, "Tiller, Tiller the baby killer" outside the clinic, and others secretly may have been thrilled that, for a time, the clinic was not fully operational.

That same year evangelical minister Randall Terry founded Operation Rescue to organize clinic blockades. By gathering hundreds of activists willing to risk arrest, Randall hoped to shut down an abortion provider for a day, a week, or however long Operation Rescue could maintain a siege. At that point in time, the largest clinic sit-in occurred in St. Louis, Missouri, where police arrested 106 people. On November 28, 1987, Operation Rescue launched its first blockade at Cherry Hill Women's Clinic in New Jersey. Three hundred "rescuers" blocked the clinic's entrance. In 1988 Operation Rescue laid siege to clinics in Atlanta, Georgia, during the Democratic National Convention in that city.<sup>39</sup> By that point in time Operation Rescue had gained the endorsements of Christian-right leaders Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. "I believe that non-violent

civil disobedience is the wave of the future for the pro-life movement in this country," wrote Falwell in 1988. "After fifteen years of various efforts to judicially and legislatively reverse *Roe v. Wade*, Operation Rescue is a breath of fresh air."<sup>40</sup>

In April 1988 Joe Scheidler returned to Wichita to find an antiabortion movement that had been transformed since his last visit in 1983. Kansans for Life's local chapter affiliate, LIFE Inc., had 10,000 members. This time Scheidler attended a protest and blockade at Dr. Tiller's Women's Health Care Services at the invitation of a new local group dedicated solely to pursuing civil disobedience: Wichita's Protecting the Defenseless. Harry Blitz had left his leadership role at Kansans for Life, an organization he had helped found, to lead the new group. Scheidler's visit was accompanied by a prayer service at Immanuel Baptist Church organized by a Christian pro-life coalition drawn from local churches and antiabortion groups.<sup>41</sup> In July 1988 twelve members of Wichita's Protecting the Defenseless and Wichita's Pro-Life Action Network traveled to Kansas City, Kansas, to blockade a clinic at an event sponsored by Operation Rescue. Police arrested over fifty antiabortion activists from the surrounding areas of Kansas and Missouri at the protest, and Wichita activists had their first contact with Operation Rescue leadership.<sup>42</sup> In January 1989 Kansans for Life invited Operation Rescue founder Randall Terry to speak at a fund-raising banquet in Wichita. Organization leaders wanted local antiabortion activists and supporters to know about Randall's "life-saving work." Though Kansans for Life had no official position on Operation Rescue's tactics, the dinner, invitation, and educational lecture helped to encourage local activists to engage in more militant clinic-blockade strategies and protests. Members of Right to Life of Kansas also attended.<sup>43</sup>

In the meantime, Kansas's neighbor Missouri Citizens Concerned for Life had revolutionized abortion politics through the *Reproductive Health Services v. Webster* court case. In 1986 Missouri activists breached the divide between incremental and purist activists with a new model statute. The statute's preamble stated that, "the Life of each human being begins at conception." The

36. "1-22-84 Press Release," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, February 1984, 2.

37. National Abortion Federation, "Violence Statistics and History," accessed May 18, 2013, [http://www.prochoice.org/about\\_abortion/violence/violence\\_statistics.html](http://www.prochoice.org/about_abortion/violence/violence_statistics.html); Alesha E. Doen, *Opposition and Intimidation: The Abortion Wars and Strategies of Political Harassment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 23.

38. Singular, *The Wichita Divide*, 37.

39. Randall Terry, *Operation Rescue* (Pittsburgh, PA: Whitaker House, 1988), 22–25.

40. Jerry Falwell, foreword in *ibid.*

41. "April Activities in Kansas," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, April 1988, 1.

42. "Operation Rescue," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, July 1988, 1.

43. "Rose Dinner," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, November/December 1988,

1.

actual statute required that “the laws of this state shall be interpreted and construed to acknowledge on behalf of the unborn child at every stage of development from conception until capable of independent existence, all the rights, privileges, and immunities available to other persons, citizens, and residents of this state.” Finally the statute prohibited government-employed doctors from performing abortions postviability, with no exceptions; banned state employees and facilities from performing abortions except in cases where the woman’s life was endangered; stopped all state funding for abortion counseling and referral services except when a woman’s life was endangered; and required abortion providers to test for the viability of the fetus in any pregnancy terminations past twenty weeks’ gestation. Republican governor John Ashcroft signed the bill into law. Abortion providers and pro-choice legal counselors immediately challenged the constitutionality of the statute, launching the *Reproductive Health Services v. Webster* court case.<sup>44</sup>

In 1989 the U.S. Supreme Court decided the case. To the disappointment of antiabortion activists, the court refused to rule on the preamble that defined the start of human life at conception, but to the excitement of anti-abortion activists, prohibitions on the use of public employees, facilities, and funds were ruled constitutional. Since these prohibitions did not distinguish between one fetus or another based on gestation length or discriminate against fetuses based on their type of conception, such as exceptions for rape and incest, purists and incrementalists found common legislative ground. The Supreme Court also ruled that it was constitutional to require physicians to test for the viability of fetuses when terminating pregnancies after the twentieth week of gestation. In a victory for abortion-rights supporters, however, the court refused to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and ruled that blanket restrictions on abortions in the second trimester were unconstitutional.<sup>45</sup>

The *Webster* decision revitalized abortion politics in Kansas. Pro-choice activists had been put on notice, and in 1989 the Pro-Choice Action League established an office in Wichita. The organization concentrated its efforts on the Republican Party, to which Dr. George Tiller belonged and which had historically been a pro-choice ally at the local and state level. Pro-life activists in Kansas



When the Kansas legislature failed to pass any antiabortion legislation in 1989 and 1990, activists focused their attention on the 1990 fall elections. In a surprise twist, the Christian conservative coalition helped to defeat the incumbent Republican governor Mike Hayden and elect Democrat Joan Finney, seen here during her inauguration in January 1991. Finney, the first woman elected governor of Kansas, came out against abortion and adopted numerous Christian right positions.

were equally determined to win the Republican Party. In October 1989 Kansans for Life worked with Right to Life of Kansas, the Kansas Catholic Conference, and the Knights of Columbus in a “spirit of goodwill and compromise” to prioritize parental-notification legislation and ban third-trimester pregnancy terminations in the state. The Reverend Gordon Schultz of Wichita joined their efforts through his newly established Evangelicals for Good Government.<sup>46</sup>

44. Cynthia Gorney, *Articles of Faith: A Frontline History of the Abortion Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 380–82.

45. *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, 492 U.S. 490 (1989).

46. “Governor Announces Five Point Abortion Proposal,” *Kansans for Life newsletter*, November 1989, Gittrich Papers.



State leaders and activists also adopted a new strategy when they disagreed over political priorities and movement strategies. They prayed, "Lord, give unity to the pro-life movement. We all work for the same goal—respect and protection for the life You have created. But sometimes we see the means to reach that goal from different perspectives. The devil must be pleased when he sees us threatened by division. Give us Your protection and help. Give us wisdom, knowledge, understanding and fortitude so that the lives of all Your children will be protected. We trust in You. Amen." In oral interviews numerous activists recalled how praying helped unify them and gave them a sense that the Holy Spirit was at work among them. Often after praying in silence for a designated period of time, antiabortion leaders found that they could come to an agreement. The strategy was also borrowed from silent prayer vigils outside abortion clinics.<sup>47</sup>

But prayer was not always enough. When the Kansas legislature failed to pass any antiabortion legislation in 1989 and 1990, activists turned to the 1990 fall elections. If they could not find Republicans willing to champion their positions, it was time for their members to run for office.<sup>48</sup> In a surprise twist, this Christian conservative coalition helped to defeat the incumbent Republican governor Mike Hayden and to elect Democrat Joan Finney after she came out against abortion and adopted numerous positions of the Christian right. Antiabortion candidates also drew resources from the newly formed Pro-Life/Pro-Family Republican Caucus to back conservative Republican candidates in the elections. Dr. Gordon Schultz organized the caucus in January 1990 and served as its first president. The caucus came out of a "pro-family" lobby day organized by the Kansas Evangelical Church Association on the opening day of the legislative session in 1988. The lobby day asked supporters of conservative causes to join together to demonstrate their growing strength. Members of antiabortion groups, advocates of abstinence-only sex education, proponents of prayer in public schools, Concerned Women for America, Eagle Forum, the Kansas Catholic Conference, and Dr. Schultz's

Evangelicals for Good Government all participated along with an assortment of churches.<sup>49</sup>

As they had throughout the 1980s, clinic protests accompanied the increased political activity. On December 9, 1990, the Wichita Rescue Movement led its ninth "rescue" outside Dr. Tiller's Women's Health Care Services. Harry Blitz contacted Keith Tucci of Operation Rescue National and invited him to be the guest speaker. Tucci witnessed 250 protesters brave the bitter Kansas cold of winter to pray, sidewalk counsel, and "rescue fetal life" by blocking access to the clinic's gates. Police arrested forty-seven local protesters. Perhaps more impressive to Tucci was the fact that the clinic sit-in movement had a sympathizer in the Wichita police department who had instructed the protesters to "baby step" to police carriers. The police sympathizer let organizers know that so long as they moved toward the carriers of their own volition, even if it was slowly as possible, police would not charge them with resisting arrest. The tactic also delayed the clinic from opening, preventing some women from having abortions that day.<sup>50</sup> The same month, 200 antiabortion activists attended a recruitment meeting for Sacrificial Lambs, a small but radical Catholic antiabortion organization that infiltrated abortion clinics, chained protesters to equipment, and/or destroyed equipment. The celebrated antiabortion activist Joan Andrews, fresh from a jail sentence in Florida, told the audience how they could shut down a clinic by destroying clinic property and why they should.<sup>51</sup>

Wichita and its local antiabortion activists were ripe for a national protest the following summer. Kansans for Life and Kansas Right to Life had resolved enough of their differences to lobby for the same legislation; there was an active clinic blockade movement at the local level with large numbers of activists risking arrests; and numerous Christian churches were coordinating with one another to support antiabortion activities and prayer services. For example, in January 1991 the Reverend Dick Kelsey of the Wichita Alliance of Evangelical Churches presided over the service to memorialize the victims of abortion in January 1991. The Reverend David Cone of Country Acres Baptist Church, Bishop Eugene Gerber of the

47. "Prayer for Unity," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, December 1990, 3; Harry Blitz interview by Jennifer Donnally, January 2012. For other examples of prayers see "Prayer for Unity," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, February 1986, 4.

48. Alan Weldon, "State Senate Shows True Colors," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, April 1990, 1; "Parental Notification Passes Kansas House," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, March 1990, 1-2.

49. Republicans Form Pro-Life/Pro-Family Caucus," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, February 1990, 6.

50. "Wichita's Rescue Movement Holds 9th Operation Rescue," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, January 1991, 2.

51. Ann Tilson, "Joan Andrews and Chet Gallagher Make Whirlwind Appearance in Wichita," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, December 1990, 3.

Catholic Diocese of Wichita, and the Reverend Brian Egan of St. Francis of Assisi Church also participated. The same month, the executive board of Operation Rescue voted to make Wichita the next city for a national clinic blockade.<sup>52</sup>

When Operation Rescue National descended on Wichita on Monday July 15, protests were small. At the request of the Wichita Police Department, administrators from the city's three abortion clinics reluctantly agreed to close the week Operation Rescue scheduled the protests. It was a terrible mistake. National antiabortion phone hotlines spread the good news throughout the country. For the first time in its existence, Operation Rescue had managed to shut down an entire city's abortion providers. The hotlines spoke of God's providence at work, attracting more protesters from across the nation. Operation Rescue announced that it would stay in the city indefinitely.

Local activists were key to the first week's protests as antiabortion activists trickled in from other parts of the country to participate in the Summer of Mercy. Wichita antiabortion leaders had worked hard to prepare the grassroots movement. For example, Wichita Protecting the Defenseless and LIFE, Inc. had decided to pursue a local policy initiative in 1991 to connect the upcoming Summer of Mercy to local politics. Antiabortion leaders worked with Wichita city councilman Frank Ojile to propose the Child Protection Statute, a city ordinance banning third-trimester pregnancy terminations that specifically targeted Dr. George Tiller's practice. Ojile proposed the ordinance in June, and the city council scheduled the hearings on July 2, two weeks before Operation Rescue's Summer of Mercy began. Over seventy antiabortion activists testified at the hearing, while forty others stood holding a petition signed by locals supporting the Child Protection Statute. Despite the intense pressure from antiabortion activists, the Wichita City Council voted down the proposed statute 4 to 3. As planned by antiabortion leaders, the city ordinance campaign mobilized local antiabortion activists as they geared up for the upcoming clinic blockades.<sup>53</sup> Once the Summer of Mercy began on July 15, local activists attended clinic protests and night rallies, keeping Operation Rescue numbers up for press reports. They also opened their homes and churches to protesters from out of town who could not afford hotel accommodations.

52. "Memorial Service to Unborn," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, February 1991, 3.

53. Greg Mills, "The Facts of Life and Death in Wichita," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, April 1991, 1; Karen Bulluomo, "City Ordinance," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, July / August 1991, 1.



*During the Summer of Mercy, protestors used their bodies to block an entrance to Dr. Tiller's clinic. Police began arresting clinic protestors on Monday, July 22, in what became the opening act of a forty-one-day siege. Activists from Wichita and other Kansas communities constituted the majority of those arrested. Courtesy of the Wichita Eagle.*

On Monday, July 22, police began arresting clinic protesters, the opening act of what would become a forty-one-day siege. Sometimes it took police as long as thirty minutes to escort one protester ten to fifteen feet to the police carrier. Activists from Wichita and other Kansas communities constituted the majority of those arrested. Police arrested 677 Wichita residents, approximately 38 percent of the total; another 265 arrested activists hailed from elsewhere in Kansas and constituted an additional 15 percent of the total arrested. The Wichita judicial system processed and released those arrested quickly. Police would arrest activists in the morning only to find the same people back again in the evening, risking another arrest. For example, a dedicated core of 184 Wichitans risked arrest two or more times alongside 68 other Kansans and 257 activists from out of state. Since the city attorney had





*In this photograph, antiabortion protestors lie in the street attempting to stop a car from entering Dr. Tiller's clinic. The Summer of Mercy, which involved these and many other activists, changed everything for local and state antiabortion leaders and their allies in the Republican Party. It stimulated press interest, mobilized new activists, and enhanced the organizations' financial outlook, as donations increased dramatically. In 1992 this coalition successfully lobbied for and passed new antiabortion legislation that Kansans for Life had proposed since 1984. Courtesy of the Wichita Eagle.*

ruled that police could not arrest protesters unless there was a patient demanding access to the clinic, patients had to wait outside in cars before running the gauntlet into one of the city's three abortion providers. The overwhelming majority of protests, however, targeted Dr. George Tiller's Women's Health Care Services, which also experienced the most sustained protests. Everyone—patients, clinic staff, clinic escorts, police, and antiabortion protesters—endured the 90- to 100-degree heat of a Kansas summer.

In the closing weeks of the protest, the embattled male leaders of Operation Rescue had publicized the development of a "new" grassroots antiabortion movement that would sustain the protests at the local level. Many of the national leaders had fled Wichita by late August because a federal judge had threatened them with long jail sentences and substantial legal fines for repeatedly violating a court-ordered injunction. Those who had not fled were now in jail. Local antiabortion groups and evangelical churches agreed to work together

under the umbrella organization Heartland Coalition in negotiations with the few Operation Rescue leaders who remained. The Heartland Coalition codified tentative alliances between antiabortion organizations that already existed in Wichita prior to the Summer of Mercy. Of the twenty-five local organizations that joined the new Heartland Coalition, twenty had existed prior to the Summer of Mercy. New antiabortion organizations were Pro-Life Pastors, Physicians for Life, Nurses for Life, Teachers for Life, and Attorneys for Life.<sup>54</sup> The Heartland Coalition took its name from the culminating antiabortion event of the Summer of Mercy, the Rally for the Heartland on August 25. Over 25,000 people attended the rally to hear Pat Robertson, Beverley LaHaye, Joe Scheidler, Keith Tucci, Governor Finney, and a selection of local ministers discuss the summer's events and the future of abortion politics in Wichita, Kansas, and the United States.<sup>55</sup> The Rally for the Heartland furthered claims by Operation Rescue leaders that they had created a sustainable local movement. Rather than acknowledge a local movement that made the Summer of Mercy possible, national leaders emphasized how they had revolutionized state politics.

The Summer of Mercy had in fact changed everything for local and state antiabortion leaders and their allies in the Republican Party. It increased organizations' financial revenue as donations poured in, stimulated press interest, and mobilized new activists. In some cases the drama of the summer protests pulled in entire local church congregations that had resisted overtures from antiabortion organizations. The increase in antiabortion organization membership was astonishing. Kansans for Life's mailing list doubled in size, with an additional 10,000 names. Recall that it had taken the organization seven years to reach 10,000 names before the Summer of Mercy. In October 1991 over 13,000 people lined a major thoroughfare in Wichita as part of a "life chain," holding hands, praying, and protesting abortion. LIFE, Inc. reported that of the 500 churches in Wichita, over 288 pastors had signed a petition supporting the "right to life of the unborn" following the summer's activities.<sup>56</sup>

In 1992 this coalition successfully lobbied for and passed new antiabortion legislation that Kansans for Life

54. Ruth Heitsman, "Heartland Rally Saves at Least One Life," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, September 1991, 1.

55. Beth Ruark, "Heartland Rally," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, September 1991, 6-7.

56. "Is Your Church Actively Pro-Life?" *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, September 1991, 7; Kathy Lenhart, "Wichita Takes a Stand for Life with Life Chain," *The Facts of LIFE, Inc.*, November 1991, 6.

had proposed since 1984. The 1992 antiabortion law raised the age at which an unmarried minor needed a parent's consent to obtain an abortion from sixteen to eighteen. The same law prohibited pregnancy terminations postviability except in cases where the pregnancy threatened a woman's health or in cases of fetal deformity. Finally the new law required a woman seeking an abortion to receive mandatory counseling followed by an eight-hour waiting period between the counseling and the procedure. The wait period effectively made abortions less accessible and more expensive, especially for non-state residents, who would have to schedule two days off work and an overnight hotel stay to receive an abortion. During the eight-hour wait, a woman was supposed to revisit her mandatory counseling, which included the risks of abortion procedures, alternatives to having an abortion, how well developed the fetus was, and available community resources if the woman decided to carry the pregnancy to term. The new abortion law, however, also increased the penalties for blockading abortion clinics and prevented any cities or counties from passing their own ordinances on abortion. Kansas legislators thus sought to prevent the lawlessness of the Summer of Mercy and undercut the local battles antiabortion activists had waged successfully to pave the way for the Summer of Mercy. As a result, the law had the unintended effect of steering direct-action antiabortion activists back to the political mainstream movement.<sup>57</sup>

A year later, in 1993, Shelley Shannon attempted to kill Dr. Tiller, firing six shots at him as he left his clinic on August 19. She hit him in both arms, but Dr. Tiller was able to return to work the next day. Shannon's actions further propelled antiabortion activists back into the political arena while heightening the divisions between a mainstream political movement and a more radical fringe in Kansas and the United States that trespassed and damaged clinics. A minority of antiabortion activists continued to harass abortion providers throughout the 1990s in order to winnow down the number of providers. In 1992 Kansas had fifteen abortion providers; by 2005 it was down to seven. Nationwide the number fell from 2,400 to fewer than 1,800 in the same period. Then Scott Roeder murdered Dr. Tiller inside Wichita's Reformation Lutheran Church on May 31, 2009, an action that resulted

in the closure of Women's Health Care Services thirty years after LIFE, Inc. set out to end abortions in Wichita.<sup>58</sup>

For conservative Republicans, the Summer of Mercy was a visceral testament to their strength in the state—a strength many had underestimated until 1991. Twelve out of the twenty-two candidates endorsed in 1992 by Kansans for Life won their elections to statewide office. Republicans also established a sixty-six-seat majority in the House and a ten-seat majority in the Senate. The Republican majorities strengthened antiabortion legislation in the next session by extending the waiting period from eight to twenty-four hours, banning the RU-486 abortion pill, and changing the definition of fetal viability to earlier in the pregnancy. Moreover, political strategists began to use the Summer of Mercy as a rallying cry for conservative Christians across Kansas to get involved in Republican primaries and precinct functions. According to Mark Gietzen, a Right to Life of Kansas organizer and future chairman of the Sedgwick County GOP, Operation Rescue-type activists constituted 87 percent of the precinct committee members in the state Republican Party by 1992. In Sedgwick County (Wichita), 19 percent of the new precinct committee members actually had arrest records from the Summer of Mercy. This cadre of social conservatives revolutionized the Kansas Republican Party, sweeping moderate Republicans who had led the state in the 1970s and 1980s out of office. In addition to restricting access to abortion, conservative Christians in the Republican Party targeted the State Board of Education in order to stop the teaching of evolution and sex education in public schools.<sup>59</sup>

The new grassroots movement that Operation Rescue touted in 1991 had deep roots in Wichita and Kansas. The Summer of Mercy by itself did not revolutionize Kansas politics. Instead the Summer of Mercy was a turning point in a longer history of grassroots conservative mobilization that transformed what had been a pro-choice stronghold of moderate Republicans in 1980 into an antiabortion stronghold of conservative Republicans by 1996. This result was by no means a foregone conclusion because the history of the local antiabortion movement since 1980 was contentious and fraught. Long before the Summer of Mercy, clinic protests proved pivotal in uniting the Kansas antiabortion movement and steering it in the same conservative direction. The assistance of Operation Rescue National in 1991 made the transformation all the more stunning. [KH]

57. Wuthnow, *Red State Religion*, 297.

58. Singular, *The Wichita Divide*, 8, 73, and 94.

59. Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* 93–95.