

Will Tiller murder alter abortion debate? Committed Christians on both sides of issue: Committed Christians on both sides of issue

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The setting of the murder of physician George Tiller—a Sunday morning inside the Lutheran church where he was a member—counters the image of late-term abortion providers as secularists, casting him more as a churchgoing martyr than a godless murderer.

Tiller was shot and killed May 31 while passing out bulletins in the lobby of his Wichita, Kansas, church as his wife sat with the choir. The event challenges popular perceptions of both abortion providers and the abortion-rights movement.

“It shows a dimension of the movement that a lot of people don’t know about,” said Carlton Veazey, president of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. “This man was castigated for what he did—but he was a faithful member of the Lutheran Church, and that gives a different view of him and his work.”

Veazey sees Tiller as “a martyr in the same sense that Dr. [Martin Luther] King was.”

“It has always been a fallacy” involving “malicious manipulation” that progressive supporters of abortion are murderers devoid of ethics, said Katherine Ragsdale, president of Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. “These doctors are not acting outside of their churches, much less outside of their faith commitments,” Ragsdale said. “People should notice it’s about differences of conscience, not lack of conscience.”

She and others aren’t convinced that Tiller’s murder will lead to much change in the long run. The public image of abortion providers did not soften in 1998 after Barnett Slepian, an abortion doctor, was killed just after returning home from his synagogue

in Buffalo, New York.

The charge of vigilantism now confronts antiabortion activists, indicated Susan Thistlethwaite, former president of Chicago Theological Seminary and a supporter of abortion rights. She said that outspoken antiabortion activists like Randall Terry, who led protests outside Tiller's clinic as far back as 1991, asserted on June 1 that Tiller had "reaped what he sowed."

If Terry is the loudest voice in the antiabortion movement, that's a problem because Tiller's death "shows the consequence of the inflated language of murder," she said. "The broad middle of Americans regard choice as a legitimate and moral option."

The fact that Tiller was a churchgoing Christian muddies the long-held perception that the only religious activists in the abortion debate are those who rally in opposition. That's no longer the case, said David Gushee, a Christian ethicist at Mercer University and opponent of abortion, who said he has witnessed that "even thoughtful and committed Christians can end up on opposite sides of this question."

"In our polarized debate about abortion, it becomes very easy to ascribe nothing but evil motives to people with whom we disagree," Gushee said.

Yet antiabortion activists, like Andrea Lafferty of the Traditional Values Coalition, questioned Tiller's personal faith and brand of mainline Protestantism. "The fact that he could go to church on Sunday and brutally abort babies on Monday is inconsistent," said Lafferty. "But I don't think that means you can take matters into your own hands."

The antiabortion movement has long been dominated by evangelicals and Catholics, while the more liberal mainline Protestant churches—including Tiller's Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—have been either fully or partially supportive of abortion rights.

Troy Newman of Operation Rescue has made a career of fighting Tiller's work, particularly late-term abortions, which opponents find particularly abhorrent. Though he condemned Tiller's murder, he said churches that support or tolerate abortion need to reexamine their positions.

"Can an abortionist be a deacon or hold a leadership position in a church?" Newman asked. "Those who would somehow justify their sinful actions are misguided, steeped in sin or heretics." *-Religion News Service*