

When Christian abortion providers are targeted for harassment

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A few years after Howard Stephens started providing abortions, he became the target of local anti-abortion protesters. They picketed his home on weekends, distributed leaflets around his neighborhood calling him a murderer, followed his moves around town, and sent hate mail to his son.

Perhaps most concerning, the protesters picketed Howard's church twice. On the day of the second demonstration, the protesters lined the street for about an hour and a half with 60 or 70 people holding anti-abortion signs. Howard, who received word of the protest before it started, stayed home from church that day, but was deeply affected by the way the protesters disrupted his church as a way to target him.

Howard is not alone. Over the past four years, [we have interviewed](#) almost 90 abortion providers around the country about their experiences being individually targeted by abortion opponents, and we learned that abortion providers are frequently targeted for harassment based on their faith. This type of harassment flips the script of common beliefs about abortion in this country. Many abortion providers draw on their religion as motivation for being involved in abortion care, and many anti-abortion extremists then harass and terrorize those providers using the provider's religious belief as the basis.

The most extreme incidence of this phenomenon is the assassination of George Tiller in Wichita, Kansas, in 2009. Tiller was an usher at the Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita. Scott Roeder, who had previously stalked Tiller to learn his routine, entered the church foyer where Tiller was awaiting the start of Sunday services and shot him.

Danielle Figueroa also described being targeted based on her religion. Danielle is a clinic administrator who believes that she has found her calling by helping the women who come to her clinic. She is not a regular churchgoer, but had been a

member the same church for more than 40 years and would attend when the occasion moved her. That is, until the protesters who regularly target Danielle at the clinic found out where her church was and went to the priest. Danielle's priest called her and told her she was no longer welcome at the church, she explained to us through tears. She tried to reason with him by telling him that she was helping women, including many of his congregants, but he refused. Danielle was hurt and angry that she was targeted in this way and thrown out of her church.

Camille Diaz, another clinic administrator, attracted the attention of a protester who saw a rosary in Camille's car. Because of that, the protester latched onto Camille and began to target her. She told us, "He sent e-mails about the Virgin Mary, and then he started sending postcards to my house saying that he was sending them to all my neighbors." Other protesters call Camille by name, referencing her religion and sometimes making comments about Camille's race.

Daniel Martin is a Christian and open about his religion, frequently discussing publicly how his faith factors into the reasons that he provides abortions as a physician. Some of the more hostile comments directed at Daniel came in the online comment section of a newspaper article that highlighted his faith. As he explained, "The commenters had direct issue with my claim of faith identity. They said that there's no way that I could be a Christian and do abortions. To them, those things are mutually exclusive, so they tried to let me know that if they controlled the thermostat of hell, my position there would be a little hotter."

These stories were among the multitude we heard of individualized harassment of abortion providers. This type of harassment can happen to any provider, no matter what their role in abortion care, and anywhere in the country, no matter whether liberal, conservative, or somewhere in the middle. Targeted harassment is also not a relic of the 1980s or 1990s when Operation Rescue was regularly in the news. These stories about religion-based harassment are almost all recent incidents.

Almost all abortion providers persist despite the harassment and terrorism they face. Many religious providers explained how their faith is part of the reason they continue. David Crowther illustrates this perfectly. After almost a decade of being targeted by anti-abortion extremists who tried myriad ways to force the hospital that employed David to fire him, David fought back and won a lawsuit against the hospital. He moved to a new hospital and continues to provide abortions because of his commitment to help women who need him. He draws strength from his

Methodist faith, which does not proscribe abortion. To David, abortion is “a religious freedom issue. The concept of saying, ‘My religious belief is just as important as yours’—I have to stand up for that.”

Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward J. Blum](#) and [John D. Wilsey](#).