

The faith leaders who helped preserve abortion access in Kansas

In the fight over an antiabortion amendment, Protestant pastors and Catholic sisters worked to show that there is more than one faith-based view.

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [August 2023](#) issue



Abortion rights advocates outside the Kansas Statehouse after the US Supreme Court's *Dobbs* ruling on June 24, 2022 (AP Photo / Charlie Riedel)

On August 2, 2022, all eyes were on Kansas. Weeks prior, the US Supreme Court had overturned *Roe v. Wade*, revoking the federal constitutional right to an abortion and clearing the way for Republican-led legislatures to ban abortions at the state level. Now, with an amendment on the ballot that would remove the existing right to an abortion from the state constitution, Kansans were about to be the first voters in a post-*Roe* nation to weigh in on abortion access.

It seemed a foregone conclusion that the amendment, known by its supporters as “Value Them Both”—a riff on the line that a constitutional right to an abortion is incongruent with the value Kansans place on both women and children—would pass in the historically populist Sunflower State. Despite having recently elected two popular Democratic governors, Kansas hasn’t voted for a Democratic president since Lyndon B. Johnson and hasn’t sent a Democrat to the US Senate since 1930. Kansas is also the place where, 14 years ago, an antiabortion extremist gunned down George Tiller, a Lutheran doctor who provided late-term abortions.

What’s more, the amendment had well-heeled, influential friends in Kansas’s Catholic bishops. The Catholic Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas—the largest single donor on either side of the issue—spent almost \$3 million to drum up support for the amendment, according to tax documents, while the Wichita diocese spent \$550,000 in 2022 and the Kansas Catholic Conference spent another \$275,000.

But the amendment didn’t pass. In what is thought to be Kansas’s highest-ever voter turnout for a primary election, 59 percent of voters said they wanted to keep abortion as a constitutionally protected right—thanks in no small part to local organizing efforts that included or were led by Kansas clergy.

In the postelection analysis and surprise, many pundits pointed to Kansans for Constitutional Freedom, a coalition formed specifically to contend with the Value Them Both campaign, as a key factor in the amendment’s defeat. (KCF out-raised and outspent Value Them Both in 2022, with most of the money coming from individual donations ranging from \$50 to more than \$10,000.)

KCF isn’t a faith-based group, but in a state where 80 percent of adults identify as religious, it was important for the coalition to show that there wasn’t one single way for people of faith to view abortion.

“We felt it was important to allow more progressive voices of faith to be empowered to be able to speak to their own experiences,” said Zack Gingrich-Gaylord, communications director for coalition member Trust Women, an advocacy group and abortion provider founded in Wichita to honor Tiller. “Especially during the election, when the other side was presenting this partially as a faith issue.”

On July 21, 2022, KCF published an open letter, signed by 64 faith leaders from across the state—including mainline Protestants, Reform and Conservative Jews, Unitarian Universalists, and one minister from the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches—urging Kansans to vote against the proposed amendment.

“While we understand there are sincerely held religious beliefs on both sides of this complicated issue, we must honor the freedom necessary for each woman to make the decision that is right for her, according to her own personal conscience and beliefs,” the letter read. “It is important that we recognize the very different and complex issues and situations experienced by people seeking abortion. . . . Each of them deserves the right to make private medical decisions for themselves, free from government interference.”

Then, four days later, KCF released a 30-second ad featuring Jay McKell, a retired Presbyterian Church (USA) minister who had served two churches in the Kansas City metro area.

“As Christians, we are instructed to love one another. We do so when we respect and trust women as God does,” McKell says in the ad, sitting in a church pew and wearing a clerical collar. “I’m voting no on the proposed amendment because it replaces religious freedom with government control.”

But while KCF may have been the most prominent platform for people of faith opposed to restricting abortion access in Kansas, it wasn’t the only one.

On July 22, 2022, a separate group of 30 Christian clergy and faith leaders published an op-ed in the *Wichita Eagle* that refuted claims that the Bible has a clear antiabortion mandate and framed abortion access as a justice issue.

Numbers 5, which describes a procedure that might be an abortion, has an ambiguous meaning, they wrote. Furthermore, Genesis 2:7 seems to indicate that life is equated with breath rather than conception, and Exodus 21:22 seems to place

a higher value on the life of a pregnant woman “over and beyond the fetus she carries.”

Meanwhile, the faith leaders continued, while people “who are wealthy enough to travel will always have access to safe abortions, it is those who cannot afford airfare or a bus ticket who will be forced to carry unwanted pregnancies to term or resort to unsafe, self-induced abortion. This unequal access to healthcare is a social justice issue and violates Scripture’s mandate to care for the marginalized among us.”

Christina Manero, copastor at Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church in Wichita and one of the op-ed signers, said the decision to publish something in the newspaper came from an online discussion among Wichita’s progressive clergy. It’s an informal group, banded together largely because they’re in the Bible Belt where many other pastors don’t share their values, Manero said.

But watching the energy around Value Them Both made the group decide it was time to mobilize. “We had a pretty united front in our group chat that we should do something to make it clear that not every clergy [member] feels the same about abortion,” she said.

Five days after the Wichita op-ed came out, Angela Fitzpatrick and Michele Morek, two Ursuline nuns living in Roeland Park, Kansas, published a letter to the editor in the *Kansas City Star*. In their letter, Fitzpatrick and Morek lambasted the state’s Republican lawmakers for attempting to force women to give birth while simultaneously failing to pass legislation to support mothers.

“Has the Legislature recently helped create an environment supporting pro-life choices by providing better health care, parental leave, Medicaid expansion and other support for poor women—or day care and child support for babies?” they wrote. “We will vote no on the amendment to preserve individual freedom, the rights of women and our democracy.”

Fitzpatrick told the *Century* that the idea to write the letter did not actually originate with the two Ursulines. Rather, Simone Campbell, founder of Nuns on the Bus, made a call to Alice Kitchen, a well-known progressive Catholic activist in Kansas City. Campbell, who is often credited with helping get the Affordable Care Act passed, believed in the power of nuns’ voices to influence legislation, and she encouraged Kitchen to get Kansas nuns active in defeating Value Them Both.

Kitchen started making calls, but some of the Kansas-based communities of Catholic sisters said that while they would be voting no, they feared retaliation if they publicly spoke out against the amendment the bishops were spending so much money to support.

Fitzpatrick and Morek did not feel a similar constraint. Although Fitzpatrick is a native Kansan, born and raised in the east-central city of Emporia, the sisters' motherhouse—and therefore their spiritual headquarters—is in Kentucky.

Even so, the duo let their superior know what they would be doing. Fitzpatrick said she was nervous but ultimately felt that it was imperative to push back against the wholesale antiabortion narrative coming from the Kansas Catholic hierarchy.

"I didn't have the pulpit, the priests do," she said, "and this was our way of saying what we felt needed to be said in regards to the other side."

Around the same time, 120 miles away in Manhattan, Kansas, an informal, interfaith cohort of women clergy began creating online content to help equip their congregations to have conversations with Value Them Both supporters.

Christian Watkins, executive director of Ecumenical Campus Ministry at Kansas State University and a member of the cohort, said that in the lead-up to the election it became clear that what some people needed was not to be persuaded themselves but rather some theological language to express to other people that terminating a pregnancy does not condemn someone to hell.

"We had to create an alternative theological trajectory," Watkins said.

Watkins grew up in the small town of Chanute, Kansas, and while she credits being raised in the Disciples of Christ tradition with giving her the ability to see nuance in the world, she knows firsthand that many people have never heard a serious religious discussion about abortion that did not automatically presume the wrath of God.

The cohort's goal wasn't to present a particular side of the abortion debate, Watkins said, noting that even within the cohort there wasn't consensus on every point.

"We didn't want it to feel like we were saying, 'If you don't want a child, you should get an abortion,'" she continued, "The goal was to create nuance. People can have beliefs as clergy, but our role isn't simply to be dogmatic—it's to encourage people

into a conversation.”

For their own safety, the cohort’s online content was intentionally impermanent and was only distributed to people that the women knew. “One of the realities of being a woman in ministry is that people can target you,” Watkins said.

Fitzpatrick said she has no regrets for taking on the Kansas bishops with her letter to the editor, but there have been consequences. She and Morek received a few antagonistic messages—some from Fitzpatrick’s own family—but the most painful repercussion was that after the election, her pastor said that she could no longer serve as an usher, lector, or eucharistic minister at church.

A year later, Fitzpatrick’s voice still trembles when she talks about it. Ministry was such an important part of her life. How could he take that away from her just because she had spoken her mind?

She has not been barred from receiving communion, but she avoids taking the elements directly from the pastor’s hands “because I don’t feel like I’m in communion with him,” she said. “But I’m in communion with Jesus.”

Fitzpatrick pointed out that for Value Them Both to have been defeated so soundly, more than a few Catholics must have voted against it. And, in fact, most of the feedback the sisters received was positive; people sent notes celebrating them for being “courageous” and “intrepid.”

Pope Francis is currently trying to promote a more synodal church, Fitzpatrick added—a church in which bishops work more collaboratively with parishioners. In the future, she hopes Kansas’s bishops are more open to hearing from the laity.

It seems like there will be plenty of opportunities for them to try. Kansas Republicans have made it clear that in spite of last year’s vote, ending abortions in the state remains at the top of their agenda.

At a March for Life event in Topeka in January, Ty Masterson, president of the Kansas Senate, told the crowd, “It’ll be a cold day in you-know-what when we stop fighting to protect women and children, including unborn children. The battleground has just changed.”

Part of Republican lawmakers’ new strategy is to increase funding to the state’s controversial and largely unregulated pregnancy crisis centers, which often claim to

be medical clinics while being operated by antiabortion volunteers. Republicans have continued to challenge the legality of specific abortion procedures, and in March, Kris Kobach, the Republican attorney general, asked the state supreme court to reverse the 2019 ruling that made abortion a constitutionally protected right in the first place.

The progressive clergy group in Wichita is not currently planning to mobilize around any upcoming antiabortion legislation, although Manero said she's watching what's happening at the statehouse and is concerned.

Likewise, Watkins said her cohort is not planning anything but will step up if necessary. Right now, most of the clergy in her circles are focused on the slate of anti-trans bills Republican lawmakers introduced earlier this year.

Gingrich-Gaylord said KCF's goal right now is to remind lawmakers that their constituents have already loudly and resoundingly said they don't want anyone chipping away at their access to abortion.

"The Kansas legislators and Kobach appear to have a short-term memory issue specifically affecting their ability to remember last August's results," he said. "We can see that they just can't take no for an answer. As a coalition and as member organizations of that coalition, we're going to stay focused and continue to bring up the election and the fact that Kansans want meaningful, local access to reproductive health care, including abortions."

Watkins doesn't want to downplay how remarkable it was that Kansans voted in favor of a constitutional right to an abortion. But at the same time, she hopes that people can use what happened in Kansas as an opportunity to examine and question their geographical prejudices. As she puts it, the people who thought they had Kansas figured out had likely flattened the state to its flattest point.

"It makes for a nice political joke," she said. "But they have to allow places like Kansas, like Christianity, to have some mountains and valleys."