



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Operation Rescue activists resist abortion clinic in Wichita, Kansas (Summer of Mercy), 1991

15 July

1991

to: 25 August

1991

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Wichita, Kansas*

Location Description: *Outside the Abortion Clinic of George Tiller and three others*

Goals:

To close clinics in the Wichita area that were known for performing third-trimester abortions, to convince the women that came to these clinics to not get abortions, and to raise national awareness surrounding the abortion issue. The last goal was not initially a goal, but become one as time moved on.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship › Protesters gathered in prayer and sang Christian praise songs to celebrate, encourage one another and to push against the police.
- 138. Sitdown
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › Protesters stood, sat and laid down in front of the abortion clinics, not allowing people or police to get in.

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship › Protesters gathered in prayer and sang Christian praise songs to celebrate, encourage one another and to push against the police.
- 138. Sitdown
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › Protesters stood, sat and laid down in front of the abortion clinics, not allowing people or police to get in.

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship › Protesters gathered in prayer and sang Christian praise songs to celebrate, encourage one another and to push against the police.
- 138. Sitdown
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › Protesters stood, sat and laid down in front of the abortion clinics, not allowing people or police to get in.

Methods in 4th segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship › Protesters gathered in prayer and sang Christian praise songs to celebrate, encourage one another and to push against the police.
- 138. Sitdown
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › Protesters stood, sat and laid down in front of the abortion clinics, not allowing people or police to get in.

Methods in 5th segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship › Protesters gathered in prayer and sang Christian praise songs to celebrate, encourage one another and to push against the police.
- 138. Sitdown
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › Protesters stood, sat and laid down in front of the abortion clinics, not allowing people or police to get in.

Methods in 6th segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship › Protesters gathered in prayer and sang Christian praise songs to celebrate, encourage one another and to push against the police.
- 138. Sitdown
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › Protesters stood, sat and laid down in front of the abortion clinics, not allowing people or police to get in.

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 162. Sit-in
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction › Some protesters laid down in front of cars and under tires, daring police to move the cars.

Notes on Methods:

While the methods were used in all segments, the intensity increased as the protests gained steam, and publicity, and more people streamed in from across the country.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Catholics
- Evangelicals
- Pastors
- Secular supporters
- clergy members

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Keith Tucci, head of Operation Rescue, the organization that led the campaign

Partners:

Local churches, pastors, and clergymen

External allies:

Focus on the Family, a large Christian media organization

Involvement of social elites:

President George H. W. Bush's administration sent in an amicus brief on behalf of Operation Rescue's legal struggle with the Federal Court that was ordering them to leave the clinic.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Operation Rescue

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Churches
- Clergymen
- Pastors

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Bush Administration Justice Department

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Pat Robertson

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

While many of the protesters involved in the first week of the Summer of Mercy were churchgoers, it took a little bit of time for pastors to seize on the protests and mobilize their congregations to make a public stand supporting the protests.

Segment Length: 1 Week

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Wichita Law Enforcement, Pro-choice counter-protestors

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

There were streams of Pro-choice counter protests, with posters and signs and yelling. They showed their support for Dr. Tiller, and the police as they tried to move the abortion protesters.

Campaigner violence:

While there were not reported acts of violence, one source noted that some protesters shoved some officers. However, there were not details on this, and other sources emphasized that though the protesters were impassioned and shouting at the officers, they were not violent.

Repressive Violence:

Forcibly removing and arresting protesters, placing them on buses and dragging them away from their positions.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

While the Summer of Mercy was a huge success for Operation Rescue at the time, it ultimately did not achieve its concrete goal of ending abortion or even strengthening the organization moving forward, as a fissure in leadership eventually split the group.

There are few issues in the United States as divisive and bitterly fought over as the issue of abortion. In 1973 United States Supreme Court ruled on *Roe v. Wade* that the issue of abortion was one of privacy, a right covered by the Constitutional right to privacy. After the ruling was handed down there was a firestorm of anti-abortion furor, with numerous death threats issued against Justice Blackmun, who wrote the majority opinion piece.

Operation Rescue began in 1986 under the leadership of Randell Terry. He was strongly opposed to abortion because he believed that it violated the sacred life that God created. The slogan of Operation Rescue was "If you believe abortion is murder, then act like it's murder!" Terry was an energetic and impassioned speaker, who stirred the spirits of anti-abortion individuals and urged them to protest its legalization and practice. Operation Rescue was inspired by the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in their tactics: they organized peaceful nonviolent sit-ins of abortion clinics. These were widely practiced through the late 1980s, and over 40,000 people were arrested for their civil disobedience over the first four years.

Following these initial protests, however, the group began to lose steam as leadership problems and fractures emerged. A man named Keith Tucci recognized the failing situation and organized what was intended to be a week-long protest in Wichita, Kansas. It would end up spanning six weeks, from July 15 to August 25, and be known as the Summer of Mercy. George Tiller was the main target of the protests; he was one of few abortion doctors in the nation who performed late term abortions, which are generally more controversial as the fetus is often viable outside the mother's womb at that point in the pregnancy. At first, the police and Tiller himself agreed to shut down the clinic for a week so the protests could occur without incident. Protesters came by the hundreds and sat in front of the building, gathered in prayer, surrounded the area, and remained highly energized by the excitement of the action. After one week, Tucci decided to extend the protest, claiming they could and would continue until the clinic was shut down. Many more protesters began pouring in from all over the country. Money and donations began flooding in as well. There was a large presence of pastors and clergymen leading the charge. Buses shuttled people from all over the country to Wichita, Kansas.

By that point the law enforcement officials, Tiller, and his workers all felt lied to, as they had agreed to a week of protests, but were considerably annoyed and upset that the protesters had taken advantage of them. The police began arresting the protesters. The protesters would place their bodies in front of cars, throw themselves onto the ground and sit there, or stand defiantly before the clinic's doors. They chained themselves to the fence around the clinic and screamed slogans and impassioned statements, including Bible verses and prayers. There were over 1,600 arrests in the first three weeks, and during the six weeks of protests there were over 2,700 arrests. An estimated 30,000 people participated in the protests. Many times, the officers simply physically carried the limp bodies of protestors onto buses that sent them elsewhere in the city, and then the protestors would simply march back to the clinic and sit or lay down again.

There were no major incidences of violence by either police law enforcement or the protesters. There were reported incidents of pushing and shoving, but the protests remained strongly nonviolent. The police often had to physically lift protestors who made

their bodies go limp, or charge into the crowds blocking the clinic entrances on mounted horses. The Wichita Chief of Police, Rick Stone, was awarded the Department of Justice Marshal Service "Law Enforcement Officer of the Year" award for his professionalism in leading his men to peacefully deal with the protesters. Even Tucci stated that Stone had handled the protests better than any other law enforcement head in history.

The Federal Courts got involved with the case, as there were legal problems with the protesters remaining without permission on Tiller's property. Tucci defied the court orders, arguing that he answered to God alone. The police issued fines and made arrests, but this only energized the protesters more, as more people and donations continued to arrive.

There were also counter-protests later organized by pro-choice groups, but all sides remained nonviolent. Finally, the six weeks of protests culminated in a final rally in the Cessna Stadium, an electrifying rally that was part religious revival, part political rally that featured prominent speakers like televangelist Pat Robertson.

The Summer of Mercy, as the six weeks of protests came to be known, captivated the country. Two legislators arose from among the protesters, and some other anti-abortion legislators were elected to Wichita's local government following the protests. However, Operation of Rescue was unable to capitalize on the event in terms of future successes. President Clinton passed a law, making impeding entrance to an abortion clinic a federal crime, not merely a local misdemeanor. This raised the stakes considerably for protesters, who would risk time in jail and \$25,000 fines. This severely limited Operation Rescue, as sit-ins at clinics was their primary method of protest. As the number of demonstrations, arrests, and amount of publicity diminished, so did the number of donations. Also, Tucci left the group following an unsuccessful protest in 1992 called the "Spring of Life." The group suffered setbacks from a lack of clear leadership and eventually split into two groups in 1999.

Research Notes

Influences:

The methods of civil disobedience and sitting-in was influenced strongly by the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1).

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Additional Notes:

In the sources there are two videos of footage from the protests that give a great depiction of what the actual protests were like.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

David Zhou, 30/04/2012

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