

Pro-choice perspective: On the occasion of George Tiller's death

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 30, 2009](#) issue

The murder of abortion provider George Tiller prompts me to do something I do not like to do—venture into the issue of abortion. My hesitation is not because I do not have a position. I do. I believe that matters of reproductive rights and responsibilities are most appropriately left to the woman who is pregnant, her religious and moral conscience and her physician. I believe that the father of the child has a role in the conversation and that the state has a stake in the issue. I do not want abortion to be totally unregulated. But the primary place for difficult decisions in this area is with the woman, her God and her physician. I support *Roe v. Wade* and I contribute to Planned Parenthood, which provides desperately needed reproductive health services, including abortion, to women who otherwise would not receive them. I do not hide my convictions; nor do I parade them. People I know and respect do not share my convictions, and they oppose abortion with the same moral passion with which I defend freedom of choice.

I have had experiences, certainly not unique to me, that have been instructive. I have counseled couples for whom the wife's pregnancy included a seriously impaired fetus with virtually no possibility of survival, let alone a meaningful life. I am the proud grandfather of a magnificent granddaughter with Down syndrome who blesses her parents and grandparents, her congregation and friends simply by being who she is. I have never had a conversation about abortion that was not exquisitely painful for the pregnant woman, nor one in which moral conscience was not very much at the heart.

When I heard the news of Tiller's murder I made two telephone calls. The first was to my brother Bill, who is county manager in Sedgwick, Kansas, whose jail is holding Tiller's accused killer. Bill's pastor was organizing an interfaith service of reconciliation—for which she is being denounced by abortion opponents who regard Tiller's murder as justifiable homicide. Bill said he thinks the extreme hate speech used regularly by some abortion opponents is an important part of a movement that

sometimes expresses itself in violent acts.

My second call was to an old friend, a former president of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists and a longtime advocate of reproductive choice. A friend of Tiller, he explained how Tiller was inspired by his own father, a physician who performed illegal abortions after having seen many patients who had been victims of botched abortions, some of them self-inflicted. The senior Tiller concluded that it was morally better to provide safe abortions than to do nothing and watch women die or undergo grave damage to their health.

I asked my physician friend about the procedure often called late-term abortion, meaning abortion after 20 weeks of gestation. He told me that there aren't very many such abortions—about a thousand per year in the entire nation. He also told me that they are done because the mother's health is truly at risk or the child to be born will be profoundly impaired and perhaps unable to live more than a few hours. And he added that Tiller never performed the procedure except for these reasons—certainly never for reasons of convenience.

Is it naive to hope for a civil conversation on the subject? Can we cease using language that allows for no diversity of opinion? Calling abortion “baby killing” and abortion providers “mass murderers” leaves no room for conversation.

There is nothing good about this appalling killing in Kansas. But could it possibly lead people of good will on both sides to show more civility and respect as we continue to talk about the issue?