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Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Can Work Together

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On May 17, 2009 at Notre Dame, President Obama voiced optimism that pro-life and pro-choice partisans can advocate for their causes with passion and conviction without demonizing their opponents, and that they can work together on shared goals such as preventing unintended pregnancies.

Fourteen days later, the murder of an abortion provider, Dr. George Tiller, in a Wichita, Kansas church, demonstrates that it will take more than Presidential vision to remove terrorism and violence from the abortion controversy. As the President's speech implied, it is one thing to advocate for civility and cooperation, but realizing them will require hard work, commitment, and willingness to learn from past tragedies.

In 1993 I was co-director of the Network for Life and Choice, a new project of the Washington, DC-based Search for Common Ground. We began by working with the Buffalo Coalition for Common Ground, a group of pro-life and pro-choice advocates, to bridge deep divisions about abortion in Buffalo, New York. The Coalition held dialogues, addressed areas of shared concern, and did its best to shift a highly polarized environment. As it turned out, the trust and track record we built prepared us for the difficult test that came in 1998.

In October of that year, Buffalo abortion provider, Dr. Barnett Slepian, was murdered at his home. The Coalition responded promptly and boldly. In the hours and days after the shooting, Coalition leaders from both sides spoke out in the local news, condemning violence, and calling for dialogue. They organized a 24-hour vigil with both pro-life and pro-choice participation. They held public briefings. Local and national media took notice of this "third voice" and reported it.

That was just the beginning. During the winter, dialogues were held for pro-choice and pro-life activists who wanted to engage each other face-to-face, but needed private space and rules of engagement to do so. Local Jewish and Christian leaders were brought together to address concerns about possible anti-Semitism in the targeting of Dr. Slepian. At a forum on teen pregnancy people with varied views on abortion developed ways to strengthen pregnancy prevention through enhanced youth development in the city.

The culmination of these activities was a "New Way" agenda to which pro-life and pro-choice leaders committed themselves in front of television cameras. When outsiders announced plans to hold a pro-life rally in Buffalo in early spring, local common grounders, fearing potential violence, voiced a collective "Not Welcome!" and the event fizzled. A law enforcement official later credited the Coalition with preventing serious trouble.

The Coalition's effectiveness depended on the strong foundation built during carefully planned and facilitated dialogues and workshops that applied approaches developed by the Network for Life and Choice and by the Public Conversations Project of Watertown, Massachusetts which had conducted dialogues on the abortion dispute since 1990.

In late 1994, John Salvi shot and killed employees of two reproductive health clinics in Massachusetts. In the aftermath, the Public Conversations Project facilitated a five-year secret dialogue involving leaders of prominent pro-choice and pro-life organizations in the state. When the participants went public by writing their own story for the Boston Globe in 2001, it was clear that the strong relationships and trust they developed had enabled them to defuse their public rhetoric and take other actions that prevented further violence in Boston.

I share these stories to encourage the people of Wichita and the state of Kansas, as well as other citizens, to respond to the recent murder of Dr. Tiller by taking President Obama's vision as a personal call to action. Excellent resources, based on solid experience, are easily available on the internet. Everyone can play a role in defusing the dangerously polarized dynamics of the abortion controversy, without changing their views on the issue. They can do so right now, right where they are.

Mary Jacksteit was the Director of the Common Ground Network for Life and Choice, a project of the Search for Common Ground, from 1993 through 1999. She is currently an Associate of the Public Conversations Project and can be contacted at mjacksteit@publicconversations.org.

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