

THE VIGIL

An afternoon in front of an abortion clinic can be an enlightening experience.

by Marge Christensen

Reprinted with permission from the August, 1996 issue of The Lutheran Witness

Well, there it was. On the answering machine was a message from Apryl, saying she had heard about an upcoming prayer vigil at the abortion clinic. Did I want to go with her?

Want to go to an abortion clinic? Boy, leave it to Apryl!

Well, at least it was just a prayer vigil, and she wasn't asking me to picket! Picketing an abortion clinic was just not high on my list of things I wanted to do. To be perfectly honest, though, there have been times when I've seen those groups with their signs, and I have felt a twinge of conscience that more of us haven't been out there with them.

But carrying signs just isn't my thing. I like to do *other* things—like *praying*, for instance. Well, this was to be a *prayer* vigil, according to Apryl—so what was I to do? We agreed to meet at 3 o'clock.

"It'll be hot," said Apryl. "Bring a lawn chair and some water." That sounded OK. I knew that Linda, a mutual acquaintance of Apryl's and mine, had a big tree in her yard, so we could gather there, do our praying and stay cool.

Linda's house and yard, in fact, is right next door to the clinic. I had met her a few months earlier when I was looking for information on an organization that helps women cope with post-abortion syndrome. Linda is the local director of this group. When she's not holding vigils outside the clinic, she's counseling women who are either considering having an abortion or who already have had one.

The afternoon was warm and very sunny. But no one was under the tree when we got there. Several teenagers and a few women were gathered in the sun at the edge of the road, so we left our chairs in the car and joined them there. One of the women, it turned out, had been on her way home from a golf driving-range; when she had noticed the group, she decided to stop.

Linda was there, too. When I asked her how many girls had come to the clinic that day, she said about 12. Most had left now, but two were still in the building and probably would not be out for at least an hour. After that, another hour or so would pass before all the workers left. Linda's plan was to stay, as she always did, until the last worker left.

Then she did it! She walked over to her porch, picked up a sign and started walking. A few of the others did the same.

“Hey, wait a minute!” I wanted to shout. “What about the prayer vigil?”

I wanted to ask this, but I didn’t. Then Apryl went over to the porch and grabbed a sign, too, looking as though she had done this many times before (she hadn’t). The sign she picked had a heart that said “Jesus Cares” on one side and a pregnancy hotline number on the other. I followed uncomfortably after her, flipped slowly through the signs and decided on “Life, What a Beautiful Choice.” It was the biggest one. Maybe I could hide behind it.

Back on the street we started walking. There were so few of us that disappearing into the crowd was not an option, and now the cars started to drive by. I suppose cars had been driving by before, too, but without the sign, I hadn’t noticed them. Now I did. As the first one approached, I squirmed but held my sign. The passengers waved at us and gave us the “high sign.” Well, that wasn’t so bad!

Some drivers ignored us as they drove by, but most would smile, honk or call out encouragement to us. Every now and then, a tractor-trailer driver, going over the highway overpass a block away, would give out a loud low blast on his air horn.

I was starting to feel more comfortable when a car filled with equipment pulled over, and I nervously wondered if it could be the press. With relief, I saw a wheelchair emerge and watched as a man who had lost his legs eased himself out of the car and into the chair. He began wheeling back and forth in front of the clinic. “Would you like a sign?” we asked, but he declined. The fact was, he made his statement very well without one. I learned that he made his vigil here a couple of times each month.

Linda, to help pass the time, tells stories—both happy and sad. The best ones are of the mothers who invite her to the hospital or who come to see her with beaming faces to show off their newborns. These babies are the ones who were on their way to being aborted when the commitment of Linda and her faithful few caused the parents to drive past the clinic. She treasures the photos and letters they send her, particularly the one that says, “Please don’t ever stop doing what you’re doing!”

Two more teens, looking very young and fresh, joined us. Their group, Teens for Life, is part of a growing movement that promotes abstinence. I thought of how much less complicated life was when I was young—how our blissful innocence (and sometimes naïveté) allowed us to be children for a little while longer. Maybe Linda needed another sign: “Abstinence, What a Beautiful Choice.”

After some time, one of the workers left the clinic. The day was still hot so her car windows were rolled down. “God loves you, Cathy!” called Linda. “I’ll be praying for you!” After eight years of doing this, Linda knew the clinic’s staff members by name, and they have come to expect to see her there. Never mind if it’s 20 below or 100 above. If the clinic is open, Linda is there.

The weathered face of this tiny woman reflects her dedication and diligence. Some of the workers ignore her, others give her a smile. Sometimes people join her, as we had, but more often she is alone. Occasionally, a pastor will come out to pray with her. Other pastors, being of the pro-choice persuasion, come to the clinic to help on the *inside*. And each week a vehicle from a nearby hospital comes by to make an unspeakably sad pick up. So it goes.

The abortionist left next. He will drive to his home in Milwaukee, where he services another clinic, and then be back again in a few days. He is coming more often than before.

We waited, and in time another car came down the drive. In it slouched a beautiful dark-haired woman chauffeured by her young male companion. I wondered how much pain and desperation had led up to this day, and how much would follow it. The young woman's abortion was over with now. Would her relationship with the young man soon be over with, too?

Linda told us about a girl who had left the clinic a couple of weeks earlier with an I.V. still attached, and another who had left on a makeshift bed in the back of a pickup truck. It doesn't look good if ambulances come to abortion clinics.

Time passed. Police drove by to check us out. We continued walking, and the cars and semis continued to honk. I asked Linda about the honking. She told me that the picketers used to carry a sign that said, "Honk for Life," but the police had warned them to put it away or they would be arrested for disturbing the peace.

The sign was gone now, but cars still honked. The truckers up on the highway had had warnings, too. Some of them had been giving long blasts as they approached the overpass near the clinic, but the police began to pull them over. Their blasts are shorter now, but our spirits were lifted up with each one.

The last patient left. Then the last of the workers came out and locked up. It was after 5 o'clock when we put our signs back on the porch. Linda hurried off to pick up her son. Only Apryl, the teens and I were left; and now, at last, we gathered under the tree. We talked a bit and then we prayed. We prayed for the girls who had visited the clinic that day. We prayed for our country. We gave thanks for our families, our churches and our new friends, and then we left for home. It had been an interesting afternoon.

Will I ever do it again? I don't know. Carrying signs is really not my thing. Still, I understand that, while picketing an abortion clinic is a matter of personal judgment, the *morality* of abortion, according to God's clear Word, is not. So, no matter whether I picket again or not, I *will* pray, and I *will* honk.

Marge Christensen is a member of Faith Lutheran Church, Appleton, Wisconsin