

Group seeks common viewpoint on abortion

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Over the last year, pro-life and pro-choice activists here have been attempting what might seem impossible — to reach an agreement.

Under the auspices of Genesee Ecumenical Ministries, a six-member task force of pro-life and pro-choice Christians have been working on a paper that will state a common position on abortion.

The idea for the task force originated in a proposal to GEM from Ken Maher, GEM's vice president for social witness and service, and manager of the Catholic Family Center's Department of Justice and Peace. Last January, Maher suggested to GEM's board of directors that Christians on both sides of the abortion question attempt to talk out their differences in a civilized manner.

The board took up Maher's proposal and, in April, appointed the task force, which was charged with completing a consensus statement by the end of this year.

But after finding deeper disagreements among members than first suspected, the group probably won't complete a statement until next spring, according to task force chairman, Rev. Paul Womack, ecumenical liaison of the West Avenue United Methodist Church.

Some of the disagreements stem from how each task force member views the role of churches in speaking out on abortion, according to task-force member Carol Crossed.

A Catholic, Crossed is the executive director of Common Ground, an ecumenical organization working for a consistent life ethic in society and studying such issues as abortion, capital punishment, war and poverty.

Crossed explained that each member of the group must submit a paper to the rest of the members on one or two abortion-related topics. Her first submission met some resistance because it explored abortion in the larger context of societal violence.



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

The Rev. Lawrence Witmer, executive director of Genesee Ecumenical Ministries, hopes a task force on abortion will reconcile Christians on both sides of the issue.

"We've become a people accustomed to violence," she said. Other members disagreed with her view that abortion is part of an overall attack on life that also includes the legitimizing of war and capital punishment.

Womack was one of the dissenters. "I guess there's a piece of me that tends to agree with (Crossed), and there's a piece of me that doesn't," he said. Calling abortion "an intrusive act," the minister nonetheless refused to place it on the same level as other forms of violence.

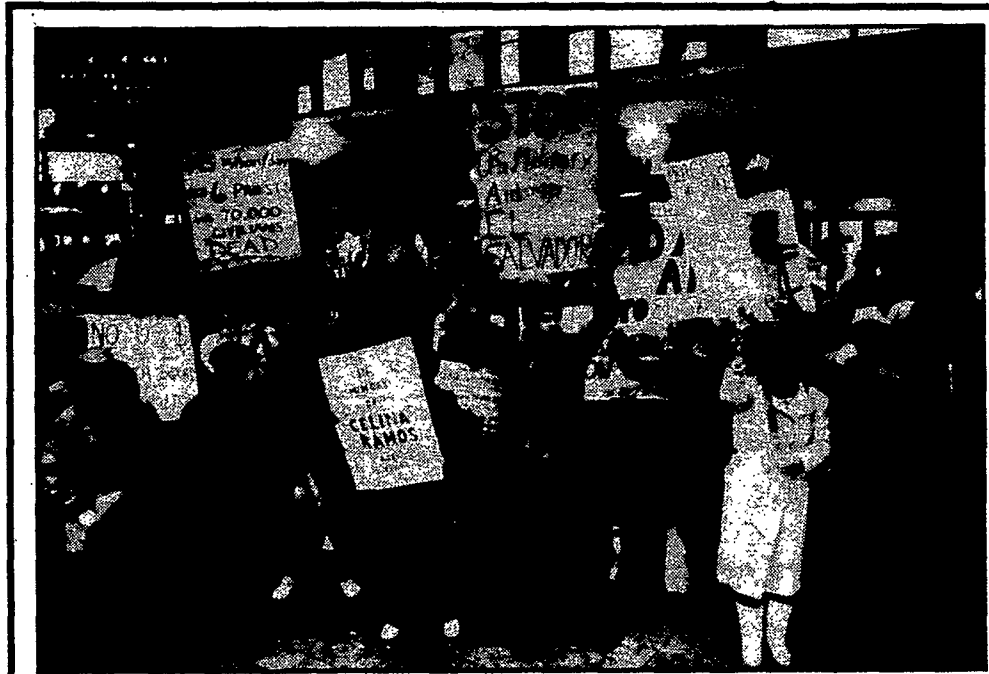
"I do think that abortion, per se, does perpetuate a kind of a violence against life. But to deny people choice does the same thing," he said, likening the prohibition of abortion to the denial of civil rights to blacks in the southern United States before desegregation.

Crossed also remarked that the task force is divided in response to her view that churches must play a prophetic role with regard to abortion. Noting that church leaders often stress compassion for women who have had abortions, she said such an emphasis can overwhelm the Christian responsibility to speak out against the practice of abortion.

"Women who have had abortions deserve our compassion and understanding," Crossed said. "We try to separate the sin from the sinner ... (But) we as Christians are also called to be prophetic. We say very clearly what the evil is. The evil is abortion."

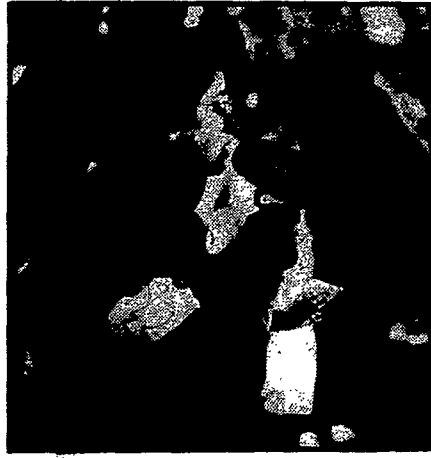
Crossed and her task-force colleagues may never see eye-to-eye on her views, but Womack asserted that the task force may

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Tom Weber

More than 200 activists protested U.S. involvement in El Salvador at a public rally Monday, Nov. 20, in downtown Rochester. The protest was triggered by the Nov. 16 killings of eight people — including six Jesuit priests — in San Salvador. At left, Sister Kathy Weider, SSJ, addresses activists in front of the Liberty Pole.



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