

'Rescues' polarize activists on both sides

Continued from page 1

cities as Los Angeles and Atlanta, Ga., as well as 1991's so-called "Summer of Mercy" in Wichita, Kan. The six-week long Wichita protests resulted in 2,600 arrests alone.

And even before it has begun, the "Spring of Life Rescue," scheduled to begin April 20 in Buffalo, has already received national attention. Some media reports have labeled this spring's massive rescue as "the next Wichita."

Furthermore, while the major protests have garnered national attention — as has Operation Rescue, the group behind many of them — hundreds of smaller-scale rescues have taken place as well.

According to Philip Lawler, author of the soon-to-be-published *Operation Rescue: A Challenge to the Nation's Conscience*, approximately 50,000 people have been arrested in connection with rescues since 1984.

These smaller rescues have been staged by a myriad of organizations that span the political spectrum. Sponsoring groups range from Liberals for Life and Rochester's own Faith and Resistance Community on the political left, to the Lambs of God on the right.

A few of the groups — including the Lambs of God — have resorted to tactics that are challenged and even disavowed by most activists in the pro-life movement. Among these tactics are the harassment of spouses and children of doctors who perform abortions, and in some extreme cases, the destruction or damaging of clinic equipment.

"There are different kinds of rescue (groups)," acknowledged Carol Crossed, a member of the Faith and Resistance Community, a group that links the issues of war and abortion.

"I think what the media gets into is the stereotype that groups are to the right," Crossed said. "I think what the media focuses on is the more extreme actions."

One of the groups charged with engaging in such "extreme actions" is Operation Rescue, which is helping to launch the Buffalo rescue. But leaders of the group deny that they are guilty of violence.

"We are totally committed to non-violence," asserted Randall Terry, who formed Operation Rescue in 1987.

"Even when we go into (the doctor's) neighborhoods, we are not yelling and screaming," Terry told the *Courier*. "We are praying for them, for their conversion."

Others disagree with characterizing rescues as peaceful demonstrations. "I think they are ingenious in describing their actions as nonviolent," observed Frances Kissling, president of Catholics for a Free Choice.

The actions involved in a rescue have to be considered as a whole, Kissling explained in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. Thus, while individuals blocking clinic entrances may be quiet and nonviolent, she claimed that those involved in picketing, chanting and speaking to clinic patients often are not.

Although they may argue over the "violence" of rescues, activists on both sides of the issue agree that the rescue movement is forcing people to take sides in the abortion debate.

"By making people take a stand one way or another, the movement has certainly polarized the issue," Lawler said in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "It's had a tremendous effect."

"We have heightened the debate," Terry declared. "When Operation Rescue exploded on the scene in 1988, it



File photo
Father Anthony Mugavero of St. Theodore's Church kneels to pray by his cot in the Monroe County Jail. The priest was serving a sentence stemming from a harassment charge in front of a doctor's office clinic in May, 1990.

put the issue back on the front pages.

"Someone sitting in their living room watching what we are doing has to ask, 'What drives these people to do this?'" he added.

Kissling, on the other hand, believes that rescues actually tend to undermine the pro-life movement.

"In terms of the attitudes of the public toward the pro-life movement, I think in general rescues have reinforced or created a negative perception of the movement," Kissling said. "It has actually been helpful to the pro-choice movement."

The potential for violence, however, has led the Catholic Church to be cautious in dealing with the rescue movement, acknowledged Helen Alvaré, director of planning and information for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities.

In a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*, Alvaré noted that, in general, bishops who have written on the issue of rescues have been supportive — provided the protests are done nonviolently.

"Generally, (the bishops) are in agreement that public protest is a very powerful and very useful and very important part of the pro-life movement," Alvaré observed.

Yet the general public apparently has mixed feelings about the rescue movement.

The Gallup Organization, which regularly conducts public-opinion polls on abortion, found a virtual stalemate among respondents to a nationwide survey conducted after the Wichita rescues. In the poll, released Sept. 11, 1991, Gallup concluded: "Neither the 'pro-choice' nor the 'pro-life' side of the abortion debate has attracted new supporters over the past two months, since Operation Rescue's Wichita campaign came to national attention."

While public opinion is important, the ultimate goal of rescues is "to save children from death and women from exploitation," noted Karen Swallow Prior, spokeswoman for the Western Pro-Life Rescue Movement, which is coordinating the upcoming Buffalo rescue.

Likewise, assessments of rescues' success in preventing abortions vary according to the speaker's position on the issue.

"There have been a lot of babies saved," Bishop Vaughan asserted. "That's been documented by the number of women who have changed their minds."

According to Prior, several hundred women each year are dissuaded from having abortions in Buffalo alone, where protests and rescues have been going on for years.

She acknowledged that some of these women do eventually seek out abortions later, but noted that studies have shown that one out of five women who misses her initial appointment for an abortion will not schedule a later appointment.

On the other hand, Kissling said, "To the best of my knowledge, (rescues) have not significantly succeeded in preventing abortions. They have caused some confusion ... they have caused some people to turn around, but they just go back later or go to another facility."

But even if the numbers are small, the fact remains that some abortions are being prevented, Lawler said.

"Taken on its own terms, (the rescue movement) does save babies," Lawler said. "You can dispute the numbers, but it has certainly saved hundreds."

One frequently voiced criticism of the rescue movement concerns the fate of women who decide not to go through with their scheduled abortions.

In Wichita, the rescue campaign actually led to alternatives for these women, according to Christopher Riggs, editor of the *Catholic Advance*, newspaper of the Diocese of Wichita.

"It resulted in Hopenet, an organization dedicated to helping pregnant women in any way possible," Riggs reported. That help includes support and assistance both before and after the birth, he said.

The rescue also helped to solidify Wichita's pro-life movement, and led to such new organizations as Doctors for Life and Nurses for Life, Riggs added.

Buffalo pro-life groups already have a history of working together, Prior noted. "As soon as a woman changes her mind, pro-life doctors make themselves available," Prior said. Several crisis pregnancy centers also exist to provide support throughout the pregnancy and after the birth, she added.

Even as preparations are underway for the Buffalo event, the rescue movement is shifting its focus, Terry observed.

Previously, Terry said, rescues had been aimed at clinics. Now, the doctors themselves are being increasingly targeted.

"We're going to go to their homes," Terry said. "We're going to picket on the sidewalks in front of their homes. We're going to be publicly disgracing them for the murders they've committed."

Bishop Vaughan, for one, supports the decision to picket at the doctors' homes.

"I think the move to picket at the doctors' homes, that has arisen out of things said by people who have come to the movement who used to be involved in abortions," Bishop Vaughan said. "They said it would be more effective to make the doctors see what they are doing."

According to observers, this tactic will be used in Buffalo. The rescue campaign will include what is being called "Operation John the Baptist," in which — as outlined by a brochure distributed by rescue organizers — activists will employ "a strategy to expose the abortionist and his crime to the public, his neighbors, friends, and colleagues."

"What we are hoping" Prior explained, "is to expose them not only to the community at large, but also to expose the abortionists to themselves. We hope to spur their consciences, because only then will they turn away from performing abortions."

Alvaré pointed out that few bishops had as yet commented on this relatively new tactic in the rescue arsenal. But, she observed, "I suspect (the bishops) would have difficulty with targeting people."

Speaking for herself, Alvaré said, "As a lawyer, my first response is that a constitutional right of free speech allows us, without trespassing on their property, to do that sort of thing. But are we harming someone personally for a good end?"

This year may provide some answers to that and other questions about the rescue movement.

According to Lawler, the Buffalo rescue may mark the beginning of a series of rescues across the country in conjunction with the 1992 presidential campaign and possible Supreme Court decisions concerning key abortion cases. He also pointed to shifting directions in the movement — such as the new focus on the doctors who perform abortions.

"I think something new is going to have to happen if the movement is going to maintain its momentum," Lawler said.

Buffalo's pro-life movement already is moving in new directions because of the rescue movement, Prior reported.

"What we are seeing is a lot more pro-life people becoming involved in pro-life activities because of the rescue movement," Prior said. In addition to branching out into support and educational ministries, these activists are working in the political arena as well.

"Now we're seeing more multifaceted actions," she said.

Yet Prior discouraged comparisons of the Buffalo rescue to the event in Wichita. In fact, she said, the movement may not need to have a single action on the scale of Wichita again.

"The rescue movement will never reach the height that it once had, simply because it has come much closer to accomplishing its task," Prior concluded.