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Abortion Doctor Slain by Gunman in Kansas Church

By JOE STUMPE and [MONICA DAVEY](#)

WICHITA, Kan. — [George Tiller](#), one of only a few doctors in the nation who performed abortions late in pregnancy, was shot to death here Sunday in the foyer of his longtime church as he handed out the church bulletin.

The authorities said they took a man into custody later in the day after pulling him over about 170 miles away on Interstate 35 near Kansas City. They said they expected to charge him with murder on Monday.

The Wichita police said there were several witnesses to the killing, but law enforcement officials would not say what had been said, if anything, inside the foyer. Officials offered little insight into the motive, saying that they believed it was “the act of an isolated individual” but that they were also looking into “his history, his family, his associates.”

A provider of abortions for more than three decades, Dr. Tiller, 67, had become a focal point for those around the country who opposed it. In addition to protests outside his clinic, his house and his church, Dr. Tiller had once seen his clinic bombed; in 1993, an abortion opponent shot him in both arms. He was also the defendant in a series of legal challenges intended to shut down his operations, including two grand juries that were convened after citizen-led petition drives.

On Sunday morning, moments after services had begun at [Reformation Lutheran Church](#), Dr. Tiller, who was acting as an usher, was shot once with a handgun, the authorities said. The gunman pointed the weapon at two people who tried to stop him, the police said, then drove off in a powder-blue Taurus. Dr. Tiller’s wife, Jeanne, a member of the church choir, was inside the sanctuary at the time of the shooting.

The police in Wichita described the man who was detained as a 51-year-old from Merriam, a Kansas City suburb, but declined to give his name until he was charged. The Associated Press reported that a sheriff’s official from Johnson County, Kan., where the man was taken into custody, identified him as Scott Roeder.

The killing of Dr. Tiller is likely to return the issue of abortion to center stage in the nation’s political debate. Until recently, [President Obama](#), who supports abortion rights, had largely sought to avoid the debate. Last month, he confronted the issue in a commencement speech at the [University of Notre Dame](#), an appearance that drew protests because of his views. During the speech, he appealed to each side to respect one another’s basic decency and to work together to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies.

Mr. Obama issued a statement after Dr. Tiller’s killing, saying, “However profound our differences as Americans over difficult issues such as abortion, they cannot be resolved by heinous acts of violence.”

Advocates of abortion rights denounced the killing, saying it would send a renewed, frightening signal to others who provide abortions or work in clinics and to women who may consider abortions. Some described Dr. Tiller as one of about only three doctors in the country who had, under certain circumstances, provided abortions to women in their third trimester of pregnancy, and said his death would mean that women, particularly in the central United States, would have few if any options in such cases.

“This is a tremendous loss on so many levels,” said Peter B. Brownlie, president of [Planned Parenthood of Kansas and Mid-Missouri](#), who had known Dr. Tiller for years.

Opponents of abortion, including those here who have been most vociferous in their protests of Dr. Tiller and his work, also expressed outrage at the shooting and said they feared that their groups might be wrongly judged by the act.

Troy Newman, the president of [Operation Rescue](#), an anti-abortion group based in Wichita, said he had always sought out “nonviolent” measures to challenge Dr. Tiller, including efforts in recent years to have him prosecuted for crimes or investigated by state health authorities.

“Operation Rescue has worked tirelessly on peaceful, nonviolent measures to bring him to justice through the legal system, the legislative system,” Mr. Newman said, adding, “We are pro-life, and this act was antithetical to what we believe.”

By late Sunday, Mr. Newman said, some were already suggesting that there were links between the suspect and Operation Rescue. Someone named Scott Roeder had made posts to the group’s blog in the past, Mr. Newman said, but “he is not a friend, not a contributor, not a volunteer.”

Dr. Tiller’s death is the first such killing of an abortion provider in this country since 1998, when Dr. [Barnett Slepian](#) was shot by a sniper in his home in the Buffalo area. Dr. Tiller was the fourth doctor in the United States who performed abortions to be killed in such circumstances since 1993, [statistics from abortion rights’ groups show](#).

Although most of the deadly violence occurred in the 1990s, advocates said, abortion clinics and doctors have continued to be the targets of intense, sometimes threatening protests. Some said they feared that Dr. Tiller’s death might signal a return to the earlier level of violence. At some clinics on Sunday, administrators were reviewing their security precautions.

Adam Watkins, 20, one of the church members, told The A.P. he was seated in the middle of the congregation when he heard a small pop at the start of the service. An usher came in and told the congregation to remain seated, and then escorted Mrs. Tiller out. “When she got to the back doors, we heard her scream,” Mr. Watkins said.

Dr. Tiller had long been at the center of the abortion debate here, one that rarely seemed to quiet much in this southern Kansas city of about 358,000.

In 1993, Rachelle Shannon, from rural Oregon, shot Dr. Tiller in both arms. Two years earlier, during Operation Rescue’s “Summer of Mercy” protests, thousands of anti-abortion protesters tried to block off the clinic, the site of a bombing in 1986.

Friends of Dr. Tiller also described regular incidents of vandalism at the clinic, and a barrage of threats to him and his family — threats they say had concerned him deeply for years.

Family members, including 4 children and 10 grandchildren, issued a statement through Dr. Tiller’s lawyer, which read in part: “George dedicated his life to providing women with high-quality health care despite frequent threats and violence. We ask that he be remembered as a good husband, father and grandfather and a dedicated servant on behalf of the rights of women everywhere.”

In recent years, Dr. Tiller had also been the focus of efforts by anti-abortion groups and others — including a former state attorney general, Phill Kline — who wished to see him prosecuted for what they considered violations of state law in cases of late-term abortions.

Two grand juries, summoned by citizen-led petition drives, looked into Dr. Tiller’s practices, including questions of whether he met a state law requirement that abortions at or after 22 weeks of pregnancy be limited to circumstances where a fetus would not be viable or a woman would otherwise face “substantial and irreversible impairment of a major bodily function” — words whose interpretation were at the root of much debate.

This year, Dr. Tiller was acquitted in a case that raised questions about whether he was too closely tied to a doctor from whom he sought second opinions in abortion cases. As recently as this spring, the State Board of Healing Arts was investigating a similar complaint against him.

Joe Stumpe reported from Wichita, Kan., and Monica Davey from Chicago.

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