

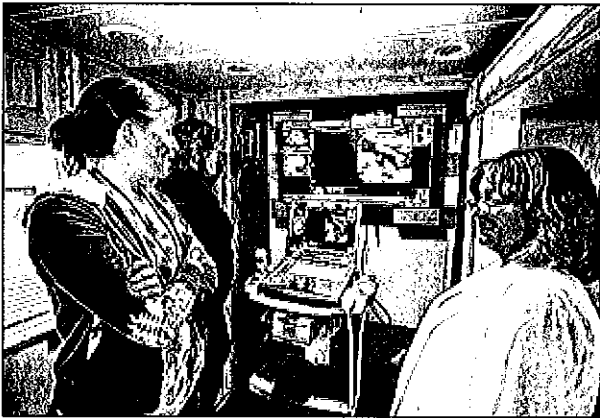
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Confronting abortion on city streets

A motor home carrying ultrasound equipment and volunteers hits the road to serve the urban poor.

By KATE LINTHICUM Los Angeles Times

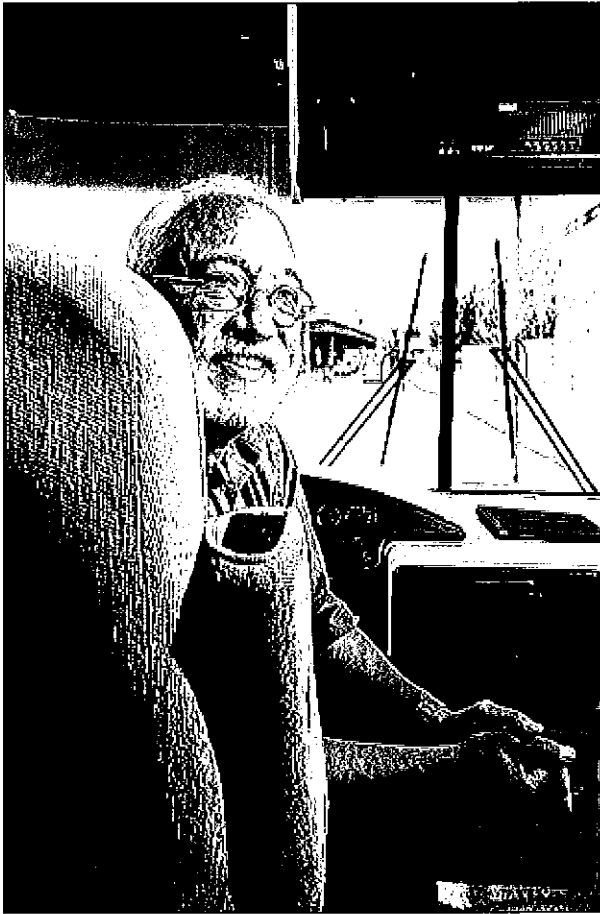
LOS ANGELES — Last year, Dave Wilkinson asked God for guidance. He wanted to know what he could do to better fight abortion.



AP Photo/Chris Wedel

Nursing and counseling volunteers await their next client on board a donated RV parked outside the Imperial Courts housing project in the Watts section of Los Angeles. The evangelical Christians bring free pregnancy detection and counseling services to low-income communities in the Los Angeles area in efforts to reduce the incidence of abortion.

Photos by Irfan Khan/Los Angeles Times



Dave Wilkinson

Wilkinson, an evangelical pastor, runs three Ventura County, Calif., pregnancy clinics that encourage women to choose alternatives to the procedure. He believes the prevalence of abortion is the biggest test Christians face.

"It's probably one of the things that American Christians are going to have to stand before God and answer for," Wilkinson said. "He will say, 'You, as Americans, what did you do to fight abortion?'"

Wilkinson, a 55-year-old Simi Valley resident with a gray beard and a calm manner, said God answered his prayers with a directive to "go where the battle is." So last September, he brought his work to Watts.

Every Tuesday since then, Wilkinson and a handful of like-minded Christians have driven into the city in a donated motor home equipped with an ultrasound machine and parked it near the Imperial Courts housing project.

They come here because Watts is one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, and abortion rates tend to be higher in low-income areas, according to the nonprofit Guttmacher Institute, a leading authority on sexual health issues.

For four hours, Wilkinson's group offers free pregnancy tests, using the ultrasound to show women images of their fetuses and leading prayer-filled counseling sessions in which they urge the women to keep their unborn babies.

Many of the women promise to go through with the pregnancy, Wilkinson said, but some say they're going to get abortions. In those "sad cases," Wilkinson said, he and his colleagues pray for the woman and the fetus and offer a phone number for post-abortion counseling.

Frequently, the encounter becomes a religious experience, Wilkinson said.

"It can be a real catalyst for people finding God, or refinding God," he said. "Because of the crisis they're in, they're more open -- and that's when we introduce God."

The bright purple motor home is hard to miss. It's covered with stickers, including a large one that says, "All services are free!"

One recent Tuesday, the first visitor was Briana Lares, a high school student who decided to stop in with her boyfriend after passing the RV on her way to her Imperial Courts apartment.

Lares knew she was pregnant and had come for the free ultrasound. She sat down on a soft couch across from Joyce Sexaur, 55, one of the counselors at Wilkinson's Community Pregnancy Clinics.

Lares, who turned 17 that day, said she had an abortion last year because her boyfriend was in jail at the time and she worried she wouldn't be able to support a child alone. The abortion had angered him, Lares said, and this time she was going to keep the child.

'SPIRITUAL WARFARE'

"I'm so happy you're making this decision," Sexaur told her. "Now, do you have faith?"

"I don't really know what I am," Lares said. "But I have accepted God in my heart."

"Good," Sexaur said. "Briana, that's going to really help. Because life can be really hard, but God will be there for you, and Briana, I believe God has a plan and a purpose, not only for you but for your baby, too."

Sexaur and the others who work at the mobile pregnancy clinic share a worldview centered on one basic idea: that life starts at conception and is a gift from God.

"This is spiritual warfare," Wilkinson said. "It's a good-versus-evil thing. Jesus came to give life, and the devil takes it."

His passion on this front was sparked in 1975, when his San Fernando Valley church screened a film by Francis Schaeffer, an evangelical pastor who was one of the first anti-abortion activists.

He was further inspired several years later when some of his classmates at a seminary in St. Louis staged protests and other acts of civil disobedience at a local abortion clinic.

While Wilkinson admired the brazenness of their work, it didn't suit his disposition. In two decades as a pastor at various Simi Valley churches, he always preferred one-on-one counseling to standing before an audience and preaching.

He believes the pregnancy clinics are a more compassionate way to urge women to see abortions as he does. In January, Wilkinson's operation expanded. The mobile pregnancy clinic now makes weekly stops near Los Angeles' MacArthur Park and in Oxnard, Ventura and Mission Hills.

In the RV, the emphasis is on birth.

COMPELLING IMAGES

"We want to educate them so they can see for themselves the miracle that this is," said Stephanie Loring, a home care nurse who volunteers two days a week at the clinic.

"It's a way that I can serve the Lord," said Loring, 22, of Westlake Village.

When Briana Lares came to Watts, Loring patted the medical chair in the back room of the clinic and instructed Lares to hop up.

Then she lifted Lares' shirt and moved the ultrasound sensor to her stomach. Lares' boyfriend, 17-year-old David Flores, looked on nervously.

An image appeared on a large flat-screen television, which had been donated by New Hope Christian Fellowship in Simi Valley. Most of the \$40,000 for the ultrasound equipment came from Focus on the Family, a conservative Christian group based in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Amid gray and white splotches, the fetus' outline appeared. Lares and Flores both brought their hands to their faces.

"Do you see the heart beating, David?" a nurse asked.

"Yeah."

"Do you see the fists?" Loring asked, pointing at the screen on which tiny hands appeared to be clasped. "It looks like it's praying," she said.

A PRAYER IS ANSWERED

While the couple watched the screen in the back, Toni Dennis stepped up the RV's front stairs.

A single mother raising a 2-year-old son, Dennis, 22, had missed her period and feared she was pregnant.

She said she had an abortion last year because "I felt I couldn't handle any more."

"I know it was wrong," Dennis said. "I went to the altar. He wasn't OK with it, but he is a forgiving God."

"You do it once and you ask for forgiveness, you can't do it again," said Pamela Lineberry, 51, of Moorpark, who volunteers with the clinic as a counselor.

Together, the women waited through four tense minutes for the results of the pregnancy test. Dennis closed her eyes and muttered prayers.

A nurse came into the room. The test was negative.

"Thank you, God," Dennis exclaimed, lifting her eyes to the sky. "Thank you, Jesus!"

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