

Pro-Life Professor Pays the Price for Convictions

For Owen Strachan, convictions come with a cost.

Strachan, assistant professor of Christian theology and church history at Boyce College, has been pro-life for many years. It wasn't until recently, however, that he decided to act on his conviction.

"I've been convictionally pro-life for a long time but hadn't taken an opportunity to get involved with the cause," Strachan says. "I was a passionate advocate for pro-life thinking, but it wasn't until coming into contact with this ministry—and finding people who were putting their convictions to work—that I started to get practically involved."

The ministry is Speak for the Unborn, which came to life when Ryan Fullerton, pastor at Immanuel Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., preached a sermon on sanctity of life Sunday in 2009. Dave and Stacey Hare, who were then members at Immanuel, decided to act on the message they heard. The following Saturday, they went to downtown Louisville to do sidewalk counseling outside of the abortion clinic.

"They had no idea what they were doing," says Andrew King, who has led the ministry at Immanuel since the Hares left for the mission field in 2010. "But they went out there and started talking to people, pleading with them not to have abortions."

A group from Immanuel continues to go out every Saturday morning to do sidewalk counseling. On Tuesdays and Fridays, a group goes from Louisville's Kenwood Baptist Church, where Strachan serves as an elder.

As a professor at the undergraduate school of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and as a pastor, Strachan's

primary calling is to teach, write and think. But he wanted to put his intellectual life to work.

“It’s an extremely good thing for our faith and convictions to cost us something,” Strachan says. “In a Jesus-like way, we can put boots on the ground and our doctrine into practice, and really experience the cost of gospel ministry.”

Sidewalk counseling makes the cost quite tangible.

“It’s not a fun ministry,” he says.

The typical morning includes waking up early to arrive by 7 a.m., when the Speak for the Unborn volunteers stand on the sidewalk outside the EMW Women’s Surgical Center next to the busy Market Street.

As women walk from their cars to the clinic door, volunteers try to engage them in conversations, which rarely last longer than a minute. Speak for the Unborn volunteers use this brief time to try and persuade these women—who are often with their boyfriends, husbands, friends or even parents—not to abort their unborn children and to receive instead a free ultrasound at A Woman’s Choice Resource Center, located next to the abortion clinic.

In the short time volunteers have to talk to these women, “You try to engage them quickly, you try to plant a seed, speak a gospel truth. And then they go in and you lose them, so to speak,” Strachan says.

The brief amount of time is not the only obstacle Speak for the Unborn volunteers must overcome. There are pro-choice volunteers there too.

These volunteers wear orange vests with the words “clinic escort” on the back to indicate why they’re there: to help women enter the abortion clinic and to shield the women from the pro-life volunteers. Interactions with escorts can turn

hostile.

“They have pushed and sworn at us,” Strachan says. “I had one escort tell me that she wished I had never been born. I had shared how thankful I was that I hadn’t been aborted and that the people walking into the clinic hadn’t been aborted, and she shouted to me that she wished I had been.”

The hostility sometimes extends from the sidewalk to the Web, where the Louisville escorts have a blog, . On the site, escorts share, among other things, stories from sidewalk interactions with people they call “antis” and “protesters.”

It is no surprise to Strachan that contact with the darkness and standing against the culture’s standards of morality can be difficult and disheartening.

“Jesus promised that ministry in His name is going to be hard,” he says. “We should expect some suffering.”

Yet despite the uncomfortable situation and the direct contact with what Strachan calls “tangible darkness,” there are reasons to endure. Just as Paul promised, God often uses fools and seemingly foolish efforts to accomplish His purposes. Even when that foolishness includes preaching to a window.

“Many of us will try to preach to the window of the waiting room where the women going into the abortionist’s chamber sit before they’re called in,” Strachan says. “We’ve seen women leave that waiting room and tell us that they could hear what we were saying outside. That’s a great thing to know, but when you’re actually preaching to a window, you feel like a fool.”

There have been other occasions for hope, as well. Heather Van Roekel, a volunteer from Kenwood Baptist Church, talked with a lesbian woman on her way into the clinic, and through her kindness and pleading, the woman decided to go in for a free ultrasound at A Woman’s Choice Resource Center. After seeing the ultrasound, she decided against the abortion. Van Roekel

has continued contact with the mother and has brought her—and the baby—to church events.

King has seen other examples of fruit in this ministry.

“I know people who have adopted children from crisis pregnancy situations,” he says. “We do see women turn away, and we get to share the gospel with those people. Every life we see saved is a reminder that the Lord is faithful.”

Currently, Immanuel and Kenwood are the only churches formally taking part in Speak for the Unborn. There are a number of Catholics and other individuals who also do sidewalk counseling—although the number of escorts usually outnumbers the pro-life volunteers—but King wants to see more evangelical churches involved.

“We would love churches to claim days,” he says. “We want to set realistic expectations, because it is a hard ministry. If your church can come out every third or fourth week even, we would love that.”

Though individuals can volunteer with Speak for the Unborn, local churches have the advantage of facing the challenge with community.

“Due to the difficult nature of the ministry, it calls out for fellowship and community, support and prayer,” Strachan says. “You can do the ministry as a lone ranger, but it’s so much more empowering to go down with fellow members, to pray together, to encourage each other between conversations, to stand on the sidewalk together. You can be a lone ranger, but you’ll miss out on so much of what God intends to give us in the local church.”

Strachan knows that those who advocate for the unborn, whether with their churches or by themselves, will face any number of obstacles. But the hope of seeing women choose life for their babies and of embracing foolishness for Christ’s sake makes

the obstacles worth enduring.

“What keeps me going is that I want to be a light, and I want to suffer in His name, and I want my faith to taste and feel more real than it does when I try to risk-proof it,” he says.

Conviction comes with a cost. But when it's life or death, the cost is worthwhile.