

Abortion Protesting on the Local Church Level

JAMES STIRLING

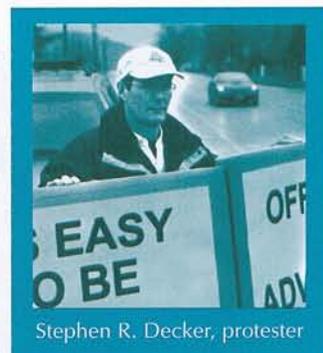
A Seventh-day Adventist pro-lifer dissatisfied with the church's stand on abortion made headlines in a local paper last April by demonstrating in front of a Washington Adventist church so often and so graphically that the church expelled him from membership. Stephen R. Decker, former member of the Redmond, Wash., church says he is trying to raise awareness among Adventists about their church's "unbiblical" stand. He says the practice of abortion violates the commandment prohibiting killing.

Chad Carlton, pastor of the church, insists that the church's action against Decker is not a response to his stand on abortion, but to his method of displaying gory images of aborted fetuses and images of baby dolls with fake blood and daggers, and to his accosting of people going by. Decker has been keeping his vigil almost every week in front of various Adventist churches for the past year, along with fellow Adventist Benjamin K. Owen, a member of the Bellevue church. According to an article by Janet I. Tu in the *Seattle Times*, the two belong to Posi-

tively Pro-Life, an informal local group of a half dozen people who have recently concentrated on demonstrating outside churches.

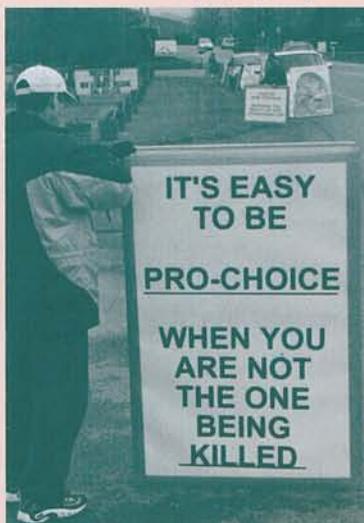
According to Gil Bahnsen, who has interviewed Decker and Owen, the church issued a statement disavowing their behavior, declaring to them that "you have overstepped the bounds of appropriate Christian behavior in your zeal to further the cause of ending abortion.... We have been disappointed by your anger, resistance and refusal to reconcile with the church. In addition, you have flatly denied a request...to not protest in front of our church again." In another statement the church said Decker was displaying the spirit of antichrist and called on him to "discontinue your demonstrations of public humiliation and join us in unity to utilize the biblical principles for resolution of sin."

But Decker and Owen remain unimpressed by the church's actions and are determined to continue their efforts to promote the cause. ■



Stephen R. Decker, protester

▼ Decker stands displaying a sign.



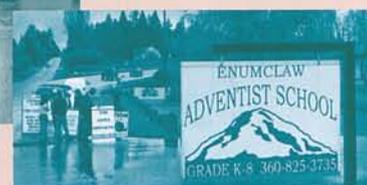
▲ Decker offers copies of the Adventist Church's official abortion policies to members leaving the church service. No one took any.



◀ The neighbor across the street parked his pickup here to block the view of the sign from his house. He said he disagreed with their message, but agreed with their right to protest. He just didn't want to have to look at the signs. He and a woman got into the truck a little while later and drove away.



▲ An Enumclaw police officer responds to a call from the church. Ben Owen (far right) gets his video camera ready for use, if need be,



to document any negative interactions with law enforcement officials. He didn't need it on this occasion. The officer verified that they were performing their protest within the law and resumed his patrol. Owen said he had contacted the police department ahead of time about this demonstration.

A church member deliberately drove his vehicle close to Sarah Thompson (middle, with umbrella) as he turned into the parking lot. When asked about his actions he told the photographer, "If my wife hadn't been in the car with me, I would have driven this close." He indicated a distance of about two inches with the thumb and index finger of his right hand. The officer returned to the church after the photographer reported this incident and maintained a presence for about half an hour.

A number of the complaints against the protestors are based on the idea of children being protected from the disturbing images displayed on the signs.

Three or four people known to the protestors stopped to talk. An Enumclaw church elder had a conversation with Ben Owen when he arrived there, but that was the only verbal interaction between the church members and protestors.

Reporting and photos by Gil Bahnsen