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## Midlands Voices: Obama 'breathes new life' into debate over abortion

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Nebraskans were pleased and proud when Omaha Creighton Prep graduate John Jenkins was named president of Notre Dame. For some, that pleasure turned to dismay when Jenkins invited President Barack Obama to speak at Notre Dame's commencement on Sunday.

Among those protesting is Bishop Fabian W. Bruskewitz of Lincoln, who calls Jenkins indifferent to Obama's "murderous abortion program and beliefs." Bruskewitz added, "The fact that you (Jenkins) have some sort of past connection with the state of Nebraska makes it all the more painful that the Catholic people here have to see your betrayal of the moral teachings of the Catholic Church."

Bishop Bruskewitz is not alone in his disapproval. Seventy other bishops have weighed in with their criticism. South Bend, Ind., has been circled by trucks and planes displaying graphic images of aborted fetuses. Protesters Randall Terry (who first gained fame when he mailed a fetus to Bill Clinton in 1992) and former presidential candidate Alan Keyes have been arrested for trespassing on campus.

Much less publicized has been the enthusiasm and support of many students, parents and faculty that has driven demand for commencement tickets to an all-time high.

Like Jenkins, I am a Notre Dame professor. I also had the privilege of attending Omaha's fine Catholic schools around the same time he did. I offer the following observations.

A majority of U.S. Catholics and residents of Omaha voted for Obama in the last election. They did not do so because of his "murderous abortion program." Rather, many viewed Obama as a man who could breathe new life into the battle for Catholic social values.

Perhaps many realized — correctly — that the pro-life strategies of the past have not brought us sufficiently closer to a world without abortion.

Self-labeled pro-life presidents have held office for 20 of the past 28 years, yet abortion remains legal. Even if that were to change, there is no guarantee that criminalization would produce the desired results.

The World Health Organization reports that the incidence of abortion is about the same in those nations where it is illegal as in where it is legal, and in the United States abortions occurred frequently even when they were banned.

Many also may have been concerned with the unintended anti-life consequences of some pro-life policies. The World Health Organization estimates that, worldwide, complications from unsafe and often illegal abortions cause 5 million women a year to be hospitalized, 67,000 women a year to die and 220,000 children to lose their mothers.

The Mexico City Policy, which banned U.S. funding of nongovernmental groups that provide abortions, also limited the ability of those same groups to provide life-saving health services to pregnant women and their infants, including prenatal and postnatal care and childhood immunizations.

None of this means that abortion is moral or should be legal. But it does suggest that, rather than simply trying to ban abortion — a strategy that produced, at best, limited success in the past and uncertain prospects for the future — we need to find ways to reduce the demand for abortion.

If implemented, Obama's plans for increases in the minimum wage, affordable day care, paid maternity leave and universal health care will hopefully encourage more women to choose life and provide the resources to make doing so easier.

Will these policies succeed? Only time will tell. But time has already shown that the strategies of the past have not produced the life-saving results that the pro-

life movement wanted. Whether or not Obama has the best strategy is debatable, but clearly new ideas are needed.

Father Jenkins has explicitly stated that the invitation of President Obama "should in no way be taken as condoning or endorsing his positions on specific issues regarding the protection of life" and has added that he hopes the invitation will serve as a catalyst for further dialogue.

Bruskewitz and others are free to condemn Jenkins for his openness to debating and discussing differing ideas that might help to move the pro-life cause further. That is his prerogative.

Speaking for myself, though, I applaud my colleague and fellow Nebraskan for having the courage to stand his ground,

and I second his call for others to join in this conversation.

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