

# Between a Woman and Her God

Clergy and Women Tell Their Stories



A Sourcebook for Legislators, Clergy, and Activists

Religious  
Coalition  
*for* Reproductive  
Choice 

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# FORWARD

By Reverend Howard Moody, Minister Emeritus  
Judson Memorial Church, New York City  
Founder, Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion

The miracle of a document like this one, the personal testimonies of clergy about women making life-changing decisions, is that it was only a few decades ago that such a book would be unimaginable. It is difficult for us today to conceive of a time when terminating your pregnancy was a crime punishable by law – a time when the emotional pain and mental anguish over whether one could get a safe abortion, far outweighed the physical pain of an abortion, a time when a woman's whole future hung on a phone call and a clandestine meeting.

It was no accident that the persons who decided in 1967 to defy an oppressive and unjust law were clergy - people of faith whose beliefs led them to help women obtain safe and secure abortions. It was our deep religious conviction that women's freedom of choice trumped any archaic law and that is what caused us to 'walk the walk' with women in need.

The Clergy Consultation Service was a faith-based organization. It was based on the faith that free choice is a God-given right with which persons are endowed. Without choice, life becomes a meaningless routine and humans little more than robots. Freedom of choice is what makes us human and responsible. For a woman, the pre-eminent freedom is the choice to control her reproductive processes. Any theological or moral argument that subordinates a woman's freedom to the imaginary screams of a fetus in early pregnancy is going to be less than human, no matter how much talk there is about the "preciousness of life".

If "right to life" is simply a crusader slogan and what is really meant is the "right to be born" than our religious traditions speaks to this issue. In my own religious understanding, being born was never seen as anything but a gift – a miraculous, marvelous surprise present – a gift of God. To speak of being born as a "right" jars the sensibilities. We are born (hopefully) of a woman's free will and human intention, at the cost of real physical pain and nourishing care, and that birth ought never be forced, compelled or mandated by another person or the state itself. Rights begin with birth – they are a birthday present – hence "birthright".

*Roe v. Wade* was a promise, written in law, that a woman would be guaranteed freedom of choice in her reproductive process. We must guard that freedom with our words and our lives. The stories of women in this book are a testament to the fact that no human right is as precious to a woman as the right to choose her time of childbearing and the role of faith in that decision making.

## INTRODUCTION

“Abortion is a personal decision between a woman and her God”

Before the ground-breaking Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*, women died of self-induced or illegal back alley abortions. In 1965 alone, 17% of all pregnancy-related deaths were due to illegal abortions. This just reflects the reported numbers; the actual numbers are certainly much higher. In 1967, Reverend Howard Moody of Judson Memorial Church in New York City, along with social justice activist Arlene Carmen, recognizing that women needed reliable information on how and where to obtain safe, albeit illegal, abortion, founded the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion. At its inception, 21 ministers and rabbis were involved. By the time *Roe v. Wade* rendered the service moot in 1973, 1400 clergy were involved, and the network had spread around the country.

Because of the work of these courageous men and women, women were able to find safer, more reliable abortions than they could on their own. And the willingness of these clergy to take a principled stand helped lay the social groundwork to allow for the legalization of abortion. Clergy undertook this task with some risk to themselves. One rabbi in Chicago had his files seized by the FBI. A minister in Ohio, whose story is told within these pages, was arrested and tried for illegally aiding a woman in obtaining an abortion. Yet, despite the risks, these same clergy today tell us, if God forbid *Roe* should be overturned, they would do it all over again. Some of their stories are contained within these pages.

In 1973, in the wake of *Roe v. Wade*, the United Methodist Board of Church and Society called a meeting of mainline Protestant and Jewish leaders. They met to discuss a movement from some conservative denominations to overturn *Roe*. The result of this meeting was the formation of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights.

Renamed the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice in 1993, it is the only national interfaith coalition working to protect a woman's right to choose. Today the Religious Coalition's membership

includes 39 organizations, including organizations from the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, the Unitarian Universalist Association, and the Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Humanist movements of Judaism. Catholics for a Free Choice and organizations from the American Ethical Movement also are members of the Religious Coalition. The organization has 27 affiliates in 24 states, and over 1800 clergy in the growing Clergy for Choice Network.

One of the programs of the Clergy for Choice Network is the All Options Clergy Counseling training and referral service. Run through the Religious Coalition affiliates, in partnership with the national office, this program trains clergy in how to counsel women and their families facing unwelcome or problem pregnancies. It is All Options, because clergy are trained to discuss all the options available to a woman, from parenting, to adoption, to abortion. It is Clergy Counseling, because it is primarily pastoral, spiritual, theological counseling, conducted by ordained clergy. Clergy who receive this training are then recruited by Religious Coalition affiliates to be volunteer counselors for their referral services. This program is a direct descendant of the pre-*Roe* Clergy Consultation Service. Some of the stories that appear in these pages come from clergy who have engaged in this important work.

Women seek out clergy for counseling on reproductive issues for a variety of reasons. All of them understand that this is a tremendously important and difficult decision, and they want to be sure to have as much information, and as much help and support, as possible in order to make the best decision they can. Unlike the rhetoric of the anti-choice movement, that would have the American people believe women frivolously choose abortion upon a whim, women deliberate long and hard before they make a decision to parent, or to make an adoption plan, or to terminate a pregnancy. In these pages you will read some of the stories from the women themselves, and see how deeply they felt about the decision they were facing.

Because of strident anti-choice rhetoric in the media, the stigma that still adheres to a decision to terminate a pregnancy is so great, that even years later they find it difficult, if not impossible, to let even those closest to them know of their abortion. This self-imposed silence only serves to further reinforce a woman's sense of isolation and loneliness. The best antidote is to bring abortion into the light of day. It is estimated that up to 43% of women will have an abortion some time before the age of 45. If women felt free to talk about their experiences, they would discover they are not alone, and they would be able to receive support and understanding from each other. However, American society seems less open and accepting of abortion today than in 1973, and so women are remaining silent. For this reason, the authors of two of the stories within chose, heartbreakingly, to remain anonymous.

Stigma is a major barrier to women seeking to make difficult decisions under trying circumstances. The current state of legislation, both on the federal and state levels, creates further barriers. Waiting periods, "informed consent" laws, attempts to ban later term abortions, parental involvement laws, and the Hyde amendment, have all made abortion an increasingly inaccessible option. Many of these laws were passed,

at least in part, at the urging of religiously conservative anti-choice groups. One of the major tasks of the Religious Coalition is to present before Congress the voice of religiously pro-choice America. Thus, our clergy and religious leaders are often called upon to present testimony to Congress regarding current and pending legislation. Some of that testimony is included herein.

We hope when you read the stories in this collection, you will see them as just the tip of the iceberg. They represent the stories of millions of women who have struggled with difficult reproductive decisions, and of the clergy who have worked hard to help them. We hope you will feel their pain, their fear, and their hopes for the future. We hope these stories will help you to put a human face to the statistics, and to see the reality behind the rhetoric. Most of all, we hope you will see in these pages the real-life impact the ability to make their own choices has had on women's lives. The "right to choose" is not just a rhetorical term, but a very real and important part of women's lives. We hope you will see in these pages the very deep commitment clergy and religious leaders have to protect and defend this right to make these choices.

*The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.*

# ABORTION BEFORE *ROE V. WADE*

**In the 1960s, clergy were horrified by the injury and death being suffered by women undergoing illegal abortions.** They became convinced of their own moral responsibility to help women with unwelcome pregnancies locate safe abortion providers.

**By the mid-1960s, a movement for the reform of abortion laws was active,** and a number of Protestant and Jewish leaders were involved. In February 1967, the New York City Protestant Council, the Association of Reform Rabbis, and several other Protestant and Jewish organizations jointly issued a press statement that attacked both the Roman Catholic view of abortion and the existing abortion laws. They described the Catholic position as “harsh and unbending” and the existing abortion laws as “unduly restrictive, tragically uncharitable, and unjust.”

Within three months of the press statement, **pro-choice clergy in New York formed the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion.** Founded in May 1967, the CCSA initially comprised 21 ministers and rabbis dedicated to assisting women seeking abortions. The founder, Reverend Howard Moody of Judson Memorial Church in New York, was an American Baptist minister. He had been one of the first clergy to voice support for Mrs. Sheri Finkbine, who in 1964 sought an abortion after learning that a tranquilizer she had taken (thalidomide) was known to cause severe fetal deformity. Moody, along with the other members of CCSA and Arlene Carmen of the Judson church, pledged to assist women in obtaining hospital abortions or refer them to doctors in the U.S. and Puerto Rico for in-office abortions.

**Within a year, the CCSA became a national organization whose membership included 1,200-1,400 clergy.** Its members knowingly faced legal retribution. CCSA groups around the country provided abortion counseling and referral services to countless women with unwanted pregnancies. As a contemporary abortion rights activist wrote, “As a religious counterforce to Roman Catholic attacks, the Clergy Service gave (the abortion rights movement) another decided advantage. It put into daily practice the philosophic stand that many denominations had already adopted—that abortion was not murder, as Catholic dogma claimed, but a humane solution to a critical problem.”

The clergy who joined CCSA were not denominational mavericks. In fact, **many religious organizations in the mid- to late-1960s and early 1970s publicly proclaimed their support for a woman’s right to choose abortion,** including the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1963 (the first denomination to adopt an official pro-choice position), the Jewish National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods in 1965, the Division of Social Ministries of the American Baptist Churches in 1968, the Southern Baptist Convention in 1971, and the United Presbyterian Church USA General Assembly in 1972.

**By 1973, when the Supreme Court handed down the landmark decision *Roe v. Wade*,** at least 20 national religious organizations had either expressed support for the liberalization of abortion laws or indicated that they viewed abortion as a matter of personal choice, or both. The denominations and faith groups lent a much-needed stability to the abortion rights movement.

### “Jane Doe”

In response to your request in my church bulletin for stories about women facing difficult reproductive decisions, I tell you my story with the proviso that my name not be used.

In 1944, having moved from a strict Protestant Midwest upbringing, with a college education but no dating background, I was swept up with war-time excitement and found myself pregnant. It is a terrifying experience, more so back then, [when it was] completely unacceptable. I found a back-alley abortion clinic, but the night before, I prayed at my church’s altar, and accepted my minister’s guidance to bring great happiness to a childless couple. I quit my job. I was alone. I ate properly though with very limited money. I hid. I am still haunted about what might have happened to my beautiful baby girl. It is emotional even now.

All I wanted was to love and be loved, but I did not learn my lesson and found myself in trouble again. No way would I go through such an ordeal again. This time I had an abortion and started life over. I would do it again. However, the guilt of having the child out of wedlock, not the abortion, hung over me until in my 70’s I finally got help. I felt like I was serving a sentence, always owing society and having to do good (that’s a plus). Then, after asking for forgiveness in the name of the church, I was able to accept and forgive myself.

All my life I have been a very active volunteer and have been given many awards. I raised my daughter [alone] from age 11 when my husband died suddenly. My life is worthwhile. I bring joy to others. I am content. But I cannot visualize what my life would have been, given the societal rejection by the so-called Christian Righters. How dare they “speak for God” and condemn me! My heart breaks for frightened young women unable to cope with a pregnancy. My prayers are with them and with [the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice] in your work.

### Sue’s Story

I very much want to tell my story, but because of my adult children I must refuse to allow my last name to be used. My story took place over fifty years ago, in the mid 1950s. I was young, just 18 years old, when I became pregnant. From the beginning, I was determined not to continue this pregnancy. I even contemplated suicide. I absolutely was not going to humiliate my mother. She would have been blamed by our parochial community. I could not do that to her. Also, I was not going to entrap the man involved. I did not want to marry under those circumstances. Some years later we were married, after I finished college and looked after my mother through a lengthy terminal illness.

I was very lucky to have the support of this man who located a doctor and his nurse who performed the abortion. The cost was \$250. The procedure was done in a makeshift surgical set up room on the second floor of an old house. I was very fortunate that it was done by medical professionals. The downside was that there was no follow-up care. In my case I healed well without any permanent damage.

What we didn’t know at the time was that we were followed that day by two plainclothes detectives. Some weeks later they came to the house where I lived, just as my friend and I were going to dinner. We were taken to police headquarters in Detroit for questioning and to look at mug shots. We were ordered to be witnesses in an upcoming trial. We had no choice but to cooperate as best we could. We had to testify in open court before a jury. To my knowledge, no one I know has ever found out. This is a secret I have kept for all this time, except from our children, who are strongly pro-choice.

### **THE CLERGY CONSULTATION SERVICE ON ABORTION - Part I** **Men's Role in the Pro-Choice Movement,** **Reverend Farley Wheelwright**

Sometime in the late nineteen sixties a member of my church took his secretary to an illegal abortionist (he was not responsible for the pregnancy). In the course of the abortion the woman hemorrhaged and died and he was tried as an accessory to her murder. I testified at his trial. That was my introduction to illegal abortions.

As a result I enrolled in a course in abortion counseling given by the minister of an interdenominational church in Washington Square, New York. A short time later I was called to the Unitarian Society of Cleveland and one of my first jobs was to organize what I believe was the first Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion under the aegis of a Unitarian Universalist Society. Subsequently many others were founded around the country, how many I do not know.

In the Cleveland area there were five, later six Unitarian Universalist ministers who were the first to sign up. Subsequently we had a rabbi, two United Church of Christ ministers, an Episcopal priest — others, in all about fifteen of us.

The Unitarian Society lent its offices as headquarters and we established a telephone answering service. To women who called, we asked for their number and gave the name and phone number to minister to make the contact. All interviews were held in the churches or synagogue. Our role was twofold:

Realizing that abortion was illegal in Ohio, our job was not only to counsel pregnant women but to locate and investigate the medical qualities of Ohio doctors who would perform abortions for women from out of state. We also had to establish a list of doctors in nearby states who would receive Ohio women we sent.

We consulted a lawyer, for we knew we were on shaky legal grounds and were told that as far as counseling was concerned, priest-penitent confidence would protect us from arrest. By having out-of-state doctors for Ohio women our only defense was that we had no idea what the abortion laws were in those states. Although few of us believed it, we all worked under that premise, and only one minister was threatened with a criminal charge, which was dropped the minute the New York State Supreme Court declared illegal laws outlawing abortion in the Empire State, shortly before *Roe vs. Wade*.

We began our program with a publicity campaign which was not hard to create. Radios, newspapers, television stations all played up our service and hardly a week went by when some paper did not call for a story. One man, supposedly representing the Wall Street Journal, called me for an interview during the course of which he asked for a photo of me in the pulpit in full regalia. Reluctantly I acquiesced and a few weeks later there was a front page picture in the *Inquirer*, a semi-porn magazine, of me standing in the pulpit, hands raised to heaven with the caption underneath reading HE LEADS YOUNG GIRLS TO ABORTION.

Later, the Wall Street Journal did come to Cleveland and gave the Cleveland Clergy Counseling Service a front page story. This time I had checked the reporter's credentials!

Not all the publicity was friendly. We tried to keep the names of the clergy private, but we were all subject to hate calls, anonymous letters, and editorials in the Catholic newspaper. I finally refused to do any further radio talk shows where I would be accused of infanticide (in much less elegant terms).

The counseling process was difficult, often heartbreaking and embarrassing. Properly this counseling should be done by women, but there was not one female clergyperson in the area at that time. And you cannot imagine the number of calls for our service. Between us, we must have counseled over a thousand young and middle-aged women. We had to be extremely careful that none of the women who came to us were moles for the government, the church, whatever.

Statistics were not kept. After the "clients" returned from their abortion, we asked them for an interview to check the doctors to whom we sent them. At the end of the interview, all our records were trashed. I wish we had kept more information. It seems in recollection that at least one fourth of the women were Catholic. Many were mothers of five or six children for whom one more would have been a family disaster.

Stories were heart-breaking. There was the wife of a Vietnam veteran who, out of loneliness, succumbed to one loveless affair. Without an abortion, it would have cost her marriage when her husband came home to find a third child, not his, in the nest. Many Catholic women said they would have the child if the Pope would bring it up.

Of the hundreds of women we were able to serve, we had only one fatality, ironically a woman whom we sent to London where abortions were legal. Her death was from unsupervised anesthetists. As Chair of the Cleveland service I took most of the publicity and punishment. When the woman died in London, my life was threatened and I had police protection from men who would willingly have killed me for killing that woman.

The day *Roe vs. Wade* was announced, the Cleveland Clergy Counseling Service on Abortion went out of business. We all heaved a sigh of relief. Speaking for myself, however, if *Roe vs. Wade* should be reversed in my lifetime, I am prepared to start up another Clergy Counseling Service on Abortion.

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### **THE CLERGY CONSULTATION SERVICE ON ABORTION - Part II** **One Minister's Story - The Reverend Robert Hare**

Reverend Robert Hare was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1962. He served as Associate Chaplain at the North Carolina State College (now University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), where he became involved in the civil rights movement, working to desegregate the city of Raleigh. Reverend Hare later moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where he joined other clergy in the Cleveland area in forming the Cleveland Consultation Service on Problem Pregnancies. Due to his involvement in the

# Abortion before *Roe v. Wade*

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## One Minister's Story - The Reverend Robert Hare, *continued*

Consultation Service, Reverend Hare became, in 1969, the only clergyman in the United States to be indicted on an abortion-related charge.

When a doctor in Massachusetts was arrested on suspicion of performing abortions, detectives were able to trace one patient's referral source back to Reverend Hare. The doctor and the minister were both indicted in Massachusetts on an abortion charge. The doctor went to prison by the end of 1969. Reverend Hare was charged with aiding and abetting an abortion, and with serving as an accessory before the fact. He fought these charges for two and a half years until the passage of *Roe v. Wade* rendered the case moot.

Reverend Hare's experiences are chronicled in a chapter of the book [Back Rooms: Voices from the Illegal Abortion Era](#), by Ellen Messer and Kathryn E. May (Prometheus Books, 1994). At the end of the chapter, Reverend Hare said, "My sense of things politically, theologically, and ecclesiastically is that we're in a very tough time and I don't see that it's going to get any easier. The battle to preserve *Roe v. Wade* is going to be a hard battle. I wish that weren't the case, but I think that's going to be the case. It would be a disaster if it were overturned."

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## THE CLERGY CONSULTATION SERVICE ON ABORTION - Part III

### Reverend Robert Frederick, East Lansing Michigan

I am not sure how the movement as a whole got started, but I guess that the Clergy Consultation Network began in East Lansing around 1970. Campus ministers began the network out here (Michigan State is located in East Lansing); it was a joint ministry of ministers involved in higher education. I think we had a staff of 4 at Michigan State who helped to facilitate the recruitment of other clergy. All of this was done through individual contact, as opposed to mass publications or anything like that.

I personally was quite reluctant to join at first. I had never been involved in any pro-choice activities, and knowing that what I was doing was illegal made it much more difficult. I wondered if I could really suggest abortion as an option for a woman. However, I did decide to do it and never looked back.

My commitment to the Clergy Consultation Network consisted of working as part of a team of 3-4 clergy members in the area. We would be on call for one weekend a month, staffing a phone. Women would get a list of our numbers and then they would choose which clergy member to call and then call us individually to set up an appointment. The vast majority of the women I counseled came to my office to meet with me, although a few preferred just to speak over the phone.

I would refer women seeking an abortion to two clinics, one was in Tokyo and the other was in London, where abortion was legal. I had a phone number to give them and that was it; I made none of the other arrangements.

## Reverend Robert Frederick, East Lansing Michigan, *continued*

I had a parish and a congregation and they knew of my work. Once, I did preach on the right to have an abortion and two members of my congregation actually came to me for a reference as a result. I think we may have even had information displayed publicly on a bulletin board or elsewhere, although I am not sure. I know other members of my congregation must have been having abortions, but many I would guess were going to other people, people they didn't know personally.

I never feared for my safety or feared that I would get in trouble with the law; all I was doing was giving out phone numbers! It wasn't really a service for spiritual guidance...

We saw many people from Michigan State. At the time, an unwanted pregnancy usually led to a shotgun marriage or to dropping out of school. It was definitely not a time when single, upper class women were raising children on their own.

There were 15 or 16 of us who met once a month to talk about our experiences. A gynecologist came to these meetings and she was probably the best in the area. This group served as both a place to learn from and support each other.

One of the largest differences I see between then and now has to do with the role of the medical community in issues relating to reproductive rights and abortion. Then, we had the medical community on our side. Today, that support does not exist anymore. You really do not find any pro-choice doctors in the Midwest. It was quite helpful to have the support of that community.

We kept the entire thing very quiet. It was not a socially accepted thing, abortion, but really you have to think about the alternatives. Not that it happened that often, but I would not minimize the threat of suicide for these women.

Other differences existed between then and now. Back in 1970, the pro-life movement was not strong or vocal, whereas today, it is both of these things. It is much scarier today with many more protests. Also, back then, sexuality in general was largely taboo. There are now less and less clergy speaking out on pro-choice issues—some are just unwilling to speak, even if they are pro-choice, but some are pro-life (I hate using that phrase—pro-life, by the way). I think people would be surprised to learn just how many clergy are supportive of pro-choice points of view.

If *Roe* is overturned and abortion again becomes illegal, I would definitely take part in a network like the Clergy Consultation again; I see such a service as having more of a need today than it did then perhaps! I am 75 and what I have come to realize is that anyone born after 1950 doesn't really know what it was like when abortion was illegal. Therefore, older people really lead this movement.

### THE CLERGY CONSULTATION SERVICE ON ABORTION - Part IV

#### “My guru said to me, we need help. So I helped” - Reverend Bob Tiller

I am originally from the DC area. I attended Yale Divinity School and was ordained in 1967. Additionally, I received a Masters in Urban Studies from Yale. I then moved to New York City where I served as Co-pastor with Reverend Leonard Chapman at an inner city church called Mariners Temple Baptist Church.

I have always been involved in movements for social change. The Civil Rights movement and the anti-war movement were the issues that defined my life and ministry. I was in Mississippi in the fall of 1963 for voter registration. I was very involved in the anti-war movement. I participated in a lot of movements within New York City, especially pertaining to issues regarding the community school board.

The Clergy Consultation network was started in May of 1967 in New York City. I moved there in June of the same year. Howard Moody, the founder, was a friend and acquaintance. In fact, he was a hero of mine who was a minister of my own denomination living quite close to me, so I saw him from time to time. There were about four of us who would sometimes just take a sandwich and go talk with him about ministry, civil rights, the war, you name it. He was what we would now call a mentor, although I don't think any of us knew that word at the time.

In early 1968, Howard was nearing 50 and pretty well known. One day, I teasingly said to him “How's the abortion business going?” and he turned to me and said “We need help. How about you?” It was the biggest challenge that had been put to me. Keep in mind, I had wrestled with many large issues, pertaining to civil disobedience, the place and role clergy should play in movements regarding social change, leadership, but I had never really thought about this issue. Abortion is what shady people did.

I thought about the issue for about a week or two; all of this thinking was theoretical, abortion had never come up in my ministry (I had been at the church for less than a year). After that amount of time, I called Howard up and said “Okay, let's go”. I don't remember what exactly it was that made me decide to do it. I know I did a lot of thinking and praying and I know I realized that there were legitimate needs that I could help meet.

I then sat down with Moody's assistant to talk about the process. She gave me the names and numbers of doctors out of town to pass on to people who came to see me. I remember referring people to doctors in Pittsburg, Puerto Rico, and England. There were no records kept of any of this; records were not important for our purposes.

I was 'on call' 1 week out of about 4 or five, along with about a half a dozen other clergy throughout the city. My secretary knew what I was doing; this all happened before there really were answering machines, so the women had to go through her.

I would say that about 2/3 of the women who came to see me were white, middle class women (very different from the people in my church) and I probably saw about 5-15 every week

that I was on-call. There was no way to disguise the work, when that number of strangers was coming into your office. In 2 years, I probably saw close to 300 people.

Women would call the Clergy Consultation Network and get the names of clergy involved and also the borough they were located in. They would then call us directly and make an appointment. Some were frightened and terrified, but many already knew they wanted an abortion and were just looking for that number. A few were wrestling with what to do. A very small amount came back again, but very few came more than once.

I am not sure how most people got the number for the Clergy Consultation Network. Probably some doctors were giving out the number, but I have a mental picture of all of these connections being made in hush-hush conversations over coffee with coworkers or girlfriends.

One particular story sticks in my mind. The doctor we referred people to in England would do what we would now call a second trimester abortion. However, it was a medical procedure that was something like a cesarean birth, which I think might be a horrendous way to have an abortion. I think that we referred people to doctors here in the US up until the 10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> week of the pregnancy, but not after that. These doctors were already putting themselves at great risk and it was important to communicate that to the women. Anyway, one of the very first girls who came to me during one of my first weeks doing this work was a sixteen year old girl who was sixteen weeks pregnant and from my neighborhood. She didn't go to my church but she was friends with a lot of people who did, so I knew her a bit. I sat there and had to think about telling this sixteen year old to go to England and have a procedure like a cesarean birth; I thought “WHAT am I doing?” I did give her the information and her parents sent her to England.

In most cases, probably 99%, I had no idea if the woman ever had the abortion. Making contact with these women after I gave them the information was unnecessary for our purposes and I wasn't doing this work for any other reason. I was part of the system. Occasionally, something would go wrong—a girl would show up in a strange city and the doctor wouldn't be there, but I really didn't have any way to change anything. I never once spoke to the doctors. In a lot of ways, I had to depend on the good will of the rest of the chain.

I remember a few other specific cases, of kids coming from elsewhere, such as Indiana, all the way to New York City because they had heard about this network. A couple of people came with siblings. A few came with their husbands or boyfriends. That was always interesting. This was at a time when men weren't really feminists or supportive in this way. However, most people were highly unremarkable. I probably sent only about 5% to England. Most knew they wanted an abortion; a few were still wrestling. I told them how much money they would need, about three hundred dollars, which was more than what I earned in a week or maybe in two weeks, but I couldn't give them any help with payment.

This work was daunting at times; it was a never-ending stream of women and we did not know how long it would last. However, it was also a source of satisfaction and gratification, because I was able to give women hands-on, concrete help with a problem.

### THE CLERGY CONSULTATION SERVICE ON ABORTION - Part V

#### “There were women among the clergy...”, Reverend Peggy Howland, Yonkers, New York

There were women among the clergy who counseled and helped women get abortions before they were legal. I was one of those women.

Yes, there were not very many women clergy before 1973, so there were only a few of us in the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion. I was one woman minister in a group of 14 clergy in the Capital District around Albany, New York, who organized a “Clergy Consultation Service for Problem Pregnancies”. I felt in those days that this was “the one cause for which I was even willing to go to prison”, but I knew I could not make this choice for my brothers in the clergy, so I was extremely careful with our efforts to take all the precautions and keep our paper trail inconspicuous and our work anonymous.

There was one male minister in those days who was arrested and tried in court in Boston for counseling a woman who had an abortion, the Rev. Robert Hare, a Presbyterian. As far as we know, he was the only minister who went to trial and faced the possibility of prison for supporting women’s right to choose before the Supreme Court decision of 1973.

One thing to note – while the leadership in the current anti-choice movement is men, many of the leaders of the movement to “reform” and/or to “repeal” abortion laws back in the 60’s and early 70’s were men.

Here in New York State, it was the New York State Council of Churches who came out strongly for abortion law REPEAL (not reform), to de-criminalize abortion, in order to end the massive number of illegal abortions and to provide safe, legal, medical care and in-hospital abortions for women. It was a male church executive who was publicizing and pushing this effort among male clergy and church leaders throughout the state.

My experience in those days was that when we women spoke out with facts, many men listened and supported our efforts and helped to carry our message to the state legislature, so that in New York we had reformed the law even before *Roe v Wade*.

I well remember one speech I gave for the Presbytery of Albany, to urge them to vote to support the repeal of abortion laws in the state legislature. A large group of older church women came out and demonstrated with picket signs inside the church, in support of my speech, and they had telephoned the local TV folks to come with cameras to see their demonstration. This was not young women seeking abortions, but mothers and grandmothers saying that they had seen the horrors of illegal abortion in their day and they wanted an end to it and a recognition of the need and desperation of women caught in unwanted pregnancies.

Now, maybe GW Bush can resist the good sense of his mother, but those men were astonished by this uncharacteristic display by older women and grandmother-types! And they voted overwhelmingly to urge the state legislature to repeal our state

abortion laws. I do think there is a tendency among men to be a soft touch for the firm convictions of their mothers!

It was so overwhelming a vote that it was quite a while later before the ultra-conservatives in that presbytery began to recover and dared to say that they were not happy with approving legal abortion.

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### One Legislator’s Story: George Michaels – A Reminiscence by his son

In 1973, the United States Supreme Court legalized a woman’s right to have an abortion. In years prior, even though each individual state was permitted to pass their own legislation regarding the issue of choice, no state assembly had ever voted to make abortion legal. In 1970, a representative in the New York Legislature named Constance Cook sponsored a bill to repeal a state anti-abortion law. This new bill would provide women with the availability of legal abortions within the first 24 weeks of pregnancy. The repeal was supported by a majority of the state Senate, and 75 votes were needed in the House to ensure the passage of the bill. The consensus throughout the House was that members would vote not along party lines, but instead they would vote by their conscience. As a result of this, support for the bill was not strictly divided between parties, and many liberal Republicans were in favor of the bill’s passage.

On April 9, 1970, the day the vote was scheduled to take place, the Speaker of the House announced that in case of a tie, he would not vote in favor of the bill. After the votes were counted, it appeared that a tie did occur. This was the chance for supporters of the bill to try and persuade assemblymen to change their vote. Democratic assemblyman George Michaels, from upstate Cayuga County, represented a heavily conservative, Catholic community. Though he supported the passage of repeal, he faced much pressure within his community to vote against it the first time around. Two of the bill’s sponsors took advantage of the tie to approach Michaels and encourage him to change his vote.

In the end, George Michaels did decide to vote in favor of the bill, and though his decision cost him his political career, supporters of choice acknowledged him a champion for their cause. Ultimately, Michaels’ decision to support the repeal of an anti-abortion law was influenced by a discussion he had with his son, Jim, one year prior. At that time, James Michaels had recently completed ten months of his rabbinic training in Cincinnati, Ohio. While living in the city, he recognized the strong presence of anti-choice rhetoric within the black community, and was taken aback by the harsh lack of support and medical care for abortions. George Michaels shared his son’s experience with the members of the New York State Assembly as he stood on the floor and gave an impromptu speech on why he needed to change his vote. Though Jim had urged his father to vote for the repeal initially, George Michaels was bombarded by pressure from the political machine in his community. When the tie was announced, Michaels knew he was morally obligated to vote truly by his conscience.

## Abortion before *Roe v. Wade*

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One Legislator's Story: George Michaels, *continued*

George Michaels' political career came to an end that day, but he will always be remembered as a defender of women's rights and an ethical politician. In this day and age, it is rare for a politician to vote consistently according to conscience, but Michaels' story proves that it only takes one vote to improve the social status of a nation. During his speech following the vote, Michaels proclaimed, "What's the use of getting elected if you don't stand for something?"

A firm believer in living by a set of ideals, Michaels also believed that if a person were to give up a political seat, there must be moral reasoning behind the decision. Success in a democratic system is as much about making the right decisions to improve the lives of your constituents as it is about winning elections.

In the 1973 case *Roe v. Wade*, Supreme Court Justice Blackmun remarked that George Michaels' courageous efforts in the New York Assembly had a tremendous impact on his decision

to vote in favor of *Roe*. In the years that followed that vote, thousands of Americans wrote letters thanking Michaels for making a difference in their lives. His memory continues to live on today, twelve years following his death. On the thirtieth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, Michaels was remembered as the man who voted to protect women and safeguard the right to choice.

One of Michaels' greatest achievements was a nomination for the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award, which honored Michaels as a man who demonstrated moral courage in showing people how to live by their values.

Rabbi Jim Michaels is devoted to helping others remember how his father defended a woman's right to choose. After one particular speech, he was approached by a young girl who asked that he thank his father for her. Though the story of this girl is unknown to us, it is a wonderful example of how the moral decision of one man, cast in one state, made one vote to affect the lives of so many people.

# ALL OPTIONS CLERGY COUNSELING

## Stories from the Front-Lines

In the following pages you will read many stories of women who have come to their clergy for help, support and advice in dealing with unwelcome or problem pregnancies. Each story is different, each woman unique. Yet some common themes emerge: the courage of the women, their struggles in the face of family and societal disapproval, and their need to come to the best decision possible for themselves and their loved ones; and the compassion and dedication of the clergy, who treat the women with the respect they deserve, give them the space and the freedom they need to make their own decisions and take charge of their own lives. Some of these women chose to parent. Some chose adoption. And some decided to terminate their pregnancies. All received comfort and support from the clergy who counseled them.

### An interview with Reverend Cynthia S. Bumb

Reverend Cindy Bumb, of the Pilgrim Congregational United Church of Christ Church in St. Louis, served as the Executive Director of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice Missouri affiliate for five years. During her time there, Rev. Bumb offered counseling to women of all ages facing difficult reproductive decisions. The most important thing to note, Rev. Bumb emphasizes, about her experiences in counseling, is that women did not come to her seeking medical or health related advice about the abortion procedure. This is what separates RCRC from Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Women came to Rev. Bumb, and other trained clergy counselors, to share their thoughts and fears about what their religion says about abortion. What does the Bible say, what was God asking them to do; these are the types of questions consuming their minds while considering abortion. The following are three stories from the many counseling sessions Rev. Bumb has held over the years.

This is the story of a child, no older than 15 years, who found out she was pregnant and wanted to keep her baby. This young girl suffered from a history of depression, and was swept away by the idealized notion of giving birth to a child who would provide with her with unconditional love. The parents did not agree with her decision to keep the baby, for they believed she was too young. They loved their daughter and only wanted what they believed was best for her. They decided to seek counseling from Rev. Bumb to discuss their situation. Throughout the session, the parents never once made any attempts to coerce their daughter into having an abortion. Already in an emotionally unstable condition, this young girl clung to the desire to have a child of her own. She felt pressure from pro-life friends who knew she was pregnant, which only added to the weight of her decision. Before meeting with Rev. Bumb, the parents decided to stand firm in their decision to not pressure their daughter into having an abortion. Whatever choice a woman makes, she will have a healthier process of recovery if she believes the choice was hers to make. In the end, both Rev. Bumb and the parents realized that the best thing they could do was pledge their support and hope she would make the best decision for her health, mind and spirit.

Rev. Bumb is a strong believer that a trained religious counselor providing advice on reproductive choice is in no position to find out what happens after a woman leaves her office. It is the responsibility of a counselor to facilitate the process of considering all possible options, but not to influence a women's decision. The more critical message here is that not all women who seek this type of counseling end up having an abortion. The issue of choice is just

that; a woman's right to choose birth, to choose adoption, to choose abortion and most importantly to choose what is best for her.

A pregnant woman, late in her second trimester, discovered that her fetus suffered from Downs Syndrome. She was overcome by an immediate sense of fear and anxiety. What state of life would her child grow up with? Would her baby face constant health problems? What kind of parent would she be to this child who was born into the world under such conditions? This woman was Roman Catholic, and she sought counseling from Rev. Bumb. The woman contacted Rev. Bumb over the telephone because she lived too far away to meet with her in person. During their phone conversation, the woman consistently made reference to the fact that she knew abortion was sinful. Rev. Bumb believed her best advice was to suggest that the woman not act against her conscience, because if she truly believed abortion was wrong than it was probably not the right choice for her in the long term.

There are certain ethics in clergy counseling that prevent a coercive decision from being made. When a woman of a particular faith seeks counseling, she will not feel pressured by her counselor, who may be of a different faith. A woman's decision whether or not to have an abortion is one that she must have complete control over, because the risk factors of coping with a decision that you did not make for yourself are far too harmful.

How does a mother bear the pain and guilt of knowing that her child was conceived during an act of non-consensual sex with her husband? The woman in this story faced such circumstances when she discovered she was pregnant after having been raped by her husband. Abuse was nothing new to their relationship, but she had already brought children into this world that she was consistently struggling to raise. Her husband believed that abortion was immoral, and he would frequently recite to her harsh "pro-life" passages from the Bible. This woman desperately needed to meet with a counselor, but because of her situation at home, it was nearly impossible for her to leave the house alone. Her only option was to speak with a counselor over the telephone, and she contacted Rev. Bumb. Rev. Bumb could sense the woman's despair and anxiety over her situation, and she was concerned for her safety. Rev. Bumb provided her with the phone number to a domestic abuse hotline and the two spoke about possible options to consider.

These are three different stories, different women, in very different circumstances, each coming to a different conclusion about what to do. Yet there is one common thread throughout these stories, and that is the necessity for each woman to be in control of her own life and to have the ultimate power over her own decisions.

## **“Unplanned is Not the Same as Unwanted,”**

**Jean Stewart Berg**

Former Chair, Religious Coalition for Reproductive  
Choice Board of Directors

Former Executive Director, Missouri Religious  
Coalition

The couple who came for counseling had been married nearly 20 years; they had a son 17 years old. The woman found she was pregnant at age forty; a total surprise to both of them. And to her own surprise, she realized she was excited about the idea of a baby, even if it was not planned. (I always distinguish between an “unplanned” baby and “unwanted” baby. The world is filled with unplanned but welcome babies!) The husband said to me, “Talk to her; she won’t listen to me. She should have an abortion.” He was adamant; “We’ve been through this before. I am not willing to start night feedings and cub scouts all over again!” And so they came together to talk through their conflict - which was deep and painful. Each expressed their fears, a mix of embarrassment and anticipation, concluding with their commitment to each other. I did point out that almost always the courts weighed in on the side of the woman and they left more peacefully than when they arrived. My parting words to the husband: “Congratulations; you’re going to be a Dad!” He nodded and even smiled.

Why I want to share this story with public policy makers is this: Reproductive Choice protects ALL the choices and offers ALL the options possible. Choice protects the right to NOT have an abortion, by pressure even by the spouse, as well as the right to have an abortion. We are not first about Abortion, we are first about Choice.

## **“A Deeply Troubled Life”**

**Reverend Judy Welles**

The one patient who really stays with me was Cathy, who came to us at about age 30 needing an abortion. She had an incredible life story: she had been widowed TWICE by the time she was 28, came from a family of 8 children (she was the 5th) whose parents were no longer living. Anyway, Cathy had petitioned for legal custody of her younger sisters and brother when she was barely 18, and won. So she was raising three teenagers when she was still one herself. Her first husband was killed in a sledding accident in Wisconsin, hit by a truck. Her second husband was killed in a motorcycle accident.

She had gotten pregnant this time in a one-night stand with a man she met in a bar. Can you imagine how much she was longing to be held and taken care of, even if only for a few hours? With all the tragedy in her life, who can fault her for seeking some pleasure with a nice man she had just met? I can’t, anyway, though I’m sure plenty of Puritans could.

Anyway, I accompanied her for her abortion and we developed a friendship. She even came to live with me for a while between households. I’ve never forgotten her and her deeply troubled, tragic life.

## **“It was Her Decision”**

**Rabbi Beverly W. Magidson, Albany, NY**

When I was a congregational rabbi there was a woman who had 3 children already who was depressed. She was struggling with going back to work after years at home with her children. She became pregnant with her 4th child and her husband was worried about her psychological well-being. Her mother had committed suicide years before. She refused to talk to someone from Jewish Family Services, but she would talk to me and I asked her what she needed from me. She said that she wondered what Jewish law said about her having an abortion—would it be murder as it was for the Catholics? Knowing her family history, I told her that it really depended on her—that if she did not feel she could handle having a 4th child, Jewish law would support her in the decision to terminate the pregnancy. She thanked me.

She made the appointment to have the abortion, and went to the office. Once inside the clinic, she changed her mind. She asked her husband if he would be ok with their having the child. He was delighted, but said he’d support her either way. She had the baby (her 4th child of the same gender) and told me afterward it was her best decision. But it was HER decision, and I wonder if she would have come out of this as happy if the baby had been forced on her.

## **“A Sacred Opportunity”**

**Judy Harrow, High Priestess, Proteus Coven  
Chair of Pastoral Counseling, Cherry Hill Seminary**

Anne stopped by for lunch last Sunday. She’s a mature, successful, professional woman, and a homeowner. Looking at the wise and confident grownup in my living room, I remember a girl at the threshold of adulthood, pregnant and frightened, facing the risk of a broken future, who once sat on that same couch nearly twenty years ago. She has done well with her life, because some of us made sure she would not lose her chance. Total strangers fought and won the legal battle for reproductive choice, but it took real friends to help her exercise her right to choose.

She got pregnant in her senior year of college, way before she was ready, financially or emotionally, to raise a child. She was living with, and still financially dependent upon, her parents. Based on religious beliefs that she no longer shared, they would have forced her to drop out of school to have the baby. She’d have lost her financial aid, and with it her promising future. Fortunately, she had others who would stand by her.

We are her coven, her chosen spiritual family, and we came through. We are a small group, and none of us was rich, but among us we were able to raise the clinic fee. In the process, we strengthened our group bond, our certainty that we could rely on one another in times of need. Every person in the group benefited from our response to one person’s crisis.

As her priestess, I arranged the appointment. Group members escorted her to the clinic and back to my house afterwards. Others dropped by with food, flowers, supportive company. She stayed with me for a few days, until she was visibly recovered, until she no longer looked shaky and weak, until she felt it was safe for her to go home.

## **A Sacred Opportunity, *continued***

It was not easy for her to go against all her instincts and hormonal drives, but our support freed her to choose her own best future. When I see her now, and think about what might have been in the days when women had no legal right to choose, or for those young women, even now, who find themselves facing a pregnancy all alone, I am grateful for the sacred opportunity to help a friend choose her own path.

## **“Driving All Night” Reverend Dorothy Chaney, Miami, Florida**

When I was about 14 or 15, I recall my aunt coming home bleeding and very weak. I had no idea what the problem was. Several days later, I overheard my grandfather and my caregiver discussing the abortion that my aunt had had, that was not done properly, and the danger her life was in. Quietly and without any discussion with anyone, I made a promise to God that if he let my aunt live, I would help women safely terminate unwanted pregnancies.

My first trip across state lines was in 1967, to help a suitemate. Caren missed her period. She was only 2 weeks late, but she was never late, and she knew something was wrong. The evening she came into my room and announced her problem, I simply looked at her. She told me she wanted to have an abortion, but was afraid because there were no known doctors in Boston at the time doing “that” procedure. But the senior girls on the seventh floor knew everything and they were my friends. I told her I would be right back. When Donna gave me the name of the nurse and the clinic where Caren could be helped, she told me that I would have to take her. I was not prepared for that. As I ran down the steps to my floor and my room, Caren was curled up on the bed. I assured her everything would be fine. Recalling the promise I made to God, I made the call, using a fake phone card number that Caren had, and made an appointment for that Friday. When we got off the train in New York, Nurse Beverly was waiting for us. She was pleasant and asked which one was Caren, she explained the procedure to us as we walked about 5 blocks to a very nice hotel, and she told us the cost would depend on how far along Caren was. Caren had \$200 and I had a \$100, so we bought round-trips tickets with my father’s AMEX card (trust me, that was hard to explain). Luckily from the examination, Nurse Beverly said Caren was only about 4 weeks pregnant and the abortion would cost us \$150. God always answers prayers.

Caren and I spent the night in New York. She was scared and feeling bad and I was happy that I had kept my promise to God. Caren and I never spoke of that weekend again, until a couple of weeks ago, when I called and asked if I could share the story. I made that trip several times before graduation and never with any regrets.

My last transport happened in 1994. There was a young female minister, who knew her ministry would suffer and she would be put out of the church, if they discovered she was expecting. The morning she called and told me her problem and that she could not have it done in Dade County, I made a hotel reservation first and then an appointment for the abortion. When we arrived the morning of the appointment, several pro-lifers were there. I did

## **Driving All Night, *continued***

not want a confrontation, and as the Lord would have it, they were so busy praying they didn’t see us go in. Once again God was on my side.

I don’t understand how it’s all right for us to kill children on far away soil and pregnant women in the name of freedom, but women in this country become government property the minute they conceive. We can never go back, never, and I’ll drive all night to make sure all women can have safe abortions.

## **“A Son’s Story of Loss” Reverend Dr. Katherine Heart**

I have been providing pastoral counseling to a 61 year old man whose mother died of complications from a back alley abortion in Chicago when he was only 18 months old. He was the first child. The father did not want to have another child so soon, so, she decided to have an illegal abortion. When she died, her husband was unable to care for his small child and had to give the child to the woman’s mother to care for and to raise. So, this man was raised by his maternal grandmother and had little and then no contact with the father.

The man has had difficulty forming intimate and lasting relationships which can be traced back to the loss of both parents following the death of the mother from a botched attempted abortion. Like so many men he had not sought counseling prior to our meetings and has tried to just “tough it out.” While he went on to marry in his thirties, he later was divorced. His wife claimed that “he could never really love someone.” This man is very socially adept and has done well in his work, but he is now retired and wants the companionship and intimacy of a marriage.

We have been discussing his life experiences and he is working to open himself emotionally to a current relationship with a woman he is dating; however, I am not confident of his ability to form a lasting intimate relationship or marriage with someone.

At age 18 months, he lost his dearest friend and support, his mother. All because she could not have a LEGAL choice in family planning.

# CLERGY SHARE THEIR OWN STORIES

For a clergy person, there are certain risks involved in standing up for a woman's right to choose. There is a risk in speaking from the pulpit on issues related to choice, a risk of being seen as too far ahead of the congregation on social issues, a risk of losing one's job. There is a risk of counseling women facing difficult decisions, a risk of the congregation resenting time given to women from outside the congregation. To attend a pro-choice march or rally, to be public and outspoken for choice, risks public censure and can even risk personal safety. But the greatest risk of all is for a minister to stand up publicly, and say that she herself has had an abortion. For women clergy, many of whom are still struggling to be seen as legitimate religious leaders in a formerly all-male role, to be seen as less than perfect, as subject to the same human frailties and the same vagaries of life as their congregants, is to risk a diminishing of the congregation's regard and support. For the congregation, perhaps still struggling with the image of a woman in the pulpit, and certainly under the sway of the religious right, which would have everyone believe that to be religious is to be anti-choice, the picture of their clergy not only as being pro-choice, but of having made the choice for abortion for herself, may be a picture too difficult for them to focus upon. So when you read these pages, think of the tremendous courage it took for these women to share their stories with you.

## **Breaking the Silence: My Abortion Story** **Reverend Susan Criscione**

In 1994 I had an abortion. It was a difficult choice for me to make, and yet I know it was the best choice for me in that time and place. I am an open person. I share my life with those around me whom I care for and who care for me. Suddenly I found myself in a situation where I could not share a very intimate piece of myself with those I knew and loved. I began to fear that if I shared this part of myself I would be shunned, disregarded and ignored. I chose to tell my parents that I was pregnant and that I was planning to have an abortion. Although my father was saddened by the news, he supported me and told me he loved me. However, my mother reacted far differently. She called me a whore, a slut, a sinner and then said the words that still haunt me to this day "you can't have an abortion and be a minister."

It was at that time that I realized that the only entity I could turn to was God. Only God and Jesus could walk through this experience with me and give me the love and acceptance I needed and deserved. I prayed to God to be with me. And I knew that God was there with me at the clinic as I recovered, even as I went on about my daily life stuck in depression and dislike of myself. I saw Jesus in the friends that surrounded me with care. I saw Jesus in the baby I met on the Underground that smiled at me and patted me on the leg. I saw Jesus in the worship at churches I visited across London.

But that wasn't enough for me. I gradually became more and more frustrated that I could not share this experience with others. I felt silenced. I felt ignored. I felt de-valued. This experience of abortion that taught me so much about God's gracious love for me was not something that was acceptable to speak about. This pivotal moment when I knew that I accepted Jesus as my Lord, my Saviour, my friend – was not appropriate to share.

Years passed. I entered therapy. I met with a Spiritual Director. I processed my experience with loving friends and a caring church community. I created a ritual of healing for myself and for the one that would not be. I was able to integrate the experience into my faith journey. I wrote my Master's thesis on a theological approach to offering pastoral care to women who have chosen abortion. It seemed that it was all coming together.

And now, I am a minister at a church in Massachusetts and I am going through the ordination process within the American Baptist Churches USA. As I write my ordination paper and reflect on my faith journey I still hesitate to share my full conversion story with the Ordination Council. I long to speak my truth and yet I know that the possibility of attack is great. The political and spiritual climate around abortion is insane. And I find myself caught in the middle of it, yearning to remove the shackles of those who judge and condemn, and yet frightened to share the real me with those who may never understand.

As a pastor, as a woman, as a believer – I believe that it is time for me to share my story in the hopes that other women of faith will be able to speak their truth, always trusting that God is with us amidst it all.

## **My Story, Reverend Barbara Condon**

I would like to share with you my story with regards to a woman's right and the need to sometimes terminate a pregnancy in the hope that it may help to keep this choice legal and safe.

First, a little bit about myself. I am a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I have been serving as pastor for thirteen and a half years. I am married to my second husband. We have been married for five and a half years and it is a very happy and healthy marriage. He was a widower and is very active in his Roman Catholic Church. I was married before for fourteen and a half years and it was a very unhealthy and abusive marriage. That marriage ended in divorce.

I have no children, although through my current husband I am deeply blessed to have eight grandchildren and to share in the lives of his six children and their spouses. The first week that my current husband and I were dating, I felt it necessary to tell him something about my past that could have caused him to terminate our relationship, but that needed to be shared upfront. I have had three abortions.

## Clergy Share Their Own Stories

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### My Story by Reverend Barbara Condon, *continued*

My first abortion occurred in 1975 when I was a sophomore in college. It was a one night stand in a college party situation. I was young and stupid. I had been on birth control pills previously, but since I wasn't dating anyone and not 'intending' to have sex, I was no longer taking them. But it happened –once- and I got pregnant. Thank God there was a Free Pregnancy Clinic in the city up the road. They helped me with all of the arrangements. I had to take a bus to another city for the procedure but it all went well. I knew that I was not emotionally mature enough nor financially able to have a child at that point in my life.

My second abortion came during the early part of my first marriage. By then I had found out that due to migraines, I was unable to take birth control pills. We used a diaphragm for birth control. My husband was one that insisted on sex even if I wasn't interested. I usually obliged without a fuss. On one occasion, in an effort to satisfy him, I took the risk of having unprotected sex with him. I became pregnant. I had told him before we were married that I did not want to have children and that if I were ever to become pregnant I would not go through with it. I have medical reasons for not wanting to pass my genes on to the next generation. He was in agreement about not having children. I can't explain to you the sheer terror I felt at being pregnant, both for myself and for the developing fetus. I immediately went in and terminated the pregnancy.

The third pregnancy came about in much the same way as the second, as part of a very unhealthy and destructive relationship. By this time I was in seminary studying to be a pastor. I never took the ending of these pregnancies lightly. I completely believed that if I didn't terminate the pregnancies, I would end up committing suicide. Before going in for my third and last abortion, I told God that if I ever became pregnant again I would not have another abortion. After that abortion I went in to discuss a tubal ligation. In the end my husband opted to have a vasectomy instead.

I have heard a number of people say how destructive abortions are to women. That it devastates them emotionally and spiritually. I believe that what is destructive to the women, and men, who experience abortion, is not the procedure itself but the shame, guilt and silence that anti-choice people heap on them afterwards. If women, and men, were free to talk about their abortion experiences openly, and to grieve the loss for what it is, instead of what other people want to make it, there wouldn't be so much pent up shame and guilt and the resulting depression that goes along with it. There is a big difference between grief and regret. Most people that I have encountered may have grief because of their decision (which is normal and healthy with any loss) but they don't have regret over their decision.

I grieved for my lost children. For years I would, on occasion, stop to figure out how old they would have been. But I never ever felt that I made the wrong decision for them or for myself. Not then and not now.

As a 'pro-choice' pastor I have been accused of being willing to 'encourage' women to have abortions. I explained to my accusers that I would never encourage or discourage a woman to terminate a pregnancy. If she went in for an abortion and wanted me there as her pastor, then I would go and hold her hand and comfort her. If she wanted to carry the child to full term but needed help to do that, I would help her find the resources to do

that. To me that is what 'pro-choice' means, having a real choice and being fully loved and supported in that choice. I am thankful that I had a legal and medically safe alternative to bringing three children into this world. I will continue to fight to keep that choice legal and safe, just as I will continue to support a woman's right to carry a child to full term.

### HARD CHOICES

A Sermon by Reverend Barbara Gerlach  
Delivered at First Congregational UCC Church,  
Washington DC, April 18, 2004

I was in ninth grade when Anna May dropped out of school, the first girl in my class to get pregnant. She disappeared in a whisper of rumors, never to be seen again. Such was the stigma and shame that surrounded women, in this case a 14 year old girl, who got pregnant outside of marriage in the early 60's. If you are over 50, you know stories like this one. Girls who suddenly got married in what were called "shot gun weddings" or who were quietly sent away to a relative's home till the baby was born and an adoption arranged. Women whose mothers or friends, doctors or ministers secretly helped them get an illegal abortion or who died trying to end a pregnancy with harsh chemicals or a coat hanger.

Next Sunday hundreds of thousands of people will gather in Washington for the *March for Women's Lives* to protect the right of women to reproductive choice, given by the 1973 Supreme Court decision known as *Roe v Wade* which made abortion legal again after it was outlawed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since then the debate has continued to rage in Congress, state legislatures, and the courts between those who are "pro-life" and "pro-choice," with people of faith on both sides of the issue.

I can tell you the exact moment my own position in this debate became clear. It was 1971. I was in my last year in seminary and part of a women's consciousness raising group that met every Sunday night to share our experiences as women. One night the discussion turned to abortion. One of my classmates described her experience of getting pregnant while a student at Brown University and coming to New York City with her mother to get an illegal "back alley" abortion. The whole experience was shrouded in danger, secrecy, and fear. She was given an address and a special password to gain entry into a brownstone house where she was ushered in by a man wearing a mask, who quickly did the medical procedure in a dark cluttered room without ever speaking a word to her.

The second classmate, who had an abortion while she was in seminary just after a cliff-hanging vote made abortion legal in New York, described an experience as different as night from day. She went to a state-of-the-art medical clinic, talked to a counselor who carefully explained and accompanied her throughout the medical procedure. She felt safe and supported, respected and well-cared for. She also told us how getting pregnant and deciding to have an abortion became a time of deep ethical reflection, self-searching, and personal change and growth for her.

Six months later, after I graduated from seminary and John and I became co-pastors of a church in Scranton, Pennsylvania, those two stories led me to train to be a counselor with Clergy Consultation Service. Clergy Consultation Service was a group

## Clergy Share Their Own Stories

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### Hard Choices, *continued*

of ministers throughout the United States, who used their right to confidentiality in pastoral relationships to provide options counseling and referrals to women with unplanned, unwanted and “problem” pregnancies. Our job as counselors was to provide information on the various options – abortion, adoption, going through with the pregnancy and raising a child alone or with a partner – and to create a supportive environment where each woman could weigh her choices and make the best decision for herself.

During the next two years, until *Roe v Wade* made abortion legal, I had the opportunity to witness the ethical decision-making process of perhaps 30 women — young teenagers, college students, older women with several children, – as they made hard choices about their pregnancies, their lives, and their futures. Often I felt like I was on holy ground.

I never met a woman who made that decision lightly. Without wrestling with the particularity of her own life situation and the affect her decision would have on others. Without considering whether she was ready and able to raise a child. Without agonizing over what is meant to terminate the life of a fetus with a serious genetic or developmental problem. Without examining her personal values in light of the values of her family, religion and society. Nor did I meet a woman with an unplanned or problem pregnancy who didn’t have to move through a complicated mix of emotions. Fear, guilt, sorrow, grief, confusion. Regret over her failure to use birth control or a birth control failure. Anger at herself for her poor judgment or at the man who may have raped or abandoned her or who simply was not the right person at the right time to become a life partner. A sense of unfairness at how the consequences of the sexual act fell far more heavily on the woman than the man. Pressures from people who wanted to dictate or influence her decision. Yet, in every situation I also witnessed the sense of relief and empowerment, personal growth and deepening ethical sense as each woman finally made and carried through on the decision that was best for her.

But when my own daughter Jessica came home from her first semester in college pregnant, I had to catch myself. I knew what I wanted. I wanted that pregnancy to go away. I wanted Jessica to go through options counseling and decide to have an abortion. I wanted her to finish college and get everything in the “right order” to fit the future I had imagined for her. But the more we talked, I realized that Jessica, whose biological mother had given her up for adoption, had already made her decision to have and keep and raise this baby. I had to remind myself that it was her life-decision and that I needed to respect and support her choice.

Let me close by putting the question of reproductive choice in a larger biblical and theological context.

Unlike the some other currents in Christianity which have clear teaching against contraception and abortion, the United Church of Christ respects the “freedom of conscience” of each individual in matters of faith and ethical decision-making. This had led many in our congregation and denomination to be “pro-choice” and become strong advocates for a woman rights to choose and the separation between church and state so that government

does not interfere in a woman’s right to reproductive choice or access to reproductive health care.

I chose the passage about Jesus giving the commandment to love one another and then promising an Advocate, a Spirit of truth who is with us and in us, teaching us what we need to know and reminding us what is most important because this is how I experience the Spirit at work in my life and the world. I certainly have felt the Spirit alive in Jessica’s decision and the way our family came together around her pregnancy and Antonio’s birth, and in the support of this church and the stories many of you have shared about your own reproductive decisions. It is true. Trusting in the active presence of the Spirit of truth, advocating for us in our most difficult decisions, makes us less afraid, increases our sense of peace, and deepens our ability to love one another.

In today’s story, Jesus appears to the disciples huddled in fear behind closed doors. Jesus begins with where he left off before his death. He greets them with “Peace be with you.” Then he breathes on them and tell them: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive sins, they are forgiven. If you retain sins, they are retained.”

At my husband John’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party, a friend asked people to share an image that described him. At the very end of the circle, Jessica said very softly, “Forgiveness.”

Think about forgiveness in relationship to some of the big mistakes or messes you have made in your life, or the big grievances and disappointments you are holding against others. Think about the stigma and desperation that still surrounds unwanted pregnancies. Remember the recent rash of stories. Babies left on doorsteps, some found living, some already dead. Babies wrapped in blankets and thrown into the water to drown because the woman, probably a young teenage girl, felt all alone with no one to turn to, no human advocate to create a safe and loving space where she could make her decision, no one to help her plead her case with her parents, who may not have known what was best for their daughter. I think of Deborah, who told us how her mother forced her to have an abortion at 16. Or a Native American friend, whose adopted mother forced her at 16 to give up her daughter for adoption immediately after birth without even letting her hold the baby she carried for nine months. Experiences like these can help us understand why some people are opposed to the requirement that minors notify and receive parental permission before they can get an abortion. No state or religious authority, no parent or boyfriend should be able to force a woman to bear a child, abort a child, or put a child up for adoption.

When my mother first learned that Jessica was pregnant, she told my sister, “This is the worst tragedy that has ever befallen our family.” When I reported my mother’s comment to my sister-in-law, she said, “Well, it’s good that one’s behind you!” What seemed so difficult at the time, and must have been hardest for Jessica, became a blessing – the life of Antonio, the coming together of our family, the deepening of our relationship with Jessica. Watching Jessica take responsibility for her decision, care for herself through her pregnancy, be a loving mother to Antonio, grow in confidence and find her way back to the University of Maryland where she graduates on May 20, confirms my trust in a women’s right and wisdom to choose what is best for her and leads me to march next Sunday to protect the right of each women to make her own decision.

# ABORTION IN THE LATER-TERM

In the past ten years, there has been a lot of rhetoric and misinformation in the media and presented to the state and federal governments about later term abortions. Anti-choice forces would have everyone believe that women are going to their doctors' offices in droves, up to the last minute of pregnancy, and demanding abortions for the most frivolous of reasons. This is simply not the case. In fact, the vast majority of abortions are performed in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, and only 1.5% takes place past the 20<sup>th</sup> week. In fact, Roe v. Wade itself bans abortion in the third trimester, except in cases where the life or health of the woman is at risk. In fact, the proportion of abortions past the first trimester has gone down since Roe, because of access to legal abortion in the first trimester. (Planned Parenthood Fact Sheet: Abortion in the First Trimester)

There are many reasons why a woman might delay obtaining an abortion. Legal and practical barriers can force a woman to delay seeking medical care. 86% of counties in the U.S. have no abortion provider, so often a woman must a considerable distance to find a provider. This means taking time off of work, finding child care for her children, finding a means of transportation, perhaps having to stay somewhere overnight. She must lose a day's pay, and raise funds not only for the abortion itself, but for the transportation, child care, hotel, etc. The longer she waits, the more the fee goes up, the more money she has to raise. It can become a vicious cycle.

Some women, the very young and the pre-menopausal especially, might not realize right away that they are pregnant. They might be in denial of the reality and delay confirmation of their fears. Other barriers, such as parental consent laws, waiting periods, and restrictions on federal funding for abortion, make access to early abortion difficult, if not impossible.

Finally, medical indications that a pregnancy is not going well usually do not surface until the second or even third trimester. Maternal health problems such as depression, high blood pressure, gestational diabetes, and preeclampsia may not occur until late in pregnancy, or may become much more severe as the pregnancy progresses. Severe fetal anomalies often are not detected until a late ultrasound or amniocentesis. It takes time to recognize a potential problem, schedule and perform tests, study the results, see specialists, and finally come to a diagnosis and know that a decision has to be made. These cases are the most heartbreaking of all, as these are pregnancies that were wanted, hopes and dreams were pinned on the baby to come, and all is dashed when a woman is told her pregnancy is endangering her life, or the fetus has a condition that is incompatible with life. Women in these circumstances need to know their family, friends, and clergy are with them, there to give them comfort and support.

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## **“My Personal Story”**

### **Cella Roberts**

Thank you for inviting me to speak as an expert witness regarding late-term abortions. Although it is not an easy subject to talk about, I feel God has called me to speak about this sad event of my life in order to help save other women's lives.

I am a 41-year old wife and mother. I am married to a wonderfully supportive husband of almost 8 years and we have a 6-year old daughter (biological) and an 18 month old daughter, just recently adopted from China! I hold a B.S. in Music Education from Hartwick College and a Master's in Music

Therapy from Florida State University. I have taught in public and private schools in Florida and New York, working with multi-cultural and multi-generational populations. Eric, my husband, and I co-founded, directed, and taught a unique and innovative music program in New York City called MusicMagic.™

I have always been very involved with the community in numerous ways over the years. Presently I am a Daisy Girl Scout leader, Parent Classroom Rep for my daughter's class and sit on the Parent council, take Suzuki violin with my daughter, am on

## Abortion in the Later Term

**“My Personal Story”, Cella Roberts, *continued***

the Board of Sisterhood at Temple, and volunteer in serving homeless families through IHN (Interfaith Hospitality Network). I most recently joined The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC).

My story begins back in May of 2002. I was 16 weeks pregnant and began feeling sick. I was extremely fatigued and was constantly hungry. This was beyond a “normal” pregnancy. By my 18<sup>th</sup> week, I was put on strict bed rest. My husband took off from work to care for our daughter. You see, we can’t just have Zoe be taken care of by anyone, she has 20 food allergies, cat & dog allergies, asthma, and has DSI (Dysfunction of Sensory Integration).

After several days of my heart pounding so hard and so rapidly that I couldn’t sleep and where every minute felt like an hour, I finally went to the doctor. Within 24 hours I was told by my doctor to pack my bags and make child-care arrangements. I was being admitted to Rose Hospital. While I was there, the doctors discovered that my blood sugar was very high and had been very high for at least 3 months (verified through a Hemoglobin A1C test). I was then instructed on how to give myself insulin shots and how to check my blood sugar 6 times per day.

The doctor explained that with a pregnancy, blood sugar intolerance only gets worse as the pregnancy goes on. I would be looking at increasing the insulin until I was at such a heavy dose that I would ultimately need an insulin pump until I delivered the baby. The potential problem we were facing with the growing fetus was a possible birth defect. After an initial sonogram, the doctors thought they saw a problem with the fetal heart and called in the pediatric cardiologist. He thought what he saw was a Hypoplastic Left Heart, but wasn’t certain; he had to wait until the fetus grew for another 3 weeks to get more accurate pictures to make a final determination. In the meantime, he gave us information about a fetus with a Hypoplastic Left Heart. My husband and I were upset, yet still hopeful. We knew that I was going to be “sick” for the remainder of the pregnancy and that we needed a lot of help at home, as well as help taking care of Zoe.

After terrible anticipation for 3 weeks, it was finally the day for the most important visit with our doctor; the day that would determine the fate of this fetus. I knew that I would be extremely emotional upon receiving bad news, so I asked my Rabbi to accompany us to that doctor visit, to hear all of the info and ask the appropriate questions in order to help us process and choose the moral and ethical thing for us to do.

My worst fears had come true. It was determined with 100% accuracy that the fetus had a Hypoplastic Left Heart and would die shortly after birth, that the fetus wouldn’t develop the Left Heart, and that it would not survive without the left chambers. I was DEVASTATED. I wailed for a good long time and then when I got the wail down to a sob, we were able to process and speak to the Rabbi about Jewish thought, ethics, and law. I COULD NOT at the time even CONSIDER terminating the pregnancy. I thought I was going to be brave and carry through as long as I could, knowing that the fetus was going to die shortly after birth, and knowing that I was facing increased blood sugar problems, an insulin pump, probably hospitalization, and possible toxemia, a

life-threatening situation. After the initial shock and deep soul-searching, I remembered the words of the Rabbi—that I was someone’s mother, wife, daughter, aunt, daughter-in-law, friend, neighbor, etc. That I had a responsibility to those loved ones who are LIVING!!! It didn’t make sense to lay my life on the line, to be sick, unavailable to my daughter and husband if there was no chance of fetal survival. I knew according to Jewish law that in this case, I had to choose LIFE, and that life was mine.

Abortions are never a clear black and white case. There are many factors involved. Certainly someone choosing to terminate a pregnancy at 25 weeks is doing so out of absolute necessity. It was hard enough walking into the abortion clinic every day (the D&E was a 4 day procedure), and even that much harder when protestors are “in your face” with their religion. My religion gives me guidelines and particular Jewish law on how to live.

It is scary to think that if I was in this exact situation today, it would be illegal for me to terminate the pregnancy. I would be forced to risk my life with knowing that I would lose the baby at birth or shortly thereafter. I cringe to think I may not be here today to take care of my family, or even to have received Lilly in China. I can respect people with their choice to choose differently than I did, and at the same time we need to DEMAND that we all have the right to follow and practice our own religions and have the choice to safely choose or not to choose to terminate a pregnancy.

### **“Late-term abortion – Is It Jewishly acceptable?” Rabbi Jonah Layman, Shaare Tefila Congregation, Silver Springs, MD**

About three years ago a young couple - newly arrived in the area and new to my shul - arranged to meet me in my office. She was 20-25 weeks pregnant and the most recent doctor appointment showed something wrong with the baby. After further tests it became clear that the fetus had a rare malignant tumor growing on the outside of its body - on its back. Based on the research the couple had done - they were biologists at NIH - and based on what the doctors told them, there was nothing they could do in utero. Also, if the fetus were born it would die shortly after. The tumor was growing dangerously close to the spine and it would suffer a painful death.

The couple asked what their options were and if late-term abortion was Jewishly acceptable. The ethics panel at the hospital convened a special session and okayed the procedure and I did too. Two weeks later the procedure was done and I buried the fetus in our synagogue cemetery. Fortunately the couple recovered and delivered a healthy girl 1 1/2 years later.

# CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY BY CLERGY

The United States is the most religious nation in the world. But we are not monolithic in our religious beliefs and expressions. There is a tremendous religious diversity in this country, and the extent to which that diversity is honored and celebrated, yet kept separate from governance, is part of what has made this nation great. The wall of separation between religion and state is also one of the great strengths of this country, but it does not preclude Congress from using ethical considerations in making public policy decisions. What it does mean, though, is that Congress has to be careful to make laws on the basis of shared ethics and does not impose any one religious point of view on the country. That is why it is so important, when ethical and moral considerations are paramount in any proposed piece of legislation, that a great diversity of religious views are allowed to be heard. The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice has always appreciated the opportunity to provide testimony before Congress, presenting the religious pro-choice view on proposed legislation. Some of the testimonies our clergy have given in the past are presented here. We hope you will learn more about the religious support for choice from these pages, and we hope Congress will continue to call upon us for testimony in the future.

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## **Testimony of The Rev. Dr. Katherine Hancock Ragsdale, Episcopal Priest Chair of the Board, Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice**

Before the House Judiciary Committee - Subcommittee on the Constitution

On the Child Custody Protection Act H.R. 3682/S.1645

May 21, 1998

Ladies and gentlemen of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to speak with you this morning. My name is Katherine Hancock Ragsdale. I am an Episcopal priest and chair of the board of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, a 25-year-old coalition of over 40 national religious organizations representing over a dozen mainline denominations and faith groups. I am also the vicar, or priest in charge, of a congregation in a very small town in Massachusetts. It is primarily as a parish priest that I am here today. As a parish priest it is my privilege to be intimately involved in the lives of a variety of people who struggle every day with what it means to be ethical, morally responsible people of God in an always complex, frequently confusing, sometimes difficult, and occasionally tragic modern world. It is my job, and my joy, to try to help, and that's why I'm here today.

Not so very long ago I left my home near Cambridge, Massachusetts, and drove to one of the economically challenged cities to the north of me to pick up a fifteen-year-old girl and drive her to Boston for an 8 a.m. appointment for an abortion. I didn't know the girl—yet I knew her school nurse. The nurse had called me a few days earlier to see if I knew where she might find money to give the girl for bus fare to and cab fare home from the hospital. I was stunned—a fifteen-year-old girl was going to have to get up at the crack of dawn and take multiple buses to the hospital alone? The nurse shared my concern but explained that the girl had no one to turn to. She feared for her safety if her father found out and there was no other relative close enough to help. There was no one to be with her. So I went. And during our hour-long drive to Boston we talked.

She told me about her dreams for the future—all the things she thought she might like to do and be. I talked to her about the kind of hard work and personal responsibility it would take to get there.

She told me about the guilt she felt for being pregnant—even though the pregnancy was the result of a date rape. She didn't call it that. She just told me about the really cute guy from school who seemed so nice and about how pleased she was when he asked her out. And then, she told me, he asked her to have sex with him and she refused. And he asked her again...and again. And then he pushed her down and forced himself on her. But he didn't pull a gun, or break any bones, or cause any serious injury—other than a pregnancy and a wounded spirit—so she didn't know to call it rape. She figured the fault was hers for not somehow having known that he wasn't really the “nice boy” he had seemed. And I talked to her about the limits of personal responsibility; about how not everything that happens to us is our own fault, or God's will; and about how much God loves her.

Then I took her inside and turned her over to some very kind nurses. I went downstairs to get a couple of prescriptions filled for her. I paid for the prescriptions after I was informed that they'd either need the girl's father's signature in order to charge them to his insurance, or the completion of a pile of forms that looked far too complex for any fifteen-year-old to have to deal with. I drove her back to her school and walked her to the nurse's office and turned her over to someone who would look out for her for the rest of the day. And then I drove home wondering how many bright, funny, thoughtful girls, girls brimming with promise,

## Congressional Testimonies by Clergy

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### Testimony of The Rev. Dr. Katherine Hancock Ragsdale, Episcopal Priest, *continued*

were not lucky enough to know someone who knew someone who could help. I despaired that in a society as rich and, purportedly, reasonable and compassionate as ours, any young woman should ever find herself in such a position. It never occurred to me that anyone would ever try to criminalize those who were able and willing to help.

Although New Hampshire was closer to that girl's home than Boston, as it happened, I did not take her across state lines. Nor did I, to my knowledge, break any laws. But if either of those things had been necessary in order to help her, I would have done them. And if helping young women like her should be made illegal I will, nonetheless, continue to do it. I have no choice because some years ago I stood before an altar and a Bishop and the people of God and vowed "to proclaim by word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to fashion (my) life in accordance with its precepts...to love and serve the people among whom (I) work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor." I have no choice. Even if you tell me that it is a crime to exercise my ministry, I will have no choice. And, I assure you, I am not alone.

I find it troubling, to say the least, that those of us in this room should find ourselves at odds over this issue. Presumably we all want the same things. We want fewer unplanned pregnancies and we want young people who face problems, particularly problems that have to do with their health and their futures, to receive loving support and counsel from responsible adults. This bill, however, doesn't help to achieve those goals. It doesn't resolve the problems with which we are faced. It doesn't even address those problems. This is not a bill about solutions; it's a bill about punishments. And, while it is the rare saint who is not sometimes subject to punitive impulses, such impulses are, nonetheless, venal and beneath the dignity of Americans or of any member of the human family.

We should be talking, instead, about reality-based, age-appropriate sex education for all young people, and about safe, affordable, and available contraception. We should be figuring out how we impress upon boys that "no" really does mean "no," and about how to teach girls to defend themselves. We should be talking about education and economics; about childcare and welfare; about violence at home and on the streets and in the schools. We should be looking for new ways to solve our problems, not new ways to punish victims and those who care for them.

Yet, no matter how intense and successful our efforts, there will still be minors who face unplanned pregnancies. And some of them will still decide that abortion is the best, sometimes the most responsible, option for them. And then, as now, we will want them to be able to turn to their parents for love and support and guidance.

That is, I have to assume, the noble motive behind this bill. We are appalled at the thought of any girl having to face and make such a decision without the help of her parents, as well we should be. Still, several years ago the Episcopal Church passed a resolution opposing any parental consent or notification requirements that did not include provision for non-judicial by-pass. In our view, any morally responsible notification or consent

requirement had to allow young women to turn for help to some responsible adult other than a parent or a judge—to go instead to a grandparent or an aunt, a teacher or neighbor, a counselor or minister. Our resolution encourages the very things this bill would outlaw. Sure, we want young people to be able to turn to their parents. But when they can't or won't we want to make it easier, not harder, for them to turn to other responsible adults.

We adopted this resolution (by a large majority) not because we don't care about parental involvement. The Episcopal Church wants young women to be able to turn to their parents for help when faced with serious decisions. I want that. I'm sure you, and everyone in this room, wants that. And, in fact, most girls do turn to their parents. In states that do not enforce any mandatory parental consent or notice requirements, 75% of girls under the age of sixteen involve one or both of their parents. We'd like it to be 100%. But we know that no one can simply legislate healthy communication within families. And we know that, of those girls who do not involve their parents, 30% feared violence or being thrown out of their home. Statistical and anecdotal evidence demonstrates that, in far too many American homes, such fears are not unrealistic. There is no excuse good enough to justify legislation or regulation that further imperils young people who are already living in danger in their own homes.

Even if we were to find ourselves drained of the last vestiges of our compassion there would still be self-interested reason to fear and oppose this legislation. It imperils all young women, even those in our own families. One hopes that none of the young women we know and love have anything to fear from their parents. We may even be quite confident that this is true. But let's not kid ourselves. Even in the happiest and healthiest of families teens sometimes cannot bring themselves to confide in their parents. Even in families like Rebecca Bell's. Perhaps you remember her story. Becky's parents report that they had a very good and loving relationship with their daughter. They believed that there was nothing that she couldn't or wouldn't tell them. But when Becky became pregnant she apparently couldn't stand the thought of disappointing and hurting the parents she loved. And she lived in a state that required parental notification. So she had an illegal abortion—and she died.

Should Becky Bell have talked to her parents? I think so. Did she exercise poor judgment? Absolutely. But, sisters and brothers, I'm here to tell you, teenagers will, from time to time, exercise poor judgment. It's a fact of nature and there is no law you can pass that will change that. Sometimes, even some very important times, teens will exercise poor judgment. The penalty should not be death.

Oppose this bill. Oppose it because, no matter how good the intentions of its authors and supporters, it is, in essence, punitive and mean-spirited. Oppose it out of compassion for those young people who cannot, for reasons of their safety, comply with its provisions. If all else fails, oppose it for purely selfish reasons. Oppose it because you don't want your daughter, or granddaughter, or niece to die just because she couldn't face her parents and you had outlawed all her other options.

## Written Testimony of Reverend Dr. Roselyn Smith-Withers, D. Min., Co-Convener, Clergy Advisory Committee of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice

FOR THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND SPACE OF THE  
U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION  
HEARING ON “THE IMPACT OF ABORTION ON WOMEN” - MARCH 3, 2004

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today on the important issue of the impact of abortion on women. I am Reverend Dr. Roselyn Smith-Withers, Co-Convener of the Clergy Advisory Committee of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) and founder and pastor of The Pavilion of God in Washington DC. The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), founded in 1973, is a national non-profit education and advocacy organization whose members are national bodies from 15 denominations and faith traditions with official positions in support of reproductive choice, including the Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, Unitarian Universalist Association, and Reform and Conservative Judaism.

As an ordained clergyperson and clergy counselor trained in the RCRC model of counseling called All Options Clergy Counseling, I have counseled many women over the last 15 years. Some women have spiritual and religious concerns as they consider their options. My goal in counseling is to help women discern what is right and best for them and their family and to help them come to an understanding that they believe is consistent with their faith and conscience. Women with an unintended or unplanned pregnancy have many different feelings and concerns as they consider their options and after they have decided on a course of action and taken that action. I tell women that there are no easy answers as to what to do, that they must weigh everything involved in this decision—whether they are prepared for parenthood, have the family and financial support they need, are physically and emotionally able to handle the challenges, and many other considerations that they know best. I assure them that, while a problem or unintended pregnancy can be devastating, it can also mark the beginning of a more mature life because it requires that they take charge of their own future. In my experience, women become stronger when they are able to make these most personal, morally complex decisions for themselves, without fear and without coercion. No woman chooses to be in a situation in which she must consider an abortion, but if that is the decision a woman has to make, I believe firmly that God is with her in that moment.

Women, both unmarried and married, become pregnant unintentionally for various reasons, including rape and date rape, failed birth control, and lack of information about contraception and sexuality. Many of these women experience a point of low esteem, some even wanting to die. Later, they can come to understand that they can heal and that their faith can be part of that healing.

Research has shown that, while some women may experience sensations of regret, sadness or guilt after an abortion, the overwhelming responses are relief and a feeling of having coped successfully with a difficult situation.<sup>1</sup> Yet the idea persists that women must be guilt-ridden by an abortion and that the

decision will haunt them for the rest of their lives. There is an unfounded and unexamined presumption that a woman's conscience guides her not to have an abortion. In my experience as a counselor, I have more often seen women who are guided by their conscience and their sense of responsibility to have an abortion. Because abortion is so stigmatized, they do not express their true feelings and desires. The stigmatization of unplanned pregnancy and abortion can have a coercive effect, causing some women to continue a pregnancy that they prefer to terminate, with lifelong consequences to the woman and her family. Clergy who are trained in the All Options counseling model and who counsel women before and after abortions know that most women believe they have made a responsible decision.

Research studies support what women know in their hearts: that women's emotional responses to legal abortion are largely positive. In 1989, the American Psychological Association (APA) convened a panel of psychologists with extensive experience in this field to review the data. They reported that the studies with the most scientifically rigorous research designs consistently found no trace of “post-abortion syndrome” and furthermore, that no such syndrome was scientifically or medically recognized. The panel concluded that “research with diverse samples, different measures of response, and different times of assessment have come to similar conclusions. The time of greatest distress is likely to be before the abortion. Severe negative reactions after abortions are rare and can best be understood in the framework of coping with normal life stress.”<sup>2</sup> Adler pointed out that despite the millions of women who have undergone the procedure since 1973, there has been no accompanying rise in mental illness. “If severe reactions were common, there would be an epidemic of women seeking treatment,” she said.<sup>3</sup>

In May 1990, a panel at the American Psychiatric Association conference argued that government restrictions on abortion are far more likely to cause women lasting harm than the procedure itself.

To insist, as do groups that oppose abortion in all cases, that women who have an abortion are devastated as a result simplifies the complex nature of each woman's feelings. Even worse, such pronouncements induce and nurture guilt, undermine women's self-respect, and convince women they must be forgiven for a sin, even though abortion might be the most responsible, moral decision.

Religious women who have had abortions have very different feelings from those described by groups that oppose abortion. The book *Abortion, My Choice, God's Grace*, by Anne Eggebrotten<sup>4</sup>, tells the stories of women who have had abortions. Elise Randall, an evangelical Christian and graduate of Wheaton College, who had an unwanted pregnancy, said, “I was filled with

## Congressional Testimonies by Clergy

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### Written Testimony of Reverend Dr. Roselyn Smith-Withers, *continued*

resentment and afraid that I might take out my frustrations on the child in ways that would do lasting damage.” She and her husband concluded that abortion “was the most responsible alternative for us at this time. The immediate result was an overwhelming sense of relief. Now we were free to deal with the existing problems in our lives instead of being crushed by new ones... Only God knows what might have been, but I like to think that our decision was ...based on responsibility and discipleship.”

Christine Wilson, an active member of a Presbyterian church in suburban Baltimore and attorney, wife and mother of two grown children, became pregnant when she was 16 after having sex for the first time with her boyfriend. At first naïve and then later embarrassed and afraid, she did not tell her parents until she was five months pregnant. Because abortion was illegal at that time, her father took her to England for the abortion. For many years she suffered in silence from guilt and emotional turmoil. Now, she says, “If I had (legal) access in 1969, I know it would not have taken 25 years to attain the peace of mind I have today.”

The attempt to stigmatize abortion and the women who have had abortions is so far-ranging that it can be considered a campaign. Medical groups calling themselves pro-life, whose purpose is to promote misinformation about abortion, are active and growing; these groups use the professional credibility of doctors to promote a political agenda that includes opposition to emergency contraception and insurance coverage of contraceptives.<sup>5</sup> The campaign is also strong in some Christian denominations, in which groups or caucuses have formed to reverse traditional church policies that support reproductive choice as an act of conscience. The website of the National Organization of Episcopalians for Life (NOEL)<sup>6</sup>, for example, which calls itself a “para-church organization within the Anglican tradition,” states that the group seeks to change “the growing ‘culture of death’ in America and the Episcopal Church,” in contrast to the resolution adopted by the church’s 1994 General Convention that “Human life, therefore, should be initiated only advisedly and in full accord with this understanding of the power to conceive and give birth that is bestowed by God.” The National Silent No More Awareness Campaign of NOEL and Priests for Life<sup>7</sup> works to make abortion “unthinkable” while the Episcopal Church, in another statement adopted by its official body, urges there be “special care to see that individual conscience is respected and that the responsibility of individuals to reach informed decisions in this matter is acknowledged and honored.”

It is important and heartening to all who care about women’s health and lives to know that the consensus in the medical and scientific communities is that most women who have abortions experience little or no psychological harm. The claim that abortion is harmful is not borne out by the scientific literature or by personal experiences of those who counsel women in non-judgmental, supportive modalities such as All Options Clergy Counseling. In fact, scientific data shows that the risk for severe psychological problems after abortion is low and comparable to that of giving birth.

Yet while there is extensive political and media discussion of the supposed harm caused by abortion, the negative effects of unintended childbearing are basically ignored. Yet they have enormous consequences for women, children and families, and society at large. A recent study documents the negative effects of unintended childbearing on both the mother and her family.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adler, NE. et al. “Psychological Factors in Abortion: A Review.” *American Psychologist*, 1992, 47(10): 1194-1204.

<sup>2</sup> American Psychological Association. “APA Research Review Finds No Evidence of ‘Post-Abortion Syndrome’ But Research Studies on Psychological Effects of Abortion Inconclusive.” Press Release, January 18, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> New studies find abortions pose little danger to women. *Time* magazine, March 27, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Eggebrotten, Anne. *Abortion, My Choice, God’s Grace*. New Paradigm Books, Pasadena, California. 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, Patricia. Special Report on Ideology in Medicine. *Faith&Choices*. Newsletter of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. Fall 2003.

<sup>6</sup> [www.noelforlife.org](http://www.noelforlife.org), March 1, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> [www.silentnomoreawareness.org](http://www.silentnomoreawareness.org), March 1, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Barber, Jennifer S. et al. (1999). “Unwanted Childbearing, Health, and Mother-Child Relationships.” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 40(3), 231-257.

### **Testimony Presented by The Reverend Lois M. Powell, United Church of Christ Minister On Behalf of The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice**

Before the Subcommittee on the Constitution of the Committee on the Judiciary  
U.S. House of Representatives, July 20, 2004  
H.R. 1755, the Child Custody Protection Act

Ladies and gentlemen of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. My name is The Reverend Lois M. Powell, and I currently serve on the national denominational staff of the United Church of Christ in our Justice and Witness Ministries. I am also the Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, the 31-year-old coalition of national religious and religiously affiliated organizations from 15 denominations and faith traditions, including the Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Methodist Church, Unitarian Universalist Association, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Reform and Conservative Judaism, and my own denomination. Together, the denominations and traditions in the Coalition have more than 20 million members.

I am here today as a person who has counseled women facing unwanted or unintended pregnancies since 1970, when I started as a peer counselor with a campus chapter of Planned Parenthood at my college. I am here today to represent many people of faith who are disturbed by the possibility that the United States Congress might enact a law that would jeopardize the health and well being of minor young women. Since 1969, the United Church of Christ has supported the right of women to determine their reproductive health. Since 1973, it has consistently opposed efforts to limit or eliminate full access to these legal rights for any woman facing an unintended or unwanted pregnancy regardless of age or income. A majority of persons of faith in the United States—74 %, in fact, according to a national survey conducted in 2000 by Lake Snell Perry and Associates—believe that these very private decisions are best made by the woman in accord with her religious and ethical beliefs, and her God.

When the woman is young, a minor, she, too, must be able to determine what is best for her. Optimally, she would be able to discuss this with her parents or legal guardian and together they would come to agreement about what path to take. Usually young women do involve their parents, even in states without mandatory parental consent or notice laws. Of those young women who did not involve a parent in their decision, over half involved a close relative or other responsible adult. (Stanley K. Henshaw and Kathryn Kost, *Parental Involvement in Minors' Abortion Decisions*, 24 *Family Planning Perspectives* 199-200, 207 [1992])

But we do not live in an optimal world. I am here today to bring a human face, a human reality to the potential effects of this Act. In the pre-*Roe v. Wade* era, when I began counseling women facing unwanted or unintended pregnancies with a campus chapter of Planned Parenthood, those who chose to terminate a pregnancy were referred to a member of the clergy in the Clergy Consultation Services, a network of ministers and rabbis who offered all-options counseling before referring women to places where safe abortions could be obtained. (In 1970, that place was the State of New

York, which had made abortion legal that year.) In many cases, they did so in order to save the lives of women who might otherwise take desperate measures to end their pregnancies, attempts that often ended in death or the inability to have children at all.

Someone once said that statistics are human faces without the tears. After I was ordained in 1978, I continued to provide counseling and support to women struggling with whether or not terminate a pregnancy. As a pastor in Tallahassee, Florida, I extended this support to parishioners and to clients at a local women's clinic who struggled particularly with spiritual and religious issues. Currently, I receive an occasional request to counsel women who have contacted the Ohio Affiliate of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice with a desire to talk with a minister.

While in Tallahassee, I counseled a 16-year-old woman at the clinic who had traveled from South Georgia with her 20-year-old sister. These sisters had grown up in a conservative Christian church that had a strong and publicly visible anti-abortion position. The 16-year-old had only her sister to turn to for support when she learned she was pregnant. Both felt they could not talk to their parents about the pregnancy because their parents had made their disapproval of sexual activity abundantly clear. Their church was a very important part of their family and community life, and the sisters were terrified at the prospect of public humiliation and shame that could fall upon the entire family if it became known that a member of the family had an abortion. Their worst fear was that they could be removed from this church and, in effect, abandoned by the faith they had known from childhood. The Child Custody Protection Act would only make this difficult situation worse. It would drive a wedge between the daughters and parents and could cause a lifelong breach in family communication.

Under the Child Custody Protection Act, the 20-year-old sister would be a federal criminal for accompanying her younger sister across state lines for an abortion. I ask you, is this just? Does not this kind of punitive law unduly burden young women and place a formidable obstacle in the way of their securing legal and safe reproductive health care?

I assured this young woman, and her sister, that God had not abandoned them but would remain with them always. I encouraged them to find a way – eventually – to talk with their parents but not without a supportive third person who could mediate on their behalf. I also encouraged them to find a counselor close to where they lived who would be able to offer emotional support in a non-judgmental manner should any issues arise when they returned home. This young woman did decide to have an abortion but many of the same questions and issues would have applied if she had decided to carry the pregnancy to term.

## Congressional Testimonies by Clergy

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Testimony Presented by The Reverend Lois M. Powell, *continued*

Statistics are human faces without the tears. Not one woman has the same story or set of circumstances as any another woman. Each situation is unique, shaped by the nuances of her religious background, her family setting, her finances, her emotional and psychological maturity, and other factors too complex and diverse to enumerate. Some women under the age of 18 are already mothers, some only want to finish high school. Some choose to terminate their pregnancy, some choose to carry their pregnancy to term. We can never forget that individual women, who themselves have been created in the image of God, struggled in each and every instance.

The Child Custody Protection Act will not protect girl children or make their struggle less difficult. It will make them even more vulnerable during a time of crisis. When only 14% of all counties nationwide have an abortion provider, a majority of women seeking to exercise their legal rights to full reproductive health care will have to travel at least to another county. The closest provider might, in fact, be across a state line. If that woman is a minor, and if she is terrified to tell her parents because of a history of physical violence in the family or for other real concerns, how is she going to get there? Alone? On a bus? What if she had been raped by a father, as was the case with Spring Adams, a sixth-grader in Idaho. Spring was impregnated by her father, and because of the parental consent requirement in her state, she was forced to tell her mother that her father had raped her. He then shot and killed young Spring Adams, her mother and then himself. (Richard North Patterson, in a speech to the National Abortion Federation, April 23, 2001) This is one American family's story.

Parents are supposed to protect their children from harm. But even in the most loving of parent-child relationships, harm can happen. Children who are close to their parents may not know if the knowledge of a pregnancy will turn parents against them, or they do not know if God will punish them, and so they keep silent. In households in which distrust or violence prevail, children are even less likely to trust a parent or legal guardian in a time of crisis. So it is reasonable that they turn to other adults whom they do trust and in whom they can confide. It would be the role of that

adult to help the young woman to negotiate the rocky waters of family conflict, to make a decision about what to do, and to assist her in achieving what she determines is best for her. If that assistance included accompanying her across a state line to terminate a pregnancy, that trusted adult would be a federal criminal.

I ask you, is this just? Should minors' access to legal health care services be compromised in this way? Should those who assist them in obtaining legal health care be criminalized? Are these the family values we choose to espouse?

I worry about every teenager who becomes pregnant, and I pray for the day when this is a rare occurrence in our society. I pray for the day when boy children are taught to respect girls, when they know that while the consequences for themselves of impregnating a girl are different than they are for the girl, there are consequences for them. I pray for the day when rape, whether date rape or stranger rape, that results in pregnancy becomes the real issue which we as a society must address, not the resultant pregnancy. I believe we all would affirm this.

Parents need to be involved in their children's lives, and we as a society need to create a culture that encourages good parenting. Yet I know from my years in the ministry that parents are not perfect and that many struggle to understand their own children. I also know parents who never grew up themselves and who impose on their children their own immaturity. The solution to involving parents is not to pass legislation that would mandate family communication on one particular issue—this issue of abortion. In reality, this legislation could end up destroying the family's relationships and endangering the girl's well-being.

Please do not support this Act. It is not about protecting children but about governmental interference in the decisions of conscience that young women sometimes have to make.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today. May you continue to hold the faces, names and hearts of those who would be most impacted by this Act, should it come to pass, before you.

## **AFTERWORD**

by Reverend Carlton W. Veazey,  
President and CEO, Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice

“Abortion is a personal decision between a woman and her God.” A “personal decision” – not a governmental decision, not a decision anyone else can or should make for her, but the woman’s own decision. “Between a woman and her God” – it is a decision a woman makes from her own conscience, her own sense of moral values, and her own beliefs and faith traditions. It is the sacred duty and responsibility of clergy and people of faith to support women in their decision-making, to accompany them on their faith journey, and to be a caring and compassionate presence for them.

The women and clergy whose stories you have read dealt with terribly difficult, even dangerous, circumstances. They were sustained throughout by their faith in God and in their own moral consciences. Their courage and determination to make the best decision for themselves and their families, in the face of the many legal, practical, and societal barriers before them, should be a source of inspiration to us all.

As we look ahead to an uncertain future, the one thing we can be certain of is that women will continue to face difficult decisions, and we people of faith will continue to be moral leaders and advocates for those who need our help. May we always keep in our mind’s eye the faces of real people who struggle to make the best decisions they can in the face of profound moral complexities. And may we always have before us, first and foremost, the well-being of women, children, and families, and the vision of a just and compassionate society. Then the vision of the prophets will be fulfilled, and we will see justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

So may it be. Amen.

## MISSION STATEMENT

The **Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice** brings the moral power of religious communities to ensure reproductive choice through education and advocacy. The Coalition seeks to give clear voice to the reproductive issues of people of color, those living in poverty, and other underserved populations.



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