

Rabbi Dennis Ross letter
12.2.21

Concerned Clergy for Choice

As clergy of diverse faiths and in communities across New York State, we commit to protecting and advancing reproductive freedom by ensuring equal rights through access to basic health care that includes contraception, legal and safe abortion, and sex education.

Our firsthand experience providing counsel, prayer and support to people receiving health care teaches that the individual confronting a medical circumstance is best situated to make the decision that is right for them, with support of their health provider, invited family, friends, counselors, and clergy, and without interference from politicians. What is more, our faith teachings affirm that each person is endowed with free will, and possesses the capacity, right and responsibility to determine whether or not to become a parent and access the health care they need, unhindered by economic status, race, gender or geographic location. While a pregnancy has a moral standing, our faiths elevate the moral standing of a pregnant person, such that it is for the individual to decide when and whether to become a parent.

Reproductive freedom means all people have equal rights when seeking access to affordable, quality care and the ability to determine one's reproductive destiny. Bans and restrictions on abortion perpetuate stigma and disproportionately harm those with low income. Such restrictions further marginalize the medically underserved vulnerable, including Black women and others of color, and those living in rural areas. Further, there is a particular need to address the alarming and disproportionate rate of maternal mortality impacting Black women which points to the devastating impacts of implicit bias and racism in health care delivery, as well as a lack of access to high-quality health care.

Abortion – including care that is needed later pregnancy - is compatible with our religious teaching and our experience providing pastoral care. Outsiders must not rush to judgment. Each situation is different as in those rare circumstances when a pregnant person experiences a health crisis, a fetus cannot survive, medically unnecessary restrictions impair timely access to abortion, or care is unavailable in a community or region. We need to provide people with the care they need when they need it.

Each young person deserves age-appropriate, medically accurate sex education that provides truthful answers to honest questions, imparts the ability to identify and build healthy relationships, and encourages our young to seek out trusted adults when something is wrong. Young people deserve to enter adulthood with the medical truth that serves as a foundation for making informed and healthy decisions about their relationships.

While religious voices contribute an important dimension to the public policy debate, faiths differ in their teachings, and our laws must protect individuals from political initiatives that would impose religious restrictions into private life. True “religious liberty” safeguards people of all faiths and conscience so that they can chart their life direction based on their own personal, private, and deeply held beliefs. Policy makers must favor no particular religious instruction or

restriction. Rather, laws should establish equal rights, ensure the opportunity for religious practice, and protect people as they determine who to marry or whether to become parents.

From the early days of the family planning movement in the United States, clergy were outspoken supporters of access to quality care and medically accurate information. We honor and continue that legacy by ensuring that each person can access high-quality, affordable reproductive and sexual health care, and information from providers like Planned Parenthood, and thereby serve as faithful stewards of the body that God places in their trust.