

Reproductive Justice: Where are the Churches?
Presbyterian Church of the Covenant
June 9, 2019

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Ephesians 6:1-4

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ²‘Honour your father and mother’— this is the first commandment with a promise: ³‘so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.’⁴ And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*

Every year in the United States, more than 6 million women get pregnant and almost half of those pregnancies are unplanned.

2.8 million unintended pregnancies.

That’s a lot of women. In fact, that’s roughly the population of the whole city of Chicago.

Of those 2.8 million women who weren’t trying to get pregnant but did; 50-60% of them were using contraception the month they got pregnant and 42% of them will have an abortion.

In fact, nineteen percent of all pregnancies end in abortion,¹ and 25% of women in the US will have an abortion by the age of 45.

The reality of unintended pregnancy should not be surprising when we consider the fact that the average U.S. woman only wants to have two children. This means that most women will spend 2.7 years pregnant, postpartum, or trying to get pregnant and somewhere between 30-40 years trying to avoid pregnancy.¹

There was a time when women’s lives were shaped by childbearing. In fact, throughout much of human history and for some women around the world still, women’s lives have been defined by the rhythm of pregnancy, childbearing, nurse, repeat.

This rhythm, however, is neither inevitable nor God-ordained. It is a rhythm that has been interrupted throughout human history (with varying degrees of success) by contraceptive and abortive techniques.

One of my favorite discoveries in my research was learning about the many and creative ways that women throughout history have managed their fertility. There is a nearly 4000-year old

¹ <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states>

Egyptian papyrus that bears the title “Recipe Not to Become Pregnant” that describes how to mix crocodile dung with fermented dough and place it in the vagina.

And ancient Greek colonists in the 7th c BCE discovered the magical properties of a plant on the island of Cyrene that was so successful at controlling fertility that it not only became a major export crop but it ended up on the Cyrenian coins as the distinctive mark of the city and demand was so high that it was harvested to extinction within 600 years.

Women’s desire to control their fertility is hardly a modern phenomenon. However, like many issues related to human sexuality – the issue of women controlling their fertility has generated some measure of controversy and concern across the ages.

Today, in our country we face renewed attempts to control the lives and bodies of women as minority groups of Christian legislators seek to impose their theological beliefs and morality on women across the country.

While there has been a surge in abortion restrictions since 2011, there is something frighteningly new in the legislation tearing across the country like wildfire – the abortion ban. So far, 27 abortion bans have been enacted in 12 states in 2019. In nine of those states - Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Utah – abortion bans seek to roll back the timeline at which women are legally allowed to access abortion care.

In some states the legislatures have banned abortion procedures after 8 weeks, in other states it has been pushed back to 6 weeks. As we consider the implications of these laws, it is important to remember that these weeks do not represent the gestational age of development – they represent the date from a woman’s last period. So, a six-week abortion ban effectively requires women to know that they are pregnant two weeks after a supposedly “missed” period. This legislation makes a lot of assumptions.

Like assuming that women’s cycles are 28 days long, a neat four weeks that would provide two whole weeks of knowing about a pregnancy and arranging for a termination.

Or assuming that women who are not trying to get pregnant are paying attention to their cycles at all! By the time many women find out that they are pregnant, they are already beyond these arbitrary windows.

The Alabama legislature gave up any pretense that it recognizes women as full citizens capable of moral decision-making and took any decision to bear children out of their hands by simply banning all abortions.

The extent to which this recent spate of legislation is explicitly being written to overturn *Roe v. Wade* became blisteringly clear when Alabama Senator Clyde Chambliss responded to a question of how the bill would apply to unused fertilized eggs created through in vitro fertilization. He stated, [“The egg in the lab doesn’t apply. It’s not in a woman.”](#) While many politicians dissemble and seek to portray their actions as focused on the spurious claim that fertilized eggs, zygotes, and fetuses have human rights, Chambliss’ words make clear that the issue is not the moral status

of these entities. Rather, the issue for traditionalist Christians, like Chambliss, is the ability of women to control their bodies and their reproductive decision-making.

All the women I have ever known have had to manage their fertility in some way or another – from contraception, to periods, to miscarriages, to unwanted pregnancies, to longed for pregnancies, to childbearing, to menopause – fertility is a major aspect of female bodies and thus, of women’s lives. In a way that it simply isn’t for men. This is just as true for women of faith as it is for secular women. Studies show that mainline Protestant women have abortions at slightly higher rates than the general public. And yet, very few mainline Christian churches talk about abortion in church and even more rarely from the pulpit.

Banning abortions is a minority position in this country. Only 14% of all Americans think abortion should be illegal in all cases. When we look at subsets of people of faith, we find that 15% of black Protestants support abortion bans, 13% of people from other faith traditions, 8% of white Catholics, and only 5% of white mainline Christians. Of all the groups of people in the country, mainline Christians have the smallest numbers of members who hold this narrow belief of any group measured!

We are the religious group most supportive of legal access to abortion and yet, we don’t talk about it. We don’t talk about it in our churches and we don’t talk about it publicly as churches.

Why is this?

Where are the churches?

In 1967, nineteen ministers and two rabbis stood up to support safe and legal access to abortion when they formed the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion which helped to counsel and refer women to safe abortion services in defiance of the law.² It is estimated that the CCS helped 450,000 women across the country access safe abortion care before *Roe v. Wade* established abortion as a constitutional right.

In the 1960s and early 70s, religious denominations across the country took up the issue of abortion and abortion access in their annual meetings and general conferences and began taking public stands in support of women’s moral decision-making related to childbearing and in support of legal access to abortion.

Today, despite the relentless anti-abortion campaign being waged by evangelical Christians and Roman Catholic clergy, the vast majority of white mainline Protestants, black Protestants, and Catholics in the United States hold that abortion should be legal in all or most cases. And yet, the dominant public narrative is that Christianity is anti-abortion. What happened to those public Christian voices supporting women and their right to safe, legal abortions? And just what role does and might Christianity play in contemporary abortion debates?

² Doris Andrea Dirks and Patricia A. Relf, *To Offer Compassion: A History of the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion*, Madison: University of WI Press, 2017, 62.9

These are the questions that we need to be asking in congregations across the country as religious liberty and women's human rights to self-determination are under assault.

Developing a progressive Christian ethic of reproductive justice begins with recognizing and affirming that the task and responsibility of parenting is a sacred trust. Now, while I believe that this idea that parenting is a sacred trust is a Christian value, this is not something that is a direct teaching in the Bible. Scripture reflects a different, ancient culture and the value of parenting and descriptions of familial relationships reflect that world. In the bible, children are taught to “honor their father and their mother” and parents are instructed to discipline their children. And yet, the idea that relationships between parents and their children should be loving, supportive, and primary moral obligations – while not in the Bible – I still argue is a Christian understanding of parenting.

Likewise, the idea that parenting is a calling, what Calvin described as “a particular way of life” to serve as a “sentry post,” complete with duties that must be heeded, so that we would not “heedlessly wander about throughout life.” These callings gives us a place to stand in the world and a sense of purpose. Every person has a calling and living into that calling brings a sense of coherence to life. Parenting is such a calling, and given the challenge and discipline it takes to be a parent – we need to make sure that people are ready, willing, and able to take up this sacred task.

Christian values support the idea that establishing and maintaining healthy and secure families requires careful, thoughtful, and morally rich consideration about the decision to become a parent and the decision not to become a parent. A deeply rich Christian moral approach to parenting is reflected in the moral wisdom my mother shared with me, “You shouldn't have a baby just because you are pregnant – you should have a baby because you want to be a mother, you want to have a family.”

Use of the Bible in the abortion debate often focuses on quoting individual verses out of context to try to prove something about the value of prenatal life. But, not only are there no direct teachings about abortion in the Bible, that approach is not how all Christians engage with scripture or how we think about what shapes and defines Christian values. Christianity has a long and deep tradition of searching scripture for principles and standards that help to shape the contours of our moral life. Based on Christian principles that promote abundant life, seeking justice, and recognizing the human dignity of women – the decision to end a pregnancy can be a morally good decision.

A progressive Christian approach to reproductive justice recognizes that in saying no to a particular pregnancy, women are often saying yes to other visions of wholeness and abundant life – sometimes for existing children, sometimes for families or marriages, and sometimes they are saying “yes” to a vision of a whole and abundant future life for themselves. This is what rankles the patriarchy – that women might affirm the value of their own abundant life more than they value the potential for life represented by a pregnancy. This progressive vision of abundant life has an essential role to play in continuing the transformation of public attitudes toward supporting and promoting a broad vision of reproductive justice that moves our legislative and

public policy focus beyond abortion to address issues that can support and strengthen women, families, and communities.

What is missing in public life today are the voices and presence of Christian leaders like clergy who were part of the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion. We need people of faith who will stand up and speak out in support of respecting women as full moral agents, created in the image of God, and capable of making the important moral decisions that shape their lives, their families, and their futures.

Across the state of Texas, congregations are declaring themselves reproductive justice congregations by publicly affirming:

In this sacred space we. . .

*Respect and trust women.

*Promise that women who attend our congregation will be free from stigma, shame or judgment for their reproductive decisions, including abortion.

*Believe access to comprehensive and affordable reproductive health service is a moral and social good.

Sponsored by the project Just Texas – Faith Voices for Reproductive Justice, there are now more than thirty congregations in Texas that have signed on to become RJ congregations and more than 100 communities of faith across the state that are now talking about what it means to actively work in the world to support women and men as they make important moral decisions about their reproductive health and the future of their families.

The RJ movement grew out of the lives and experiences of women of color who found the reproductive rights movement too narrowly focused on abortion rights and not adequately attentive to the reproductive healthcare concerns that enable all women to live healthy and full lives.

In a context where women of color have been targeted for sterilization, where the maternal mortality rate is not only four times greater for black women than white women but rising, where access to contraception is increasingly threatened, it is not insignificant that the actual bodies that are being policed by the state under the mountain of new “regulations” are the most vulnerable women in our society.³ While middle and upper-class women will always find access to abortion,

³ Myra J. Tucker, Cynthia J. Berg, William M. Callaghan, and Jason Hsia, “The Black–White Disparity in Pregnancy-Related Mortality from 5 Conditions: Differences in Prevalence and Case-Fatality Rates,” *American Journal of Public Health* 97, no. 2 (February 2007): 247–51; Marian F. MacDorman, Eugene Declercq, Howard Cabral, and Christine Morton, “Is the United States Maternal Mortality Rate Increasing? Disentangling Trends from Measurement Issues; Short Title: U.S. Maternal Mortality Trends,” *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 128, no. 3 (September 2016): 447–55.

poor women, young women, and women of color are the women whose lives are the most significantly impacted by the loss of access to contraception and abortion care.

In this context, RJ focuses on three principles:

- 1) the right not to have a child
- 2) the right to have a child
- 3) the right to parent in safe and healthy environments

Reproductive Justice offers a more robust framework for talking about reproductive health and decision-making. RJ recognizes both that abortion is a serious moral question and that women are capable of making serious moral decisions about their bodies and their lives. The moral norm that we should trust women is hardly a radical norm, it only *feels* radical in a world where we don't trust or respect the decisions that women make about having or not having children.

Full and unhindered access to comprehensive and affordable reproductive healthcare is a justice issue. It is a moral issue. And it is a faith issue.

In a country where conservative Christians increasingly seek to deny comprehensive reproductive healthcare to women, it is time for Christians to speak up for reproductive justice.

It is time for Christians to say loudly and clearly that abortion can be a moral and social good.

What is Church of the Covenant prepared to do in this moment?

<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/06/05/729753903/early-abortion-bans-which-states-have-passed-them>

<https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2019/05/unprecedented-wave-abortion-bans-urgent-call-action>

<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=267>

I have been working on abortion and women's reproductive healthcare for all of my professional life. I have written a recent book on a progressive Christian argument for abortion and reproductive justice. I am also fifty-one and nearing the end of my fertility. In my life, I have borne two children and had two abortions. Because I research and write on abortion and women's reproductive health, I have talked a lot about abortion and to women who have had abortions. Some of those women have never talked to anyone else about their experiences.