

Here We Are, Send Us! 3.0
Standing With and For Those in Harm's Way: Women Seeking Reproductive Health Care
Maine Council of Churches
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Let me offer some context for looking at these denominational statements.

It's an old, old story, told in the Bible and ever since: women have struggled to manage their fertility and, at times, cope with infertility.

Historically speaking, the most common means of controlling family size has been infanticide, followed by child abandonment and the sale of children by desperately impoverished parents.

We're now living at a watershed moment in history because of two profound changes: first, the availability of medically safe, legal, and affordable reproductive technologies, and, second, the global movement for the social and economic empowerment of women.

These two factors now make it possible (*not* inevitable but possible) for women to freely direct their sexual and reproductive lives so that they may live without fear of frequent and unplanned pregnancy. The use of effective contraception with abortion as backup is a far gentler, kinder method of limiting family size, wouldn't you agree?

About these matters, there's good news and bad. The *bad* news is that there are strong forces that oppose this cultural momentum toward women's reproductive freedom and bodily self-determination.

The *good* news is that there is a broad movement to rethink these matters and challenge the anti-sex and misogynistic biases that may persist within every religious tradition. The momentous cultural transformation here is the turn toward respecting and trusting women and celebrating reproductive freedom – “birth by choice” – as a personal and social moral good.

All seven member denominations of the MCC reject the patriarchal notion that good order requires male control of women's lives, their bodies, and their labor, including their reproductive labor. The Council is strongly united in affirming women's moral agency and decision-making power. Similarly, the Council proactively supports public policy that guarantees access to safe and legal contraception and abortion.

While the seven Council denominations are unified about these key matters, there's also a noticeable divergence of theological sensibilities and commitments among them. For that reason, I'd advise caution whenever reading these or other theological statements about gender, sexuality, and reproductive issues.

For starters, more conservative religious voices speak *as if somehow* there are two distinct groups of women: women of faith and women who have abortions. The truth of the matter is

that these two groups overlap to a great extent, even though it's seldom acknowledged that the *majority* of women who have abortions are religiously affiliated.

Similarly, some still presume that abortion is morally wrong, something shameful and sinful, always to be regarded as the option of last resort. These voices go on to say, rather disingenuously, that women choosing abortion, sinners though they are, should be met with compassion and forgiveness rather than judgment or punishment. So, perhaps it's not very surprising, then, that few conservatives actually speak about, or seem to have learned from, women's moral wisdom about these matters.

In contrast, more liberal religious statements are more women-friendly, say little about sin or the need for forgiveness, and instead emphasize moral freedom, personal choice, and legal access. These voices affirm the ability and responsibility of individual women to make good moral choices, and they call upon the church to help protect women's access to abortion services and family planning.

Finally, more progressive religious voices have moved beyond even this liberal framework centered on reproductive *rights* to shift the focus of the conversation toward advocacy for reproductive *justice*. While it's crucial to give an ongoing defense of reproductive rights, it's also critically important to address the *context* in which those rights may actually be implemented. After all, choice doesn't mean very much if you don't have the resources to exercise it.

Now, to be sure, this justice framework also affirms women's moral freedom to decide whether and when to have children, but it goes on to acknowledge how social *injustice*, especially poverty and white supremacy, deeply restrict many people's sexual and reproductive lives. Therefore, it's necessary to critique and transform the social, political, and economic constraints that deny freedom to so many.

Not by accident, a reproductive justice framework connects the struggle for procreative freedom with a more robust, more comprehensive, and, yes, more ambitious social justice agenda. That social change agenda includes securing decent housing, jobs with adequate pay and benefits, clean air and water, paid leave, affordable childcare, fair immigration policies, an end to anti-Black and anti-Brown violence, and on and on.

Above all, this reproductive justice framework is noteworthy in the fact that it intentionally centers our collective moral project in the experience and the moral wisdom of poor women of color, the most vulnerable and marginalized community members among us.

Those of us who are white and relatively privileged are called to act *in solidarity with them* – which means acting in *ongoing accountability to them*, continually asking whether current policies and practices afford *to them* greater respect, dignity, safety, freedom, and both personal and communal self-determination -- or not. *If not*, then the struggle for reproductive justice must continue.