

Social Awareness. Living Truth.

Sanctity of Life: Abortion

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There are many voices in the pro-life/pro-choice debate. Anger, righteous indignation, and shaming proliferate. Some voices (from both sides) claim to speak for God on this issue and use the Bible to make their point. Some have stated that this is the “water-shed” issue of our day, turning abortion into a political platform in which each side insists that it stands for “woman’s rights” and/or “human rights”. In a culture of information overload, abortion has become a highly polarized issue. I would suggest that the impassioned often speak without listening. Those who lack passion, in contrast, may approach the subject with apathy. *If I don’t see it, or it doesn’t impact my life in any obvious way, why should I be concerned?* they may ask. Those of us who stand somewhere in the middle of the spectrum may be asking ourselves a series of questions. *What is the truth? Is there another way? How should I, as a person who believes in the teaching of Jesus, respond? How can I speak in a way that will be heard? How can I protect the innocent? Who am I called to protect? Is it the woman, or the child? Where are the men in this conversation?* My humble hope is to shed some light on this issue so that we as people of faith can be more effective in forming and sharing a vision of caring for those who need our protection and care.

What is Abortion?

An abortion is a procedure that ends a pregnancy. It uses medicine or surgery to remove the embryo or fetus and placenta from the uterus. Legal in Canada, the procedure is done by a licensed health care professional in an abortion clinic or a hospital that offers that procedure.

Medical abortion (MA) involves the use of medications to terminate a pregnancy. In Canada, the mifepristone and misoprostol combination is the only Health Canada approved MA regimen. At the time of the writing of this paper, the approved indication for this combination is a gestational age of 63 days (9 weeks). Canadian health care providers are not required to complete a training course before prescribing or dispensing the mifepristone and misoprostol combination. The cost of the medications is generally covered, either through public or private health insurance.

Surgical abortion involves dilating the opening to the uterus (cervix) and placing a small suction tube into the uterus. Suction is used to remove the fetus and related pregnancy material from the uterus.

The risks from having an abortion in the second trimester are higher than in the first trimester.

Abortions are rarely done after 24 weeks of pregnancy.

Abortions throughout Canada are funded by Canada’s health insurance system and are provided upon the request of the patient, provided that they are a Canadian citizen or a permanent resident. There are some exceptions provincially.

An elective or therapeutic abortion is not the same as a miscarriage. Miscarriage is when a pregnancy ends on its own before the 20th week of pregnancy. Miscarriage is sometimes called a spontaneous abortion. The surgical removal of a tubal pregnancy would not be considered an elective abortion, rather a critical medical intervention.

History of Abortion

“What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

In our contemporary culture, with our advanced medical and scientific knowledge, we tend to think that the abortion question and debate is unique to our time. In reality, abortion has been practiced worldwide from ancient times to the present. Unintended pregnancies are not a new phenomenon, nor are the debates and practices surrounding them. Physically, various methods have been used over the years to perform or attempt an abortion, including the administration of abortifacient herbs, sharpened implements, the application of abdominal pressure, and other techniques. Historically and in many cultures, less value was and still is ascribed to women and children and they were (and are) regarded legally and morally as possessions or under the guardianship of men. Abortion was accepted in Ancient Greece and Rome, for example. The early philosophers also argued, much as we do today, about when a fetus becomes human.

“...when couples have children in excess, let abortion be procured before sense and life have begun; what may or may not be lawfully done in these cases depends on the question of life and sensation.”¹

Infanticide (the killing of a newborn) and infant exposure (leaving a baby to perish on its own) has also been the norm in many cultures throughout history. Babies with defects were historically often not allowed to live. The patriarch of the family would make these life and death decisions.

Children were not considered individual entities worthy (and entitled to) protection. They were used in many ways to further either the individual, family or societal ideals or success. Slavery was a common practice as was child sacrifice to ancient deities and spirits. This is well documented in Old and New Testament writings and elsewhere.

In much of Western History, abortion was not considered a criminal offence when it occurred before “quickening” (first fetal movement). English Common Law considered abortion a crime after quickening (the first movements of the fetus felt in utero). It occurs from the eighteenth to the twentieth week of pregnancy).

In America, laws against abortion became widespread in the second half of the 1800s, and by 1900 abortion became illegal,

1. Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Politics: Book 7, Chapter 16* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905).

with the exception of cases in which the procedure was necessary to save the life of the mother.

In 1973 the Supreme Court of the United States legalized abortions. This is often referred to as “Roe v Wade” and was based on the court’s judgement that a woman’s right to terminate her pregnancy came under the freedom of personal choice in family matters as protected by the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution. This decision was and still is highly controversial and has become an ongoing political issue.

In Canada, inducing an abortion was a crime until 1988, when the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the law as unconstitutional. Since then, abortion has been legal at any stage of a woman’s pregnancy.

Prior to 1969, inducing an abortion was a crime under Section 251 of the Criminal Code. In 1969, the government under the leadership of Pierre Trudeau amended the Criminal Code, allowing doctors to perform abortions in accredited hospitals if a pregnancy threatened the health or life of a woman. This decision was made, in part, after the government convened the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1967. After three years of public hearings, the Commission recommended that abortion be made legal for the first 12 weeks of a pregnancy and that after 12 weeks, abortions should only be legal if the pregnancy threatened the health of the woman, or if the expected child would be born “greatly handicapped” mentally or physically.

In 1988, the Supreme Court, upon evaluating the R. v Morgentaler case in relation to the 1982 Charter of Rights and freedoms, found that the Criminal Code provision on abortion violated a woman’s right to “life, liberty and security of the person” guaranteed under Section 7 of the Charter. While the court did not say there was an inherent right to abortion under the Charter, it did state that the system that regulated access to abortions was unfair. As a result, the abortion law was struck down. The law technically remains in the Criminal Code; however, it is considered unconstitutional and therefore unenforceable. Because no other law has replaced it, abortion has remained legal throughout Canada since 1988. The Supreme Court also ruled that the rights of the fetus begin at birth and that the father has no right to prevent a woman from having an abortion. All new attempts to restrict a woman’s right to abortion have failed.

Prior to performing abortions, physicians in Canada must obtain certification from either the College of Family Physicians of Canada or the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, as well as becoming members of their provincial or territorial medical professional regulatory authority. Abortion procedures and regulations vary from province to province, but costs and gestational age limits are regulated. While there may be exceptions, the gestational age limit varies provincially from 12 to 24 weeks.

At the time of this writing, physicians are not legally obligated to either perform or refer for abortions. The Canadian Medical Association policy states that a physician should not be compelled to participate in terminations. When moral or religious beliefs prevent the physician from recommending or performing an abortion, the CMA recommends that the patient should be informed of this so that she may consult another physician and upon her request be referred to alternate sources for referral.

Even to this day, this issue remains divisive, both morally and politically, with no resolution in sight.

Honouring Life

“I am increasingly impressed by the Christian possibility of celebrating not only moments of joy but also moments of pain, thus affirming God’s real presence in the thick of our lives. A true Christian always affirms life, because God is the God of life, a life stronger than death and destruction. In him we find no reason to despair. There is always reason to hope, even when our eyes are filled with tears.” (Henri Nouwen)²

While the Bible doesn’t specifically speak in today’s terminology about abortion, it speaks clearly of the principle of honouring God by honouring life. In the Psalms David speaks of the value of his life from the womb onward, marveling that God knew and created him (Psalm 139:13-18). This concept of God as the Creator of our lives is spoken of throughout Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments: Isaiah 49:1 and Galatians 1:15 are just two examples.

Luke, the physician, writes of the miraculous conception and life “in utero” of both John and Jesus (Luke 1:1-80). As Christians, we see the incarnation of God’s Son, Jesus, as an affirmation of the sacredness of all human life. Christ’s birth and death demonstrates his love for humanity. The dignity of the human body is further explored in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, where Paul writes, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God. You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore, honour God with your bodies.”

The reading of the creation account in Genesis also compels us to view all human life as a gift. Human beings have meaning because we were intentionally created by a perfect Being. We are sacred, created in God’s image (Imago Dei) (Genesis 1: 26-27), and unique in all of creation because of our imperishable souls. Every life is God given and has purpose and meaning.

Historically, early Christians believed that because we were made in the image of God, human life was good. This belief inspired them to be countercultural, not just opposing abortion and infanticide but also caring for the poor, their neighbour, and those who were disenfranchised by their culture. This radical lifestyle often came at a cost, a threat to life and livelihood.

Culture and the Church

It would be naive to believe that all people who call themselves adherents of the Christian faith hold to the same beliefs when it comes to human sexuality and abortion. Every generation of believers has been impacted and influenced by culture. In fact, it could be argued that culture has impacted the church more than the church has impacted culture.

Abortion may be as polarized an issue within the church as it is without. With the proliferation of information and opinion sharing on the internet, and the availability of a vast array of literature, it is little wonder that there is little consensus on any number of issues. Unlike the early church with its emphasis on community, we, especially those of us living in North America, are highly individualistic. To add to the confusion, each generation is influenced by different ideas and opinions. The increasing competition for our time leaves little room for family discussion and influence. Some voices are louder than others: while we are inundated with sexual messages and live in a highly sexualized

2. Henri Nouwen, “Always Reason to Hope,” Henri Nouwen Society, accessed July 15, 2021, <https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/always-reason-to-hope/>.

culture, we seldom hear sexual issues addressed from the pulpit. Church is less a part of the community and family life than it was even a generation ago, and biblical literacy and weekly church attendance has declined. Given that there are so many choices available in all areas of our lives, and so many voices adding to the mix, it is little wonder that discernment is increasingly difficult.

Abortion and the Church

Statistically, 1 in 3 Canadian women will have experienced abortion by the time she reaches 45 years of age.³ Reports on these statistics state that there is very little difference in the numbers among those surveyed in the faith community, and those in the secular. It should also be taken into consideration that for every woman impacted by abortion, there is a man involved.

Men are both involved and impacted by abortion, yet abortion is still seen as primarily a “woman’s issue.” Sadly, both in faith and in secular culture, a woman is often made to feel that she carries the total responsibility for this decision because it is “her body, her choice.” This pressure should concern us all. Biblically we can find many passages that instruct men on how to care for their families, and their responsibility toward women and their own sexual decision-making.

Biblically, the church community also has a responsibility to love and care for those who are without the supports they need to move forward with an unintended pregnancy. I would suggest that these are “the widows and orphans” of our day. None of us who believe we are created in God’s image and accountable before Him can stand back and say: “this has nothing to do with me.” We are called to be “salt and light” in our culture. We are called to be change agents for justice and to strive for the good of all, especially the innocent. And, perhaps most difficult of all, we are to be the representatives of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, and to do everything with love, which is, biblically, the highest virtue (1 Corinthians 1:1-13).

Making an Impact

“I always wondered why somebody didn’t do something about that, then I realized I am somebody.” (Anonymous)

What in a practical sense does it mean to be pro-life? If we want more than a war of words, we need to seriously consider how each of us will respond to the issue. How do we advocate for the sanctity of life and dignify all of those who are created in God’s image?

As a beginning, let us speak of what we are for, rather than what we are against. God is, after all, for people and for life. He is the giver of human dignity and hope. What are practical ways we can impact our homes and communities? How can we advocate for others?

Those who would identify as pro-life often describe themselves as working in one of three spheres:

Pastoral: Pro-life Christians have been criticized, often legitimately, for only caring about saving the baby and not caring about the life that the mother and the child will experience after

birth. Often the number of babies (or lives) saved will be reported. Unfortunately, it is less common to have reports about follow-up care for the families that keep their babies, and long-term outcomes. Isolation, addictions, mental health issues, poverty, and homelessness are a few of the realities facing the lives of those who are considering abortion.

For those aware of the challenges that families face, pro-life advocacy means coming alongside with practical, emotional, and spiritual supports. Help can be offered in many creative ways that align with personal means and ability. Volunteering with or financially supporting a charitable organization that works to improve the lives of single mothers (and fathers) is one example. “Adopting” a single mother and her children as part of the extended family or small group would be another. Sharing needed resources, such as baby items and food, helping with rent, supporting education to move someone out of poverty are other ways to be positively pro-life. If you encourage a woman to carry her pregnancy, you might consider taking on the responsibility of helping her thrive once her child is born. This is a long-term commitment and is essential.

Political: Changing policy and law around life issues. This form of advocacy is broader than campaigning for a repeal of abortion or creating a law in Canada. It could involve working for a change in the way we deal with homelessness, or poverty (single women with children are most highly represented in those living below the poverty line and this is one of the reasons women choose abortion). It could be working to provide legal protection for the handicapped, or positively impacting end-of-life legislation. It could mean becoming more politically involved by running for office or keeping informed or writing thoughtful and well researched articles and letters to reach those making political decisions. If this is an interest, you can have a voice and an impact.

Prophetic: Many people have no understanding, interest, or knowledge about abortion or its impact in lives and communities. Confronting the culture with the reality of abortion can be a way to take a stand in a culture that sometimes chooses what seems to be a convenient way to solve a problem without understanding the long-term impact. Education is key to understanding and can have significant influence in changing minds and hearts. This type of advocacy should be done with empathy: those to whom you are speaking deserve dignity and respect. Anger and harsh words turn people away. We are called to be “wise as serpents and gentle as doves.” (Matthew 10:16)

There are many ways to be involved. One is not superior to another, but a matter of personality, gifting, and calling. Many advocates find themselves moving into a different sphere at different times in their lives, sometimes working in a combination of ways. Advocacy should never be seen as an either-or situation: it’s a both-and. Whatever form it takes, humility and love should be evident in the way the issue is approached.

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” (Colossians 3:12)

Polarization

“Polarization is,” according to a definition penned by Dr. Ronald

3. Wendy V Norman, “Induced Abortion in Canada 1974–2005: Trends over the First Generation with Legal Access,” *Contraception*, August 5, 2011, [https://www.contraceptionjournal.org/article/S0010-7824\(11\)00424-0/fulltext](https://www.contraceptionjournal.org/article/S0010-7824(11)00424-0/fulltext).

Richardson,⁴ “the concentration of opposing extremes of groups or interests formally ranged on a continuum.”⁵ Richardson goes on to describe the result of polarization from a Christian context:

It is normal for human communities to hold a range of opinions along a continuum on nearly any topic. In polarization, as an electrified atmosphere of opposing forces, people begin to regard those who do not think like they do as the enemy. As the intensity of feelings increases, they seek to defeat and even humiliate or destroy one another. Respect for others is lost. The ethic of love gives way to the ethic of hate. I have heard good Christians speak of how much they hate the people on the other side of an issue. Civil discussion of important issues, in recent years, has become more difficult to achieve. Those on each side believe they are morally right, as well as politically superior, and they see the other side in more negative, if not in morally evil terms. In these circumstances, calm and reasoned group discussion of an issue is less likely. Each side makes negative assertions about the other side, questions their motives, and uses inflammatory images to characterize the other’s position.⁶

Abortion, it can be argued, has become one of the most highly polarized issues of our time. Each side of the issue insists that its proponents are taking the “moral high-ground.” Entering the word “abortion” into a Google search will quickly reveal the wildly diverse perspectives that exist. These, of course, tend to devolve into pictures and claims that demean and dehumanize the opposition, naming those with an opposing perspective as “evil”. Politicians and media enter the fray, showing the conflict and inciting the ‘us versus them’ battle. When an issue becomes a war of words and ideology, civil discourse is lost. Polarization helps no one: personhood is diminished, and the heart of the issue is quickly forgotten in the heat of battle.

The heart of the issue is the women, children, and men, made in the image of God, who are impacted by abortion in a culture that does not value them enough to give them true choice. It is all of our failure. If we thoughtfully look to the teachings of Jesus, we can find another way.

It is also important to remember that those on the other side of the issue are also made in the image of God. Many have themselves been wounded in significant ways in a culture that does not value them. They are fighting for what they honestly believe is right. They believe that “reproductive choice” will free women and men, and that they are working for the good of society as a whole. Both sides are firm in their conviction that the other is misguided. If we choose not to ascribe evil to the person but see them as Christ does, perhaps the dialogue can change. While we may never agree, we can show care and respect. Perhaps we need to listen and get to know the other before we speak.

“Civil discourse isn’t the answer to everything, but uncivil discourse isn’t the answer to anything.” (N.T. Wright)⁷

Language

Words are important. How we speak about an issue either draws or repels. The words we speak may be true. They may even be justified (abortion is undeniably an ugly reality in our culture). But if our use of language turns people away from the church or the faith, or drives them deeper into shame and secrecy, have we accomplished anything other than making ourselves feel superior?

Those who have had abortions are very sensitive to the language they hear. Feelings of guilt, shame, and condemnation are often expressed. (I have heard more than one woman speak of it as a “self-loathing.”) We should always be aware that in any group there will be people who have had this painful experience. If we want them to be able to confess, and subsequently find hope and healing and forgiveness in Christ, it is critical to use gentle words of hope and healing. We must speak of the redemption that is offered to all of us who are sinners. We do not know the circumstances a woman found herself in when she had an abortion, and while we can name abortion as sin, we can also have compassion and the love that we are called to as the body of Christ. If we claim to be followers of Jesus, we need to heed the words He speaks in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-48) and understand that we are all guilty and in need of grace.

I know women whose lives have been shattered by abortion. I have sat with many who identify with and condemn themselves for sexual sin and abortion. They hide their secrets and are convinced that they can never be forgiven or approach God because of the words spoken to them by those claiming to speak for God. *Jan*,⁸ one such woman, was told by her pastor that she was now condemned to hell because of her abortion. She has spent her life punishing herself. No amount of speaking of the love of Christ and his forgiveness convinces her that there is any hope of restoration. A believer in a punishing and unforgiving God, she continues to heap upon herself the judgment she feels her sin deserves.

Words spoken at a critical time can change the direction of a life. These words may traumatize and never be forgotten. They can become a trap for an already vulnerable person. I have been privileged to be present when someone has had the courage to come for help and healing, and in the midst of telling of what she considers her ugliest secret has been met with love and grace.

Cara was one such woman. Her abortion had been a secret for 25 years when she finally found a way to work through that grief in a caring community. Courageously, she agreed to speak to a group of women, in a church context, about her experience. She nervously told me that she was sure that when she told her story to this group, she would be met with hatred and rejection. She confided in me, “I think they’ll spit on me,” but trusted me and told her story anyway. As people came up and thanked her, commended her, and told her how much her story had moved them, she began to believe that she had worth after all. Hope was restored. Cara’s faith is growing, she has no more shame, and she lives out her healing with joy and even volunteers to help others. Words matter they can heal or destroy.

4. Dr. Ronald W. Richardson, BA, MDiv, DMin, has been a marriage counselor and family therapist since 1976. He retired in 1996. He was formerly the Executive Director and Director of Training at the North Shore Counselling Centre in British Columbia. He was also on the faculty of the Pacific Coast Family Therapy Training Association. He is active as a Clinical Member and Approved Supervisor of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy and is a Diplomate of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors.

5. Ronald W. Richardson, *Polarization and the Healthier Church: Applying Bowen Family Systems Theory to Conflict and Change in Society and Congregational Life*, (CreateSpace, 2012), 3, Kindle.

6. Richardson, *Polarization and the Healthier Church*, 3.

7. N.T. Wright, British Bible scholar.

8. Name has been changed to protect identity.

Why Abortion?

There are many mixed messages facing both men and women about sexuality, and their place in society and in the world. No one could have predicted the changes brought about by the technological advances that are impacting us all. Access to sexually explicit materials and expectations to be sexually active without consequences cannot be avoided, even in the most protective homes. Anyone with a cellphone has access to things the previous generation could neither have anticipated nor imagined. Women are encouraged to take their place alongside men and to be in control of their choices and futures. Adolescence has extended by years and couples are marrying later or not at all. Sexual activity is no longer expected to be confined, by society, to one partner or to marriage.

While the church has, on the whole, a different standard, it can be faulted for not addressing the pressures faced in a culture steeped in sexual messages. Statistically, this is another area where culture has impacted the church more than the church has impacted culture. Even with advances in birth control, unexpected pregnancies happen, and equality seems to fall apart in this area. Women and men have many freedoms, but when the consequences of a pregnancy are a reality, the pressures are most often brought to bear on the women. "Her body, her choice" is often spoken and intended to be freeing and positive. When faced with an unexpected pregnancy, however, all of a woman's choices are difficult. Each one will change her life; each one will come with a cost.

In the crisis of the moment, it is normal for any one of us to try to find an escape. The quickest solution to an unplanned pregnancy may seem to be abortion. It is legal, and it can happen quickly. It may help alleviate the pressure to make a "good decision" that enables life to resume. It also offers an element of privacy: a woman may think "no one needs to know," and believes she can go on with her life as if nothing happened. For the community at large, the pregnancy is seen as a problem that can be solved cheaply and efficiently.

For someone within a faith community, the pressures may be even greater. A woman can hide both her sexual activity and the pregnancy and may be compelled to do so if she has heard negative conversations about other women in her situation. She may even have the support of her parents and friends to "help her" to avoid the consequences and "save face."

It is essential to understand that women most often choose abortion because they feel they have no option. Many are contending with financial and housing insecurity, isolation, a lack of supports, poverty, abuse, pressure from the father or family, peer and social pressure, addictions, and mental health issues. Others bear the weight of others' expectations about lifestyle and achievement, and the costs of having a baby at the "wrong" time. Some fear being shamed or excluded by their religious or cultural community. Other women are impacted by our culture's expectation that we, as individuals, should be able to control our lives. A few fear the loss of control altogether through the prospect of Children's Services taking their child (a realistic fear in some circumstances).

If we are to care for these women, we need to help them recognize that abortion is not an act of self-defence but of self-harm. We are living in a culture that tells us that we are foolish if we choose to parent when the circumstances are not perfect or if the child conceived has some physical or mental challenges. Abortion, from this standpoint, becomes an act of self-defence. Some women who follow this train of thought may see their unborn child as a threat to their life, their future, and their sense

of well-being. They may also believe that they are protecting their child from the kind of pain that they have experienced in their own families and homes, or from a partner who is violent.

I was hugely saddened when a Christian woman from a First Nations community told me that she was going to go through with an abortion even though she believed it was wrong. She came from five generations of sexual abuse and trauma. In her mind, the baby would go to be with Jesus rather than being exposed to the kind of pain she had experienced and was still enduring.

Tragically, some women and men choose abortion because they fear being shamed or excluded by their religious or cultural community.

There seems to be very little understanding, in our culture, of the effect the choice of abortion has. The loss and grief involved has a long-term impact that is seen in a woman's future decisions and mental health. Although abortion is commonly portrayed as a necessary and "easy" solution, a cost-effective answer to a social problem, it is anything but.

Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is the state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes, especially related to behavioural decisions and attitude change.

When a person's behaviour and beliefs do not align, or this person holds two beliefs that contradict each another, a mental conflict results. The same holds true when a society holds two contradictory beliefs or attitudes. The result is often tension and discomfort. Relief may be sought by explaining things away or rejecting new information that conflicts with existing beliefs.

The concept of cognitive dissonance in community and family is worth exploring as we try to understand the impact of abortion. Often those choosing an abortion are making what they perceive as a survival choice, knowing full well that it is at the expense of their child. With the proliferation of ultrasound access, pictures, and videos of life before birth, as well as readily available scientific and medical information, very few are unaware of what this fetus (Latin for little one) is. A small minority, avoiding the medical information, would still describe it as "a clump of cells."

What needs to be understood is what a woman is defending in her life. She may believe that her pregnancy will cost her a university education and her reputation. She may be defending her identity and longed for future, unaware of how this choice will change her future or her identity. In order to preserve one set of values, she may dispense with another. Indeed, while the arguments against abortion are straightforward, lives are complicated.

We say, as a culture, community, and church, that we value children. In many ways, however, we fail to protect them either before or after birth. Canadian poverty statistics reveal huge inequities in what we say we believe, and how we care. Likewise, women and children who are fleeing domestic violence and abuse are seldom given adequate practical and legal supports. We say that boys and girls have equal value and lament the fact that sex-selection abortion is a global reality, and yet may do little to open up opportunities for girls to be born and educated.

If we are to speak about (and protest against) the pain of abortion and its consequences, we must give equal voice to the conditions that create the barriers to thriving for families during critical times. Pregnancy and the early childbearing years are

the most vulnerable times in the lives of both women and their children, physically and emotionally. The brain development and attachment that happen prenatally and during the first three years after birth are critical to the future of both parent and child. We have excellent research and information available (look up Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), that clearly demonstrate how adverse early experiences have a lifetime of impact for children and their communities).⁹

Impact

The solution that abortion is intended to provide is often the source of unanticipated, ongoing pain for the individuals and families involved. It is generally understood that pregnancy losses impact individuals and families and need to be grieved. There are some losses, however, that remain unacknowledged. Abortion is one of those losses. This is called disenfranchised grief—grief that is given no place—and its impact on emotional wellbeing is recognized in grief literature (see Kenneth Doka).

“The grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported.”¹⁰

Because a person has a choice in the abortion decision, she may believe that she has no right to grieve. Her community may affirm this belief. Sadly, some even believe that she should be punished, excluded, and shunned for her decision. (This is often true, as well, for those who make adoption decisions.)

Abortion is a pregnancy loss regardless of choice, and many losses are involved. Often there is the loss of the relationship, the loss of the person she thought she was, the moving away from faith and God, and the loss of trust in family and community. This is especially true for a woman who feels unsupported or pressured, or who cannot be transparent with people because of her secret and fear of judgment. A woman's ability to grieve may be hindered because she believes she has no permission, from either her culture or herself. As a result, she may work very hard to push the reality away. Disenfranchisement may damage her ability to attach in relationships. For example, she may be afraid to bond with a subsequent child, however wanted, because of guilt or the fear that God will punish her. She may even expect this child will die.

Unresolved grief is often the underlying issue when people appear to be stuck and unable to move on in life. When a loss isn't grieved, significant energy is spent in keeping that pain at bay. Grief may exhibit itself in what appear to be self-destructive behaviours, including addictions, relational difficulties, self-harming choices, and even repeat pregnancies under similar situations and with similar outcomes. This repetition of poor choices and consequences adds to a woman's current feelings of shame and worthlessness. In the faith community context, she might feel she has to pay God back by doing everything perfectly, becoming the person who works tirelessly in the church or the perfect mother, sometimes having baby after baby to fill that void.

Grief is hard work and takes time, and understandably it is often avoided. It is only through entering the grieving process that healing can begin. Grieving should not be done alone, but in community. How many people sit in our services, unable or

unwilling to ask for someone to come alongside because of their shame, guilt and fear of condemnation? As people of faith, we need to ask ourselves what messages we are intentionally or unintentionally giving that keep people stuck. Words matter.

Compassion, empathy, and companionship heal, freeing people to become all that God intends them to be, fully themselves and fully able to participate in our communities of faith.

Practicle Ways to Honour Life

Being pro-life means supporting parenting.

Without support, we set up a vulnerable person for failure. The consequence of a difficult and unsuccessful parenting experience creates a situation that makes abortion for her next child the likely choice. One child may be safe, but the next isn't.

Society makes assumptions and criticizes but doesn't offer adequate support to open doors for actual choice. A vulnerable parent may have to scramble for resources such as food and clothing, making basic survival a full-time occupation. Our food banks are overwhelmed by the need. The question we all need to ask if we are pro-life is this: what are we doing to help young families be successful? How are we being a community of support to children who are being raised by single parents? Who is helping women navigate the complexities of the social service system in order to find resources and supporting educational opportunities? Who is willing to offer child-care for a stressed and overwhelmed mom? What part are we playing in keeping children in safe homes by fostering and supporting foster parents?

We celebrate when someone makes a choice to carry an unintended pregnancy to term. For the child this is truly a victory. However, what may not be recognized is the desperate and overwhelmed woman who may return to the clinic the following year, once again pregnant and dealing with the same issues that put her into this crisis in the first place.

Continued participation in the long-term outcome for parents and children tell the more impactful story, the life affirming and changing story that will impact for generations.

Being pro-life means honouring adoption.

Adoption is becoming increasingly rare. The criticism often leveled, and not without justification, is that there are already many “unwanted” children in our world, languishing in foster care or on the streets of our big cities, orphaned and alone. There are infants and children being trafficked and abused, sold into slavery. These are both justice and pro-life issues which need to be protested and resolved. This reality is painful, complex, and uncomfortable. If we are truly honest, we show more concern for the well-being of our pets than the world's children. How much education and effort is needed for us to take seriously God's call to care for those made in his image?

While fertility rates decrease, there are fewer and fewer infants available for adoption in Canada. How many resources are we willing to invest in education about adoption? How often is it even discussed in our churches?

Ironically when we hear people speak about adoption and how wonderful it is, they mention the beautiful baby and what

9. Adverse Childhood Experiences can be found in numerous sources and studies including Harvard University, Centre on the Developing Child. Also see <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources> for resources from leading experts on the science of early brain development and its connection to adult mental health, including addiction.

10. Kenneth J. Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2002), 11.

great and self-sacrificing people adoptive parents are. That is all true, but too often the person missing in the equation, quickly forgotten, is the birth mother and the birth family who supported her decision to give a much-loved child a brighter future. How many Christians are uncomfortable with the concept of openness in adoption, perceiving the person who gave the child life as a threat to the child and family's well-being? Being pro-life to me also means truly honouring birth mothers and fathers publicly and privately.

Being pro-life means caring for the post-abortive.

A woman who has chosen abortion needs hope and healing instead of condemnation. She needs to hear words that heal, not words that wound or drive her further into shame and secrecy.

Cara, who has experienced both pain and healing, expressed it this way:

"When I hear the word 'abortion,' I grieve for the lives lost, but I also think of the women who took a wrong turn in the road and made a desperate decision like I did. I hope and pray they find programs like Living in Color¹¹ so they too can find healing and self-worth. Compassion, mercy, and love are words I now use to describe how I treat myself and those whose lives are the subject of discrimination and judgement."

Cara has a passion for helping women heal. She is making a difference by speaking about her experience. As Cara says, "Giving women a place to heal and to become as Henri Nouwen would phrase it 'wounded healers' is one of my great joys."

Being pro-life means educating and encouraging men to take equal responsibility.

What is happening in the arena of abortion is all of our responsibility. Men are obviously involved in conception and the decision-making yet are rarely spoken of in the conversations around abortion. Sadly, men are often absent, threaten to leave if a woman carries. They may put pressure on her to abort. I have heard many men express that they feel that it isn't fair if she chooses to carry to term because then they will be forced to take responsibility when they don't feel ready to parent or do not want to be in a long-term relationship with her.

There are also the men who support and take responsibility and do everything in their power to help their partners. These men need our approval, affirmation and care.

Men who treat women with dignity and respect can lead the way in terms of having positive conversations about the social issues faced by us all. Imagine a society in which Christian men purposefully mentor young men, helping them fully care for the sons and daughters they helped to bring into the world. Imagine a world in which all women are treated as co-inheritors of the kingdom.

Being pro-life means having the hard conversations with our children.

From early childhood onwards, we must teach our children that their lives, and the lives of others, have intrinsic value. We must treat them as image bearers of God. We must extend unconditional love that mirrors God's and assure them that no secret is too big to share.

Modeling pro-life values includes a willingness to be appropriately transparent about our own struggles and failings. It means not leaving sexual education to outsiders. It means treating the

opposite gender with respect. It includes engaging in meaningful and regular conversations early and emphasizing that no topic is forbidden. It includes a responsibility to educate about pornography and why it harms. It also means limiting access to devices and time spent on the internet for all members of the family and leading by example.

Those in our care and community need to know that if they ever find themselves facing the consequences of their sexual choices, you will help them support the new life for which they are now responsible. They need to know that you will stand with and beside them, without shame, in front of family, friends and community.

Being pro-life means having open conversations in our churches, families, and communities about sexuality and the struggles the human family has always faced.

It means becoming educated even if it is uncomfortable. It means listening to things you might not want to hear from your children or others who have the courage to confide in you. It means not judging but trying to understand. It means taking a stand against abuse in all forms and refusing to make victims responsible for the choices of their perpetrators. It means refusing to hide or cover up incidents of abuse in your church or home.

We must stop defaulting to a "God says no, it's bad" mentality that prevents children from becoming mature adults with a healthy attitude towards sexuality. We must speak positively of sexuality as God's good idea and educate about the context in which it is meant to be safely enjoyed.

Grace-Filled Conversations

One of the ways to assess if a church community is a place where people find safety is to ask good questions. For example, do those who are considering abortion feel permission to come and speak to someone about the difficult decisions they are facing? Given that 1 in 3 women in Canada will have an abortion at some point (impacting their partners and families as well), do these conversations happen on a regular basis? If not, is it a matter of safety for the individual or an avoidance of an issue that is difficult for the staff and congregation to address? Are we really willing to engage in the abortion dialogue and open the door in practical ways to those who need our support? How many are coming forward about an abortion decision that they regret making in the past?

How is the church equipping and educating both staff and lay-people to handle these challenging conversations in a way that draws and cares for those involved? How much knowledge is there about available resources in the community at large? Do we speak about the sanctity of human life often and in different ways, considering all the ways to value people and their lives? When we do speak about abortion are we careful to put ourselves in the place of the person to whom we are speaking, considering how this person might interpret our words? After a sermon is given on the topic, how many come to seek help and healing? If this is a rare occurrence, there is work to be done, given the numbers impacted by abortion. This is an exciting opportunity for change and impact.

Grace-filled words heal. Empathy heals. Providing places of safety and good, informed counsel and connection has the potential to diffuse conflict and show that the church is a community that values and practically cares for those caught up in this divisive issue. It is hard to be critical of a church and a people that offer

¹¹ Jenny McDermid, *Living in Color: The Goal of Post-abortion Recovery* (Seattle, WA: Createspace, 2011)

hope, help and healing, especially if done thoughtfully and with excellence.

When speaking and responding to the issue of abortion, there are pertinent questions to answer before speaking too loudly. How are we, as caring faith communities, dealing with the barriers that women face in their decision making? Are we addressing the many inequities faced by women who are enveloped in poverty, housing insecurity, domestic violence, and abuse?

Women with a family or pregnancy have fewer choices. Few addiction facilities are accessible, as women are more complicated and expensive to help. Housing is an issue as well, as women most often come with children who need to be factored into the equation. In spite of much dialogue about justice and equality, women (and children) are still the most highly represented in these problem areas. Do we want to be known as a community that opposes abortion, or one that helps young families thrive?

We need to give up stereotypes and be aware that an unintended pregnancy can happen to anyone. Any woman of child-bearing age can experience the emotional pain and the external and internal pressures that compel her to contemplate abortion. I once had a pastor's daughter come to speak to me. She had a positive pregnancy test and was extremely distressed. She was sure that she was going to have an abortion even though it went against her values and against what she wanted to do. It was a painful conversation. This sensitive, perceptive and discerning young woman told me she had heard how her parents and her church talked about girls who became pregnant and was certain that she would lose not only her reputation, but her church community as well.

It begins with how we talk about these situations, and what kind of love and support we model.

In another case, a pastor spoke to me about someone in his congregation who had an abortion booked and was coming to speak to him about it. He was looking for help and information. He told me that he and his congregation would do whatever it took to support her. If she was in an abusive situation, they would protect and shelter her. If she was in poverty the church would commit to paying for an apartment and helping her financially. This pastor asked her if she would like to speak to someone else and personally brought her to see me.

I was in awe at the gentle way he spoke to her, telling her that he, together with her church, would become a family to her and to her child. They would help her succeed and thrive. He also offered to speak to the father of the child, if that would help. He didn't downplay how difficult her circumstances were but offered unconditional love and support.

There was no shame and no condemnation, just an

encouragement that allowed her to contemplate and even celebrate the child she was carrying. She began to see this child as a gift from God to both herself and the community. I watched her face turn from worry and sorrow into glimpses of joy as she thought about becoming a mother, something she had always wanted to be. This pastor freed her to make the choice that her heart wanted to make.

As demonstrated by this church leader, changing the abortion conversation involves sacrifice. It means, in practical terms, doing more, becoming more informed, and getting involved long term in the lives of people whose choices we don't necessarily approve of.

If we fail to use language and words that others can hear, we have already lost the ability to speak effectively into the conversation. If we do not listen well and respectfully, we cannot understand. If we are quick to speak and slow to listen, we will represent poorly the God in whose image we are created.

We need to take responsibility for the things we have said and done that have pushed people away, sometimes, if we are honest, into a choice we judge them for. Support, encouragement, care and love will not be turned away. How we approach the issues of the day and the lives impacted matters. It is how we present the *imago dei* in us.

Given the history of abortion, it is unrealistic to expect punishment and judgment to turn things around. Instead, we must grapple with what it means to be truly pro-life—full advocates for the sanctity and dignity of all human life. We need to move beyond our personal safety and get involved with those whose lives are not valued. We need to stop polarizing individuals. Love, empathy, and service need to be evident, and can only be realized when we see and appreciate the faces of those impacted by abortion.

In these challenging times, it is easy to be cruel and divisive on social media. I would hope and pray that those who call themselves Christians are challenged to be counter-cultural in this arena, filling their social media pages with opportunities to help, educate, and encourage. Refusal to participate in polarization or to politicise the issue is a critical stance for faith communities to take if they are to be trusted as safe places.

Jesus will show us the way if we care to pay attention. He did not treat women as "unclean" as many did in his culture and as many do today in the area of sexuality and abortion. He did not use them or judge them or discard them. He called them "daughter." Valuing life means valuing women who carry life when they have the burden of an unintended pregnancy and offering support to make parenthood more possible. Given the example of Jesus we have a high calling: to defend those who need our help, advocate for truth and justice, and to make a difference, helping one person, winning one victory, and embracing one heart at a time.

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Recommended Resources:

Alberta Family Wellness Initiative resource library. <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources> - Resource Library from leading experts on the science of early brain development and its connection to adult mental health, including addiction.

Grief Is a Journey: Finding Your Path Through Loss by Dr. Kenneth J. Doka

Living in Color: the Goal of Post-Abortion Recovery by Jenny McDermid. This is a comprehensive healing program designed to engage those who have experienced the loss of abortion. It is effective for use in small facilitator-led support groups, for a person making her recovery journey alone, or in the company of a mentor, pastor or counselor.

Perfectly Human: Nine Months with Cerian by Sarah C. Williams

Polarization and the Healthier Church by Ronald Richardson

The Pearl Brown Story. <https://youtu.be/9U0aOhncprU> - In this SBC video, Eric and Ruth Brown recall daughter Pearl Joy, whose life still speaks.

About the Author:

Jutta Wittmeier began as a Calgary Pregnancy Care Centre volunteer more than 30 years ago before transitioning through Client Services Director and Centre Director to Executive Director. In her previous role as Client Services Director, Jutta developed and oversaw a post-abortion recovery education team. This led to a passion for caring for those who have experienced the loss of abortion and a firm commitment to provide relevant, sensitive, and meaningful opportunities for healing. Jutta and the author of *Living in Color*, Jenny McDermid, teach post abortion facilitator's trainings that endeavour to equip others with useful tools and resources.

Jutta has co-authored a book on adoption called *Affirming the Birthmother's Journey*. She has seen the difference a caring, well-equipped volunteer community can make in the lives of the vulnerable.

EDITORIAL COMMENT:

The SALT Committee (Social Awareness Living Truth) is grateful to the author for providing us with their academic and personal exploration of this topic. We encourage all readers to prayerfully consider how to integrate this culturally relevant information into their Biblical worldview and ministry context.