

PARO: Presbyterians Being Faithful to a Woman's Right to Choose

The Experience

I was working my way through high school (1965) in the lab of a small rural hospital in Idaho. I was “on call” one night when a local farmer came running into the emergency room; his wife was bleeding to death in the cab of his pick up truck. She had induced an abortion and punctured her uterus. Doctors tried frantically to save her. She was 38 years old and the mother of six children. Her obituary in the local newspaper listed her death as due to “natural causes”. No one could explain to my satisfaction why such a tragedy could not have been avoided. I knew there had to be a better way. (Unpublished journal entry, January 22, 1973, ALH)

The Experience Expanded

Both the United Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church US were “pro-choice” in their social witness policies prior to the United States Supreme Court’s Roe v. Wade decision in January 1973. Both churches affirmed:

The proper use of medically approved contraceptives may contribute to the spiritual, emotional, and economic welfare of the family, (1959 – UPCUSA)

The willful termination of pregnancy by medical means on the considered decision of a pregnant woman may on occasion be morally justifiable. Possible justifying circumstances would include medical indications of physical or mental deformity, conception as a result of rape or incest, conditions under which the physical or mental health of either mother or child would be gravely threatened, or the socio-economic condition of the family. . . (1970 – PCUS)

Such foresight had little impact on the life of a rural homemaker in Idaho, but countless numbers of lives have been saved since the advent of legal abortion services in the United States. Pro-choice Presbyterians have been on the forefront of the efforts to keep access to safe a legal abortions the law of the land.

In 1983 Presbyterians adopted *The Covenant of Life and the Caring Community and Covenant and Creation: Theological Reflections on Contraception and Abortion*. These documents became the backbone of PC(USA) social witness policy on family planning, abortion and other reproductive health issues. It states that the Presbyterian Church:

- a. *Commits this denomination and urges its members to encourage research and development of contraceptive knowledge and techniques to make this awareness and facility easily available to all and to support legislation and public funding which strengthen family life:*
- b. *Urges Presbyterians to support sexuality education programs in families, churches, schools, and private and public agencies;*
- c. *Encourages mutual responsibility by men and women for contraception;*
- d. *Affirms the need for research in and development of a range of contraceptives which can be used by men;*
- e. *Encourages couples to use more than one method of contraception in order to minimize contraceptive failure;*
- f. *Affirms the use of voluntary sterilization by couples who have completed their families.*

Our Traditions: If Presbyterians are pro-choice why do we need PARO?

Even though the PC(USA) has a history of pro-choice social witness policy, there have been forces that have sought to sunder this progressive legacy. PARO grew out of the 1988 Consultation on Reproductive Rights and Responsibilities (CRRR). Participants in this significant national educational event sponsored by the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association (PHEWA) and the two women's groups of the PCUS and the UPC, frequently mentioned a need for information sharing about reproductive health related issues. A pro-choice Presbyterian newsletter ("Choice Words for

Presbyterians”) was started with funds remaining from CRRR in 1989. Clara Morgan served as the editor.

With nurture and guidance from PHEWA and Justice For Women (JFW) the seeds were sown for a membership organization in 1990. Space was made available at the 1990 General Assembly for networking and disseminating printed materials and an effort was made by Clara and other supporters to secure testimony for the Special Committee on Problem Pregnancies and Abortion holding open hearings during GA.

On February 5, 1991, a group of concerned Presbyterians gathered two days prior to the PHEWA Biennial in Oakland, CA. They agreed on a name (PARO), adopted a Purpose Statement, Bylaws, and elected a Leadership Team. Those elected included: Rev. Bebb Wheeler Stone, Pittsburgh, PA; Rev. Rebecca Reyes, Chapel Hills, NC; Rev. Don Coleman, Ann Arbor, MI; Virginia Copenhefer, Louisville, KY; and Clara Morgan, Westerville, OH.

PARO’s stated mission was to value the lives of women, to trust women as moral decision makers and to create an environment in which women could be faithful stewards of their lives and bodies. PARO also took on the responsibility to educate the church as to the pro-choice social witness policies of the Presbyterian Church, to work actively to maintain that policy and to provide resources to help Presbyterians understand and affirm their social witness policies.

The Legacy Continues

Since 1991 Presbyterians Affirming Reproductive Options has accomplished many of the goals it set for itself and more. Through its annual General Assembly

presence in committee work and through disseminating information, PARO lifts up and protects the PC(USA) heritage of affirming the value of women's lives and their ability to be moral decision makers. PARO also maintains a presence at other large church gatherings such as the Youth Triennium and Presbyterian Women's National Gathering. PARO members are also available to lead workshops and seminars on reproductive health issues.

PARO's commitment to education and the church's pro-choice social witness policy has been furthered with the publication of *Abortion in Good Faith*, by Gloria Albrecht, *Responsibility and Respect*, by George and Clara Morgan and a guide for Presbyterian considering foster parenting and adoption written by Dr. Lois Rifner, *Nurturing the Children of God: The Call to Foster Parenting and Adoption*. Brochures related to problem pregnancy have been produced in cooperation with the Women's Ministry Unit: *There's Always a Father, When You Need the Wisdom of Solomon*, and *When No Choice is Easy*. PARO has had *When No Choice Is Easy* translated into Spanish.

PARO provides a service to the church for those individuals seeking information and advice related to pregnancy and other reproductive health issues.

Through advocacy and education PARO affirms that as Reformed Christians, we believe that God alone is the sovereign arbiter of each individual conscience and that God alone is to be worshipped: God, the Creator, rather than the creation. By affirming the Good News of forgiveness, freedom and reconciliation in the lives of women and men as they make decisions in faith in Jesus' promise of abundant life, Presbyterians remain faithful to scripture and to their lives as stewards of their own bodies.