

Problem Pregnancy

When You Need Wisdom

Helping Others Face Problem Pregnancies

I have a friend who is 15 years old, pregnant, and scared to death.

What do I say?

He's 17 years old—she's pregnant—he wants to go to college, and he also wants to do the “right thing.”

Where do I find the words?

She's 48—married—pregnant for the first time. They want a child.

How much should I stress the risk?

She's 42—a mother of three children—divorced—works—can't afford another child, but has concerns about having an abortion.

How can I help her?

They're in their late 30s—she's pregnant—a genetic disorder is diagnosed.

How do I counsel them?

What Shall I Say to Her—Him—Them?

Pastors are called upon to be informed, compassionate, sensitive, and helpful when it comes to counseling. This is a major challenge, yet all of these skills are needed when it comes to dealing with a problem pregnancy. Problem pregnancy includes women in a variety of difficult circumstances, *e.g.*, the woman is under age 15, or is the victim of rape or incest, or there is a congenital anomaly in the fetus. A problem pregnancy affects both the pregnant woman and her partner, and perhaps even both sets of their parents. All of them may be looking to you as the pastor for guidance and advice.

This resource is for pastor-counselors who are helping others face the news of a problem pregnancy in a variety of difficult circumstances. As God has expressed love and grace in Jesus Christ, so we are to express that love and grace to one another when faced with difficult and complex circumstances regarding problem pregnancies.

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General Assembly Mission Council

People will be more likely to approach you for counseling if you have signaled your availability and your desire to help them. Your preaching, pastoral care, and other aspects of your ministry should communicate your openness to persons who are hurting. Your willingness to be deeply involved will encourage hurting persons to come to you for help. They must be sure that anything told to you in confidence will remain confidential. They must trust that you can and will offer understanding and compassionate advice.

When you display understanding and compassion, hurting people will come to you with some of the most wrenching concerns that human beings encounter. For that reason there is no absolute set of laws or rules that can provide an appropriate answer in all cases. When you are faced with cries for help, your most valuable gifts are your care and compassion.

When the pregnant woman or her partner or parents come to you, the first thing to do is to listen non-judgmentally. Resist the urge to provide an easy answer—there is no easy answer or choice. The more carefully you listen to the conversation, the more significant help you will be able to provide. You may learn more from voice inflections, body language, and other nonverbal signals than from the words spoken.

Seek to get all the information possible about the woman, the man, their families, health (including genetics if appropriate), financial condition, and religious background and understanding. You will want to learn about the attitudes of the families in order to understand the pressures that are bearing upon all who are involved.

As a counselor, it is important that you learn the extent of your counselee's knowledge and understanding of what is required in the birth process and in raising a child. Many young people do not realize how pregnancy occurs or how to prevent pregnancy. Therefore they may have no real understanding of fetal development or the birth process. They may not have a clear understanding of what is involved in raising a child. It will be helpful for you, as a counselor, to be as knowledgeable about and comfortable with all these subjects as possible.

What Are the Options?

There are three distinctive options for the pregnant woman to consider:

- She can decide to deliver the baby and then parent the child after birth.
- She can decide to have the baby and to make a plan for the adoption of the baby.
- She can decide to terminate the pregnancy.

Companion resources have been developed, entitled *Problem Pregnancy: When No Choice Is Easy*, *Problem Pregnancy: There's Always a Father*, and *Problem Pregnancy: When Pregnancy Involves Loss*. The first resource is addressed primarily to the woman who finds herself pregnant when she does not want to be. The second is addressed to the father facing the news of a problem pregnancy with an unmarried partner. The third is addressed to those who want to help individuals when loss of a pregnancy has occurred.

This resource and the companion resources are addressed, primarily, to young, unmarried persons. They are, however, not the only ones who are confronted by problem pregnancies. Others who may need your help include: older women, married or single, for whom giving birth to a child may be hazardous to their life and health; women carrying a fetus with genetic disorders; women, especially single women, who have more children than they can adequately provide for.

You may be asked to consult with the father whose desires, aspirations, and moral views may coincide with or differ from those of the mother. Before you begin to advise or counsel, as a pastor-counselor you will want to consider both the immediate and long-term effects of each of the options.

Having and Raising the Baby

Our Christian tradition affirms that all life is a gift from God. Yet many Christians, including Presbyterian Christians, disagree about exactly when human life begins.

The pregnancy may be a problem for the woman right now because of her circumstances. A child can, however, be a tremendous source of love, fulfillment, and happiness. Your approach in counseling may differ, depending upon the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy. Divergent counseling is required for the very young teenager, the older woman, and the woman whose fetus has been diagnosed as having a congenital anomaly.

You are the only one who can determine your different approaches to differing circumstances. Presbyterian Church policy recognizes that problem pregnancies are the result of, and influenced by, so many complicated and unsolvable circumstances that the church has neither the wisdom nor the authority to address each situation. This resource will not provide inflexible guidelines.

The decision to keep the child must ultimately be left up to the pregnant woman. That decision, however, should be advised only when she is reasonably sure that she can provide for the physical and emotional needs of a child. If the physical and emotional future of the mother would be jeopardized by selecting this option, then this choice may not be the best. Adoption or abortion may be more appropriate choices, depending on the circumstances.

Planning for Adoption

Adoption can be a very loving response. Once the pregnant woman has determined that she cannot raise the child, she may then wish to explore the possibility of adoption. Adoption may assure the child's future welfare and fulfill the dreams of persons who are unable to bear children.

There are, however, other considerations. Some mothers never get over the emotional loss they experience in giving up a child. This loss is important to recognize. In addition, some cultural traditions consider failure to raise one's child unthinkable—"we don't give our babies away." A careful counselor will want to be sensitive to such beliefs and to recognize that the pregnant woman may be seeking affirmation from family and friends that adoption is an acceptable choice.

We read in the Bible the story of a mother who, because she loved her child so deeply, gave her child to another woman. Because of circumstances beyond her control, Moses' mother knew she would not be able to raise him to adulthood in her care. So she created a plan whereby he might be adopted into a family that could provide that care (Exodus 2:1–10). This is exactly the pattern that a birth mother today follows when she chooses to seek adoptive parents to care for the baby.

If adoption becomes the option chosen, it is imperative to get good legal advice. Adoption is a legal procedure. The mother, and perhaps the father, will be required to sign papers relinquishing parental rights. Adoption laws vary from state to state, and a certified adoption agency or a lawyer should be consulted.

Once the pregnant woman has determined that she cannot raise the child, she may then wish to explore the possibility of adoption.

Abortion

Abortion—the remaining option—should be considered only after carefully weighing the other two alternatives. The church’s position is that none of these three options is always an absolute.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has deep respect for human life. It also recognizes that in certain circumstances abortion can be a morally acceptable decision to make. However, the church also considers abortion an option of last resort. The following legal, ecclesiastical, and biblical statements concerning abortion offer information and ideas that you need to consider in discussing this option with a pregnant teen, pregnant woman, and the father.

What Do the Courts Say About Abortion?

In 1973 the United States Supreme Court overturned anti-abortion statutes of Texas and Georgia in the cases of *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton*, legalizing abortion with these restrictions:

- For the stage prior to approximately the end of the first trimester, the abortion decision and its effectuation must be left to the medical judgment of the pregnant woman’s attending physician.
- For the stage subsequent to approximately the end of the first trimester, the State, in promoting its interest in the health of the mother, may, if it chooses, regulate the abortion procedure in ways that are reasonably related to maternal health.
- For the stage subsequent to viability—usually placed at about seven months (twenty-eight weeks but may occur earlier, even at twenty-four weeks)—the State in promoting its interest in the potentiality of human life, may, if it chooses, regulate and even proscribe, abortion, except where it is necessary, in appropriate medical judgment, for the preservation of the life or health of the mother” (*Roe v. Wade Decision*).

In summary, a woman can obtain a legal abortion in the first 13 weeks of pregnancy without any interference from the state. (Exceptions are made in some states where parental notification for minors presents a possible restriction.)

After the first 13 weeks of pregnancy, she may still obtain an abortion, but the state, if it chooses, may prescribe regulations for the abortion procedure in ways designated to protect the woman’s health. The state may more stringently regulate or even prohibit abortion after “viability,” except where abortion is necessary to preserve the woman’s life. Viability is the stage in pregnancy after which a fetus would probably survive outside the womb.

What Does the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Say?

The basic Reformed tenet is that God alone is the Lord of the conscience. That belief undergirds long-standing church policy in support of a woman’s ability and responsibility, as guided by the Holy Spirit, to make good moral choices about contraception and abortion within the limits of federal and state law. In society this is usually called a “pro-choice” policy, which allows for a woman to consider a range of options with regard to reproduction.

The church affirms that idea, but the church does not advocate abortion. Rather, the church recognizes a woman’s moral authority and circumstances that may make abortion the least objectionable of difficult options, but also the option of last resort.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has policy statements regarding problem pregnancy issues. One, published in 1992, is “The Report of the Special Committee on Problem Pregnancies and Abortion: Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly (Micah 6:8).” The second is the decision of the 2006 General Assembly, Item 10-01, “On Late Term Pregnancy.”

The 1992 problem pregnancies and abortion report provides guidance for how Presbyterians who have different points of view about abortion can get along in their church. Two general ways of using and interpreting scripture and five points of view about when a human life begins are listed as sources of disagreement. The policy development section of the paper is clearly designated and lists areas of substantial agreement, followed by implications for the life and witness of the church.

The 1992 report clarifies the church's affirmation of a woman's moral authority.

“We affirm the ability and responsibility of women, guided by the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, in the context of their communities of faith, to make good moral choices in regard to problem pregnancies” (*Report of the Special Committee on Problem Pregnancies and Abortion, 1992*).

The report lists some of the possible circumstances that may make abortion justified: severe physical or mental deformity, rape or incest, or threats to the woman's or fetus's physical or mental health. Also listed are circumstances that are not seen as acceptable reasons: instead of birth control, to select gender for non-medical reasons, or to obtain fetal parts for transplantation. The church clearly says that abortion should be “an option of last resort” and that Presbyterians should work to change society so that fewer problem pregnancies happen as a way to decrease the number of abortions.

In 2006, the 217th General Assembly approved this statement on late-term pregnancy:

“The church has a responsibility to provide public witness and to offer guidance, counsel, and support to those who make or interpret laws and public policies about abortion and problem pregnancies. Pastors have a duty to counsel with and pray for those who face decisions about problem pregnancies. Congregations have a duty to pray for and support those who face these choices, to offer support for women and families to help make unwanted pregnancies less

likely to occur, and to provide practical support for those facing the birth of a child with medical anomalies, birth after rape or incest, or those who face health, economic, or other stresses” (*General Assembly Policy on Late-Term Pregnancy, Item 10-01, 2006*).

The church also affirms the value of children and the importance of nurturing, protecting, and advocating their well-being. The church, therefore, appreciates the challenge each woman and family face when issues of personal well-being arise in the later stages of a pregnancy.

“In life and in death, we belong to God.” Life is a gift from God. We may not know exactly when human life begins and have but an imperfect understanding of God as the giver of life and of our own human existence, yet we recognize that life is precious to God, and we should preserve and protect it. We derive our understanding of human life from Scripture and the Reformed tradition in light of science, human experience, and reason guided by the Holy Spirit. Because we are made in the image of God, human beings are moral agents, endowed by the Creator with the capacity to make choices. Our Reformed tradition recognizes that people do not always make moral choices, and forgiveness is central to our faith. In the Reformed tradition, we affirm that God is the only Lord of the conscience—not the state or the church. As a community, the church challenges the faithful to exercise their moral agency responsibly.

When an individual woman faces the decision whether to terminate a pregnancy, the issue is intensely personal and may manifest itself in ways that do not reflect public rhetoric or do not fit neatly into medical, legal, or policy guidelines. Humans are empowered by the Spirit prayerfully to make significant moral choices, including the choice to continue or to end a pregnancy. Human choices should not be made in a moral vacuum but must be based on Scripture, faith, and Christian ethics. For any choice we make, we are accountable to God. However, even when we err, God offers to forgive us.

We affirm that the lives of viable unborn babies—those well-developed enough to survive outside the womb if delivered—ought to be preserved

and cared for and not aborted. In cases where problems of life or health of the mother arise in a pregnancy, the church supports efforts to protect the life and health of both the mother and the baby. When late-term pregnancies must be terminated, we urge decisions intended to deliver the baby alive. We look to our churches to provide pastoral and tangible support to women in problem pregnancies and to surround these families with a community of care. We affirm adoption as a provision for women who deliver children they are not able to care for, and ask our churches to assist in seeking loving, Christian, adoptive families” (*Minutes*, 2006, Part I, p. 905).

Not every Presbyterian agrees with this policy. It is not binding on the conscience of individuals but reflects the opinion of the General Assembly that adopted it.

As a pastor-counselor, you may want to keep on hand a small library of problem pregnancy sources, including the 1992, 1997 and 2006 documents, guidelines for evaluating crisis pregnancy centers, adoption study papers, all-option counseling suggestions, and others. A brief listing of contacts is found on the final page of this resource.

Biblical and Theological View on Abortion

There are no biblical texts that speak directly to the topic of abortion. Consequently contemporary positions are derived from the application of general biblical principles. Varying and even contradictory positions on contraception and abortion are held by different groups in the church. Each group is convinced that its position is “biblical,” depending on which texts and which principles are used and how they are used.

Recognizing these facts, we can take a more informed look at three positions held by various Presbyterians. They are: (1) abortion should be forbidden by law in all circumstances, (2) abortion can be a responsible moral choice in limited circumstances, and (3) abortion can be a morally responsible choice under broader circumstances. These positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, nor are they the only perspectives. Presbyterians who believe that abortion should be prohibited by law

under all circumstances cite texts such as Jeremiah 1:5 and the Sixth Commandment, “You shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13). For them human life begins at the moment of conception because they believe that God is intimately involved in the creation of life in the womb. For the Presbyterians who hold this position, God alone has the right of life and death over creation.

The second group of Presbyterians believes that abortion can be a responsible choice in limited circumstances. These Presbyterians generally hold two beliefs in tension: (1) their belief in the value of potential human life, and (2) their belief that in certain, limited circumstances the pregnant woman’s life and welfare should take priority over that of the fetus that she carries. Those who take this position point to Exodus 21:22–25 as an indication that the woman’s life had greater priority than did fetal life. These verses say that when a pregnant woman is injured and miscarriage results from the injury, the one who hurt her shall pay a fine. If she has suffered additional injury, however, the one who caused her harm shall be punished under *lex-talionis*, or a life for a life, an eye for an eye. Under the Jewish ordinances the fetus was considered to have less value than a born person.

Presbyterians who take this position reason that if there is biblical evidence that the pregnant woman’s life takes priority over fetal life, then the pregnant woman’s life must take precedence in circumstances where a choice must be made between the fetal life and the pregnant woman’s life. In addition some Presbyterians who hold this view would accept abortion in cases of rape, incest, or severe fetal abnormalities.

A third group of Presbyterians view pregnancy and childbearing as part of our covenant relationship with God and therefore as a form of stewardship involving both responsibility and decision-making in the context of the human situation in which we all share both the responsibility and consequences for sin. While upholding the dignity of any child conceived under a variety of circumstances, this position challenges the belief that God’s intentionality is present in every conception, given the fallen nature of the human situation. Presbyterians who hold this position take seriously our responsibility to make

decisions and understand decision-making as an important aspect of our stewardship as humans created in the image of God.

This group believes that because the pregnant woman carries the primary biological responsibility for pregnancy and childbearing, she should be allowed to make the critical decisions regarding her pregnancy since Jesus recognizes women as responsible, decision-making agents (Luke 10:38–42).

This last position is the essence of the church's stance. The woman's choice whether to have an abortion should reflect her ability—physically, mentally, emotionally, and financially—to give birth to and provide care for a child. Though Presbyterians in this category accept abortion under broader circumstances than the previous group, it is not fair or accurate to characterize this position as advocating “abortion for convenience.”

Presbyterians focused on the covenant relationship with God agree with the Jewish tradition that life begins at birth, with the first breath of a new person. Among other passages, they cite Genesis 2:7, believing that with the first Creator-given breath of life, we become living beings. In Hebrew thought the closest word to “person” is *nephesh*, occurring over 750 times in Scripture. *Nephesh* means a human being's total nature, and it is incomplete without breath. Most Presbyterians in agreement with this third position believe that once birth and breath have happened, the taking of a human life is a sin.

Scripture has been used in many ways on the topic of abortion. There are libraries of arguments on either side of this topic. Presbyterians can also find principles on which they can agree.

Role of Pastor-Counselors

As a pastor-counselor, you are advised to engage in your own careful study of the major General Assembly policy papers of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other resources. Reflect prayerfully upon these materials and consider them in light of your own biblical and theological understandings. You may decide that abortion is always wrong or that it is appropriate according to when you understand that a human life has begun.

Whatever conclusion you reach, the church should be able to maintain within its membership those who, on the basis of studying Scripture and their own prayerful decisions, reach diverse conclusions (the first area of substantial agreement in the 1992 paper). Whatever your conclusion, remember that within the right-to-choose framework the Presbyterian Church has adopted, your own moral authority prevails. You are wrestling with options that a woman facing a problem pregnancy must wrestle with. You owe this much to her as her counselor.

Helping The Pregnant Woman With Her Decision

You have considered the legal, biblical, and theological implications. You have learned as much as possible about the situation surrounding this pregnancy. Now comes the most difficult part. Remember, it is not your decision to make. You are there to help those who come to you become more comfortable and confident about their decisions and feel affirmed by you and by the community of faith.

The 1992 report reminds us that “it must be clearly stated ... that there is no biblical evidence to support the idea that abortion is an unpardonable sin.” A 1983 paper titled “The Covenant of Life and the Caring Community” summarizes the counselor's role: “Effective counseling is evidenced ... not in the reproductive behavior or decision making of the families, but in their understanding of their own situation and of all the options, facilities, and persons who are available to help them.” In the

1992 report, the community of faith is called upon to provide pastoral care in at least the following ways:

- work with men and women in times of critical decision;
- seek to nurture faithful and responsible relationships;
- proclaim the gracious gift of God's mercy and forgiveness;
- encourage new life in the spirit of God.

Other counseling-related issues include the importance of sexual activity within the context of marriage, love, respect for one's partner, self-respect and equality, mutual support, fidelity, the use of contraceptives, and sexuality education.

As a counselor, be clear and truthful about the consequences of the decisions to be made regarding problem pregnancies, as difficult as these consequences may be. Physical, emotional, financial, moral, and theological ramifications of each need to be explored in depth. The day-to-day responsibilities of child raising should be examined, so that the woman who might want to raise a child will be fully informed. Feelings of loss that may result from making a plan for adoption or that may occur after an abortion deserve serious attention as well.

Urge the man to take seriously his responsibility. His values or desires about which option is selected may differ markedly from those of his partner. If he wants her to keep the baby and she wishes to make a plan for adoption, in some states he may, by acknowledging himself to be the father, put himself in the position of being able to prevent adoption by third parties by refusing to execute a consent. This option should be considered only if the father is willing to assume full responsibility for raising the child and has resources to do so. Never hesitate to refer the counselee to other responsible professionals if you feel uncomfortable with any counseling situation.

What Comes Next?

You have provided fair and compassionate counsel. What is the next step? It is essential that there be follow-up counseling, no matter what the decision is. It may be wise to make an appointment for the next counseling session before the counselee leaves your office. Timing of the woman's decision is critical. From legal, medical, and emotional perspectives, and under the church's guidance, a decision to terminate should, if possible, be made within the first 13 weeks of pregnancy. If the teenager or woman chooses to have the baby, it is highly desirable to urge her to see a physician early in her pregnancy so that prenatal care can be started at once, including instruction about good nutrition, personal hygiene, substance abuse, and other related factors.

Finally, the woman, in consultation with her physician, must make the ultimate decision. Providing her with accurate information is important. Your greatest gift to her will be your love, respect, and support. As the 2006 statement says, "Human choices... must be based on Scripture, faith, and Christian ethics." Our choices are to be guided—always—by the Holy Spirit.

*Your greatest gift to her will be
your love, respect, and support.*

When You Need Wisdom

Where do you as a pastor-counselor go when you need wisdom? The first step is to seek wisdom through prayer. As we read in James 1:5: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” This Scripture passage roots the pastoral task in a context of prayer. May God continue to make God’s loving presence known through your ministry and may you be guided by the Holy Spirit in your ministry.

Gathering Resources

In order to be well prepared as a pastor-counselor, you will gather information and resources that may be particularly helpful to the woman and her partner. You are advised to gather such resources in advance of needing them, so that you will have them available when the need arises. That way, you will be able to provide information immediately to your counselee and not have to hope that the counselee will make a return visit.

Some of the resources include:

- Names of physicians or other health care professionals to explain the physical process of pregnancy, labor, and delivery; the necessity of prenatal care; costs, and other factors that must be considered if the decision is made to deliver the baby
- Names and telephone numbers of social workers (hospital, welfare agencies, etc.)
- Names and addresses of homes and schools for unwed mothers
- Names of adoption agencies and lawyers who can discuss issues relating to adoption
- Names of agencies or physicians offering safe abortion services
- Names of persons, if available, who have faced similar decisions and are willing to help
- Names of evaluated crisis pregnancy ministries endorsed by your presbytery as resource centers
- Names of churches designated by your presbytery as resource centers for those seeking alternatives to abortion
- Sources of financial assistance for whichever option is chosen

May God continue to make God’s loving presence known through your ministry and may you be guided by the Holy Spirit in your ministry.

Available from Presbyterian Distribution Service (PDS)

Call (800) 524-2612 or visit www.pcusa.org/store to order. The resources are free, however there is a charge for shipping and handling.

Problem Pregnancy — When No Choice is Easy

PDS# 27-526-10-001

Problem Pregnancy — There's Always a Father.

Does the Father Have a Problem Too?

PDS# 27-526-10-002

Problem Pregnancy — When Pregnancy Involves Loss

PDS# 27-526-10-003

Problem Pregnancy — When You Need Wisdom

PDS# 27-526-10-004

***Report of the Special Committee on Problem Pregnancies
and Abortion: Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly (Micah 6:8)***

(policy statement and study paper)

PDS# OGA-92-017

***The Covenant of Life and the Caring Community and Covenant Creation:
Theological Reflections on Contraception and Abortion***

(policy statement and study paper)

PDS# OGA-88-109

On Late Term Pregnancy

(2006 policy statement of the General Assembly, Item 10-01)

Notes

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