

What Does PRO-CHOICE Really Mean?

BY SYLVIA THORSON-SMITH

Pro-choice—for choice. So simple and yet so complex.

The most basic definition for pro-choice, and the one offered by Webster's dictionary, is "favoring the legalization of abortion," which is clearly what was meant when the term was first used in the mid-1970s. Following the *Roe v. Wade* decision by the Supreme Court in 1973, the legality of abortion was challenged and increasingly debated. Pro-choice became the common self-description of people who supported the Court's legalization. Since then, the term has come to describe those who support the right of women to make decisions about the full range of options regarding their reproductive lives.

Historical Perspective

In order to understand how important the language of choice is for women, it helps to review some of the history of abortion and reproductive rights. The question of abortion has not held much interest in the history of Christianity. When abortion was condemned in earlier Christianity, it was understood to refer to termination well into the process of pregnancy, after ensoulment—the point at which the

breath of God entered the fetus. Not until 1869 did the Roman Catholic Church declare that ensoulment (or personhood) begins at the moment of conception.

No Protestant clergy or theologian gave early support for proposed nineteenth-century laws banning abortion in the United States. It is likely that Protestant clergy, often married and poor, understood that decisions about abortion were set in very real life circumstances that involved suffering and difficult options. Those Protestants who finally did join the antiabortion movement were often influenced by racist and classist arguments that America's strength was threatened by white, middle-class women's lower birth rate.¹

The mid-nineteenth century was marked by a significant change affecting the lives of women—the first wave of the Women's Rights Movement. It is sometimes difficult for people today to grasp how very little choice women had, in every arena of their lives, prior to this organized social movement for women's rights. Patriarchy—the rule of the fathers—

was codified into all social and legal institutions. Wives were subject to their husbands and their sexuality was truly not their own in any of the ways we assume today. Furthermore, medical and legal authority converged with religious and familial authority to uphold men's power over virtually all reproductive and procreative decisions. Women's lack of authority in the social realm left them without authority in the domestic sphere as well.

By the end of the nineteenth century, women were actively working for increased control over their reproductive lives. Margaret Sanger and others challenged the Comstock laws that made it illegal to send information about contraception (labeled as obscenity) through the United States mail. Little by little, with the help of supportive men (often clergy and doctors), women gained more of a social right to make decisions about the health of their bodies.

Although the organized Women's Rights Movement became less visible after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1920 (giving women the right to vote), women continued to assert well into the twentieth century that they were entitled to full human standing and authority under the law to make decisions about themselves. When a second wave of the movement developed in the 1960s, reproductive rights emerged as a major issue, intensifying the question, "Who has the authority to make decisions regarding procreation and fertility?" Prior to its ruling on abortion, the Supreme Court established the principle of privacy and applied it to matters of contraception. All people, the Court declared, are entitled to a zone of privacy in which to make procreative decisions

that are not the government's business. Women were the ultimate beneficiaries of the extension of this new reproductive authority. No longer could husbands, partners, fathers and doctors legally prevent women (both married and single) from obtaining and using birth control methods, although it wasn't until 1965 that the Court declared a ban on the use of contraception unconstitutional.



Thirty-six years after *Roe v. Wade*, the debate continues.

The Religious Movement for Reproductive Choice

Before *Roe v. Wade*, both Protestant and Jewish faith communities were active in ministering to women who faced problem pregnancies. By the mid-1950s, most Protestants accepted therapeutic abortion to save the life of the mother and later, to prevent fetal anomalies. Some will remember the case of Sherry Finkbine, who in 1962 was prescribed the drug thalidomide, soon to be known for causing horrific birth defects. Although abortion was prescribed by her doctor, she was refused by a hospital and, after working around the denial of a visa by the United States government, finally managed to obtain an abortion in Sweden. The stark contrast between rich and poor came into public view as Americans began to see that those with money and resources had access to safe medical abortions—and choice—while other women did not.

By the mid-1960s, Protestant and Jewish leaders joined the growing movement to reform abortion laws. In 1967, 21 ministers and rabbis in New York formed the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion, which, within a year became a

national organization of nearly 1,400 clergy. Their common statement of purpose declared “that there are higher laws and moral obligations transcending legal codes” and “we agree that it is our pastoral responsibility and religious duty to give aid and assistance to all women with problem pregnancies.”² Functioning like the Underground Railroad, this chain of religious counselors helped women obtain abortions in hospitals and doctors’ offices for years prior to 1973. My husband, Mike Smith, was part of this network in his role as campus minister at the University of Arizona. At the time, states like New York, California and Colorado had legalized abortion, so Mike and other clergy helped women without sufficient resources overcome unequal access to safe, legal abortion services.

These ministers were not mavericks. Both predecessor denominations to the current PC(USA) called for a change in abortion laws prior to *Roe v. Wade*. In 1970—three years before *Roe v. Wade* and with the support of United Presbyterian Women—the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. adopted a report (*Sexuality and the Human Community*) from the Advisory Council on Church

and Society stating, “abortion should be taken out of the realm of the law altogether and be made a matter of the careful ethical decision of a woman, her physician and her pastor or other counselor.”³

In the same year, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. affirmed, “there is no consensus in the Christian community about when human life begins” and “the willful termination of pregnancy by medical means on the considered decision of a pregnant woman may on occasion be morally justifiable.” Circumstances regarded as justifiable included “medical indications of mental or physical deformity, conception is the result of rape or incest, conditions under which the physical or mental health of either mother or child would be gravely threatened, or for the socio-economic condition of the family.”⁴

Following the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, a full-scale debate about the legalization of abortion ensued on many fronts. At least 20 religious organizations regarded abortion as an issue of privacy and supported the Supreme Court’s decision to extend to women the legal—and moral—right to make abortion decisions free of governmental interference. The two predecessor denominations of the PC(USA) regarded women’s choice in abortion decisions as consistent with their overall repudiation of the historic oppression of women. As massive organizational efforts, led primarily by Roman Catholic clerics, sought to overturn the Court’s decision, representatives of mainline Protestant and Jewish faith communities, including Presbyterians, met to form the Religious Coalition for

Abortion Rights (RCAR). Even though their specific positions about abortion varied, these religious bodies joined together for one purpose: “To encourage and coordinate support for safeguarding the legal option of abortion, for ensuring the right of individuals to make decisions in accordance with their conscience, and for opposing efforts to deny this right of conscience, through constitutional amendment or federal and state legislation.”⁵

In 1993, RCAR became RCRC—the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, indicating that there are many other reproductive issues besides abortion rights, which deserve the protection of privacy and individual choice.

The Meaning of Choice

In the past 30 years, Presbyterians have been deeply involved in the struggle over abortion rights and the meaning of language applied to this debate. Members have not been of one mind on this issue. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues to be a member of RCRC, in spite of repeated overtures to General Assemblies urging that we withdraw. Presbyterians Pro-Life, an independent group, works actively to reverse Presbyterian policy on abortion rights and membership in RCRC. However, for more than three decades, the PC(USA) has continued to uphold a basic commitment to choice. It does so through the work of Women’s Ministries and the Advocacy Committee on Women’s Concerns (ACWC), the Washington Office (which advocates on behalf of Presbyterian policies) and Presbyterians Affirming Reproductive Options (PARO), a network of the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association (PHEWA).

As a member of PARO and women’s advocacy groups of the



Photo courtesy of Sen. Barbara Boxer

Elenora Giddings Ivory, director of the PC(USA) Washington Office and Carlton Veazey, president of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, deliver a box of petitions to Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) in opposition to the Federal Refusal Clause that allows health care entities to refuse abortion services to women, even during a medical emergency.

Presbyterian Church, I have offered testimony to many General Assembly committees in the past 30 years. Whenever I do, I rely on the following principles, which I think are at the heart of the pro-choice position:

Pro-choice advocates are fundamentally committed to redressing the historic oppression of women.

Choice arguments seek to advance the full humanity and decision-making authority of women, who throughout history have been denied the right to determine the direction of their lives and exercise their reproductive options. It is because of a legacy of denied choice that contemporary women work so hard to preserve the legal and ecclesiastical gains of the twentieth century Women’s Rights Movement.

Pro-choice is not the opposite of pro-life.

These terms reflect different frameworks for understanding issues

of abortion and procreation. Pro-choice advocates are committed to choosing life; however, they accept the premise that people of faith and good will, including Presbyterians, disagree about the meaning of prenatal existence. Throughout history, theologians and legal scholars have disputed the point at which a conceptus (the product of conception) becomes a human life with personhood distinct from the woman who is carrying it. To be “for choice” is not to be “against life.” The 1992 policy on abortion acknowledges, “Presbyterians hold varying points of view about when human life begins.” The statement also recognizes “diversity of opinion in the church as to whether or not abortion should be legal,” but affirms that, within the context of limited governmental interest, “no law should deny access to safe and affordable services for persons seeking to terminate a problem pregnancy.”⁶

In certain conditions of pregnancy, abortion is a morally faithful option.

Reformed theology, which guides Presbyterians, recognizes that all life is a gift from God. As human beings who are gifted with life, we are also gifted with the awesome responsibility to make a variety of difficult decisions about life and death. The complexities of life's situations are heightened in the twenty-first century. Gratefully, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has consistently affirmed that women as well as men are fully capable of making moral decisions, particularly about matters that pertain to their own bodies. Our community of faith has resisted the notion that women should be coerced into carrying a pregnancy to term against their will, by the government or anyone else. Because abortion decisions are contextually considered among other options, the church's most recent policy (1992) states that "the considered decision of a woman to terminate a pregnancy can be morally acceptable, though certainly not the only or required, decision."⁷

Choice has different meanings, depending on the context of race and class.

It is impossible to disentangle the language of *choice* from the history of women's oppression. Historically, the limits on women's decision-making authority differ according to their racial and economic experiences. In a culture where financial resources guarantee access to reproductive options, including abortion services, women of color and women who are poor have been particularly disadvantaged in their right to choose. It is with attention to social and economic injustice that pro-choice advocates seek policies



AP Photo/Ric Feld

Speaking out at the Walk for Women's Lives through downtown Atlanta, April 17, 2005

and laws that guarantee reproductive rights for all women.

Pro-choice and right to choose do not mean "pro-abortion" or favoring "abortion on demand."

Such language smacks of angry confrontation, quite the opposite of the attitude of most women who make abortion decisions in the context of quiet personal struggle. Many people who are pro-choice cannot see themselves ever choosing to have an abortion and do not think abortion has a preferred status among other options. The language of choice represents an attempt to indicate that difficult reproductive decisions will be made, and abortion is one among other options. Pro-choice advocates do not promote a particular decision. They do, however, contend that women are entitled to make reproductive decisions involving their own bodies, and these decisions may necessitate inclusion of the option of safe, legal abortion.

While individual Presbyterian women hold a variety of attitudes toward reproductive rights, Presbyterian Women and its predecessor

organizations have long advocated our denomination's pro-choice policy. They recognize that the lives and moral agency of women are at stake when our church makes policy on this issue. Presbyterian theologian Gloria Albrecht, in her *Church and Society* article "Abortion in Good Faith," makes it clear that "we are faced by the truly 'hard' question—the question of our willingness to empower every woman to make responsible choices regarding her use of the abilities and opportunities she has to contribute to the fullness of Life. It is the question of our willingness not to define women solely or primarily by biological capacity."⁸

To be *pro-choice* is to be fully aware that decisions regarding abortion will be made. The question is, who will make them? The *pro-choice* answer is *women* who are gifted with God-given moral agency, whose bodies and lives are most affected by the consequences. 🍷

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Resources

1. Beverly Wildung Harrison, "Theology and Morality of Procreative Choice," *Feminist Theological Ethics*, edited by Lois K. Daly (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 218.
2. "The Challenge of Choice: 30 Years of Affirming Reproductive Choice," *Church and Society*, November/December 2002, 13.
3. *Ibid.*, 14.
4. *Ibid.*, 77.
5. *Ibid.*, 15.
6. *Ibid.*, 83, 87–88.
7. *Ibid.*, 83.
8. Gloria Albrecht, "Abortion in Good Faith," *Church and Society*, November/December 2002, 31.