

Planned Parenthood's clergy panel counsels clients and staff

Clergy ensure spiritual guidance not lost in the controversy.

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Late last year, Rabbi Alan Freedman responded to a counseling request for a woman making an agonizing decision. She was terminating her pregnancy in the 19th week of gestation because of severe fetal deformities.

The woman wasn't Jewish, but she told the staff at the Planned Parenthood clinic in South Austin where she was seeking the abortion that she wanted to talk to a member of the clergy before going through with the procedure. Freedman, the chairman of the clergy panel for Planned Parenthood of the Texas Capital Region, asked the woman to tell him about her baby. Then the two planned a ceremony to memorialize the child before the abortion took place.

"This was the end of a precious life," he said.

Freedman later said it was one of the most challenging experiences he'd faced as a rabbi, but it was exactly how he wanted to help. Already a Planned Parenthood board member, he said he knew he and other religious leaders could provide a much-needed spiritual resource for women.

Though religion often marks the battle lines in the abortion debate, clergy involvement at Planned Parenthood, an institution that has long supported abortion rights, is nothing new. One of the founding board members of Austin's Planned Parenthood in 1938 was Rabbi Abraham Goodman of Congregation Beth Israel, the city's largest synagogue.

The clinic has had a chaplain on staff and has helped organize interfaith renewal services for women struggling with abortions they've had and other issues in their past. Planned Parenthood also is creating an outdoor space for spiritual reflection at the South Austin clinic.

The current seven-member clergy panel, formed about a year and a half ago, includes Protestant ministers and a Buddhist priest — all of whom are available not only to Planned Parenthood clients, but to staff members as well.

On a chilly Friday morning early last month, Freedman delivered the panel's message to a Planned Parenthood staff meeting: "God is a loving and a forgiving God."

Freedman explained his role to about 18 women whose jobs ranged from receptionist to nurse practitioner. They listened quietly as bright morning sun streamed through shatterproof glass windows.

Freedman's talk was about more than the perennially volatile topic of abortion.

The vast majority of the work done at Austin's Planned Parenthood clinics involves prenatal care, birth control and gynecological care for uninsured women, spokeswoman Sarah Wheat said. She said abortions make up only 5 percent of the procedures done in Austin.

But for many staff members, just reporting to work behind strategically placed walls and windows creates stress.

In April 2007, Austin resident Paul Ross Evans left a bomb outside a South Austin women's clinic that performed abortions. Police were able to defuse the device, and no one was injured.

In addition to those worries, clinic workers say that clients' stories, which are often fraught with anxiety and guilt — whether they were seeking an abortion or prenatal care — also weigh heavily on their minds.

For those reasons, they asked that their names not be used.

At the staff meeting, one woman who worked in quality assurance at the clinic said she had to watch herself when women talked to her about terminating a pregnancy because of deformities. She had to be careful, she said, that she didn't bring her own personal experience as a mother of two young children to the fore.

Another staff member said she struggled with clients who declared they were Catholic and didn't believe in abortion even as they were terminating a pregnancy or asking for emergency contraception. Those clients, she said, seemed to be in denial about their decisions while judging other clients in similar situations.

Freedman suggested that the women strive to be a "nonanxious presence" for clients and to recognize that if a client needs to hear from the clergy, "it's OK; God loves you and will love you at the end of this."

For many clergy members, abortion is a thorny issue, Freedman said, stressing that no one wants to promote it. And the truth is, he added, "you can never say that it's OK. You don't know that. I don't know that."

Though he has not received complaints from his congregation, Temple Beth Shalom in Northwest Austin, Freedman said that he was not representing his synagogue in his role at Planned Parenthood.

But he said he wants women in crisis who are seeking spiritual help to see God as a loving and forgiving force.

The organization's staff and board include people active in a variety of faith traditions. One Christian staff member wears a cross around her neck and has prayed with patients who request it. She said she's not afraid to talk openly about faith.

"If you get the religious people, send them my way," she told the others at the staff meeting.

Wheat said Planned Parenthood wants each woman to be able to make an informed decision that draws on guidance from her family and, if applicable, her faith tradition.

But the idea of spiritual guidance that does not explicitly dissuade a woman from having an abortion is unthinkable to many religious leaders. Bishop Gregory Aymond, who leads the Catholic Diocese of Austin, said he finds the notion particularly troubling, given the other options available to women facing unplanned pregnancies.

The diocese provides resources for pregnant women through Project Gabriel as well as two maternity homes where women can live and learn life and parenting skills. In addition, the diocese offers a confidential ministry called Project Rachel, which counsels men and women with abortions in their past.

Aymond said that women seeking spiritual guidance about an unplanned pregnancy need to hear about these options as well as understand the church's theological position on the sanctity of life in the womb.

He said he would like Catholic Church leaders to participate in the clergy panel at Planned Parenthood to help women "form their conscience so they can take full responsibility for their decision."

"It's more than just saying, 'God will forgive,'" said Aymond, who noted that he has counseled women before and after abortions.

Though he stressed that he's "radically pro-life," Aymond said he would like to sit down with Planned Parenthood leaders and talk about how the diocese might participate in clergy counseling.

Wheat said she was encouraged by Aymond's interest in talking.

"Planned Parenthood welcomes the invitation for dialogue to identify common ground to better serve Austin families," she said.

In the meantime, Freedman said he knows that many religious leaders do not support abortion rights, emergency contraception or birth control. He did not cite specific biblical passages but said he is confident that bringing comfort to people in difficult situations and helping women protect their bodies by providing low-cost gynecological and prenatal care "is something God wants us to do."

At the close of the meeting, Freedman told staff members that the work they do is important and that caring for women is a loving act.

"I hope keeping that in the back of your head helps all of you dealing with the emotionally and spiritually laden aspects of your work."

He promised to be there for them if they needed to talk.

A receptionist piped up, "So, if we have a bad day, we can say, 'Today's a Rabbi Freedman day?'"

Freedman laughed and nodded. All she had to do was call, he told her.

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