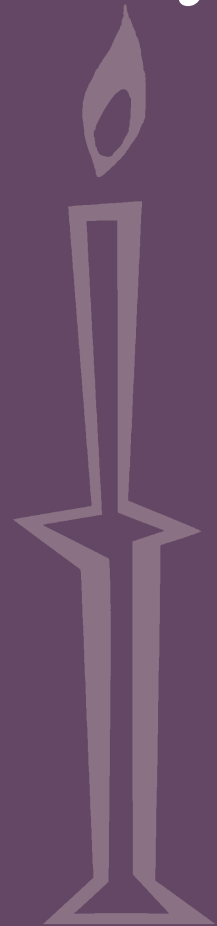
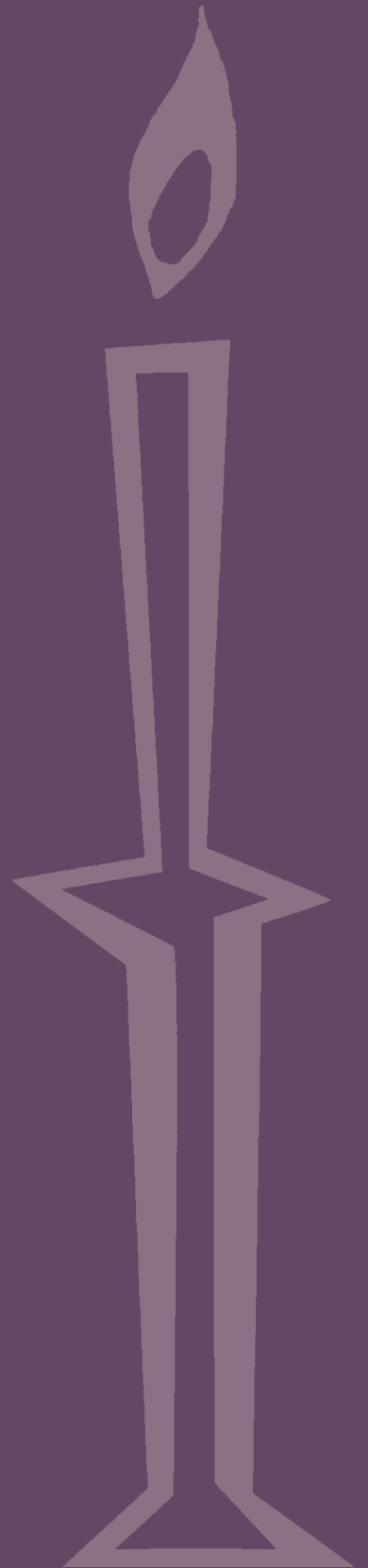


Reproductive
Justice *in a*
Just Society





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A S T A T E M E N T

By

The Planned Parenthood of New York City
Religious Leaders Task Force

March 7, 2006



Dedication

Planned Parenthood of New York City dedicates this publication to the memory of Rabbi Balfour Brickner, a stalwart champion of reproductive justice, who spent a lifetime in the struggle to secure economic and social justice for all. Rabbi Brickner worked on this statement until shortly before his death on August 29, 2005. He is greatly missed.



Reproductive Justice *in a* Just Society

S U M M A R Y

A social system that denies reproductive justice violates the central Biblical imperative to love and render justice to one's neighbor. Further, the effort to achieve reproductive justice cannot be divorced from the struggle for economic and social justice.

Reproductive justice is essentially a question of access – access to knowledge about the great gift of human sexuality and access to reproductive health services. Specifically, reproductive justice requires sex education that provides our youngsters with the information they need to form healthy relationships, prevent them from having children before they are ready to become parents, and keep them safe from infections and abuse. It also requires birth control that is affordable, with legal abortion readily available.

The decisions we make about our reproductive and sexual lives, but most especially, the decision to have a child, are among the most important decisions that we, as human beings, can make. Having a child is a precious responsibility that changes our lives forever. The privileged in this world, for the most part, have unfettered access to the reproductive health and education services necessary to decide for themselves when and whether to bear or raise a child. The poor and the disadvantaged do not. Thus, the struggle for reproductive justice is inextricably bound up with the effort to secure a more just society. Accordingly, those who would labor to achieve economic and social justice are called upon to join in the effort to achieve reproductive justice and, thereby, help realize the sacred vision of a truly just society for all.

STATEMENT

This statement reflects the views of clergy of differing religious faiths and diverse backgrounds. We believe that a social system that denies reproductive justice violates the central Biblical imperative to love and render justice to one's neighbor.¹ Reproductive justice is essentially a question of equal access – equal access to knowledge about the great gift of human sexuality and equal access to reproductive health services.

As inheritors and guardians of a prophetic tradition, we are called on to proclaim that reproductive justice is an integral part of any society that would call itself just. The “justness” of a society depends on the extent to which each of us actively affirms that each person is created in the image of God and is therefore deserving of equal treatment. We do not believe that God's vision of a just society is static. Accordingly, we use the term “justness” to convey the notion that a theology of justice, including reproductive justice, is inherently a work in progress and that ours are living faiths.

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Our predecessors, who supported Margaret Sanger's initial attempt to legalize birth control in the 1930s and who carried on the struggle for more than 35 years, understood the links between reproductive and economic and social justice. So did the small group of ministers and rabbis who, in 1967, formed the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion. The CCSA, which eventually grew to include more than 2,000 clergy and lay religious leaders across the country, developed a network of compassionate doctors who provided an estimated 100,000 women with abortions that were safe, but not necessarily legal, in the six years before *Roe v. Wade* was decided.²

Today, we confront a growing web of restrictive legislation and regulation of reproductive health services and sex education in the schools. While these strictures appear reasonable, in fact, they serve only to reduce access to and

increase the cost of these services, threatening the reproductive and sexual health of women and men in this country and around the world, especially if they are young and poor.

These recent policy prescriptions reflect the religious views of some, but by no means all Americans. In a democratic pluralistic society no law should codify the views and teachings of any one religion. Even unanimity of religious views is not a basis for public policy. We are reminded that both slavery and the subjugation of women found their justification in religious teachings. At the same time, religious leaders have the right and the obligation to share their perspectives on the great issues of the day.

It is in this spirit that we issue this statement and that we ask that those who labor to achieve economic and social justice join us in the struggle for reproductive justice, just as we support their efforts. Together, we can help realize the sacred vision of a truly just society for all.

Reproductive Justice

Nearly a century ago, Margaret Sanger proclaimed, “No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body.” And to own and control our own bodies, all of us must have the information and services necessary to make informed and responsible decisions about our sexual and reproductive lives so that we can plan our futures and fulfill our fondest dreams. As human beings, created in God’s image, we are entitled to nothing less than full reproductive justice. At the same time, we are obligated to accept responsibility for our actions, as they affect our families and our communities.

Reproductive justice entails sex education that provides our youngsters with the information and skills they need to form healthy relationships, prevent them from having children before they are ready to become parents, and keep them safe from infections and abuse. It also requires birth control that is affordable, with legal and therefore safe abortion available to all.

Sex Education

We believe that an individual's sexuality must be affirmed as an essential dimension of being human.

Clergy have a responsibility to remind the community that the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, as well as the teachings of other religious faiths, view the body and the physical world as a sacred arena in which God acts.

God commands us to instruct our children so that they will gain understanding and the ability to make wise choices. As leaders who care about the well-being of young people, we urge them to be good stewards of their bodies. Many faith traditions support comprehensive sex education, and many faith traditions teach that children must be treated, with due allowance for their ages, as responsible persons who can make critical decisions about their lives.³ It is our duty, as clergy, to help parents reach and teach their children, to provide medically accurate and age-appropriate sex education in our congregations and communities, and to support sex education in our schools.

Here in New York City, where more than one in ten girls between the ages of 15 and 19 in the Bronx give birth every year,⁴ and HIV/AIDS is ravaging the African-American community, we clergy see every day the consequences of ignorance, fear, and shame. What we see in our backyard is multiplied across our country and around the world. Our young people need to understand their bodies and the nature of loving relationships so that they can have healthy and fulfilling lives. Sadly, we must also arm our young people with the information necessary to protect themselves from abuse by adults and peers.

Like a substantial majority of Americans, we clergy encourage teens to abstain from sexual intercourse. And, like a substantial majority of Americans, we also recognize that many will not. We cannot, in good conscience, fail to teach young people about both abstinence and contraception so that they have complete information about how to prevent pregnancy and protect themselves from contracting or spreading sexually transmitted infections.

The federal government funds only abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. Such programs do not discuss birth control except to say, erroneously, that it fails. Further, sex education programs that ignore the diversity of human sexuality stifle the development of healthy and responsible attitudes toward our God-given gift of sexuality.

Family Planning

God blessed us with the ability to bear and raise children as a sign not only of the sacredness of life but also as a sign of our capacity for sexual intimacy. But human beings are not endowed with a limitless ability to bear or raise children.

Birth control is about being able to choose when to start a family and when to add to a family. It's also about being able to provide for the family you already have. Ultimately, it's about the power that planning gives us to fulfill our human potential.

Advances in science and technology in the past 25 years have made birth control more reliable. They have also made child-bearing possible in new ways for those who could not otherwise conceive. The full enjoyment of these advances is limited to the relatively few who can afford to pay for them.

The power to plan when and whether to have a child, together with medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education, is the best way to reduce unplanned pregnancy and thereby the need for abortion, both at home and abroad. Yet, there has been no substantial increase in federal funding for birth control in this country since the program began nearly 35 years ago. Overseas, the United States is once again denying funds for birth control to international family planning organizations, if such organizations perform abortions or counsel, refer, or even lobby to make or keep abortion legal in their own countries.

Abortion

Each of us has been endowed with free will, together with the capacity and the responsibility to make moral judgements about complex issues.⁵ One purpose of religion is to guide people of faith in making good use of these God-given gifts, so that each of us can determine how best to live our lives.

Religious teaching on abortion, even among branches of the same religion, varies greatly. Many denominations support a legal right to abortion, even as some of them recognize a conflict between a potential human life and a living human being. But even those religions that recognize this potential conflict assert that it is the right of a woman to make the determination to end her pregnancy, in light of her individual circumstances, guided by her conscience and her faith.⁶

Liberty of conscience in a democratic pluralistic society demands nothing less.

Abortion is a service that a responsible community provides when something goes wrong – when there is a failure to use birth control or birth control fails; or when a pregnancy threatens a woman’s health or her life; or when there are severe fetal anomalies; or when a woman is the survivor of rape or incest or other violence or coercion. Like so many human decisions, the decision to end a pregnancy can be viewed as moral or immoral. Indeed, some denominations that support a legal right to abortion have explicitly made that distinction, while continuing to insist that abortion remain safe and legal.

Sonograms and operations on a fetus *in utero*, along with other advances in medical science and technology, have intensified our appreciation of the potential for life inherent in the fetus and for the great gift of human life. As miraculous as these developments are, they do not render women any less able to make the difficult judgement about accepting the awesome responsibilities that raising a child entails.

As clergy, we have had long years of experience counseling women facing unplanned pregnancies. We know that, in most cases, women who seek abortions are driven primarily by concern for the well-being of their families and for the larger community of which they are a part. We also know that for many women the decision to have an abortion can be agonizing.

But making abortion a crime forces women to choose between a dangerous, illegal procedure and a forced pregnancy. To force a woman to carry an unplanned pregnancy to term is to deprive her of the right to determine what is best for her and those around her. It reduces her to a vessel, with no rights to her own bodily integrity, but with no similar burden for her partner. Far worse, it deprives a child of its right to be welcomed, nurtured, and loved.

Where abortion is illegal, women suffer, and the women who suffer are overwhelmingly poor and young. When abortion was a crime in the United States, it was these women who wound up in emergency rooms and hospital wards. Today, more than 65,000 women die each year as the result of complications related to unsafe abortions in countries where abortion is a crime or is severely restricted.⁷

Reproductive Justice in a Just Society

Instead of making abortion illegal or making it more difficult to obtain, we should instead address the circumstances that lead women to seek abortion. It is primarily this consideration that compels us to link the struggle for reproductive justice to the effort to secure economic and social justice for all.

Accordingly:

We cannot ignore the fact that many women seek abortions because they cannot afford even the bare necessities to care for a child and are coerced by friends and family to terminate a wanted pregnancy.

We cannot ignore the fact that restrictive legislation has reduced access to and raised the cost of obtaining an abortion for those least able to bear the burden. Requiring parental notification before a teen can receive an abortion may sound like a good idea, but not when a teen has reason to fear her parents' reaction or when delay could jeopardize her health. State-mandated counseling to inform a pregnant woman about fetal development and state-mandated waiting periods implicitly assume that women do not carefully consider the decision to seek an abortion. These requirements, which purport to provide information and time so that a woman can reflect on her decision, in fact, only create delays, which are especially onerous for those who must travel great distances to locate an abortion provider. The delays also increase the expense of ending a pregnancy, because the cost of abortion rises as a pregnancy advances. A society that genuinely wishes to encourage parents and children to communicate with one another and to ensure that its citizens understand exactly what abortion entails does not enact legislation that confines such worthy aims only to situations involving pregnant women.

We cannot ignore the fact that making abortion legal did not make it equally available to rich and poor women alike. Yet, poor women are no less able to make moral judgments about whether or not to bear a child than their more affluent sisters.

We cannot ignore the fact that the limited choices that poverty brings to a woman's life reduce her access to the type of birth control best suited to her needs and, thereby, deprive her of the ability to make the critical decision about when and whether to start or add to her family.

We cannot ignore the fact that the young people who give birth long before they are ready to assume the responsibilities of parenthood almost uniformly come from poor homes, have been relegated to inferior schools, and have little hope for the future.⁸

Thus, we cannot separate the struggle for real sex education and access to affordable birth control and abortion from efforts to divide up the great resources of our world more equitably; protect our environment; educate all of our children to help them become mature and responsible adults; structure our economy to generate jobs that pay a living wage; and make housing, health and childcare available and affordable.

The promise of economic and social justice will remain only that in a society that denies reproductive justice to all of its citizens. And reproductive justice without economic and social justice will be equally hollow. The agenda is long and the demands are great, but the quest must be an integrated effort if we are to achieve the sacred vision of a truly just society for the whole of humanity.

¹ See Tom Davis, *Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances*, (Rutgers University Press: New Jersey, 2005), p.12. Also, see pp. 5 to 14 for an explanation of the religious roots of the sexism that has deprived and continues to deprive women of reproductive justice. Tom Davis, an ordained minister who retired as chaplain of Skidmore College, chairs the Planned Parenthood Federation of America Clergy Advisory Board.

² After 1970, abortion was legal in New York, Alaska, Hawaii, and Washington. Clergy were able to arrange legal abortions in some of these states for women living in states where abortion was a crime.

³ Debra Haffner, *A Time to Speak: Faith Communities and Sexuality Education*, (SIECUS: New York, 1998).

⁴ *Who's at Risk: Teen Pregnancy in New York City*, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Bureau of Family Health, December 2002, Appendix Table I, p. 25.

⁵ "Under Din of Abortion Debate, an Experience Shared Quietly," *The New York Times*, September 18, 2005, p. A1 reports how women facing an unplanned pregnancy who choose to have an abortion struggle to reconcile "religious, ethical, practical, sentimental, and financial imperatives that . . . often . . . conflict." This struggle is what it means to be a moral agent.

⁶ Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, *We Affirm: Religious Organizations Support Reproductive Choice*, summaries of denomination statements, www.rcrc.org/pdf/We_affirm.pdf

⁷ WHO, *Unsafe Abortion: Global and Regional Estimates of the Incidence of Unsafe Abortion and Associated Mortality in 2000, 4th Edition* (World Health Organization: Geneva, Switzerland, 2004).

⁸ V. Joseph Hotz, S. McElroy, and S. Sanders, "Teenage Childbearing and Its Life Cycle Consequences: Exploiting a Natural Experiment," *Journal of Human Resources* 40(3), Summer 2005, pp. 683-715.

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Affiliation is noted solely for the purpose of identification.



Add Your Voice

If you are a member of the clergy or a lay religious leader and would like to endorse this statement, please visit:

<http://www.ppnyc.org/facts/facts/clergystatement.html>

PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF NEW YORK CITY

Almost 90 years ago, Margaret Sanger opened a tiny family planning clinic in a Brooklyn storefront. Planned Parenthood of New York City (PPNYC) was born, and with it, an entire movement. The movement was built on a then-radical idea: the notion that every woman should have the right and the means to choose when or whether to bear a child.

That powerful idea drives the work of PPNYC to this day. Our mission is to protect women's reproductive rights and maintain their access to safe, effective and confidential care. PPNYC pursues these goals through state-of-the-art clinical services, education and professional training, and advocacy.

PPNYC has health centers in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. To learn more, visit www.ppnyc.org or call 1(800) 230-PLAN.

PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF NEW YORK CITY RELIGIOUS LEADERS TASK FORCE

The Religious Leaders Task Force was begun at the end of 2003. It is comprised of clergy representing diverse religious traditions who support and advocate for reproductive justice in the pulpit and in the public square.