

## **Session Position on Abortion**

### **Adopted November 22, 2004**

Dr. Mike Loudon appointed a Special Task Force in the Fall of 2003 to study the issue of abortion and the position of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and how it relates to First Church, Lakeland.

The members of the Task Force were Dr. Mack Reavis, chairperson, Dr. Stephanie Schmidt-Sobowali, Carolyn Spoto, Lamar Rogers, Dr. Richard Marshall, The Rev. Jim Cummings, and Carol Nichols. Cecelia Moore, Director of Christian Education, served as Task Force resource person.

The mission of the Task Force was to study scriptures on the issues of life and abortion, to ascertain the positions taken by the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly on abortion, to research other positions on abortion, and to bring a recommendation to the Session as to what, if anything, our session should say publicly about this subject.

The position statement adopted by the Session is close to that brought by the committee, although not exactly the same. There was some changing of wording and after two and one-half hours of discussion and debate, the Session adopted the following:

#### **Position Statement**

“We, the members of the Session of First Presbyterian Church, Lakeland, Florida, are opposed in principle to abortion.

We believe that abortion is contrary to the Word of God as set forth in his Holy Scripture which recognizes the sacredness of life from the point of conception.

While scripture does not use the word abortion, we believe that Holy Scripture reminds us that human life belongs to God (Psalm 139) and that we are commanded to protect the powerless (Psalm 82:3-4). Certainly the unborn are among those weak that need our protection.

We do share concern for women who have undergone abortions and who have been faced with this heart-wrenching decision. These women may suffer guilt and psychological trauma. We believe that healing and peace comes through forgiveness of sins by our merciful Heavenly Father. God loves us and His grace flows to us when we confess and seek restoration. Our compassion is extended to those families who have experienced an abortion. We pray for their physical and spiritual healing and welcome them into our fellowship here at First Presbyterian Church, Lakeland, Florida.

We further acknowledge that the Church of Jesus Christ is the family of forgiven sinners. We all stand in need of divine grace. ‘None is righteous, no, not one. All have turned aside, together they have all done wrong.’ (Romans 3:12) As grace receivers, our mission is to ‘bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.’ (Galatians 6:2)”

## **Addendum 1**

There are a variety of counseling services available to those who have begot unwanted pregnancies. Some are designated to help individuals or couples choose the path of carrying the unborn to term and placing the child for adoption. Some are devoted to helping women who have had abortions in the past cope with the guilt and scars left by abortion. There are support groups, individual counseling sessions, and instructive seminars on parenting and life skills available in our community.

There are several counseling ministries to men who were involved in creating life apart from marriage. These ministries include counseling to enable men to become whole and healthy fathers, resolving addictions to pornography and promiscuity, and making restitution to their partners.

Counseling ministries are not limited to those who have had, or are considering, abortion as a means of birth control. The "A New Beginning" center in Lakeland needs volunteers on an ongoing basis for outreach to women in need. Some may choose to provide physical labor and work at the center for construction or reorganization projects. Some may serve as receptionists or office assistants, and others will provide lay counseling and information to those who are seeking assistance.

"A New Beginning" support wish list includes: Volunteer Advocates (women), Liaison persons for support and fund raising, Pastor's Advisory Board, the Baby Bottle Campaign, Construction/Alteration helps (men and women), Board Membership, and Baby Showers for center clients.

The St. Andrew Ministry of First Presbyterian Church serves as a "first responder" role with respect to counseling. We are able to help individuals assess both their needs and the types and locations of more extensive counseling services in the community.

## **Addendum 2**

**Psalm 139:13-16** – For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am carefully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful. I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

**Psalm 127:3** – Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him.

**Psalm 51:5** – Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

**Matthew 10:30** – And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

**Isaiah 49:1-2** – Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the Lord called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.

**Jeremiah 1:4-5** – The word of the Lord came to be, saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

**Luke 1:41** – When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

**Job 10:8-12** – Your hands have made me and fashioned me, an intricate unit; yet you would destroy me. Remember, I pray, that you have made me like clay. And will you turn me into dust again? Did you not pour me out like milk, and curdle me like cheese, clothe me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews: You have granted me life and favor, and your care has preserved my spirit.

**Psalm 119:73** – Your hands have made me and fashioned me; give me understanding, that I may learn your commandments.

**Job 31:15** – Did not he who made me in the womb make them? Did not the same one form us both within our mothers?

**Isaiah 40:11** – He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

**Psalm 22:9-10** – Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother’s breast. From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother’s womb you have been my God.

**Ecclesiastes 11:5** – As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things.

**John 16:21** – A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.

**Exodus 20:13** – You shall not kill.

**Exodus 23:7** – Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.

**Ezekiel 18:4** – For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son – both alike belong to me.

**1 Corinthians 6:19-20** – Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own.

**1 Peter 2:16** – Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.

**Exodus 4:11** – The Lord said to him, “Who gave man his mouth? Who made him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord?”

**Isaiah 45:9-11** – Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, “What are you making?” Does your work say, “He has no hands?” Woe to him who says to his father, “What have you begotten?” To his mother, “What have you brought to birth?” This is what the Lord says – the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker; Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands?

**Deuteronomy 24:16** – Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin.

**Proverbs 14:12** – There is a way which seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.

**Psalms 82:3-4** – Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless, maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

**Job 1:21** – Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.

**Romans 3:12** – All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.

**Galatians 6:2** – Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

## Addendum 3

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## Abortion

Presbyterians have struggled with the abortion issue for more than 25 years, beginning in 1970 when a General Assembly statement declared that "the artificial or induced termination of pregnancy is a matter of the careful ethical decision of the patient, . . . and therefore should not be restricted by law . . ." <sup>(1)</sup> The latest major statement on abortion by a Presbyterian General Assembly came in 1992. Here's an excerpt from that position statement:

. . . There is [both] agreement and disagreement on the basic issue of abortion. The committee [on problem pregnancies and abortion] agreed that there are no biblical texts that speak expressly to the topic of abortion, but that taken in their totality the Holy Scriptures are filled with messages that advocate respect for the woman and child before and after birth. Therefore the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) encourages an atmosphere of open debate and mutual respect for a variety of opinions concerning the issues related to problem pregnancies and abortion.

### Areas of Substantial Agreement on the Issue of Abortion

- The church ought to be able to maintain within its fellowship those who, on the basis of a study of Scripture and prayerful decision, come to diverse conclusions and actions.
- Problem pregnancies are the result of, and influenced by, so many complicated and insolvable circumstances that we have neither the wisdom nor the authority to address or decide each situation.
- 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.
- We call upon Presbyterians to work for a decrease in the number of problem pregnancies, thereby decreasing the number of abortions.
- The considered decision of a woman to terminate a pregnancy can be a morally acceptable, though certainly not the only or required, decision. Possible justifying circumstances would include medical indications of severe physical or mental deformity, conception as a result of rape or incest, or conditions under which the physical or mental health of either woman or child would be gravely threatened.
- We are disturbed by abortions that seem to be elected only as a convenience or ease embarrassment. We affirm that abortion should not be used as a method of birth control.
- Abortion is not morally acceptable for gender selection only or solely to obtain fetal parts for transplantation.
- We reject the use of violence and/or abusive language either in protest of or in support of abortion . . .
- The strong Christian presumption is that since all life is precious to God, we are to preserve and protect it. Abortion ought to be an option of last resort. . . .
- The Christian community must be concerned about and address the circumstances that bring a woman to consider abortion as the best available option. Poverty, unjust societal realities, sexism, racism, and inadequate supportive relationships may render a woman virtually powerless to choose freely. <sup>(2)</sup>

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In a subsequent action, the 209th General Assembly (1997), while refusing to call for a ban on the late-term procedure often called "partial-birth" abortion, did offer the following "moral guidance" regarding this procedure:

That the 209th General Assembly (1997) offer a word of counsel to the church and our culture that the procedure known as intact dilation and extraction (commonly called "partial birth" abortion) of a baby who could live outside the womb is of grave moral concern and should be considered only if the mother's physical life is endangered by the pregnancy.

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In addition to offering personal counsel, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has a long history of public policy advocacy. This tradition includes public stances on the abortion issue. The 1992 policy statement included these public policy recommendations:

There is diversity of opinion in the church as to whether or not abortion should be legal and on the extent to which the government should be permitted to regulate or prohibit abortions. The church acknowledges that many of its members find fault with the philosophical basis of Roe v. Wade and its division of pregnancy into three trimesters, preferring that the state be permitted to regulate and even prohibit abortions throughout the pregnancy, rather than just at the stage of viability. Others feel that Roe's framework effectively safeguards the constitutional liberties of pregnant women while also recognizing the state's interest in protecting the unborn child and the woman.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) also recognizes that if fetal development is no longer the standard by which the government measures the extent of its involvement in abortions, then our lawmakers must find some other acceptable standard by which the rights of the mother to terminate her pregnancy will be balanced against the state's interest in protecting the unborn child. Based on prior experiences of the courts and legislatures, it will not be easy to present a standard that will balance the competing interests in such a manner that will not lead to additional litigation. Courts and legislatures have not always well represented the interests of the economically disadvantaged, the undereducated, and women. Some among these groups historically have had greater difficulty in circumventing the obstacles posed by restrictive abortion legislation than have the more affluent.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) concedes that we cannot respond definitively to every legal aspect of the abortion issue in a manner that will garner consensus among the church constituency. We believe that in the shaping of the future law, the following affirmations are of vital consideration.

- a. The state has a limited legitimate interest in regulating abortions and in restricting abortions in certain circumstances.
- b. Within this context of the state's limited legitimate interest, no law should impose criminal penalties against any woman who chooses or physician who performs a medically safe abortion.
- c. Within this same context of the state's limited legitimate interest, no law should deny access to safe and affordable services for the persons seeking to terminate a problem pregnancy.

d. No law or administrative decision should provide for a complete ban on abortion.

e. No law or administrative decision should

(1) limit access to abortions;

(2) limit information and counseling concerning abortions; or

(3) limit or prohibit public funding for necessary abortions for the socially and economically disadvantaged.

f. No law should prohibit access to, nor the practice of, contraceptive measures.

g. No law should sanction any action intended to harm or harass those persons contemplating or deciding to have an abortion.

h. No law should condone mandatory or forced abortion or sterilization. Such laws should be abolished where they do exist.<sup>(3)</sup>

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1. Minutes of the 182nd General Assembly (1970), Presbyterian Church U.S.A., p 891.

2. Minutes of the 204th General Assembly (1992), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p 367-368, 372-374.

3. Minutes of the 204th General Assembly (1992), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p 372-373.

Adapted from the Compilation of PCUSA Social Witness Policies.

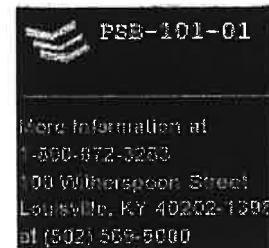
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