

FREEDOM OF CHOICE CONCERNING ABORTION

A Proposal for Action adopted by the Eighth General Synod

June 29, 1971

“A proposal is a recommendation for action in a specific situation in application of a pronouncement previously agreed upon by the General Synod.” (67-GS-175).

A responsible position concerning abortion should be based on a consideration of the rights of the individual woman, her potential child, her family and society, as well as the rights of the fetus.

Theological and ethical factors

Standing in the Hebrew-Christian tradition, we affirm God as the Source of life—our life, all life, life to the full. He has called us to share the work of creation with him, giving us the privileges and responsibilities of fellowship in the family and in the wider unities of society. Thus we affirm the freedom with which God endowed men and women, but we affirm and receive this as freedom bound to responsibility. At its best our Western legal tradition, too, has served the dual purpose of protecting human freedom and helping human beings to discharge their responsibilities to one another.

Our religious heritage has also stressed reverence for human life. Accordingly, the enhancement of human life and the protection of the rights of persons, particularly the weak and defenseless, has become an important element in our legal system. It has found expression in laws intended to protect those who cannot protect themselves, such as children, including the unborn. It is neither likely nor desirable that organized society would disavow its responsibility in this regard.

Inevitably, therefore, a judgment will be made or assumed as to when personal human life begins and at what point society has an interest in it and affirms an obligation toward it. Although a form of life exists in the sperm and the unfertilized ovum, a new kind of life emerges at the moment of their union. Many regard conception (up to 72 hours after coitus), others implantation (7 days), as the beginning of an inviolable life. But while such life is human in origin and potentially human in character, the integration of bodily functions and the possibility of social interaction do not appear until later. Alternative candidates for the beginning of significantly human life are the final fixing of the genetic code (3 weeks), the first central nervous system activity (8 weeks), brain development and cardiac activity (12 weeks). Some time after the twelfth week “quickening” occurs; that is, the mother can feel the arm and leg movements of the fetus. “Viability” in the present stage of technology begins between the 20th and 28th week, and the fetus has a chance for survival outside the womb. At some point in the process from conception to birth there comes “a period when a life contains that which is essentially valued as significantly human and should be vested with a sanctity uncompromisable to the interest of lesser claims” (Robert M. Veatch in *Social Action*, March, 1971).

An ethical view does not require an *undifferentiated* concern for life. It places peculiar value upon *personal* life and upon the *quality* of life, both actual and potential.

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In that light it is understandable that today an increasing number of persons find it difficult, if not impossible, to attribute anything more than the *potentiality* of human personhood to the embryo in its *early* stages. The implication is that factors other than its existence may appropriately be given equal or greater weight at this time—the welfare of the whole family, its economic condition, the age of the parents, their view of the optimum number of children consonant with their resources and the pressures of population, their vocational and social objectives, for example.

On the other hand, many would agree that during the later months of a normal pregnancy life should not be interrupted except for the most serious reasons (such as the physical or mental health of the mother, abnormality or disease of the fetus, incest, or rape).

This distinction is of the greatest importance. Individuals contemplating an abortion should make a responsible decision early, certainly within the first two or three months.

Legislative policy

The theological and scientific views on when human life begins are so numerous and varied that one particular view should not be forced on society through its legal system.

Present laws prohibiting abortion are neither just nor enforceable. They compel women either to bear unwanted children or to seek illegal abortions regardless of the medical hazards and suffering involved. By severely limiting access to safe abortions, these laws have the effect of discriminating against the poor.

The mere liberalization of the laws has not proven to be a viable solution to the problem of illegal abortions. The liberalized laws tend to cause more rigidity and narrowness of interpretation, and, in any case, cannot cover all circumstances in which an abortion may be appropriate.

For these reasons, the Eighth General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls for the repeal of all legal prohibitions of physician-performed abortions. This would take abortion out of the realm of penal law and make voluntary and medically safe abortions legally available to all women. Simultaneously we ask that adequate protection be given to “conscientious objectors” against abortion, including physicians, nurses, and prospective mothers.

Call to action

In order to give effect to its concern for freedom with responsibility, and acknowledging the church’s obligation to aid in the resolution of the problem of unwanted pregnancies, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ takes the following action:

1. The General Synod calls upon the churches of the United Church of Christ and their members to involve themselves extensively in programs which would support repeal of present abortion legislation and to expand their ministries of counsel and concern to all women who have problems related to unwanted pregnancies.

2. The General Synod calls upon pastors, members, local churches, Conferences, and Instrumentalities to provide programs of counseling and education as to the meaning and nature of human life, sexuality, responsible parenthood, population control, and family life.

3. The General Synod calls on pastors, members, local churches, Conferences, and Instrumentalities to support and expand programs of family life and sex education in schools, agencies for adult education, communications media, and other public institu-

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tions; and to encourage the extension of information and services related to contraception as instrumental to the prevention of undesirable pregnancies and the achievement of wholesome family life.

4. The General Synod calls on pastors, members, and local churches to offer counseling opportunities and supporting fellowship for persons facing problems of unwanted or ill-advised pregnancies; to assist such persons in making wise ethical decisions regarding their problems; and to help them find professional assistance if necessary, as through existing noncommercial consultative services.

5. The General Synod urges the Council for Health and Welfare and its member agencies to work for the expansion of family planning services in the communities they serve and to initiate new programs that can serve as models to other hospitals and institutions.

6. The General Synod requests the Division of Health and Welfare and the Division of Christian Education to provide educational resources, consultative services, and training for constituents who wish to sponsor programs which are consistent with this General Synod position.

7. The General Synod calls on pastors, members, health and welfare committees, the Division of Health and Welfare, and other agencies to develop ministries on behalf of disadvantaged and minority groups which would give them freedom of choice in the area of family planning and in the termination of unwanted pregnancies in keeping with this statement.

8. The General Synod calls the above action to the attention of Conferences and Instrumentalities and urges their appropriate staffs to co-operate closely in the implementation of the purposes of this statement.

(71-GS-58)