

RELIGIOUS AMERICANS SPEAK OUT

Pro-choice

How to organize and mobilize religious support for choice.

It's available, and here are guidelines!

Clinics and pro-choice groups in many communities are struggling with determined and often violent 'pro-life' activists. Reproductive health care providers and pro-choice activists in these communities are desperate for pro-choice clergy to step forward. They especially need Christian clergy to stand up to the women-bashing, oppressive use of Christianity.

Fortunately, many are aware that religious support exists because they've heard about the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. Yet we know that for every person who seeks us out, many others who are under siege are not calling—very possibly because they have given up hope that religious support is truly available. Many have been deeply hurt by religious people and institutions. Many are angry and/or have "written off" the religious community.

Some examples of religious support.

The Religious Coalition has affiliates and chapters in many communities across the country, who increasingly offer support to women's health care providers. Several Coalition affiliates schedule regular "peaceful presences" in front of clinics on their worst picketing days; train clergy and other religious leaders in "all-options counseling"; conduct clinic blessings and offer in-service programs for clinic staff. Affiliates have conducted candlelight vigils and healing services, placed sign-on ads in local newspapers to commemorate the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, and held interfaith press conferences condemning clinic violence. All mobilize clergy and other religious leaders to speak publicly about being-pro-choice because of their faith—in school board and state legislative hearings, in religious services, in op-eds and letters to the editor, and on radio and television talk shows.

These are only examples of ways that local Religious Coalitions support women and those who provide essential reproductive health care services. Yet the Religious Coalition has no official presence in

many other communities that need and deserve religious pro-choice support. We would like to come to your community ourselves, yet may not be able to as urgently as you need it. So we've written this paper to share what we know and to offer to be partners in creating the support you need.

Four things you need to know before you approach clergy who serve congregations:

1. Clergy may face divisive politics.

Frequently, the people you have your eye on first—prominent clergy who serve congregations—may be the least likely to step forward at the first request. Why? Just as your community is being attacked by anti-abortion, women-negative and anti-gay forces, controversies are also raging in the religious denominations. Many congregations are split, and clergy speak often about the difficulty of "keeping their congregations together." They may bend over backwards to avoid "dividing the church." Even among those clergy or congregations that currently take on controversial issues, there may be a hesitancy to take on one more and upset the balance they've created.

Consider as well that most Protestant congregations recruit their own ministers or pastors who serve at the pleasure of the congregation. It is not unusual for a few conservative members of a congregation to make clear to the minister that being supportive of reproductive choice would be occupational suicide. Those members, though few in number, may make substantial contributions which they threaten to withdraw if the minister gets out of line.

Similarly, some women clergy are struggling for recognition and position in their congregations and denominations. If they have spoken out at all, they have very likely paid a price. Often they will express fears of their ministries being discredited if they take strong social stands.

This is why you may hear ministers confide in privacy, "I really agree with you and support what you

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do, but speaking out on this issue would compromise my whole ministry." While they may be concerned for the women and families who would benefit from their church confronting moral issues related to sexuality and childbearing, they're worried quite literally about their own future, and they are reluctant to compromise the other ministries their congregations are already engaged in .

Because of these obstacles, it may make sense to approach other people in the initial organizing stages—people who can then approach the clergy who serve congregations. More about that in the next section.

2. Few clergy have time on their hands.

Most clergy who serve congregations are struggling to take even one day off, by the time they plan and lead religious services, visit the sick, welcome new attenders, supervise staff, oversee church finances, manage property, and participate in community and social service. When approached, clergy may say, "I'm already doing all I can, I can't take on one more thing."

Don't give up. In our experience, clergy often move from this first reaction to a position of committed involvement. Do consider, however, what requests you make. Avoid requesting things that others could do just as well; make every effort to create specific time-limited avenues of involvement.

3. Many pro-choice clergy are not prepared to speak.

Remember that clergy hear what everyone else hears—a constant stream of religious condemnation of women's choices, accompanied by a claim of God's approval for anti-choice activities. Even pro-choice clergy hear the lies about what is going on in clinics and doctors' offices and may be carrying images (without realizing it) of "seedy abortion mills." More than likely, they have no idea what the women in their own congregation have experienced related to sexuality, coercion, rape, unwanted pregnancies, incest, or abortion (after all, who tells them?).

Women may wish to seek counsel from clergy on reproductive issues, yet few seminaries address issues related to sexuality, much less reproductive health. And few seminaries prepare would-be ministers for community action.

So be prepared to do some educating. Also, acquaint yourself (and them) with the Religious Coalition's continually expanding educational series of published materials, study guides, all-options counseling training, and conferences.

4. Finally, don't assume clergy are natural leaders!

We often encounter an unspoken expectation that every minister will act like Martin Luther King, Jr., stepping forward with vision and eloquence to lead their flock. You will have an easier time if you assume the opposite—that many clergy will neither build nor lead the bandwagon. Instead, they will wait until the bandwagon is at least half full before climbing on. The advantage of shifting your expectations is that you will be less frustrated and more creative in how you invite their participation and support. And some clergy may surprise you!

Four essential conditions for pro-choice clergy to speak out:

1. Safety in numbers.

Some clergy will join only when there is already a critical mass of other respected clergy in the community who are ready to step forward. One strategy is to approach clergy and say, "If we gather five respected clergy who are willing to publicly speak in support of this clinic and the women we serve, will you join them?"

2. Support within the congregation.

The minister will need some people in the congregation who are as committed to the minister's supporting choice as the detractors are committed to silencing dialogue. A minister's own congregants or parishioners are likely to be the best ones to approach the minister requesting support and involvement.

3. An invitation.

It may sound crazy, but we have heard clergy say, "I was wondering when I would be asked." Or "I didn't know how to help." Sure, they could have reached out with an offer, but many are so busy responding to requests and needs within their job that they don't get around to it. Consider this: they may be relieved to be offered a concrete way to address this community problem.

4. Reflection time, resources.

The religious foundation for being pro-choice is well-documented from many different points of view. Before an individual clergyperson can step forward, however, s/he may need help "getting up to speed" through reading or dialogue with others. Be prepared to offer appropriate resources and educational sessions to clergy you are approaching (see the Religious Coalition's *Resources & Order Form*).

Getting down to it: Finding key supporters and organizers.

Organizing religious support can be time consuming at the beginning. Because clergy are so busy, and you really need them for the more public roles, you should probably assume that lay people will do the initial work and will provide key links to clergy. Where should you begin your search?

Pro-choice activists.

Anti-choice folks often falsely claim that this is a struggle between religion and secular feminism. Not true. Most of us in the pro-choice movement do this work out of religious, moral, or spiritual convictions. Knowing that, you can start with people who are already working as staff or volunteers at your facility and with other pro-choice groups in the community. Make the connection; ask them to acknowledge publicly that they are religious and pro-choice. You may find it had never occurred to them to mobilize their own religious contacts.

Unitarian Universalist and Jewish groups.

Among religious people, these are the most likely to understand that the last thing your community needs is religious intimidation and coercion. Both groups have a tradition of social activism, and are likely to be savvy about whom to organize. Both groups have networks, expertise, and strong national organizations behind them: the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, National Council of Jewish Women, Hadassah WZOA, Women of Reform Judaism: The Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, and others.

African American women.

African American women know, from their own history, all about scare tactics of intimidation as well as the reality of violence against individuals and groups. Although traditionally black churches tend to be male-led (from the point of view of staffing and power over resources), women are often the ones who get things done and influence the way people think. They too have excellent local and national pro-choice organizations behind them: National Council of Negro Women, Coalition of 100 Black Women, National Black Women's Health Project, and others. Although these organizations don't identify themselves as religious, many of their members do.

Clergy who have taken other controversial stands.

We said before not to expect clergy to be leaders. However, some are, and they may reside in your community. Ask yourself and others: Who has a reputation for standing in solidarity with marginalized groups? Look for clergy who have stepped

forward to combat racism, support a rape crisis center, affirm gay/lesbian people, speak in favor of sexuality education, etc.

Clergy who may be more willing to risk controversy.

Rabbis and Unitarian Universalist ministers, in general, are less likely to face the dilemmas that Protestant clergy face within congregations. They can often provide necessary leadership by being the first to come forward and invite their Protestant colleagues to stand with them. Rooted in strong traditions of working for social justice, they may be extremely articulate and eloquent about the need for reproductive choice.

Clergy in non-parish settings.

Clergy who are not serving congregations are often freer to speak. Look for college chaplains, retired ministers, people in staff positions of church organizations, pastoral counselors, faculty in seminaries and religious studies departments, hospital chaplains. Ask them to approach others to join them. Or ask them to lend their names so you can say, "These clergy in our community have already agreed to stand with us..."

The key is to begin the bandwagon. Once it starts filling, others—who wouldn't have taken the lead or even joined your initial efforts—will jump on.

Ask more than to denounce clinic violence.

Clearly, you need—yesterday!—religious people to denounce violence against women and their providers of reproductive health services. Some people argue that we should organize religious support simply around the violence, leaving aside the question of support for reproductive choice. After the shooting deaths in Brookline, Massachusetts, for example, the top leaders of the member denominations of the Religious Coalition were joined by the leader of the National Council of Churches in denouncing "pro-life" violence, even though the NCC does not have a pro-choice policy.

However, in the long run, you need more than condemnation of clinic violence. The underlying violence of the rhetoric—which disrespects women and strives to usurp their most basic childbearing decisions—must also be confronted. Precisely because violent acts against women and their health care providers are justified as "Godly," they demand a unique response from the religious community.

Clinic violence is based on condemnation of women. If the religious community condemns terrorist acts and harassment without challenging the negative assertions about women and the choices

they make, they can rightfully be perceived as agreeing with those assertions.

To be successful in the long run, we must ask clergy to counter the Christian Right's pervasively degrading, dehumanizing portrayals of women. Ask them to go further than acknowledge that "we all have different beliefs." Ask them to explain their own religious beliefs and why those beliefs lead them to, and are consistent with, being pro-choice.

Give specific avenues.

Because of clergy's constraints, it's important to clarify your priorities for their involvement. Do you want them, for example, to develop and sign joint statements of support for women and providers? Participate in press briefings? Provide clergy presence during demonstrations? Offer all-options counseling? Serve as a resource to clinic staff to understand spiritual/religious issues in their work (their own as well as patients')? Visit policymakers in the city council, board of education, and/or state legislature? All these and more are offered by clergy and lay leaders in other communities. As you develop your own clergy network, help them discern what is most needed in your community.

And, don't limit yourself to clergy.

Although it is certainly important in this climate to organize clergy, we must also challenge the idea that only clergy can speak with religious authority, or even that clergy are necessarily the best spokespeople. The denominations and faith groups that belong to the Religious Coalition are convinced that women themselves, not just clergy, are moral agents.

Yes, do organize clergy. And do also encourage women of all faiths, backgrounds, and economic circumstances to speak from their own religious or spiritual wisdom. We can empower women to claim their own authority in discerning what is right and wrong for themselves, their families, and their communities.

How the Religious Coalition can help:

Clergy for Choice database and other networks.

The Religious Coalition works with many denominations and caucuses to identify pro-choice clergy. We can search our database for clergy in your area; please send your request in writing and provide zip codes. If that pool is insufficient to begin, we will ask our member denominations and other religious organizations to identify support in your community.

Resources.

Religious Coalition publications address theological questions from various faith perspectives, give

background on public policy issues, and encourage religious people to take action. We also sell buttons, t-shirts, bumper stickers, placards and other inexpensive ways to publicly declare oneself. Call or write for extra copies of our resources brochure.

Billboard and transit ad campaign.

You can put our message in front of your community: *Believe it: People of all faiths believe a woman should decide.* Local groups rent the space; we provide artwork and technical assistance with media. Write or call and ask for the "billboard packet."

Affiliate and chapter information.

In many cities, religious people come together in public support for choice after they are sought out by clinic directors or community leaders who realize the need for a balancing religious voice. In Cincinnati, after 80 clergy had come forward (organized by the public affairs director of the Planned Parenthood affiliate), they began to consider the advantages of affiliating with the Religious Coalition. If you would like to organize a local chapter or statewide affiliate under the name of the Religious Coalition, let us know. We'll be glad to discuss that with you and send our organizing manual.

Together, we shall overcome.

Finally, please remember that most religious people have supported choice all along. Before *Roe v. Wade*, clergy provided referrals to safe abortions through an underground network, and many congregations had policies that affirmed the necessity of a full range of options for women making decisions about child-bearing. In the wake of a movement to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, these denominations came together—as the Religious Coalition—to let legislators and the public know about religious support for choice.

The truth is that most people in the U.S. consider themselves religious. And most people in the U.S. want the government out of women's personal decisions. We look forward to working with you to get that word out.

Written by Ann Thompson Cook, National Director, with assistance from affiliates in Missouri, New Jersey, and New York City.

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The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice is 38 national mainline Christian, Jewish and other religious organizations. We work to create a public opinion climate that is conducive to pro-choice policy-making, and that affirms women as moral decision-makers. If you'd like to know more about us, call or write us at 1025 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 1130, Washington DC, 20005. Phone: 202/628-7700. Fax: 202/628-7716.

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