

RELIGIOUS AMERICANS SPEAK OUT

Pro-Choice

Family Planning: A Moral Good, A Human Right

Family planning is embraced by religions across the spectrum as a moral good, a responsible choice, and a basic human right. The world's religions recognize that family planning helps build strong families, protect the health of women and children, reduce child and spousal abuse, and prevent unwanted pregnancies.

In the United States, there is long-standing religious support for family planning. The overwhelming majority of women – 98%-- have used contraception during their reproductive years. Contraception not only leads to healthier families, it also helps reduce unintended pregnancy and the need for abortion.

Yet the "Religious Right," which has wrongly made abortion a political issue, defies logic—and decency—by trying to undermine support for family planning services. "Religious Right" groups conduct aggressive campaigns to reduce funding for clinics and restrict access to contraception for adolescents, including those who are already sexually active and at risk for sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy). They insist that health care providers and hospitals affiliated with religious groups (most frequently Catholic) be free to refuse to provide family planning services even when they accept public funding and participate in public health programs.

The same Catholic and fundamentalist groups also lobby for the elimination of U.S. funding for family planning services in the developing world—despite the fact that tens of millions of women around the world want to limit or space their children and do not have access to family planning services.

Religious support for family planning is consistent with the priority that faiths place on human well-being, including the health of children, families and the

community at large. Religions recognize that children fare best in body and spirit when they are born into nurturing environments and families prepared for parenthood. In fact, many religions believe that family planning is a moral duty, a stance echoed by well-known leaders.

Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "Planned parenthood is an obligation of those who are Christians. Our church thinks we should use scientific methods that assist in family planning." The Dalai Lama said, "Family planning is crucial, especially in the developing world."

The Episcopal Church first approved of contraception for the purpose of family planning in 1930. In a 1994 resolution, it directed dioceses and agencies to "provide information to all men and women on the full range of affordable, acceptable, safe, and non-coercive contraceptive and reproductive health care services."

In 1954, **The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America** stated that "to enable them to more thankfully receive God's blessing and reward, a married couple should plan and govern their sexual relations so that any child born to their union will be desired both for itself and in relation to the time of its birth."

The Presbyterian Church (USA) supports "full and equal access to contraceptive methods." In a resolution endorsing insurance coverage for contraceptives, the church affirmed that "contraceptive services are part of basic health care" and cautioned that "unintended pregnancies lead to higher rates of infant mortality, low birth weight, and maternal morbidity, and threaten the economic viability of families."

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Jewish movements have a long history of support for family planning, dating to the 1929 Reform resolution noting that birth control contributes to social stability. In a pioneering 1935 resolution, Women of Reform Judaism supported lifting bans on the dissemination of information about birth control.

The Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination, supports the use of some forms of family planning by married couples. According to Dr. Richard Land, President of the denomination's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, "...in terms of regulating the number of children and how far apart they are, we would leave that as a moral decision for the couple, as long as they used means of birth control that prevented conception from taking place."

Unitarian Universalists consider the use of contraception to be a human right. The 1987 General Assembly opposed "any move to deny or restrict the distribution of government funds as a means of restricting access" to contraception in the U.S. or abroad.

The United Church of Christ General Synod, in affirming God as "the source of life—our life, all life, life to the full," recognizes that "He has called us to share the work of creation with him, giving us the privileges and responsibilities of fellowship in this family and the wide units of society."

The United Methodist Church, the nation's second largest Protestant denomination, says that "each couple has the right and the duty prayerfully and responsibly to control conception according to their circumstances." Its Resolution on Responsible Parenthood states that in order to "support the sacred dimensions of personhood, all possible efforts should be made by parents and the community to ensure that each child enters the world with a healthy body, and is born into an environment conducive to realization of his or her potential." To this end, the United Methodist Church supports "adequate public funding and increased participation in family planning services by public and private agencies."

The Roman Catholic Church is the only major faith institution in the U.S. to forbid the use of contraception. However, most Catholics disagree with the prohibition; 88% of Catholic women of childbearing age who are sexually active use a contraceptive method forbidden by

the church, according to the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth.

Family planning is the mainstream moral choice.

Support Family Planning!

The Prevention First Act (S. 21 in the Senate and H.R. 463 in the House of Representatives) is a comprehensive package of family planning, health and education measures that will reduce unintended pregnancy and make abortion less necessary. These bills will increase access to publicly funded contraceptive services; require private health insurance plans to provide parity for prescription contraception; require hospitals to offer emergency contraception to rape victims; increase awareness about emergency contraception; and fund comprehensive sex education and sexually transmitted diseases prevention programs.

As people of faith, we need to speak up for the health and well-being of women and their families.

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, founded in 1973, is the national organization of pro-choice people of faith. The Religious Coalition – comprising Protestant, Jewish, and other denominations and faith groups, the Clergy for Choice Network, and state affiliates throughout the country – works to ensure reproductive choice through the moral power of religious communities. All programs seek to give clear voice to the reproductive health issues of people of color, those living in poverty, and other underserved populations.

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