

What is the Truth about Abortion?

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A real concern is a gift from God.

– *London Yearly Meeting (1925)*

One of Friends' testimonies is "Community". Community is important, not only to Friends, but to all humanity. Life starts with a community of two—the mother and her infant. A baby's community grows as she grows, to include the father, other children and eventually many more people.

In fact, we live in a community that is much more complicated than just the people with whom we have contact. Our extended community includes the people we may never meet—people who grow our food, who fix our plumbing and who develop the vaccines that protect us. It also includes the food that we eat, the mosquitoes that drive us crazy and the lions on the Serengeti. After all, we all belong to the web of life and we are all connected.

In the past, discussions about abortion have usually focused either on the fetus or the woman. Obviously, both parts of this dyad are most important in considering the future of a pregnancy. However, abortion has effects that are more widespread than just the fetus and the pregnant woman. This essay will try to provide a wider view of the benefits and risks of abortion.

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When Ronald Reagan was president, he asked his Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop, to find out how having an abortion harmed women. Eventually Dr. Koop, an evangelical Christian, responded that he could find little evidence of harm. There is much more evidence now that this is correct. In fact, now there is strong evidence that withholding an abortion is harmful when a woman requests one. Furthermore, that harm goes past the woman and includes the child who is born unwanted, and to her other, older children, if she has any.

I learned early on that not all pregnancies are planned, and not all children are wanted. When I was 11 years old our family traveled to Latin America. In Venezuela we were walking along a path when a barefoot young woman held a beautiful baby out and said "Wanna buy baby?" My mother had a difficult time explaining to her prepubescent son why this woman was trying to sell her baby.

It seems that everyone is either prochoice or antiabortion. How has the subject of abortion become so politicized? Dr. Randall Balmer, an evangelical professor and historian, perhaps has the answer. In his book "Thy Kingdom Come—an Evangelical Lament" he describes what he calls the "abortion myth": that the Religious Right has always been against abortion.

How did this myth get started? In the middle 20th century people were leaving evangelical churches because they were getting divorced, and the Bible and evangelical religions were stalwart against divorce. This was a problem for the church leaders, according to Balmer: "Evangelicals generally, and the Religious Right in particular, chose around 1980 to deemphasize radically the many New Testament denunciations of divorce and to shift their condemnations to abortion...."

Balmer goes on to write: “In the 1980s, in order to solidify the shift from divorce to abortion, the Religious Right constructed an abortion myth, one accepted by most Americans as true. Simply put, the abortion myth is this: Leaders of the Religious Right would have us believe that their movement began in direct response to the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. Politically conservative evangelical leaders were so morally outraged by the ruling that they instantly shed their apolitical stupor in order to mobilize politically in defense of the sanctity of life.”

There are important questions concerning the truth about abortion that I’ll try to answer. For instance, is it true that most women regret having an abortion? Are women’s lives harmed by having an abortion? Don’t women die from having abortions? Does having an abortion increase a woman’s risk of having breast cancer later in life? (No, according to the majority of scientific studies.) Why don’t women with unwanted pregnancies have the children and relinquish them to parents who will love them? Why don’t women just use contraception or abstain from sex? What happens to a child whose mother wanted to abort them, but couldn’t?

There are other questions which are difficult, or impossible, to answer: When does human life begin? Does a fetus have a soul? How does one compare the value/rights of a pregnant woman with the value/rights of the fetus? These questions I will leave to the individual Friend. These are important matters that our Meetings and Churches can help us decide.

For more objective information, there are two studies that can help find answers to basic questions about abortion. The first study was done in several states of the USA, and focuses of the effects of having—or not having—an abortion. It compares two groups of women. One group were turned away from the clinic because the pregnancy was slightly too far advanced. The other group, the controls, were women who had abortions that were just under the limit. Although the study was primarily looking at the women, they also looked at the children of these two groups of women.

This study was done by a group of social scientists who were meticulous with its design. The numbers were large—about a thousand women participated—and they were followed for 5 years. I have read the book “The Turnaway Study” and am amazed at the painstaking care that the researchers took. Here are the major findings of the study:

“The major aim of the study is to describe the mental health, physical health, and socioeconomic consequences of receiving an abortion compared to carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term. The main finding of The Turnaway Study is that receiving an abortion does not harm the health and wellbeing of women, but in fact, being denied an abortion results in worse financial, health and family outcomes.”

Specific findings of the study include:

- Most women who have an abortion do not regret having had it.
- Having an abortion did not tend to cause or worsen psychological problems.
- Women who wanted an abortion but did not receive it had an increase in poverty.
- Being denied an abortion makes it more likely that a woman will stay with an abusive partner.
- Being denied an abortion makes it more likely that a woman will be a single parent without family support.
- Children born as a result of abortion denial are more likely to live below the federal poverty level.
- The financial wellbeing and development of children is negatively impacted when their mothers are denied abortion.

- Carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term is associated with poorer maternal bonding, and may cause feelings such as feeling trapped or resenting the baby.
- Giving birth is connected to more serious health problems than having an abortion.
- The higher risks of childbirth were tragically demonstrated by two women who were denied an abortion and died following delivery. No women died from an abortion.
- Relinquishing a child for adoption can be very traumatic for the mother.

In summary, “Women who receive a wanted abortion are more financially stable, set more ambitious goals, raise children under more stable conditions, and are more likely to have a wanted child later.”

These findings confirm my own experiences. For instance, I was a general practitioner in a small town as a conscientious objector. One of the people I cared for was a toddler who had burns from hot water. His mother told me that he was fussy so she put him in the bathtub, thinking that a bath would help him calm down. Instead, he had a tantrum and she turned on the hot water to punish him. “I never wanted him, anyway” is what she told me.

The second study was started in the 1960s, in Prague, Czechoslovakia. It looks primarily at the children of women who wanted to abort a pregnancy, but were denied. Dr. Henry David, an American psychologist, worked with a group of Czech social scientists to perform this study. Although abortion was legal, the state controlled who could and who could not have that procedure performed. David and researchers found a group of women who had been turned down twice: the women had been denied an abortion and reapplied, and were turned down a second time. The children who resulted from those pregnancies were compared with children whose mothers had not requested an abortion. Both groups of kids were followed for up to 35 years. The report of this study was published in a series of papers and the book “Born Unwanted”.

The findings consistently showed disadvantages of being an unwanted child, compared to children who were desired. These babies were breastfed less than their desired controls. As they grew up, the unwanted children showed poorer socialization, they did less well in school and had more problems with friendships. “Unwantedness” seemed to lead to social maladaptation and more run-ins with the police. As they aged, these unwanted children had less satisfaction with their lives and with their jobs. They tended to stay single, or if they married, they were more likely to divorce. These unwanted children needed more psychiatric care than the controls.

Both of these studies illustrate interactions between abortion and community. A child who was born in the Prague study whose mother wanted to abort that pregnancy didn’t fit into his community as well as the child who was desired. The same is true of the Turnaway women who requested an abortion, but had to carry the pregnancy to term. These unintended children needed more community support because they resulted from an unintended pregnancy.

Let's look at the global community. We are facing serious problems that are unique to this era. We all know about climate change, and most of us acknowledge that it is anthropogenic. There is less publicity about the loss of biodiversity, but that loss may have even more of an impact on humanity than climate chaos. Species are becoming extinct at a rate much, much faster than normal. In addition, the numbers of many animals—both vertebrates and invertebrates—is decreasing rapidly. It is thought that unsustainable numbers of people are causing both the decrease in numbers of animals and the rapid extinction of species. We humans are doing terrible things to Creation.

There is a relationship between the numbers of people and the deterioration of Creation. The human impact of a population is related both to the number of people and how much we consume. This is most easily seen with CO2 emissions—the principal cause of climate chaos. The more people there are, whether they are driving cars or simply burning biomass for cooking, the more greenhouse gases are emitted.

“But”, you might say, “consumption is the real problem. We, in the rich global north consume too much.” Yes, it would be great if we could persuade people to consume less, but it is an uphill battle. Not only are we struggling against acquisitiveness, we are surrounded by irresistible media which encourage us to consume even more. Furthermore, the people who consume very little want to improve their lives, which will cause them to use more resources.

Even though I never do, I always want to ask people about their own consumption when they say that we need to consume less. The Ecological Footprint (EF), a way to measure human demand on natural capital, is one of the best measures of consumption. The EF of an average individual has been determined for most countries: see www.footprintnetwork.org. Average EF for a sustainable Earth is about 1.6 hectares per person. However, the average EF in both the USA and Canada is over 8 hectares, while in Kenya it is only 1 hectare. If we all lived like Kenyans the world would be a better place, but that is a dream that is highly unlikely to come true. Trying to decrease consumption is the work of Sisyphus.

On the other hand, most people want to limit their fertility. It is estimated that 98% of sexually active women in the USA have used contraception at some time in their lives, and as many as 40% of women will have one or more abortions during their lifetime. Sadly, almost half of all pregnancies in the USA are unintended.

The global figures are similar to US numbers: a quarter of women will experience one or more abortions and 40% of pregnancies worldwide are unintended. More than 200 million women don't have access to effective contraception for various reasons. Probably the most prevalent reasons are patriarchy and culture. In many societies, large families are favored, especially by men. Lack of access to family planning facilities is also common. These are causes of the high proportion of unintended pregnancies.

We live in an imperfect world and often need to make difficult choices. Problem pregnancies are caused by failure: failure of a man to respect a woman; failure to use contraception; failure of a contraceptive method; or failure of a fetus to develop normally. Abortion may be the best choice that a woman can make to deal with such a failure. My feeling is that the best person to make a decision about abortion is the woman herself.

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You probably guessed that I am prochoice. I became concerned about human population when I was a senior in a Friends school and wanted to spend my life working for peace. I read:

“...unless a favorable balance and resources is achieved with a minimum of delay, there is in prospect a Dark Age of human misery, famine and unrest; We believe that widespread, effective and voluntary use of medically sound and individually acceptable birth control is an essential factor in any humane design to raise world living standards and *achieve international peace*.”

Scientific American, December 1960

A member of our Meeting spent his career as an officer in the Navy. Just as there are Friends who serve in the military despite (or perhaps because of?) our peace testimony, our Friends community should have room for both prochoice and antiabortion Quakers. In Meeting for Worship, I spent years in discernment about abortion. However, it was a teen woman who made me realize the importance of abortion to individuals. At first this teen was quiet, but after her abortion she sat up and said: “Thank you doctor; you gave me back my future”.