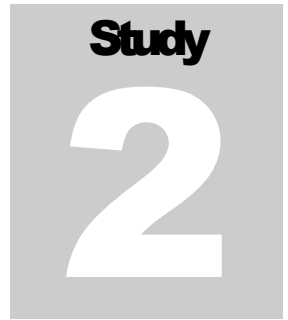


Everyday Ethics: Abortion



This study has been written by Justin Denholm, Director of CACE. See details at end of study

Why is abortion such a contentious issue today? What is at stake (both for those who are 'pro-life' or 'pro-choice')?

- Read the two newspaper articles provided. What reasons for the different positions are offered or implied? What are the ethical bases for these views?
- Both writers identify themselves as Christian, but arrive at quite different conclusions. Why do you think this is?
- Read the following Bible passages. What ideas or principles do they highlight? How might these relate to abortion? How do they complement or contrast with the views in the newspaper articles?
 - o Genesis 9
 - o Psalm 139: 13-16
 - o James 2:2-6
 - o Revelation 21:3-4
- What are some of the reasons you have heard for wanting an abortion? Choose one or two to discuss as a group – how could you respond if a friend offered this as a reason they were going to seek an abortion?
- In what ways do you think the church could make a helpful contribution to decreasing abortions in our society?

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The Anglican Church can no longer ignore this most confronting of issues, writes Archbishop Peter Watson. (The Age, August 5, 2004)

As the reaction in Australia to the scheduled screening on Sunday night of a filmed abortion (on ABC TV's Compass) and the controversy generated in Britain when this program was shown both demonstrate, the issue of abortion just won't go away. Feelings run high in both the "pro-life" and "pro-choice" camps, with each having strong and emotive arguments. It seems no amount of argument will resolve the debate, with repetition of the same old slogans and often inflammatory rhetoric about the right to life and women's rights to control their own bodies, seemingly irreconcilable rights. Most of the time abortion is a "no go" area, even - perhaps especially - in the church. How is it that we in the Anglican Church particularly have been so silent? Are we not moved by the 100,000 pregnancies that are terminated each year in Australia? Do we think this is unimportant? Have we bought the line that this is just an individual private decision for women to make? Are we intimidated by the feminist rhetoric that links any opposition to abortion with misogynist, oppressive attitudes to women? Or do we imagine that this is not relevant within our churches because churchgoing people don't have abortions? Certainly churchgoers don't talk much about it, but evidence from Britain suggests many women in our congregations will have had the procedure, and not only as the stereotypical single teenager who can't face motherhood, but as married women who want to limit the size of their families, or come under medical pressure to abort a "defective" foetus.

Without adopting an absolutist stance that abortion in any circumstance is always wrong (because certain rare, tragic circumstances may constitute a valid justification for abortion), Christians who take seriously the high value of human life as made in the image of God must be prepared to grapple with the following questions:

- *Why, when contraception has never been safer, more freely and cheaply available, or more effective, is abortion so common in our society?*
- *How welcoming is our church community to single mothers and their children?*
- *How welcoming is our church community to the disabled?*
- *Do we really regard every child as a gift from the Lord?*
- *To what extent have we been seduced by the secular idolatry of "the perfect child"?*
- *To what extent do we regard children (more than 1.7) as threats to our material prosperity?*
- *How do we encourage fathers as well as mothers to take responsibility for their children?*
- *How does the church offer practical and emotional support to women/couples facing abortion decisions, whether they continue or discontinue the pregnancy?*

These questions reflect the Christian insight that morality is not just about rules or rights, but about responsibility and relationships. Moral decisions are not made in isolation, but in the context of a community. We like to think we act autonomously, but the pressures and expectations of those around us, or more positively their encouragement, wisdom and support, can exert a profound influence. Moral decisions in the church reflect not only the character of the one who makes the final decision but the character of the community to which she belongs. The "burden" of an unwanted, inconvenient or disabled child should not, and often cannot, be borne by a woman or even a couple alone. Further, the burden of grief and guilt carried by those men and women who have decided to terminate the life of their unborn child is a burden that must be shared by all of us. Making the subject "off limits" deprives many of our brothers and sisters of the opportunity for counsel, prayer and the assurance of forgiveness.

Moral issues are not just about abstract questions, in this case questions about the moment when human life begins, the moral status of the foetus, and how to resolve conflicts between competing rights. Moral issues are also pastoral issues. So even if we find the moral question of abortion too hard to face, let alone resolve, for pastoral reasons alone the church can no longer ignore this difficult issue in our congregations.

Male church leaders should stop presuming to tell women how they should behave, writes Muriel Porter. (The Age, August 10, 2004)

Why is the Anglican Church so silent on abortion, asks Melbourne's Anglican Archbishop, Peter Watson (in The Age last Friday). Let me respond, as an Anglican laywoman and Christian feminist.

Archbishop, unlike you, I have been grateful for my church's silence on this issue. I am deeply disturbed that your article seems to suggest it is time for our church to enter this particular political debate. Abortion is like death and taxes - inevitable. Whatever you or the Pope or Tony Abbott has to say on this matter, the harsh reality is that abortions will continue to be performed. They have persisted since the beginning of time, since women found themselves pregnant with a child they could not bear, for a range of reasons. The reasons have changed over time. Not so long ago - just a few decades, actually - women who became pregnant outside marriage had few options. They could "disappear" to the country or to a home for unwed mothers for a few months and then give their child up for adoption, virtually sight unseen. Or they could somehow find the exorbitant amount of money needed for a dangerous, back-street abortion. Talk about being between a rock and a hard place. Either choice was agonising. And if their situation became public, their future chances of either a good marriage or respectable employment were severely compromised. Thank God that is no longer the case. Today, unmarried women can become mothers without any public opprobrium, and bring up their children without any loss of respectability, either for themselves or their child. And with the availability of safe and reliable contraceptives, unwanted pregnancy should, as you say, be unnecessary anyway.

In terms of logic, you are absolutely right, Archbishop. So why are there still about 100,000 abortions a year (if we can be sure of that vague statistic), given this dramatic change of dynamic? Sadly, when it comes to such issues, the situation is not black and white, as you seem to imply. This is a complex, multifaceted issue. Women who still have abortions are not necessarily cynical, careless or cruelly selfish. Of course, there may be some who are, as there always have been. But most are caught up in a situation beyond their control. For whatever reason, they know that to bring this unexpected child to full term would be seriously detrimental not only to their own physical and mental wellbeing, but more importantly, to the child's. It is easy to mock the notion that no child should be born unwanted, unloved and unable to be properly provided for, but it is the crucial factor for many of the women who seek abortions. Heaven knows, we now have enough information about the psychological problems such children face to give us pause.

You suggest a pastoral response, Archbishop, arguing for a greater acceptance of single mothers and their children into Christian congregations. If only it were that simple! All the evidence from multiple surveys over recent years shows that the church's black-and-white morality on issues of sexuality keeps more than single mothers at bay. De facto couples, divorcees and gay people all feel unwelcome in church, because all the churches - including the Anglican Church - espouse the unrealistic standard of sex only within formal marriage. By maintaining such an impossible standard, the churches have turned their backs on the needs and concerns of many Australians who are struggling with the complexities of the modern world. You speak, too, of the high value of human life in Christian doctrine. I am not arguing with that - clearly, you are right. But why are the churches always quick to cite this doctrine when it comes to women who abort their babies, but remain strangely silent about warfare? I know the churches rightly opposed the war in Iraq, but they still maintain general support for military responses to international problems. They provide chaplains to the armed services, and even, on occasions, bless battleships. If the sacredness of human life is an absolute value, then the churches should uphold a position of total pacifism. Why cannot the churches adopt the same generous relativism to pregnant women?

Most of all, Archbishop, I am sorry that you are entering this particular debate in the present heady political atmosphere. You are playing into the hands of right-wing politicians who are demonising stereotypical feminist arguments to help them win votes. Finally, Archbishop, I have to say that I am tired of hierarchical male church leaders presuming to tell women how they should behave. The Vatican offered a lecture on the place of women just last week, and though some have been grateful for its limited support for working women, it was at heart a patronising and demeaning document. The only bishop who should presume to speak about the role of women is a woman bishop - roll on the day.