Pastoral Letter – May 30, 2023

Dear friends,

Considering the recent decision by our NC legislators to prohibit abortion after 12 weeks of pregnancy, I wanted to take this opportunity to explore our denomination's stance on abortion and women's reproductive justice. The topic of reproductive choice is an important one, and I believe it is crucial for our congregation to engage in thoughtful dialogue and understanding.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has a longstanding commitment to social justice and the preservation of human dignity. The church recognizes that issues related to reproductive health and abortion are complex and deeply personal. Therefore, the denomination respects the diversity of opinions within its membership on matters such as contraception, family planning, and abortion.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirms the right of women to make their own decisions regarding their reproductive health, including the difficult and personal decision to have an abortion. The church acknowledges that these decisions are often made in the context of challenging circumstances, such as cases of rape, incest, fetal abnormalities, or threats to the life or health of the mother. We also acknowledge the intersectionality of reproductive justice with economic, racial, environmental, and criminal justice. We are charged to support individuals facing such choices with compassion, empathy, and pastoral care.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) does not advocate for or promote abortion as a method of birth control. Rather, the church encourages comprehensive sex education, access to contraception, and initiatives that promote reproductive health and well-being. By addressing the underlying social, economic, and educational factors that contribute to unintended pregnancies, the church seeks to create a society where the need for abortion is significantly reduced.

I encourage you to read and study the following documents. The final document, while lengthy, is comprehensive, Biblically, and theologically based, and worth your time to read (I shared this document last summer, as well):

1) **Action taken at the 225th PC(USA) General Assembly (2022):** "Approved by a vote of 348-38, HSB-11 affirms that women and pregnant people are full moral agents, created in the image of God, and it supports their moral capacity to decide whether to continue or end any given pregnancy. It also denounces attempts to prevent people from receiving essential health care and rejects attempts at all levels of government to reduce, limit or eliminate access to contraceptive and abortion care."[1] https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3001108
2) **2019 Statement from the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA)** following action taken in Alabama to limit access to abortion: https://www.pcusa.org/news/2019/5/20/abortion-debate-grows-stated-clerk-reminds-church-/
3) **2012 General Assembly Resolution on Reproductive Health Care:** https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/1-res_on_reproductive_health_care_access-2012.pdf
4) "The Covenant of Life and the Caring Community and Covenant and Creation: Theological Reflections on Contraception and Abortion" - The 195th General Assembly

[1] https://www.pcusa.org/news/2022/7/8/resolution-rejects-government-attempts-limit-acces/

(1983) received the reports and adopted the policy statements and recommendations https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/8-covenant-of-life-and-covenant-and-creation-1993.pdf

The PC(USA) also addresses two myths sometimes referred to in discussions on this topic, the myth that the number of abortions could be reduced by making abortion illegal, and the myth that the Bible is clear in its opposition to abortion. You can find these at the end of this letter.

It is important to note a central theological tenet of the Presbyterian Church and our Reformed faith: *That God alone is Lord of the conscience.* This understanding leads the PC(USA) to claim that "people of good faith can differ in their interpretation of Scripture, their understanding of when human life begins, and their decision about the morality of abortion."[2]

In 2003, the General Assembly stated:

"Men and women of faith and good conscience can, and do, disagree about the profound moral and spiritual implications of terminating a pregnancy, even at its earliest stage. This means that individuals will make different choices about whether to end or continue a pregnancy. It is wrong to coerce women to forsake their own religious and personal views about the right course of action in a problem pregnancy. Beliefs about these matters are a matter between God and the person, and ought not to be dictated by the State or others" (Minutes, 1988, Part I, pp. 42-43,46-47).[3] Despite repeated efforts over the last thirty years, consensus on the morality of abortion at any stage still evades us. Ultimately, the decision to continue or end a pregnancy is a moral judgment that defies human certainty and demands faith.[3]

I share these resources with you so that 1) you can see some of the history of our denomination regarding this issue, and 2) you can explore the very deep and complicated theological, moral, and ethical questions that lead people of faith in this church and in our nation to land in different places, 3) you can think about and pray about this and come to a conclusion based on your faith and your conscience.

If there is interest in the congregation for further conversation on this topic, please let me know and we will make that happen. It is important that all voices feel heard.

I am grateful to be a part of this community that continuously strives to know and love one another, to know and love our neighbors in the world, and to work for justice, peace, and equity in everything we do.

With love,
Mindy

[2] https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/1-res_on_reproductive_health_care_access-2012.pdf
[3] https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3001108

From the PC(USA):

Reproductive health information: Separating fact from fiction

Myth: The number of abortions could be reduced by making abortion illegal.

Not true. A study by the World Health Organization and the Guttmacher Institute, published in the medical journal, Lancet (October 13, 2007), found that the abortion rate has decreased more in developed countries where abortion is generally safe and legal than in developing countries where it is mostly illegal and unsafe. In addition, the abortion rate was almost the same in developed countries (26 per 1,000 women) and developing countries (29 per 1,000 women). Illegality does not stop abortions. Of the 42 million abortions worldwide in 2003, the vast majority — 35 million — took place in the developing world. Almost all unsafe abortions (97 percent) took place in developing nations. A spokeswoman from the International Women's Health Coalition pointed out that, "The legal status of abortion has never dissuaded women and couples, who, for whatever reason, seek to end pregnancy." See the full study (free registration required).

Regular access to effective contraception, as in the developed world, is the best way to reduce unplanned pregnancies and the need for abortion. Unfortunately, current U.S. policies restrict family planning assistance to foreign non-governmental clinics and agencies that perform or even discuss abortion or advocate liberalizing abortion laws. The result has been a loss of family planning services and less access to condoms in many developing countries — services that would help reduce the need for abortion. Learn more at the Population Action International Web site.

Myth: The Bible is clear in its opposition to abortion.

There are no texts in the Bible that address directly the question of elective abortion. This is rather surprising because specific prohibitions of abortion were present among certain neighboring peoples and cultures. No such prohibition can be found in the Old or New Testaments. The appeal to biblical texts necessarily involves interpretation. None of the texts alone or together provides a single conclusive answer. (Paul D. Simmons, "Personhood, the Bible, and the Abortion Debate," Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, Educational Series, No. 3)

It is clear that Christians disagree about how biblical teachings apply to questions related to abortion. In its study in 1992, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) points to two quite different views. The first maintains that teachings about God as the Creator of all life and poetic language about life in the womb lead Christians to oppose abortion as

an option. The second emphasizes that women and men are created in the image of God and are entrusted with the responsibility to be faithful stewards of life in reproductive decisions; therefore, abortion is one of the choices they may conscientiously consider. (*Problem Pregnancies and Abortion*, 204th General Assembly (1992), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

The differences in these viewpoints cannot be resolved by appeal to specific biblical texts. Conscientious Christians continue to disagree about biblical interpretation, as they disagree also about the option of abortion itself. But it is inaccurate, as well as intolerant, to maintain that the Bible provides a single clear-cut answer to the complex dilemmas persons face when they are considering abortion.