

United Church of Christ



*General Synod
Statements and
Resolutions Regarding
Freedom of Choice*

United Church of Christ General Synod Statements and Resolutions Regarding Freedom of Choice

Eighth General Synod, 1971

Freedom of Choice Concerning Abortion: A Proposal for Action adopted by the Eighth General Synod, June 29, 1971.

“A proposal is a recommendation for action in a specific situation in application of a pronouncement previously agreed upon by the General Synod.” (67-GS-175).

A responsible position concerning abortion should be based on a consideration of the rights of the individual woman, her potential child, her family and society, as well as the rights of the fetus.

Theological and ethical factors

Standing in the Hebrew-Christian tradition, we affirm God as the Source of life—our life, all life, life to the full. He has called us to share the work of creation with him, giving us the privileges and responsibilities of fellowship in the family and in the wider units of society. Thus we affirm the freedom with which God endowed men and women, but we affirm and receive this as freedom bound to responsibility. At its best our Western legal tradition, too, has served the dual purpose of protecting human freedom and helping human beings to discharge their responsibilities to one another.

Our religious heritage has also stressed reverence for human life. Accordingly, the enhancement of human life and the protection of the rights of persons, particularly the weak and defenseless, has become an important element in our legal system. It has found expression in laws intended to protect those who cannot protect themselves, such as children, including the unborn. It is neither likely nor desirable that organized society would disavow its responsibility in this regard.

Inevitably, therefore, a judgement will be made or assumed as to when personal human life begins and at what point society has an interest in it and affirms an obligation toward it. Although a form of

life exists in the sperm and the unfertilized ovum, a new kind of life emerges at the moment of their union. Many regard conception (up to 72 hours after coitus), others implantation (7 days), as the beginning of an inviolable life. But while such life is human in origin and potentially human in character, the integration of bodily functions and the possibility of social interaction do not appear until later. Alternative candidates for the beginning of significantly human life are the final fixing of the genetic code (3 weeks), the first central nervous system activity (8 weeks), brain development and cardiac activity (12 weeks). Some time after the twelfth week "quickenings" occurs; that is, the mother can feel the arm and leg movements of the fetus. "Viability" in the present stage of technology begins between the 20th and 28th weeks, and the fetus has a chance for survival outside the womb. At some point in the process from conception to birth there comes "a period when a life contains that which is essentially valued as significantly human and should be vested with a sanctity uncompromisable to the interest of lesser claims" (Robert M. Veatch in *Social Action*, March, 1971).

An ethical view does not require an *undifferentiated* concern for life. It places peculiar value upon *personal* life and upon the *quality* of life, both actual and potential. In that light it is understandable that today an increasing number of persons find it difficult, if not impossible, to attribute anything more than the *potentiality* of human personhood to the embryo in its *early* stages. The implication is that factors other than its existence may appropriately be given equal or greater weight at this time—the welfare of the whole family, its economic condition, the age of the parents, their view of the optimum number of children consonant with their resources and the pressures of population, their vocational and social objectives, for example.

On the other hand, many would agree that during the later months of a normal pregnancy life should not be interrupted except for the most serious reasons (such as the physical or mental health of the mother, abnormality or disease of the fetus, incest, or rape).

This distinction is of the greatest importance. Individuals contemplating an abortion should make a responsible decision early, certainly within the first two or three months.

Legislative policy

The theological and scientific views on when human life begins are so numerous and varied that one particular view should not be forced on society through its legal system.

Present laws prohibiting abortion are neither just nor enforceable. They compel women either to bear unwanted children or to seek illegal abortions regardless of the medical hazards and suffering involved. By severely limiting access to safe abortions, these laws have the effect of discriminating against the poor.

The mere liberalization of the laws has not proven to be a viable solution to the problem of illegal abortions. The liberalized laws tend

to cause more rigidity and narrowness of interpretation, and, in any case, cannot cover all circumstances in which an abortion may be appropriate.

For these reasons, the Eighth General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls for the repeal of all legal prohibitions of physician-performed abortions. This would take abortion out of the realm of penal law and make voluntary and medically safe abortions legally available to all women. Simultaneously we ask that adequate protection be given to "conscientious objectors" against abortion, including physicians, nurses, and prospective mothers.

Call to action

In order to give effect to its concern for freedom with responsibility, and acknowledging the church's obligation to aid in the resolution of the problem of unwanted pregnancies, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ takes the following action:

1. The General Synod calls upon the churches of the United Church of Christ and their members to involve themselves extensively in programs which would support repeal of present abortion legislation and to expand their ministries of counsel and concern to all women who have problems related to unwanted pregnancies.

2. The General Synod calls upon pastors, members, local churches, Conferences, and Instrumentalities to provide programs of counseling and education as to the meaning and nature of human life, sexuality, responsible parenthood, population control, and family life.

3. The General Synod calls upon pastors, members, local churches, Conferences, and Instrumentalities to support and expand programs of family life and sex education in schools, agencies for adult education, communications media, and other public institutions; and to encourage the extension of information and services related to contraception as instrumental to the prevention of undesirable pregnancies and the achievement of wholesome family life.

4. The General Synod calls upon pastors, members, and local churches to offer counseling opportunities and supporting fellowship for persons facing problems of unwanted or ill-advised pregnancies; to assist such persons in making wise ethical decisions regarding their problems; and to help them find professional assistance if necessary, as through existing noncommercial consultative services.

5. The General Synod urges the Council for Health and Welfare and its members agencies to work for the expansion of family planning services in the communities they serve and to initiate new programs that can serve as models to other hospitals and institutions.

6. The General Synod requests the Division of Health and Welfare and the Division of Christian Education to provide educational resources, consultative services, and training for constituents who wish to sponsor programs which are consistent with this General Synod position.

7. The General Synod calls on pastors, members, health and welfare committees, the Division of Health and Welfare, and other agencies to develop ministries on behalf of disadvantaged and minority groups which would give them freedom of choice in the area of family planning and in the termination of unwanted pregnancies in keeping with this statement.

8. The General Synod calls the above action to the attention of Conferences and Instrumentalities and urges their appropriate staffs to co-operate closely in the implementation of the purposes of this statement.

(71-GS-58)

Ninth General Synod, 1973

The committee proposed that the intentions incorporated in alternative I on the Abortion Issue be referred to the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, and it was.

76-6EC-12 VOTED: The Executive Council refers the intentions incorporated in alternative I on the Abortion Issue (Freedom of Choice) to the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries:

The Ninth General Synod affirms the Supreme Court decisions of January 22, 1973, removing the legal restrictions on medical termination of pregnancy through the second trimester. We further commend the Instrumentalities of the General Synod that have influenced abortion reform.

While respecting the rights of individuals of various convictions on medical termination of pregnancy and family planning, we re-affirm the Eighth General Synod call to action for freedom of choice with responsibility in the area of abortion.

We direct the Executive Council to implement the following actions (through appropriate Instrumentalities' cooperation):

1. To urge pastors, members, local churches, Conferences and Instrumentalities to resist attempts to erode or negate the recent Supreme Court decision as well as to strengthen state and local efforts in this regard.

2. To urge pastors, members, local churches, Conferences and Instrumentalities to provide new and better counseling services to all persons who have problems related to unwanted pregnancies. Training and facilities for these services must be expanded.

3. To urge pastors, members, local churches, Conferences and Instrumentalities to support and expand programs in the

understanding and responsibility for human sexuality in the schools, agencies for adult education, communications media, and other public institutions; and to encourage the extension of information and services related to contraception as instrumental to the prevention of undesirable pregnancies and the achievement of wholesome family life.

4. To provide educational resources, consultative services, and training for conferences, associations and local churches who wish to sponsor programs concerned with human sexuality and family planning.

5. To urge the Division of Health and Welfare to work for the expansion of family planning services in the communities they serve and to help to initiate new programs.

6. To develop ministries on behalf of disadvantaged and minority groups, of the young and the poor, which would give them choice in the area of family planning and in the termination of unwanted pregnancies.

Eleventh General Synod, 1977

The 1977 General Synod took the following action:

RESOLVED, That the 11th General Synod of the United Church of Christ:

Affirms the right of women to freedom of choice with regard to pregnancy expressed by the Eighth General Synod and interpreted as a constitutional right in the January 22, 1973 decisions of the Supreme Court which remove the legal restrictions on medical termination of pregnancy through the second trimester. Pastors, members, congregations, conferences, instrumentalities and agencies are urged to resist in local communities or in legislative halls attempts to erode or negate the 1973 decisions of the court and to respect and protect the First Amendment rights to differences of opinion and freedom from intimidation concerning the issue of abortion.

Deplores the June 20, 1977 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court and recent actions of the U.S. Congress that effectually deprive the poor of their Constitutional rights of choice to end or complete a pregnancy, while leaving the well-to-do in the full enjoyment of such rights.

Calls upon UCC members, congregations, associations, conferences and instrumentalities to assure that publicly supported hospitals provide medical services to women within their usual service area to exercise their Constitutional right to end or complete pregnancies;

and to petition their State legislatures and the U.S. Congress to assure that poor will be provided with medical services to exercise their Constitutional rights to end or complete pregnancies.

July 4, 1977

Twelfth General Synod, 1979

A resolution adopted by the 12th General Synod of the United Church of Christ, 1979.

We, the delegates of the 12th General Synod, reaffirm the theological statements of the 8th, 9th and 11th General Synods on the matter of freedom of choice on abortion, and recognize the position statements calling attention to supportive services for people involved in making these choices and in responsible family planning, as enumerated in paragraphs two through six page 78, of the minutes of the Ninth General Synod, and in points 2-8 from the General Statement on Freedom of Choice Concerning Abortion of the Eighth General Synod which are as follows:

2. The General Synod calls upon pastors, members, local churches, Conferences, and Instrumentalities to provide programs of counseling and education as to the meaning and nature of human life, sexuality, responsible parenthood, population control, and family life.

3. The General Synod calls upon pastors, members, local churches, Conferences, and Instrumentalities to support and expand programs of family life and sex education in schools, agencies for adult education, communications media, and other public institutions; and to encourage the extension of information and services related to contraception as instrumental to the prevention of undesirable pregnancies and the achievement of wholesome family life.

4. The General Synod calls upon pastors, members, and local churches to offer counseling opportunities and supporting fellowship for persons facing problems of unwanted or ill-advised pregnancies; to assist such persons in making wise, ethical decisions regarding their problems; and to help them find professional assistance if necessary, and through existing noncommercial consultative services.

5. The General Synod urges the Council for Health and Welfare and its members agencies to work for the expansion of family planning services in the communities they serve and to initiate new programs that can serve as models to other hospitals and institutions.

6. The General Synod requests the Division of Health and Welfare and the Division of Christian Education to provide educational resources, consultative services, and training for constituents who wish to sponsor programs which are consistent with the General Synod position.

7. The General Synod calls on pastors, members, health and welfare committees, the Division of Health and Welfare, and other agencies to develop ministries on behalf of disadvantaged and minority groups which would give them freedom of choice in the area of family planning and in the termination of unwanted pregnancies in keeping with this statement.

8. The General Synod calls the above action to the attention of Conferences and Instrumentalities and urges their appropriate staffs to cooperate closely in the implementation of the purposes of this statement.

BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED THAT THE TWELFTH GENERAL SYNOD:

1. **Reaffirms** full freedom of choice for the persons concerned in making decisions regarding pregnancy;

2. **Affirms** that all persons are called by our Lord Jesus Christ to celebrate, nurture, and support life;

3. **Affirms** the fact that, since life is less than perfect and the choices that people have to make are difficult, abortion may sometimes be considered;

4. **Affirms** that within the context of the concern for the sacredness of individual lives, as exemplified in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, God calls us when making choices, especially as these relate to abortion, to act faithfully.

Background

During the late 1960's and early 1970's over three thousand Protestant clergy and rabbis participated in the Clergy Consultation Service, a nationwide counseling and referral network for women facing unwanted pregnancy. Through their testimony as to the tragic situations faced by these women, and because of the efforts of other national groups of lawyers, doctors, and others, the laws in a number of states were modified to allow for legal, medically safe abortion in certain situations. However, these changes did not make legal abortion accessible to thousands of poor women who found the hospital fee too high and the great distances needed to travel to states offering legal abortion prohibitive. Thus, a number of local Clergy Consultation Services organized free standing clinics to provide adequate counseling, contraceptive information and inexpensive medical services available to poor women. These clinics still offer some of the best abortion and contraceptive services across the country.

In response to these developments, the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries and the Council for Christian Social Action voted in 1970 to support a woman's right to choose the legal option of abortion and the right to safe and effective methods of family planning. In 1971 the issue of abortion was brought before the Eighth General Synod which voted to endorse freedom of choice for women. The General Synod said,

Standing in the Hebrew-Christian tradition, we affirm God as the Source of life—our life, all life, life to the full. He has called us to share the work of creation with him, giving us the privileges and responsibilities of fellowship in the family and in the wider units of society. Thus we affirm and receive this as freedom with which God endowed men and women, but we affirm and receive this as freedom bound to responsibility. At its best our Western legal tradition, too, has served the dual purpose of protecting human freedom and helping human beings to discharge their responsibilities to one another.

Following this call, the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries joined the *amicus curiae* brief in the Georgia and Texas cases challenging those states' restrictive abortion laws. These cases were heard before the U.S. Supreme Court and in January 1973 the Court ruled that women have the Constitutional right to abortion.

In order to protect the right of every woman to follow the dictates of her conscience or her faith's religious teachings, the UCBHM and the UCC Office for Church in Society helped to establish the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights. RCAR is a coalition of over twenty Protestant, Jewish and Catholic groups whose presence in Washington, D.C. makes lawmakers aware of their corporate commitment to the option of abortion as a principle tenet of religious freedom.

In response to the Eighth General Synod actions, the UCBHM has established a Family Life Issue Group commissioned to develop programs for helping to strengthen families and to address the many issues related to family life and public policy in this age. UCBHM is currently testing models of sex education involving both parents and teenagers through congregations in two Conferences. The results of these programs should be available to all congregations in 1980.

Legislative Action

Legislative battles on abortion are now being waged at local, state, and federal levels. No politician or law-making body is exempt from demands from vociferous anti-choice supporters.

City and county councils are attempting to harass abortion clinics through extensive overregulation by ordinance. Laws require 24-hour ambulance service and elaborate medical equipment at clinics which are not medically necessary, but serve as a great deterrent to the continued existence of safe, low-cost abortion facilities. Such ordinances are being challenged on Constitutional grounds.

State government action is focused on both restrictive legislation

and calls to convene a Constitutional Convention. A new Ohio law, for example, restricts the use of state funds for virtually all abortions and even prohibits funding to organizations or agencies which "perform or promote" abortion. If upheld by the courts this would have devastating effects on the service of rape counseling centers, mental retardation clinics, and other therapeutic agencies which may now discuss ("promote") the abortion option. The state legislature of Massachusetts even sent a resolution to its Federal Congressional delegation requesting it to support a change in the pledge of allegiance to promote "liberty and justice for all . . . the born and the unborn."

Fifteen states have asked the Congress to convene a Constitutional Convention under Article V for the purpose of drafting a proposed Constitutional amendment to outlaw abortion. If 34 states request such a gathering, the Congress is obligated to hold one. Any proposed amendments would be sent to the states for ratification. Unfortunately, the Constitution provides no guidelines for such a Convention, and Constitutional scholars are terrified at the damage such a meeting could do to basic guarantees of civil liberties, in addition to freedom of choice regarding abortion.

Most Federal action in this area now entails restrictions on payments for abortion in various government programs. Abortions are compensated by Medicaid only if done to protect the life of the mother or if performed under the prompt reporting of rape or incest. Similar restrictions exist for military service personnel. These restrictions, and worse, can be expected for many years to come. Some Representatives also want to stop Federally-supported agencies, including colleges, from referring persons to abortion clinics, and to stop abortion coverage in all Federal insurance programs. Additionally, there are several proposed Constitutional amendments introduced each session to restrict or eliminate abortion (and the use of certain contraceptives like the IUD).

—Mary Ellen Haines and Barry Lynn

Resources

Available from Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, 100 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002; UCBHM, 475 Riverside Drive, 10th floor, New York, NY 10115; National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL), 825 15th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

Thirteenth General Synod, 1981

81-GS-60 VOTED: The Thirteenth General Synod adopts as amended the Resolution on Freedom of Choice.

The Thirteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ reaffirms the theological statements of the 8th, 9th, 11th and 12th General Synods on the matter of freedom of choice on abortion, and supports the following statements:

1. The question of when life (Personhood) begins is basic to the abortion debate. It is primarily a theological question, on which denominations or religious groups must be permitted to establish and follow their own teachings;

2. Every woman must have the freedom of choice to follow her personal religious and moral convictions concerning the completion or termination of her pregnancy. The church as a caring community should provide counseling services and support for those women with wanted or unwanted pregnancies to assist them in exploring all alternatives;

3. Abortion should not be considered a primary method of birth control. To reduce the need for abortion, the church is concerned that counseling, family planning information, and assistance be made available to all;

4. Freedom of Choice legislation must be passed at both the federal and state levels to provide the funds necessary to insure that all women, including the poor, have access to family planning assistance and safe, legal abortions performed by licensed physicians;

Therefore, the Thirteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ urges individual members of the local churches and the appropriate instrumentalities of the United Church of Christ continue efforts to guarantee a woman's freedom of choice as outlined above.

The Thirteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ urges individual members of the local churches, associations, conferences and the appropriate instrumentalities and other bodies of the United Church of Christ to actively oppose the passage of constitutional amendments and legislation revoking this freedom of choice.

Sixteenth General Synod, 1987

87-GS-112 VOTED: The Sixteenth General Synod adopts the Resolution "Sexuality and Abortion: A Faithful Response" as amended.

WHEREAS, Scripture teaches that all human life is precious in God's sight and teaches the importance of personal moral freedom, and

WHEREAS, previous General Synods, beginning in 1971, have considered the theological and ethical implications of abortion, and have supported its legal availability, while recognizing its moral ambiguity and urging that alternatives to abortion always be fully and carefully considered, and

WHEREAS, women and men must make decisions about unplanned or unwanted pregnancies that involve their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being, and

WHEREAS, the United States leads nearly all other developed nations of the world in pregnancy, abortion, and childbearing rates for teen-agers, and

WHEREAS, access to birth control is being jeopardized by decreases in Federal funding for human services, including family planning programs, and certain groups continue the efforts to reverse the Roe vs. Wade decision of 1973, which affirms the right to choose a safe and legal abortion, and

WHEREAS, abortion is a social justice issue, both for parents dealing with pregnancy and parenting under highly stressed circumstances, as well as for our society as a whole, and

WHEREAS, previous General Synods have called upon the church to provide programs of counseling and education about the meaning and nature of human life, sexuality, responsible parenthood, population control, and family life,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Sixteenth General Synod:

1. Affirms the sacredness of all life, and the need to protect and defend human life in particular;
2. Encourages persons facing unplanned pregnancies to consider giving birth and parenting the child or releasing the child for adoption before considering abortion;
3. Upholds the right of men and women to have access to adequately funded family planning services, and to safe, legal abortions as one option among others;

4. Affirms the need for adequately funded support systems, including health and day care services, for those who choose to raise children;

5. Urges that resources on human sexuality being prepared by the Board for Homeland Ministries be used widely in the churches, and that the Resolutions of previous General Synods on sexuality issues be distributed and studied as part of these resources;

6. Urges the United Church of Christ, at all levels, to provide support, resources, and information to persons facing unplanned pregnancies, including counseling of persons who choose to have abortions;

7. Urges the United Church of Christ, at all levels, to provide educational resources and programs to persons, especially young persons, to help reduce the incidence of unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, and to encourage responsible approaches to sexual behavior;

8. Urges pastors, members, local churches, conferences, and instrumentalities to oppose actively legislation and amendments which seek to revoke or limit access to safe and legal abortions.

Seventeenth General Synod, 1989

Reaffirmation of UCC Support for Freedom of Choice, adopted by the Seventeenth General Synod, July 3, 1989.

WHEREAS, the UCC has, for almost two decades supported a woman's right to choose a safe, legal abortion, and

WHEREAS, we deplore the willingness of many legislators, at all levels, to restrict the access of poor women to safe, comprehensive reproductive health care with a full range of options, and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, the 17th General Synod of the United Church of Christ reaffirms its historic and courageous leadership in support of freedom of choice as legally supported by *Roe v. Wade*, and urges all parts of the church to work toward a society where a full range of reproductive options are available to all women regardless of economic circumstances and to address the root causes that lead to unplanned pregnancies, ignorance, and lack of life options.

THEREFORE BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the 17th General Synod deplores the decision handed down today by the United States Supreme Court severely limiting major provisions of *Roe v. Wade* as undermining the spirit of the constitutional freedom of choice of women in this nation and making freedom of choice essentially a luxury for those who are not economically disadvantaged.

RESOLUTION "FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REGARDING MEDICAL OPTIONS FOR WOMEN"

The Eighteenth General Synod, 1991:

91-GS-73 VOTED: The Eighteenth General Synod adopts the Resolution "Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Information Regarding Medical Options for Women."

FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REGARDING MEDICAL OPTIONS FOR WOMEN, adopted by the Eighteenth General Synod, July 21, 1991

WHEREAS, the Christian tradition affirms that God has endowed women and men with freedom and affirms that justice is served with equal access to information;

WHEREAS, all persons need adequate information to make informed decisions;

WHEREAS, the United States Supreme Court ruling of May 23, 1991 permits legal restriction of information pertaining to all legal medical options for pregnant women in facilities receiving Title X Federal Funds;

WHEREAS, denying to poor persons information that is accessible to persons of financial means is unjust; and

WHEREAS, religious liberty, freedom of speech, equal access to information, and the right of conscience are cherished and vitally important elements in our democracy and in our moral lives.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, the Eighteenth General Synod affirms the right of freedom of speech for all Americans, and supports the passage of S.323 to overturn the restriction of information regarding all legal medical options for pregnant women, encourages the President of the United States to sign such legislation, and calls upon the Congress to resist all attempts to defeat this legislation by Presidential veto.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the Eighteenth General Synod calls upon the President of the United Church of Christ, local churches and individual members to actively support this legislation by calling upon Congress and the President of the United States to approve S.323.

Subject to the availability of funds.

RESOLUTION "PREGNANCY AND CHOICE"

91-GS-74 VOTED The Eighteenth General Synod adopts the Resolution "Pregnancy and Choice."

WHEREAS, for 20 years, Synods of the United Church of Christ have affirmed a woman's right to choose with respect to abortion;

WHEREAS, the 16th General Synod affirmed "the sacredness of all life, and the need to protect and defend human life in particular," and affirmed "the need for adequately funded support systems . . . for those who choose to raise children."

WHEREAS, women continue to struggle with decisions about difficult pregnancies;

WHEREAS, the issues surrounding abortion continue to be problematic and divisive, requiring continued prayer, dialogue, and openness;

WHEREAS, we need to be reminded that choice implies alternatives.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, the Eighteenth General Synod calls upon the national bodies and the conferences of the United Church of Christ to:

- 1. Continue to identify, develop, update, and widely distribute resources for women regarding the full range of options for problem pregnancies,**
- 2. provide and encourage opportunities for social service advocates, pastors, pastoral counselors, Christian educators and laity, at regional and local levels, to act**

together, seeking areas where agreement exists, and to support women in their choices,

3. provide care and support for women facing the emotional, psychological and physical challenges of pregnancy, and
4. affirm a responsible and faithful male role in sex, marriage, and reproduction.

Subject to the availability of funds.