



Voice for Choice

A Newsletter from the Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice

Becoming a Pro-Choice Catholic

Lynn Bretl

I have not always been pro-choice. Growing up Catholic, and attending Catholic schools for twelve years, I learned that abortion was always the wrong choice. Plain and simple. In college, however, I became interested in sexuality education, and after graduating, I took an internship as a sexuality educator at Planned Parenthood. As part of my internship, I was exposed to a wide variety of women and their wide variety of reasons for choosing abortion. Suddenly the choice was not so plain and simple. I began to consider myself pro-choice, though I was far from an activist. My views on the subject were private.

Then I became a mother. I had an overly-planned pregnancy inside a stable, healthy marriage and I was scared to death. I experienced the complex emotions that come with deciding to be a parent and understood even better why someone might choose abortion. My belief in the right to choose was solidified, and yet I was not compelled to be outspoken for the cause.

It was when my second daughter was born that everything changed. In the 31st week of pregnancy, we discovered she was sick and too compromised to be helped by modern medicine. She was delivered via c-section and, after a few short hours of life, we made the difficult decision to take her off a ventilator and let her die peacefully in our arms.

In the months that followed, we slowly began to heal. Through the grief, I tried to find meaning and purpose in her short life and found myself contemplating my views on abortion more than ever before.

I thought about the choice we had made, and sadly, met many more parents who had made similar choices for their own sick children. In the nearly three years that have passed since my daughter's birth and death, I have continually been grateful that we had this choice, a choice we made out of nothing but the deepest love for her.

The decision we made to remove our daughter's life support is not the same decision as someone choosing between carrying a pregnancy or not, but when I hear the rhetoric of those who oppose abortion, particularly "partial-birth" abortion, I can't help but wonder what we would have done if we had not been able to make the choice we did for our daughter. What would we have done if we had been told that what we, and the doctors, thought was best for our daughter had, in fact, been outlawed by people with no experience in this situation? I fear that if abortion rights continue to be whittled away bit by bit, as they are now, women and parents will not have the same rights to choose when faced difficult decisions for their children, born or unborn.

So now I am an activist, a pro-choice Catholic, and a member of the Board of Directors for the Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. This is no longer time for complacency and silence. I am not the most vocal or visible choice activist the country, but I am committed to doing all I can to ensure my daughters will grow up having choices throughout their reproductive lives.

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2008 Elections: Let Your Voice Be Heard

As people of faith, we have a responsibility to ensure that decisions about when and whether to have children are left up to individuals. We must elect a president and legislators who respect each person's religious and ethical beliefs and believe in a woman's ability to make her own decisions regarding her family.

Religious opponents of reproductive justice have made their voices heard loud and clear. As religious pro-choice people, we need to raise *our* voices and ensure that our elected officials will work to guarantee access to comprehensive reproductive health care and sexuality education.

We must also make sure political candidates do not make assumptions about our views. If we identify as religious, some candidates may assume we are anti-choice. If we are elderly, some may assume that reproductive justice isn't important to us. This is what happened to Phyllis Fairman, a long-time pro-choice activist and former MNRCRC board member, when she asked a question at a candidate forum at her retirement facility. Her question, submitted on a piece of paper, was: "What is your stance on abortion rights?" The candidate said, "I'm pro-life, and I am surprised that older citizens would be concerned about this issue." It's offensive to assume that older people would *not* be concerned with issues surrounding women's health. Phyllis' question was motivated by her work as a social worker in the 1940-1960's, when she saw too many women die because they did not have access to safe, legal abortions.

Please plan to participate in caucuses, candidate forums, debates, and fundraisers and let the candidates know that there is strong constituency for reproductive justice and religious freedom by asking the following questions:

Will you vote to expand access to family planning services for low-income women through the Title X national family planning program and Medicaid? A woman with low income is 4 times as likely to have an unintended pregnancy, 5 times as likely as have an unintended birth and 4 times more likely to have an abortion than a woman with higher income. Unintended pregnancy can perpetuate poverty, interrupt education and job opportunities and create family hardship. My faith underlies my commitment to equality and justice and inspires me to fight for accessible healthcare and intentional parenthood.

Will you vote to fund comprehensive medically accurate sexuality education instead of abstinence-only programs? The federal government has spent over \$1 billion on ineffective abstinence-only education programs that do not reduce teen sexual activity. There is no stream of funding dedicated to comprehensive sexuality education, which can reduce the risk of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease. 85% of Americans support comprehensive sexuality education, including a significant majority of people of all faiths.

Will you vote to require all hospitals receiving federal funding to offer emergency contraception (EC) to victims of rape? Up to 32,000 women become pregnant each year as a result of rape or incest. Timely access to emergency contraception could prevent the additional trauma of an unintended pregnancy. Yet, many hospitals refuse to provide or refer for EC, thereby imposing one religious perspective and denying access to legal medical care. As a person of faith, I want to keep medical care free from sectarian doctrine and protect the inviolability of conscience in making personal health care decisions.

Will you vote to ensure patient access to emergency contraception (EC) without delay? Emergency contraception can prevent unintended pregnancies when taken within 72 hours of sex. There are increasing numbers of pharmacist refusals to provide birth control, including EC. These refusals are based on personal beliefs, not on legitimate medical or professional concerns. They interfere with equal access to health care products and services and undermine the inherent dignity of an individual's health care decision.

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I am grateful to live in a community where an organization like the Minnesota Religious Coalition is working peacefully and prayerfully to reframe the abortion debate and create a strong pro-faith, pro-choice movement to advocate for reproductive justice for all of our daughters.

PASTORAL CARE FOR REPRODUCTIVE LOSS United Theological Seminary Tuesday, April 29, 9:00 am – 3:00 pm

Any loss, whether through miscarriage, infertility, adoption, or abortion, can carry with it a range of feelings, including grief, loneliness, regret, relief, and sadness. In this workshop we will learn and discuss ways of honoring people's real experiences of reproductive loss through our pastoral care and learn to create and use ritual in a counseling setting. The workshop is open to ministers, chaplains, and seminarians.

Facilitators: **Rev. Eily Marlow** has journeyed with people through both deep loss and great gladness through her work in the reproductive choice movement, the HIV/AIDS community, and with GLBT persons of faith. Marlow is the former executive director of the Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and is currently the Lilly Program associate at Macalester College.

Rev. Ann Romanczuk currently serves as co-chair of the Board of Directors of the Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. She works as a chaplain at Hennepin County Medical Center, where she frequently provides spiritual care to women and couples who have experienced miscarriage, stillbirth, or the death of a child. Romanczuk has been a longtime advocate for reproductive justice. She is also the adoptive mom of two young adult children.

Fee: \$35.00 (*lunch included*)

Students: \$10.00 (*lunch included*)

Registration deadline: Tuesday, April 22

To register: www.unitedseminary.edu/ce/index.asp#loss

New Office Assistant!

We are happy to welcome Kelly Henseler, who joined the MN Religious Coalition in October as our office assistant.

Kelly is a junior at the University of Minnesota, working toward her Bachelor's degree in English. After graduation, she is planning to pursue a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature.

Kelly is from Rosemount, Minnesota, and has attended Rosemount United Methodist Church since she was a child. She is

excited to be working with a pro-faith, pro-choice organization dedicated to empowering women and families everywhere.

Welcome, Kelly!



Voice for Choice is a publication of the [Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice](http://www.mnrsrc.org). If you would like your article or letter considered for our next newsletter, please e-mail Kate at kate@mnrsrc.org, and write "newsletter submission" in the subject line.

2008 Elections Continued

Will you vote to increase international funding for family planning and reproductive health services and to fight HIV/AIDS? Meeting the need for contraceptive services in developing countries would prevent 52 million unintended pregnancies annually and the deaths in childbirth of 1.5 million women. In 2006, there were over 4 million new cases of AIDS around the world. Only 24% of people who needed HIV treatment throughout the world had access to it. As a person of faith and a citizen of the world, I am committed to righting this injustice.

Decisions affecting the lives of women and families are made at all levels of government. Raise your voice and show the local and national candidates that there is a strong constituency for reproductive justice and religious freedom!

Upcoming Events

Pro-Choice Lobby Day – March 4

Join us at the Capitol in St. Paul for the 2008 Pro-Choice Lobby Day and raise your voice for choice! Please visit www.prochoicelobbyday.org for more information and to register for Lobby Day.

Coalition for Responsible Sex Ed – Youth Lobby Day – April 8 12:00 pm – 4:00 pm — State Capitol Great Hall and Rotunda

Youth and their parents will learn about the legislative process and issues surrounding comprehensive sexuality education and minors' consent. Please join us for this opportunity to learn about sex education issues, hear from advocates and legislators, and meet with the legislators from your district. For more information, contact Amy Kodet at MOAPPP at 651-644-1447 x17 or publicpolicyintern@moapp.org.

***Keeping It Real In Our Lives* Teen Youth Summit**

Youth involved in the sexuality education program *Keeping It Real* led the 3rd annual Teen Relationship Summit and Parent Adult Forum, *Healthy Relationships: “Keeping It Real In Our Lives”* on Saturday October 27, 2007 at Camphor Memorial United Methodist Church in St. Paul. Youth who had participated in *Keeping It Real* became leaders in their community, planning the summit, leading break-out sessions, and helping to spread the word about healthy relationships to over 100 youth and adults in their community.

The summit was co-sponsored by the Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and Camphor Memorial United Methodist Church. “It was a great opportunity for youth and adults to discuss sexuality and the components of a healthy relationship in a safe setting,” said Crystal Brown, the *Keeping It Real* Coordinator at MNRRCRC. “Youth facilitated their own sessions, so it really was a unique experience in which they were in charge of the conversation.”

Hildegard Richardson from the national Religious Coalition also led a workshop for the adult attendants about the Black Church Initiative’s *Breaking the Silence*, a faith-based sexuality education model developed to help congregations, parents, guardians, and clergy discuss sex and sexuality and assist teens in making healthy life choices. The model is designed to engage African American Christian Educators and congregations in a biblical, theological, and ethnological exploration of human sexuality.

If you are interested in learning more about *Keeping It Real* or *Breaking the Silence* or if you would like to participate in the upcoming male youth summit in March at Faith Kingdom Baptist Church in North Minneapolis, contact Crystal Brown at 612-230-3342 or crystal@mnrcc.org.

In the Student Spotlight

Abbie McMillan: Speaking Out for Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Accurate, holistic sexuality education helps young people to reduce their risk of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections and improve their decision-making skills and the quality of their relationships. Too often, however, youth are not receiving the comprehensive sexuality education that they need in order to make healthy choices for their lives. Fifteen-year-old Abbie McMillan is trying to change that.

A member of First Universalist Church of Minneapolis and an active participant in her youth group, Abbie first realized the importance of comprehensive sexuality education when her youth group participated in *Our Whole Lives*, a set of curricula developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ. Grounded in a holistic view of sexuality, *Our Whole Lives* provides not only facts about anatomy and human development, but helps participants clarify their values, build interpersonal skills, and understand the spiritual, emotional, and social aspects of sexuality.

“Going through *Our Whole Lives* made me realize what students in public schools were missing. Other teenagers my age are not getting the information they need to make healthy decisions about their bodies and their lives.”

Abbie’s belief that all young people deserve comprehensive sexuality education led her to the Sexuality Education Advocacy Training (SEAT) in Washington, D.C. in March, 2007 as part of a delegation from the Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. SEAT is an annual collaboration between the Unitarian Universalist Association, the United Church of Christ and Advocates for Youth that brings together youth, young adults, and adult allies to discuss sex-ed as a religious issue and discuss how it impacts young people, GLBT people and people of color.

“Participating in SEAT was such an empowering experience for me. I learned that even the most stubborn people with set values and beliefs can learn to look at the world from a different perspective if they take the time to really listen to the ideas of another person,” said Abbie. “The trip helped me become more open minded about controversial topics and made me conquer the fear of talking about difficult issues.”

When it comes to talking about comprehensive sexuality education, Abbie is, indeed, fearless. She spoke at Pro-Choice Lobby Day in 2007, advocating for comprehensive sex education, and then went on to apply for an internship at Pro-Choice Resources in Minneapolis through Unity Summer, a program hosted by First Unitarian Society that places youth in social justice organizations. Abbie also became involved with Advocates for Youth and went to Washington D.C. again last fall as part of the Urban Retreat, an annual training and networking session that brings together youth activists and peer educators, ages 13 to 24, from across the country, helping them develop their leadership and advocacy skills. “It was really exciting,” said Abbie. “I was able to lobby for comprehensive sex ed with teens from all 50 states. Now I have a network of activist friends all over the country.”

Abbie’s abilities as an advocate for comprehensive sex ed continue to grow. This year, her youth group chose sexuality education as its social justice issue and will be leading a one-day sexuality education event in May, and through the Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, Abbie will be participating in the Coalition for Responsible Sex Ed Youth Lobby Day on April 8.

“I’m also working on getting information about sexuality education into my high school, setting up activities, and meeting with administrators,” said Abbie. “If young people don’t have the information they need about keeping their bodies safe, they won’t have a sense of direction when the time comes to make life-changing decisions. I’ve heard of and seen too many people who have made bad choices with results that last a lifetime. Young people deserve to know how to have safe relationships, safe sex, and make healthy choices.”

Thank you, Abbie, for your dedication and advocacy efforts to make comprehensive sexuality education available to all Minnesota youth! If you’d like more information about the Coalition for Responsible Sex Ed Youth Lobby Day, visit our website at www.mnrcc.org/ue.html.



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