

***THE PROCHOICE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY  
MAY BE THE FUTURE OF REPRODUCTIVE  
RIGHTS, ACCESS, AND JUSTICE***

**Political Research Associates  
SEPTEMBER 2020**





Political Research Associates is a social justice think tank devoted to supporting movements that are building a more just and inclusive democratic society. We expose movements, institutions, and ideologies that undermine human rights.

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ISBN-13: 978-0-915987-34-4

The Prochoice Religious Community May Be the Future of Reproductive Rights, Access, and Justice, Political Research Associates, September 2020.

Cover image from Texas Freedom Network/Just Texas

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**An Essay**

**By Frederick Clarkson**

*“No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.”*  
*Matthew 5:15 NRSV*

There is a vast prochoice religious community in the United States that could provide the moral, cultural, and political clout to reverse current antiabortion policy trends in the United States. Most, but not all, of this demographic are Christians and Jews. There are also deeply considered, theologically acceptable, prochoice positions and, therefore, prochoice people and institutions within all of major world religious traditions present in the United States, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Chinese traditions.<sup>1</sup> Taken together, they have vast resources, institutional capacity, historic and central roles in many towns and cities, and cadres of well-educated leaders at every level—from national denominational offices to local congregational leaders, current and retired.

This cohort is often measured by reputable pollsters and may actually comprise the majority or near majority of the religious community. Nevertheless, it is not well identified or sought out by the organized prochoice community, the media, and elected officials. What’s more, this wide and diverse constituency is insufficiently organized by the *prochoice religious community itself*. But it could be.

This essay will show that this demographic, and the institutions and traditions that inform it, may be the best hope for restoring and sustaining abortion rights, access, and justice in the United States at a time when the Christian Right and its allies in state and federal government are undermining and seeking to eliminate them.

The Christian Right is indeed a well-organized minority that has achieved the heights of political power in the United States, but it could be dethroned. There may be a variety of ways to do this, but it stands to reason that any way forward ought to involve the prochoice religious community.

First, a word about terms: The term *prochoice* is admittedly used broadly, and it is inadequate for many reasons, a few of which are mentioned below. But being for or against choice to varying degrees is how most of the major religious bodies frame their positions, and it is how most polling is framed. So, it is necessary for the purposes of this essay.

A key limitation, as Presbyterian theologian Rebecca Todd Peters says in her 2018 book *Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice*, is that it creates a false

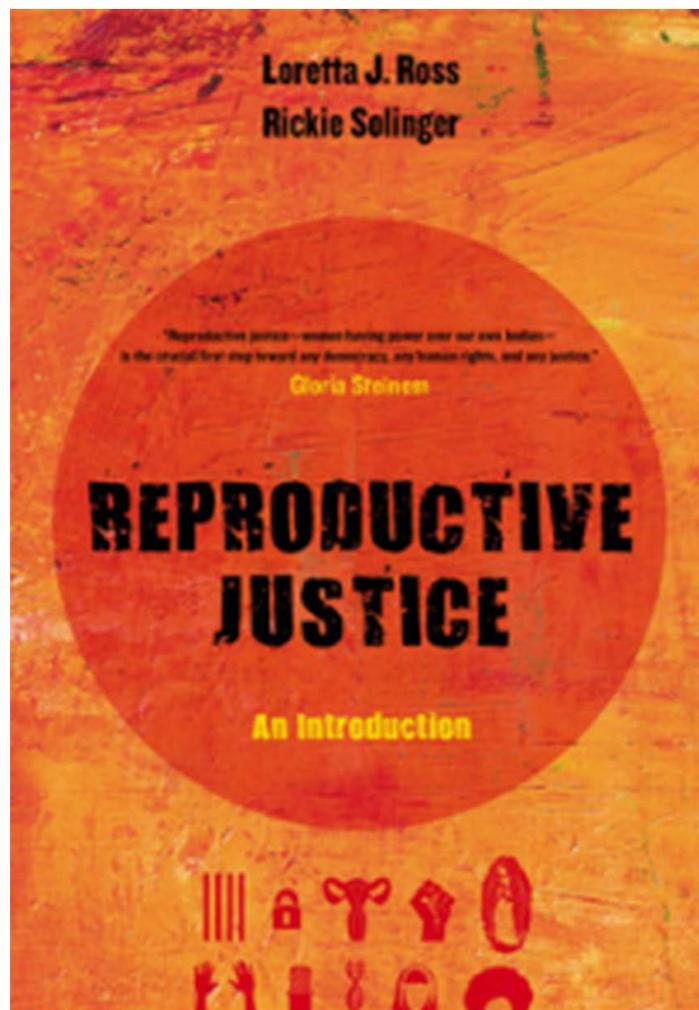
binary between prochoice and prolife when most people are both. Prolife in the sense that whatever their view, they recognize that whether or not to have a child is a moral decision, but prochoice in the sense that they also believe that abortion should be legal.<sup>2</sup>

Second, the broader view of reproductive justice is gaining traction in the religious community. A leading reproductive justice group, SisterSong, defines it as “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.”<sup>3</sup> The reproductive justice framework also includes, as Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger explained in their book, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*, the idea that individuals do not have the ability to make choices on equal terms, when factoring in economics as well as matters of family and community and a variety of life responsibilities.<sup>4</sup>

Peters told journalist Stephanie Russell-Kraft that embracing the idea of reproductive justice contextualizes rather than isolates abortion, thus providing what she calls a counter-narrative or a counter-framework.

“The three principles that the movement identifies are the right not to have a child, the right to have a child, and the right to parent the children that we have. I think what is so powerful about that framework is that it recognizes that the issue is about parenting and families and motherhood, and the right not to be a mother, and the right to be a mother, and the right to raise our children in healthy and safe environments,” Peters said. “A reproductive-justice framework highlights the difficulties women face when they do have children, in raising those children in a country that tolerates obscene levels of poverty, obscene levels of racism and damage to vulnerable children and families.”<sup>5</sup>

Cherisse Scott, the CEO and founder of SisterReach in Memphis, Tennessee,<sup>6</sup> avers that based on her work as an organizer in the religious community generally and African American Christian communities in particular, discussing anything to do with reproductive matters, no matter what terms are used, can be a “barrier.” She says that navigating and seeking to enhance people’s levels of comfort in talking about sex, reproductive health,



and sexuality can be sensitive, particularly in southern areas of the country and small, rural towns where everyone knows everyone and may even attend the same church.

Still, Scott says that among the various iterations of the “Christian Black Church,” some are more “conservative at least in doctrine” than others. However, she says that research conducted by In Our Own Voice: National Black Women’s Reproductive Justice Agenda shows that Black women who “identify as Christian” nevertheless “align themselves with being able to make health decisions without hindrance.”

Because this is so, Scott suggests that there may be a need for a “strategy within a strategy” for bringing people along in ways that make the most sense for particular communities, so that no one is marginalized or left behind.<sup>7</sup>

We should also underscore that access to reproductive health care has both practical and legal implications, often impinging on choice, since, for example, even when abortion is legal, if abortion care is not available, the right to choose is rendered meaningless. In fact, making choice meaningless by making it inaccessible has been the stated antiabortion strategy of most of the Christian Right since the late 1990s.<sup>8</sup> This strategy has been and continues to be quite successful.<sup>9</sup> What’s more, lack of access to reproductive health care disproportionately affects people who are poor, people who are rural, people who are immigrants, and people of color.

**LACK OF ACCESS TO REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CARE DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTS WOMEN WHO ARE POOR, WOMEN WHO ARE RURAL, WOMEN WHO ARE IMMIGRANTS, AND WOMEN OF COLOR.**

This essay is not intended to resolve all these matters so much as to suggest that there are ways forward for a prochoice religious community that has yet to be fully engaged and organized. It is remarkable that this has not already happened, because it brings a history of deeply considered and evolving moral thought to the table, as well as leaders, institutions, and the legitimacy that comes from serving as central institutions both in communities and, more broadly, in American history.

The reality that vast numbers of religious people are prochoice may be a revelation to those who have been conditioned by the false narrative that people of faith—almost by definition—oppose abortion. The prochoice religious community needs to dismantle the false narrative that faith = antiabortion to offer the hope and possibility of meaningful, even powerfully fresh cultural and political visions, organizations, and actions. That

the vast prochoice religious community is under-recognized, under-identified, and under-organized is both the challenge and the opportunity. Taking on this and other false narratives is the first task of this essay, before sharing lessons from a clear-eyed view of the Christian Right about how the religious pro-choice community might organize its power post-Roe.

While this essay affords us an opportunity to cast a fresh eye toward a better future, it does not pretend to satisfy every concern. There are no panaceas for issues decades or longer in the making. But if it helps us to better consider how we got to where we are and to imagine a better way forward, it will have done its job.

## THE HISTORY AND THE ARGUMENT

The prochoice religious community has deep roots and a dramatic story in the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion (CCS). Initially comprising Protestant ministers and Jewish rabbis, its services were featured in a front-page story in *The New York Times* in May 1967.<sup>10</sup> Many of these clergy had been active in the Civil Rights Movement and, writes Kira Schlesinger in *Pro-Choice and Christian: Reconciling Faith, Politics, and Justice*, they “connected their theological positions on race and dignity to their commitment to helping women and their families gain safe access to abortion.”<sup>11</sup>

CCS was the largest abortion referral service in the United States before *Roe v. Wade*, eventually involving about 2,000 religious leaders who, in addition to helping people obtain safe abortions in the United States and abroad, lobbied for the repeal of abortion laws. CCS members established their own clinics beginning in 1970 after abortion laws were repealed in several states.<sup>12</sup>

The founders of CCS focused more on the pastoral obligation to help people access safe, affordable abortions than the question of morality. The practical realities for people in need of appropriate abortion care were evident in the 1960s as thousands of people—disproportionately poor

CLERGYMEN OFFER ABORTION ADVICE  
By EDWARD B. FISKE The New York Times  
New York Times (1857-Current file); May 22, 1967; Historical New York Times with Index  
pg. 1

# CLERGYMEN OFFER ABORTION ADVICE

21 Ministers and Rabbis  
Form New Group—Will  
Propose Alternatives

By EDWARD B. FISKE

Twenty-one Protestant ministers and rabbis in New York City have announced the establishment of a Clergymen's Consultation Service on Abortion to assist women seeking abortions.

The Rev. Howard R. Moody, spokesman for the group, said that its services, which begin

women of color in New York City alone—were dying annually from unsafe abortions.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, people of greater means were able to travel to find ways to get legal abortions, even under the limited circumstances available under the law in New York at the time.<sup>14</sup>

One woman who saw the *New York Times* story about CCS contacted them at the Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan, where it was just getting started. They arranged an appointment for her with a doctor in Washington, DC. She took the bus alone. “I don’t know what I would have done without those contacts at Judson Memorial,” she told scholar Gillian Frank. “I think maybe their goal was to reach more impoverished people than I was, but I was just as desperate as any of those people would have been.” She added, “Later I had two healthy beautiful children and a marriage that’s been excellent, and I always felt that this fetus was a potential life, but I had, every month, the potential for life. And if I had gone forward with that pregnancy, the children I have now would not have come to be.”<sup>15</sup>

The historic role of CCS, and the tradition and function of churches as a sanctuary from oppressive societies and governments, may provide a model for a future in which *Roe v. Wade* is overturned and criminalization of abortion resumes in a number of states. That time is not yet, but the realities of abortion before and since *Roe*, and the frontline role of clergy, have all occurred within living memory. This provides a possible model for difficult times to come, including drawing on the wisdom and experience of women, clergy, and medical professionals.

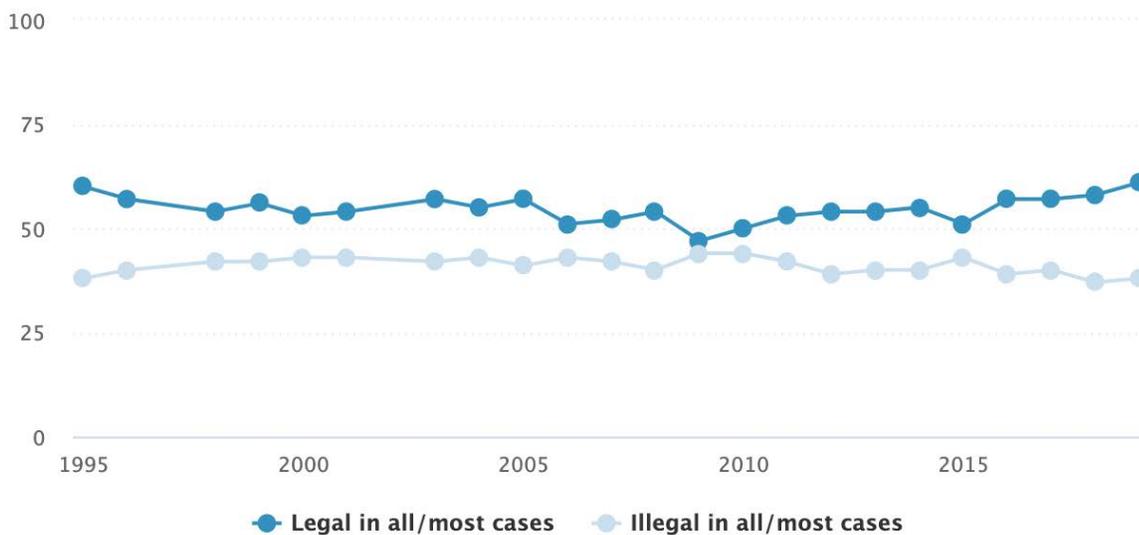
Although the current leadership and engagement of progressive clergy and prochoice religious activists does not get much press coverage, that does not change the fact that it has continued, broadened, and deepened since the era of the CCS. For



example, the Religious Institute, a think tank headquartered in Bridgeport, Connecticut, before closing in 2020, had some 15,000 religious leaders in its network and had consulted over the past decade with seminaries from a variety of traditions to help prepare young seminarians for the real world of counseling. These clergy are “first responders” that many turn to in a time of personal crisis.<sup>16</sup> The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) and Catholics for Choice have also become prominent in state and Washington policy circles.

All of this is especially significant in light of the irrefutable fact that most Americans are prochoice. A long-term Pew study of views on abortion between 1995 and 2019 found that “public support for legal abortion remains as high as it has been in two decades of polling. Currently, 61% say abortion should be legal in all or most cases, while 38% say it should be illegal in all or most cases.”<sup>17</sup> Pew and other reputable pollsters show increasing support for abortion rights.<sup>18</sup>

*% of U.S. adults who say abortion should be legal/illegal (1995-2019)*



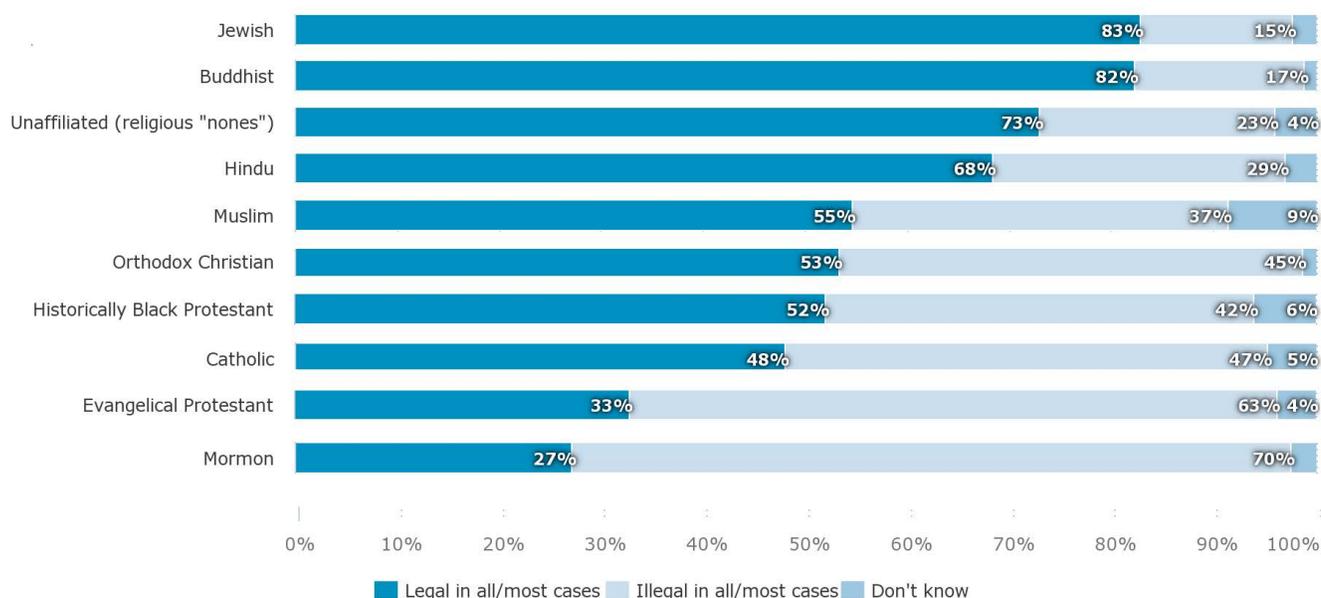
This undermines the false narrative that religious people necessarily oppose abortion access. The Pew data also show that a majority or near majority of the religious community in the United States is prochoice, while the Roman Catholic Church, by far the largest Christian group in the United States, is institutionally opposed to abortion in all instances. However, even among that religious community, Pew reported in 2019 that 56% of rank-and-file Catholics believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Moreover, while some mainline Protestant denominations are prochoice, some are not, and others have no position. Pew found that 60% of “White Mainline Protestants”

and 64% of “Black Protestants” believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.<sup>19</sup> Pew data also show that significant minorities of large antiabortion religious groupings, such as Mormons and White evangelicals, are also prochoice.

The chart below, based on the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study, shows prochoice majorities or near majorities in every category measured—except for evangelicals and Mormons, which also have significant prochoice minorities. While the numbers vary from year to year, the basic proportions do not.

### Views about abortion by religious group

*% of adults who say abortion should be...*



PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Polling shows that support for reproductive rights in the U.S. religious community is broader and deeper than many might think. But polls alone cannot help organizers find the people who will help to build a movement. Fortunately, beyond the numbers, there are historic institutions and well-informed advocacy groups whose leaders and members have played important roles in advancing reproductive rights over the past half-century or so. These institutions include (but are not limited to) the leading denominations of mainline Protestantism as well as most of organized Judaism. It could make a profound difference to know which prochoice religious institutions exist, clarifying the role of other religious organizations, finding the right people within them, and assessing their respective capacities for defending and advancing reproductive rights, access, and justice.<sup>20</sup> The sheer numbers, profound cultural resonance, and vast institutional infrastructure of these institutions and

the communities they serve suggests great hope and possibility for a resurgent prochoice religious community of historic consequence.

## **THE CHALLENGE AND THE OPPORTUNITY**

Once one shakes off the narrative that religious Americans are necessarily opposed to abortion, the political implications are clear. The Christian Right, made up of conservative Roman Catholics and evangelicals, is outnumbered by the growing majority of prochoice religious and nonreligious Americans.

A coherent, sustained political and cultural effort to identify and organize explicitly prochoice religious voters and to train and deploy electoral activists in a systematic way would be a dramatic departure from the way that the prochoice religious community has operated to date, and it would compel changes in its relationship to both allies and adversaries. It would not just be novel, but would arguably be transformational in the history of American politics.

Getting to this point of departure would require recognizing the strengths of the historically powerful and well-organized minority we call the Christian Right. These strengths include the decision of key partners in the antiabortion cause to set aside differences in the name of what antiabortion evangelical theologian Francis Schaeffer called “cobelligerence”; the depth and breadth of its organizational capacity, the maturity of its strategy; the experience of its political practitioners; and its alliance with the Republican Party in such matters as gerrymandering and voter suppression.

This can be challenging because there is a tangle of rationalizations that work to preserve status quo thinking. For example, some believe the growing Latinx demographic will somehow organically counter the conservative White evangelicals and Roman Catholics that comprise the Christian Right. Polling by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) in 2019, however, should give pause to such optimism.<sup>21</sup>

PRRI reports that majorities of all religiously affiliated Hispanics say abortion should be illegal in most or all cases. Opposition is stronger among Hispanic Protestants (58%) than among Hispanic Catholics (52%) and rises to 63% among Protestant evangelicals.

**A COHERENT, SUSTAINED POLITICAL AND CULTURAL EFFORT TO IDENTIFY AND ORGANIZE EXPLICITLY PROCHOICE RELIGIOUS VOTERS WOULD NOT JUST BE NOVEL, BUT WOULD ARGUABLY BE TRANSFORMATIONAL IN THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN POLITICS.**

Among younger Hispanic Protestants, just 48% of Generation Z (ages 18–24) and 27% of Millennials (ages 25–29) support legal abortion. The numbers are similar among Hispanic Catholics, of which 55% of Gen Z and only 38% of Millennials support legal abortion.

Thus, the trend is not particularly promising. This may be in part because the Christian Right has long sustained antiabortion organizing efforts in these communities, notably via the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC), an evangelical organization headed by Samuel Rodriguez and based in Sacramento, California.<sup>22</sup>

The creation of a sustainable prochoice religious movement, perhaps marked by a number of distinct and independent institutions or organizations that are not defined by the ups-and-downs of the electoral cycle or by the fortunes of individual politicians, or the tactical decisions of political parties, would be not just a departure, but also a difficult journey. Daniel Schultz, a minister in the United Church of Christ and author of *Changing the Script: An Authentically Faithful and Authentically Progressive Political Theology for the 21st Century*, said this could be messy, because democracy itself is messy. There is no “transcendent” path to social change, he insists. “Until the Kingdom come, those who want to create and sustain social change are stuck with morally ambiguous involvement in the world of partisan politics.”<sup>23</sup>

Wading into the messiness of democracy would mean making a broad assessment of the political landscape with an eye to the opportunities and obstacles.

A much-ignored part of the political landscape is that 100 million eligible voters did not participate in the 2016 election. This number represents those who were registered but did not vote combined with those who could have voted, but were not registered.<sup>24</sup> The antiabortion Christian Right, however, is acutely aware of this large pool of potential supporters—and opponents—and over the last 40 years has aggressively sought to identify those most likely to be sympathetic and target them for registration, education, and electoral participation. The prochoice religious community has not.

“We projected that there would be potentially as many as 50 million Christians who ... would stay on the sideline,” Jason Yates, CEO of My Faith Votes, a Christian Right voter engagement organization, said in 2016. “That is an overwhelming number and a huge amount of influence. So, we’re doing a number of things to really motivate and equip Christians to vote in these midterm elections.” Yates said that there are about 90 million evangelical Christians eligible to vote and between

25 million and 35 million who regularly do not.<sup>25</sup>

The Family Research Council, the premier political organization of the Christian Right with affiliates in 35 states, sustains projects across the election cycle to identify and develop their voter pool and turn their people out in election years.<sup>26</sup>

Not satisfied with their successes of the past decade—notably the election of Donald Trump—these groups continue to refine their methods. Christian Right pollster and strategist George Barna said that it is risky to assume that registering new voters in theologically conservative churches will necessarily net ideologically conservative voters. “Future registration efforts,” he said, “need to be carefully orchestrated to prevent adding numbers to the ‘other side.’”<sup>27</sup>

Barna’s point about taking care whom to register and activate is supported by a study of nonvoters by the Knight Foundation that found that most nonvoters are prochoice. The nearly 100 million eligible Americans who did not cast a vote for president in 2016 represented 43% of the eligible voting-age population. This is a sizeable minority whose voices went unheard. This happened, in part, because political groups, pollsters, and parties tend to focus most of their attention on already registered and “likely” voters. As a result, relatively little is known about those with a history of nonvoting. While the Knight study did not focus on religious affiliation, it did find that of 12,000 “chronic non-voters,” a clear majority—56%—believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases. The number of supporters rises to 63% among young people ages 18–24.<sup>28</sup>

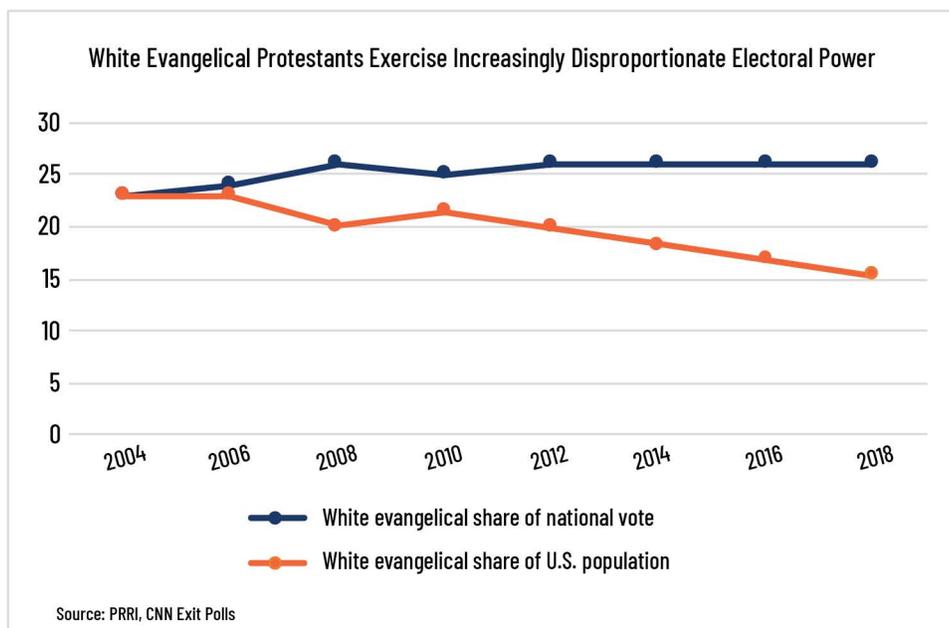
Still, it is important to note that a Pew study of “voting-eligible non-voters” in 2016 came to different conclusions about the composition of this group. While Knight found little demographic difference between the voting and nonvoting public, Pew reported “striking demographic differences” and “significant political differences as well.” “[N]onvoters were more likely to be younger, less educated, less affluent and nonwhite. And nonvoters were much more Democratic.”<sup>29</sup> The discrepancy in the findings of these major studies underscores that while nonvoters are generally not well understood, there is nevertheless compelling data that suggest that a majority is prochoice, regardless of religious views. It also illuminates why Barna advises the Christian Right to seek nonvoters carefully—to avoid making unforced errors in something as

**IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSCORE THAT THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT MAKES EXTRAORDINARY EFFORTS TO FIND VOTERS LIKELY TO BE SYMPATHETIC TO THEIR CAUSE, WHILE THE PROCHOICE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY DOES NOT.**

basic as voter registration. Once again, it is important to underscore that the Christian Right makes extraordinary efforts to find voters likely to be sympathetic to their cause,<sup>30</sup> while the prochoice religious community does not.

Meanwhile, the Christian Right's approach to the long game of electoral power politics has resulted in the Christian Right minority, led by White evangelical Protestants, exercising electoral power vastly disproportionate to their numbers. From 2006 to 2018, the White evangelical Protestant share of the national vote increased from 23% to a steady 26%, even while its share of the population declined from 23% to 15%.<sup>31</sup>

## THE POWER IS NOT IN THE POLLS; IT'S IN THE ORGANIZING



There is no analogous organizing on the moderate-to-liberal/left part of Roman Catholic or Protestant Christianity—or any other elements of the religious community—with the broad political and electoral vision and ongoing development of related skills and practices that define the Christian Right.

On the plus side, the million-member United Church of Christ maintains a voter education program around its many issues, which includes but does not necessarily prioritize reproductive justice. They offer an elections tool kit to guide congregations in how to conduct voter registration drives and candidate fora without running afoul of the nonprofit tax laws.<sup>32</sup> Likewise Reform Judaism has sought to mobilize their voters (with an aim to 100% voter participation in 2020), combat voter suppression, and engage student voters—but are not highlighting issues.<sup>33</sup> And Interfaith Alliance (although it has no position on abortion) produced a helpful guide for voters, churches, and what candidates for public office need to know about religious diversity for the 2020 elections.<sup>34</sup> These piecemeal approaches, however, highlight the difference with the Christian Right's comprehensive, long-term approach to building for political power.

## THE PARACHURCH VIEW

Parachurch ministries within modern evangelicalism helped make what we now know as the Christian Right possible, and there are lessons to be learned from them. These are trans-denominational organizations with a religious mission that operate outside of, but not necessarily in conflict with, and often in cooperation with denominations. Among the best-known are Youth for Christ, Focus on the Family, Youth with a Mission, and Campus Crusade for Christ (now rebranded as Cru).<sup>35</sup> Such organizations helped pave the way for political parachurch organizations such as the Moral Majority led by Jerry Falwell Sr. and later the Christian Coalition led by Pat Robertson.

These organizations included political and not just religious elements, and in the case of Focus on the Family, they created a national network of public policy and electorally focused organizations, now known as the Family Policy Alliance. The Alliance operates in three dozen states, and its members are also affiliated with the Family Research Council and the legal network, Alliance Defending Freedom.<sup>36</sup> Later parachurch organizations brought a maturation of the concept to meet contemporary life, notably the Promise Keepers. This group holds a deeply political vision while maintaining an (arguably disingenuous) public stance of being apolitical.

A 2019 report by Political Research Associates, *Playing the Long Game: How the Christian Right Build Capacity to Undo Roe State by State*, observed, “Creating organizational infrastructure around a long-term vision of the future was necessary to launch the kinds of political assaults on government and governmental policies that are currently shocking the system.”<sup>37</sup>

It may be surprising to some that parachurch organizations are not always led by clergy. For example, James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, was a pediatric psychologist, and Bill McCartney, founder of Promise Keepers, was a college football coach. Clergy are not always the obvious or natural leaders for large organizations that are not religious denominations. But there are exceptions. Another interesting characteristic is that these and other parachurch organizations draw on individual members of conservative denominations, while remaining entirely separate from them.

Parachurch organizations evangelized, recruited, and trained people in theologies, skills, and ecumenical organizing activities that denominations could or would not. They paved the way for the more aggressive political operations that have emerged,

matured, and gained real political power in recent decades.

The multi-faith, multiracial Poor People's Campaign led by Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, has the stirrings of a possible political movement outside of traditional religious denominations. It's Mobilizing, Organizing, Registering, and Educating (M.O.R.E.) project planned three stops in 22 states between September 2019 and June 2020<sup>38</sup> before it went online due to the COVID-19 crisis. Beginning in September 2020, the Campaign also sought to turn out 1,000,000 voters for the November election.<sup>39</sup>

There may be much to be learned from this initiative even though reproductive rights, access, and justice are not a formal focus. Instead (as discussed below), the Campaign argues that the Christian Right and the antiabortion movement use the issue to mask a racial and economic agenda that they say is inconsistent with Christian teaching and is undermining democracy.<sup>40</sup>

That said, the multi-faith and multiracial nature of the prochoice community makes organizing generally more complicated than for the Christian Right. For example, the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), housed at Harvard University, found Republicans are both racially and religiously more homogeneous than Democrats. The study found that 70% of Republican primary voters in 2016 were White Christians, while Democratic voters were much more diverse: 31% were White Christians, 22% were non-White Christians, and 12% belonged to non-Christian religious groups (Jews, Muslims, Hindus, etc.) or said that their religious affiliation was "something else."<sup>41</sup> This reality underscores how greater religious diversity means promoting greater religious literacy and a deeper grounding in historic notions of religious freedom, religious pluralism, and separation of church and state. Although it may sometimes be challenging, it is a necessity, not an option.

**HEY PAVED THE WAY FOR THE MORE AGGRESSIVE POLITICAL OPERATIONS THAT HAVE EMERGED, MATURED, AND GAINED REAL POLITICAL POWER IN RECENT DECADES.**

## **AVOIDING FALSE EQUIVALENCES**

It is important not to engage in false equivalences between the Christian Right and the Religious Left. The visibility of a few activists and liberal politicians who happen to be articulate about the way that they link their faith to their values and political agenda is not necessarily evidence of a Religious Left (some prominent commentary notwithstanding). Neither is the

existence of some politically active liberal religious leaders necessarily evidence of a Religious Left. There have always been politically progressive people who are religious and religious people who happen to be progressive. But that is not the same thing as having a large-scale, sustained, well-resourced, and perennially renewed religious and political movement analogous to the Christian Right.<sup>42</sup>

Some may argue that the Religious Left is differently organized and operates differently than the Christian Right. To whatever extent that may be true, it then must also be true that this Religious Left has been overwhelmed at almost every juncture by the sheer organizing capacity and electoral power of the Christian Right, and it needs to reconsider its approach. This is certainly true on matters of reproductive rights, access, and justice.

But it does not have to be this way.

What is perennially ballyhooed as an emergent Religious Left by some media, pundits, and interest groups is not necessarily prochoice.<sup>43</sup> In fact, pro-choice religious people and their concerns have been largely marginalized in public life generally and the electoral arena in particular.

One remarkable example of this played out at the 2020 Democratic National Convention. Although reproductive choice and justice received the requisite mentions one would expect from an officially prochoice party, there was nothing from an explicitly pro-choice religious perspective. However, Fr. James Martin, a liberal Jesuit priest, closed the convention with a prayer in which he asked God to “[o]pen our hearts to those most in need.” On his list was “[t]he unborn child in the womb.”<sup>44</sup>

Three days later, Roman Catholic Cardinal Timothy Dolan opened the Republican National Convention with a prayer in which he also listed those for whom we must pray, including “the innocent life of the baby in the womb.”<sup>45</sup> Speakers throughout the RNC linked their antiabortion views with their vision of God and country.

While the GOP has sought to solidify its base, the Democrats chase antiabortion religious voters on the margins, and both

**THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN POLITICALLY PROGRESSIVE PEOPLE WHO ARE RELIGIOUS AND RELIGIOUS PEOPLE WHO HAPPEN TO BE PROGRESSIVE. BUT THAT IS NOT THE SAME THING AS HAVING A LARGE-SCALE, SUSTAINED, WELL-RESOURCED, AND PERENNIALY RENEWED RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL MOVEMENT ANALOGOUS TO THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT.**

parties ignore the vast prochoice religious community in the United States.

Beyond the parties, prochoice religious people may be working alongside those with whom they agree on such matters as immigrant, criminal, and racial justice—but have to set aside matters of reproductive choice and justice and work on those things elsewhere, in some other way.

A decade ago, Carlton W. Veazey, an African American Baptist minister and then-president of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), highlighted this problem: “A Religious Left that is unwaveringly committed to protecting religious freedom and enabling religious pluralism to flourish,” he wrote, “should speak with one voice against all attempts to violate church/state separation, including in areas of reproductive decision making.”<sup>46</sup>

“The current and prospective Religious Left faces a significant challenge,” Veazey added, “in how and even, for some, whether to address reproductive justice.” He posed a choice that remains as true today as it was then: “The options are clear. We can continue to give lip service to the issues of reproductive justice, rejecting these issues as too divisive. Or we can directly address them because they are of the most profound concern to women and men throughout the world.”<sup>47</sup>

A prospective Religious Left, or sectors of a Religious Left with unambiguous views on reproductive rights, access, and justice, need not ape the structure and methods of the Christian Right—although it could probably take some lessons from it.<sup>48</sup> Whatever organizations it might develop would need to be consistent with its own values in its organization and methods. Some such organizations might be affinity groups within or outside of denominations. They might be ecumenical or multi-faith. They may be local, regional, or national. They might even be loosely modeled on evangelical parachurch organizations. There may be no right way or wrong way, except to begin. (See strategic considerations, below.)

Meanwhile, there may be a historic shift underway among some progressive evangelicals. The Poor People’s Campaign, a contemporary revival of the Poor People’s March on Washington, launched by Martin Luther King Jr. prior to his assassination, does not have a position on abortion. However, its leaders argue that the antiabortion politics of the Christian Right are

**WHILE THE GOP HAS SOUGHT TO SOLIDIFY ITS BASE, THE DEMOCRATS CHASE ANTIABORTION RELIGIOUS VOTERS ON THE MARGINS, AND BOTH PARTIES IGNORE THE VAST PROCHOICE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY IN THE UNITED STATES.**

part of a long-term effort to sustain White supremacy as well as social and economic injustice in the United States.<sup>49</sup> Campaign co-chair Rev. Barber says, “You know where they actually started? They actually started being against desegregation and when that became unpopular, they changed the language to be about abortion.”<sup>50</sup> Author Katherine Stewart agrees, and in her 2020 book, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, she details the way that abortion was developed as a rallying issue for the nascent Christian Right in the 1970s, partly out of a recognition that old-time racial politics was no longer going to work.<sup>51</sup> Noting that the 2020 March for Life featured Donald Trump—the first president to address the event—the Campaign’s Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove wrote, “The ‘pro-life’ movement is killing democracy in America.”<sup>52</sup>

The shift in the view of the Poor People’s Campaign is one, but far from the only, way that the prochoice religious community, like the rest of the prochoice population, is ideologically more diverse than anything that would fit neatly into a Religious Left.

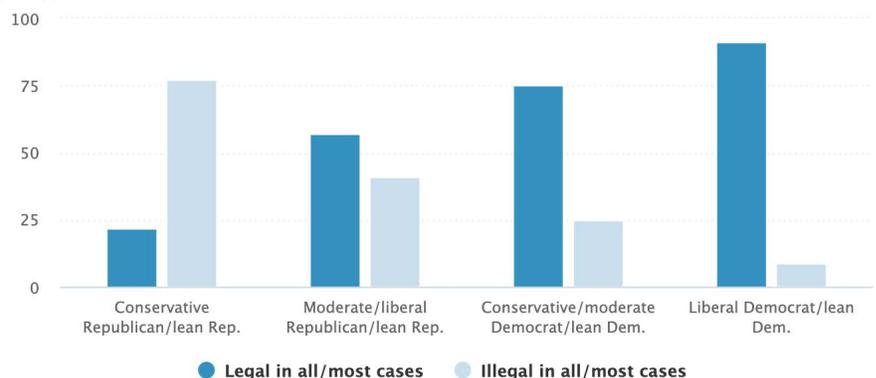
Therefore, for purposes of building a prochoice religious movement of any kind, it is important to note that a wide swath of the prochoice community is not necessarily progressive. Many are moderate, conservative, or libertarian. Pew reported in 2019:

*Conservative Republicans and Republican leaners are far more likely to say abortion should be illegal in all or most cases than to say that it should be legal (77% vs. 22%). Among moderate and liberal Republicans, 57% say abortion should be legal, while 41% say it should be illegal.*

*The vast majority of liberal Democrats and Democratic leaners support legal abortion (91%), as do three-quarters of conservative and moderate Democrats (75%).<sup>53</sup>*

The implications of this are important, as the various elements of the prochoice religious community look to one another to figure out how to achieve their common purposes, rather than looking first to opponents in search of elusive “common ground.”

*% of U.S. adults who say abortion should be legal/illegal, by party ideology (2019)*



Indeed, the conversations that most need to take place are within the prochoice religious community itself. One effort to realign the moral narrative without having to capitulate to antiabortionism in the name of common ground is underway in Texas. Sonja Miller of the Just Texas project of the Texas Freedom Network says that antiabortionism is “actually not the majority opinion; it’s the loudest, most dominant voice. So it’s absolutely essential that people of faith who fully affirm women accessing their own moral agency and making their own decisions step up and speak out affirming that.” Just Texas is designating “Reproductive Freedom Congregations” in the state. They report that twenty-five congregations have received the designation as of August 2020, with more in development.<sup>54</sup> Similar projects are underway in several other states as well.

Since there is real ideological (and not just religious) diversity in the prochoice religious community, one of the lessons is, as Jean Hardisty and Deepak Bhargava said in their influential 2005 essay, “Wrong About the Right,”

*We ought to tolerate a diversity of views and think strategically about how to align them to common purpose rather than seek a homogeneity we falsely ascribe to conservatives.*<sup>55</sup>

## **DON'T GET BURIED UNDER COMMON GROUND**

The problem of the marginalization of reproductive rights, access, and justice is illuminated by election-year efforts by the Democratic Party and related interest groups that are not as inclusive as they may appear.<sup>56</sup>

One faith outreach effort in 2020 has gone so far as to say it is “teaching Democrats how to speak evangelical”—as if evangelicals were the only, or at least the most important, religious demographic worth reaching.<sup>57</sup> The initiative echoes the past when it argues that Democrats should focus their message to evangelicals on efforts to reduce the number of abortions rather than criminalization of abortion.<sup>58</sup> This is the same argument that antiabortion figures in the Democratic Party have been making since at least the 2008 election, with little to show for it.

The reason for this failure may be that it is a funhouse mirror image of the central strategy of the antiabortion movement since the 1990s. This is when it began to focus on legislative efforts intended to reduce the number of abortions by restricting access to abortion services<sup>59</sup>—while ignoring or opposing the things that actually do so, such as sex education and access to contraception and reproductive health services. The Christian

Right's incremental approach to shrinking access to abortion services has led to numerous restrictions in the states, particularly since the Republican landslide of 2010, which created anti-abortion legislative majorities in many states.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, the abortion-reduction argument fell flat in the Democratic Party.

Continuing and compounding this problem is that those Democrats looking to get a bigger slice of the pie of religious voters in election years are not necessarily looking for prochoice voters. This is particularly so since "faith" became so conflated with "White evangelicals" and "White Catholics." Democratic strategists have been targeting them, with little success. The values and programmatic ideas related to reproductive rights, access, and justice are often downplayed out of fear of alienating ostensibly "gettable" members of these groups.

Daniel Schultz wrote, "trying to make the Democratic Party more 'faith friendly' in order to draw in 'persuadable' social conservatives is, frankly, a waste of resources ... there is no need to water down the identity of a nascent Religious Left by soft-peddling core social beliefs in order to reach swing voters."<sup>61</sup>

Schultz's point is important, in part because there are few sustained efforts to increase the size of the electoral pie by registering and engaging voters across the election cycle, let alone identifying, registering, and mobilizing a specifically pro-choice religious electorate.<sup>62</sup>

"A truly *progressive* Religious Left will need to stand its ground on abortion," Schultz has also written. "A truly *faithful* movement will need to seek hope and freedom for women beyond medicalized regulation of their bodies. Only when we understand that women must be empowered as a principled matter of justice will we be able to break new ground on this social, political, and religious dead zone."<sup>63</sup>

In the religious community, there has been a temptation and a tendency to seek common ground with opponents. As worthy as those conversations may be, of far greater importance to the future of reproductive rights, access, and justice are conversations among those who already agree that when to have a child or terminate a pregnancy is a moral choice that people make all the time, taking into consideration their life situation and the needs of their current and future families. Most of the world's major religious traditions recognize<sup>64</sup> that people are fully capa-

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ble of deciding when and under what circumstances to make that choice without direction from the state and other uninvited agencies.

## **DERAILING FALSE NARRATIVES, INCLUDING THE ONE ABOUT THE “NONES”**

If and when the prochoice religious community, broadly writ, seeks to more profoundly organize to defend and advance its values in public life, blowing up false narratives will be not only necessary but also possible.

First, the existence of a multi-faith prochoice majority or near majority derails the false narrative that “religious” or “Christian” equals antiabortion and that secular means “pro-abortion.” As noted above, the very existence of formal prochoice positions and activities of many of the leading historic denominations of Christianity and Judaism refutes the false narrative. It is also worth noting here that there are many nonbelievers and otherwise religiously unaffiliated who are antichoice. Indeed, the percentage of antiabortion “Nones” is about the same as the percentage of prochoice White evangelicals.

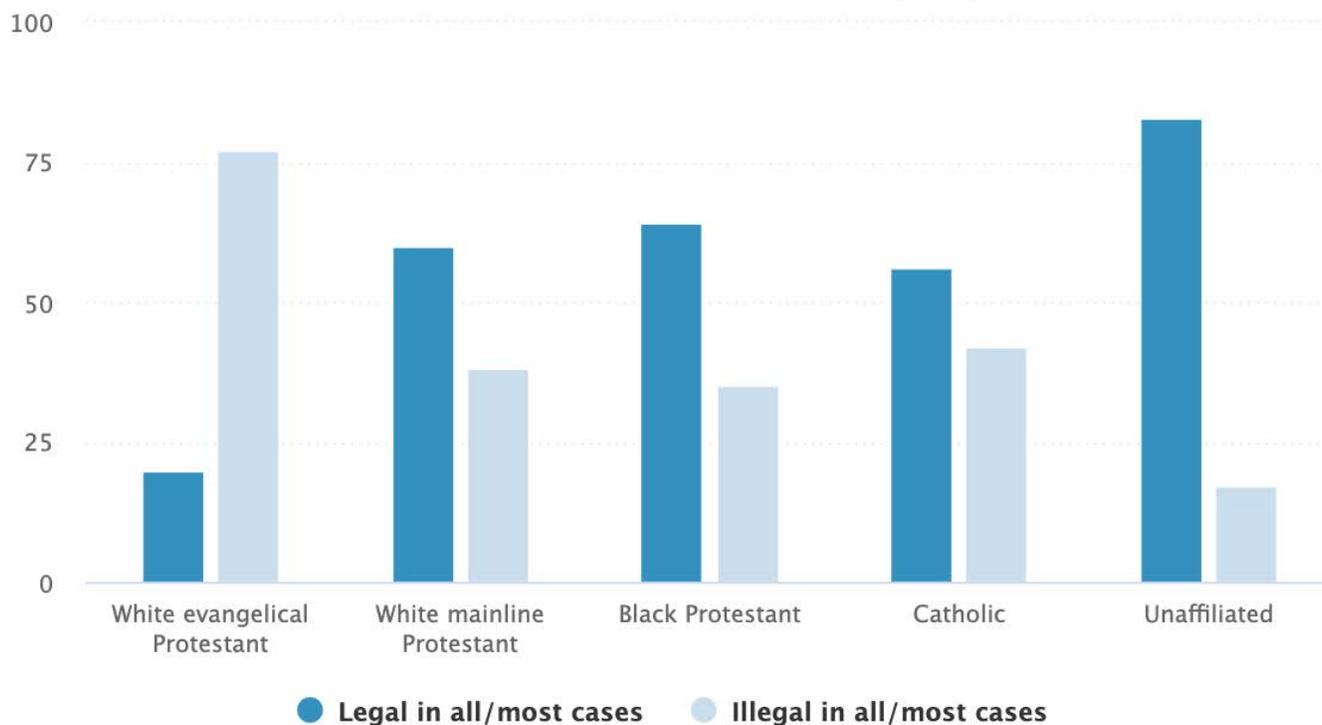
**MOST OF THE WORLD’S MAJOR RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS RECOGNIZE THAT WOMEN ARE FULLY CAPABLE OF DECIDING WHEN AND UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES TO MAKE THAT CHOICE WITHOUT DIRECTION FROM THE STATE AND OTHER UNINVITED AGENCIES.**

Another false narrative that is derailed by the facts is: just because people disaffiliate from a denomination, or no longer identify with a specific religious tradition to a pollster, that does not necessarily mean that they are not religious or that they hold or no longer hold particular views on matters of reproductive choice.

## **WHAT ABOUT THE NONES?**

The polling phenomenon of the “Nones” is a trend that has received a lot of media attention, but finding significance can be elusive when trying to make sense of the political landscape for reproductive rights, access, and justice. A 2019 study by Pew found that the category of the Nones—that is, people who say they have no formal religious affiliation or identity—is increasing, particularly among young people, even as the percentage of Americans who identify as Christian has continued to fall.<sup>65</sup> The trend that fewer people now claim a specific religious identity is part of the related trend of the steep membership losses

*% of U.S. adults who say abortion should be legal/illegal, by religion (2019)*



experienced first by mainline Protestant denominations and more recently by Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic churches.

Because of the centrality of Christianity in U.S. history and culture, signs of historic declines are certainly newsworthy. However, there may be little going on of any consequence in terms of people's values or their political or electoral behavior.

Pollsters have observed that the Nones "are far from a monolithic group."<sup>66</sup> Thus, Baylor University religion scholar Philip Jenkins urges caution in drawing conclusions about them. The Pew study "carefully points out," he stresses, "that 'None' does not equal no religion, or no religious belief, and you should dismiss any media report that suggests otherwise."<sup>67</sup> (In 2012, Pew reported that "a third of the unaffiliated" said that religion was very important, or somewhat important, in their lives.<sup>68</sup>)

"A typical 'nothing in particular' None," Jenkins says, "is a person who believes in God and might pray regularly, but who rejects a religious affiliation. Given the religious breakdown of the larger population, most of the Nones come from Christian backgrounds, so that the religion that they choose not to admit belonging to is Christianity."

Jenkins says that the recent uptick the number of the Nones

tracks with widespread revulsion to the overt greed and harsh politicization of parts of conservative evangelicalism, and to the ongoing Catholic clergy sex abuse scandal. Therefore, he sensibly argues, many would rather not identify with these groups and Christianity in general, even if in earlier years they may have been unaffiliated, but still willing to identify as Christian.<sup>69</sup>

These caveats are important for purposes of thinking about religious community support for reproductive choice and justice. Pew data show that the Nones are more prochoice than society as a whole, and that their numbers are growing. However, the Nones are not any more explicitly organized on matters of reproductive rights, access, and justice than the broad prochoice religious community; what's more, a significant fraction—about a quarter—are not prochoice.

It is also important to note that while the decline in religious identity and institutional membership is real, less well recognized and reported is that the decline in organizational identity and membership is not unique to religious institutions. In fact, there have been long-term declines in membership organizations across the board for decades, as detailed by Harvard political scientist Robert D. Putnam in his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*. “For the most part,” Putnam wrote, “the younger generation (‘younger’ here includes the boomers) are less involved both in religious and in secular activities than were their predecessors at the same age.”<sup>70</sup>

While most popular reporting on and, unfortunately, political analysis of the data is framed in terms of the decline of religious belief and membership, the same data looked at from an organizing perspective tells a different story—a story of opportunity in the midst of social and demographic change. To be sure, the opportunity is not without challenges, but a clear-eyed understanding of both the opportunity and the challenges makes planning to organize possible.

Yet it is the organizing piece that is typically missing from published news, opinion, and analytical discussion of these trends. Of course, a prochoice religious movement would not be electoral alone. It would be rooted in a broader religious and political culture in which these values are central. The point is that the absence of any vision or practice of electoral democracy in this sector illuminates the necessity of having the power to

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make much of a difference.

To build a broader religious and political culture in which prochoice religious values are central, it will be important to set aside the assumption that demography and polling are necessarily political destiny. The Christian Right has proven that demography is not political destiny. An important reason for the success of the Christian Right has been the absence of meaningful counter-organizing that contends in the democratic marketplace and encourages the development of relevant political knowledge, skills, and organizations. This is a problem that can be solved.

**THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT  
HAS PROVEN THAT  
DEMOGRAPHY IS NOT  
POLITICAL DESTINY.**

## **THE WAR OF ATTRITION AGAINST PROCHOICE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES**

The prochoice religious community in the United States and the institutions that inform it exist in a context of contending forces. The effects of all this goes unmeasured by pollsters and tends to be ignored by reporters and academics—even among those who attribute dismay about the “culture wars” as a reason for the decline in church membership.

Leading mainline Protestant denominations—all of which are prochoice—have been the target of a decades-long war of attrition waged by outside conservative evangelical and Catholic-led organizations working in consort with conservative and antiabortion factional dissidents. This multifaceted effort has sought to degrade and divide the historic communions of mainline Protestantism—largely for the purpose of diminishing their positions on economic and social justice generally, and reproductive choice and justice in particular—and reducing their capacity to advance their views in public life. The right-wing organizations behind the attack are still active and are a relevant part of the religious/political landscape.

The leader of this war of attrition has been the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), based in Washington, DC, and underwritten by some of the same conservative foundations that helped found and sustain such organizations as the Heritage Foundation and the Ethics and Public Policy Center (EPPC) in the 1970s.<sup>71</sup> (The EPPC, led by Catholic neoconservatives, also hosted the 1996 meeting that forged the strategy of seeking state legislative restrictions on abortion access.<sup>72</sup>)

IRD for many years organized and caucused with conservative and prolife factions in the mainline denominations under the

rubric of the Association for Church Renewal.<sup>73</sup> Some of those “renewal” groups were also part of the ecumenical National Pro-Life Religious Council,<sup>74</sup> a subsidiary of the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC) and long led by Fr. Frank Pavone, the militant leader of Priests for Life. Some are members to this day.<sup>75</sup> The NRLC in turn was founded in 1967 as a project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. It was separately incorporated in 1973 in response to *Roe v. Wade*. It became ostensibly independent and ecumenical out of the desire to attract Protestants.

One telling project of the National Pro-Life Religious Council was a 2003 book-length critique of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), an interfaith organization founded in Washington, DC, in 1973 in the wake of *Roe v. Wade*. (The founding members included several major institutions of Protestantism and Judaism.) The authors arrogated to themselves the role of judging what is and is not authentically Christian, concluding, “RCRC does not represent the Christian faith in the matter of abortion.”<sup>76</sup> RCRC never claimed that it did—being an *interfaith coalition* of prochoice religious communities, founded by them in the first place. Additionally, Christianity has no one view on these matters. This is unsurprising since Christianity has no central authority and no one orthodoxy. For the authors to imply that it does, and that they speak for it in this way, is hubris and is not to be confused with orthodoxy.



Credit: Texas Freedom Network/Just Texas

The story of the long-term war of attrition against the pro-choice denominations of mainline Protestantism is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is important to note that once again, an outside agency sought to pick apart the prochoice religious community: in this instance by inflaming differences of views among the members of RCRC and the organization of the coalition itself. Due in part to such efforts, RCRC is no longer a coalition, but it remains a freestanding organization, continuing to work with a wide swath of prochoice religious community.

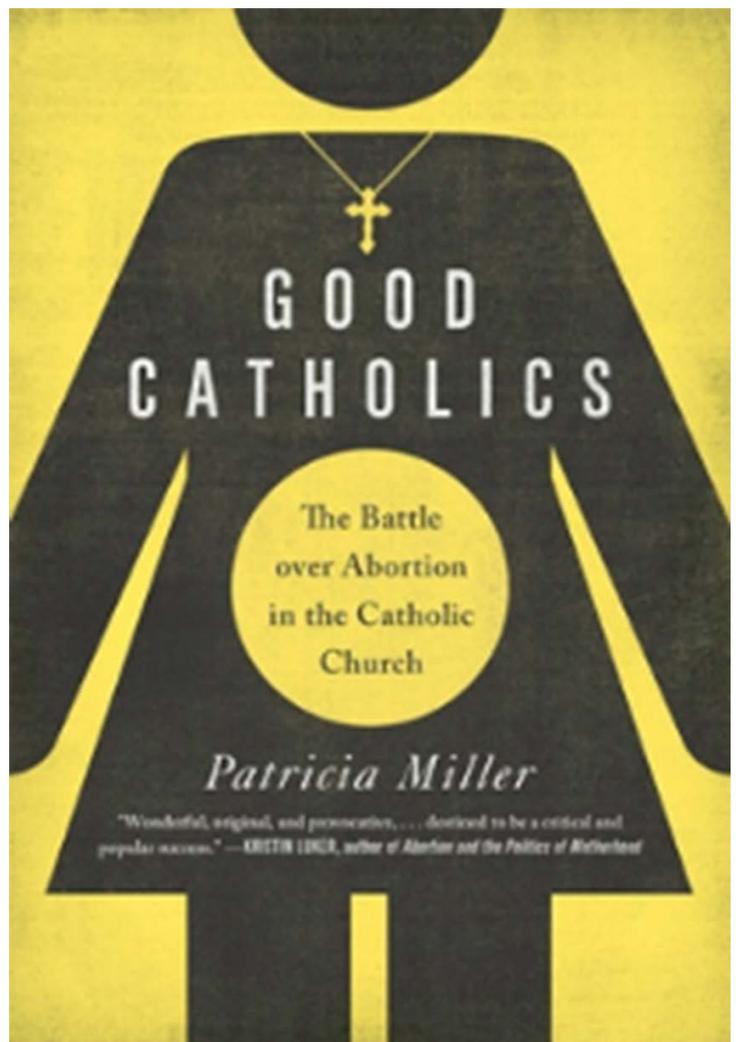
As happens with any broad movement, there is at once greater

ideological diversity than sometimes meets the eye, and overlap among groups and individuals. In this instance, it is important to see that there is sometimes a relationship between conservative and progressive antiabortion figures that animate religious antiabortionism.

Illustrative of this seeming paradox is that the late Richard John Neuhaus, one of the endorsers of the anti-RCRC book, was also a founder of IRD. Some other of the endorsers are members of the more progressive Consistent Life Network,<sup>77</sup> formerly known as the Seamless Garment Network. This group grew out of the “Consistent Ethic of Life,” views of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago who held that a prolife view must not be limited to opposition to abortion, but must include opposition to capital punishment, economic and social injustice, euthanasia, and militarism in terms of Catholic principles of valuing the sacredness of human life. The Consistent Life Network, like the National Pro-Life Religious Council, also includes some progressive evangelicals and mainline Protestants.

Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Church has sought to silence prochoice dissidents for decades. Throughout the 1970s and mid-1980s, some priests, nuns, and theologians publicly argued that the Catholic values of conscience and discernment created space for a prochoice Catholicism. Furthermore, they argued that in a pluralist society, Catholics had no right to impose their values through the legislative process, likewise creating space for prochoice Catholic public officials. These Catholics were largely silenced beginning with the papacy of Pope John Paul II—most famously in 1984 after some 100 signed a statement in *The New York Times* stating that Catholics could be prochoice.<sup>78</sup>

While working to silence prochoice Catholics, conservative elements of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops openly came alongside the Republican Party to signal that practicing Catholics could not vote for prochoice candidates. Catholic parachurch groups, such as Catholic Answers, EWTN (Eternal Word Television Network), Catholic Vote, and Priests for Life have issued voter guides that reflect this view.



These groups have been active in broader ways as well. Priests for Life conducted campaign skills trainings during the 2016 election, for example, on behalf of Ohio Right to Life.<sup>79</sup> Catholic Vote, run by prominent pro-Trump Catholics, in 2020 tracked the cell phones of people who attend Mass in order to gather data about their voter registration status and voting history. The goal was to develop profiles for targeted outreach in swing states. This method, called “geofencing,” has also been used to identify and track White evangelical churchgoers as potential voters.<sup>80</sup>

Meanwhile the stakes in the decline of the prochoice Christian churches are not limited to reproductive rights, access, and justice. As Robert Putnam observed in *Bowling Alone*, the trend of overall decline in membership organizations, including churches, raises concerns about the loss of opportunities for people to learn and practice relevant knowledge and skills for engagement in democracy. He observed that churches “are one of the few vital institutions left in which low income, minority and disadvantaged citizens of all races can learn politically relevant skills and be recruited into political action.”<sup>81</sup>

The decline of prochoice religious institutions with democratic polities (in which people choose their own leaders, develop their own theologies, and make public policy choices that flow from them) has allowed more authoritarian, conservative, and patriarchal institutions to gain in influence at their expense, and arguably at the expense of the culture and practice of democracy itself.

## **INSIDE THE ORGANIZED PROCHOICE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY**

Even as these mainline Protestant denominations are in some sense bastions of support for reproductive choice and justice with long histories that predate *Roe v. Wade*, some are internally divided, due in part to the gridlock generated by internal factions with the assistance of outside interests. This leaves many frustrated.

“[M]ost of the statements supporting a woman’s right to a safe, legal abortion are several decades old,” writes Episcopal priest Kira Schlesinger in her 2017 book *Pro-Choice and Christian: Reconciling Faith, Politics, and Justice*. She notes that it’s “almost as if the mainline position has thrown up its hands and ceded this ground to the Roman Catholic Church and more theologically

and politically conservative evangelical and fundamentalist churches.” She explains,

*It’s so personal, so morally ambiguous and fraught, such a third rail, that it’s rarely discussed even in more progressive Christian circles. I attended a notoriously liberal divinity school [Vanderbilt] that prided itself on a commitment to social justice, but there was virtually never a mention of abortion or reproductive rights except in passing.*

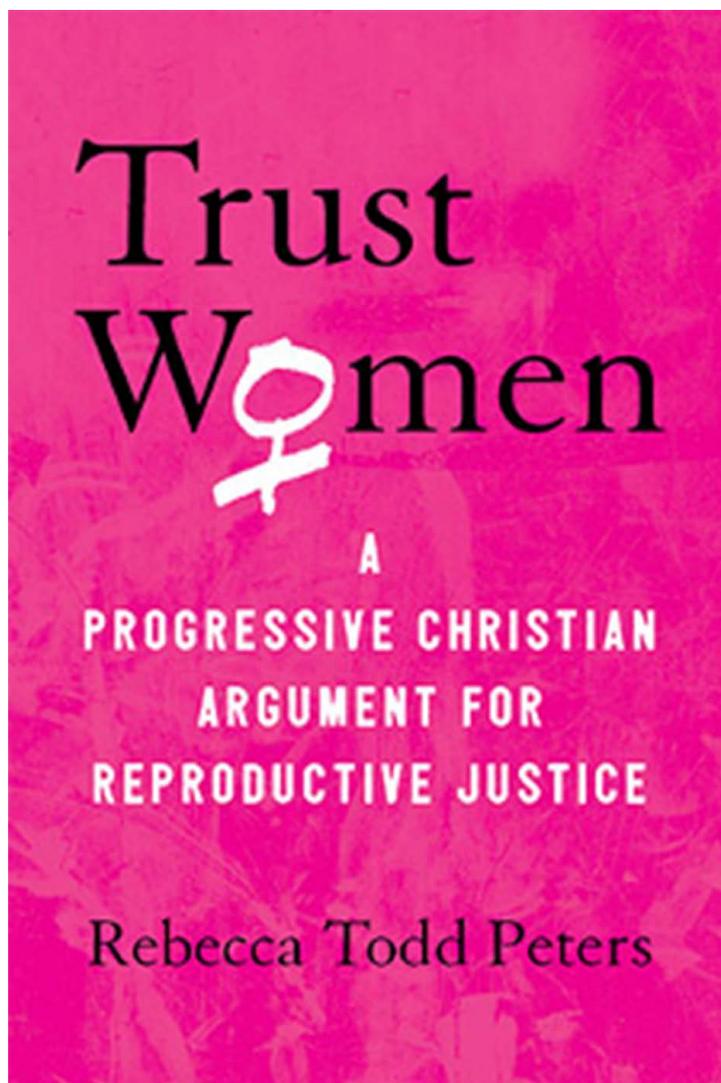
She concludes,

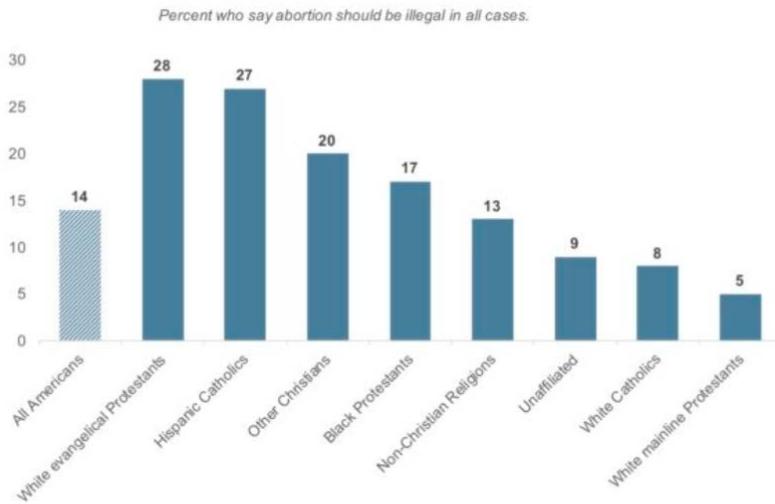
*Even as mainline denominations make statements in favor of other social justice issues, like LGBTI rights, an end to the death penalty, sensible gun legislation, and support for racial justice organizations like Black Lives Matter—they remain remarkably silent on issues of reproductive justice.<sup>82</sup>*

Nevertheless, the voices of the traditional advocacy for reproductive choice and justice have not been silent, even if they have not always been heard. Tom Davis, a minister in the United Church of Christ and one of the founders of the Clergy Consultation Service, wrote in his 2005 book, *Sacred Choices: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances*, “no prophetic faith can leave a group behind. It is, in fact, the very essence of prophetic religion to seek justice for the very group that is left out.”<sup>83</sup>

This situation is not limited to seminaries and denominations. Books about religious social justice often fail to incorporate reproductive justice, perhaps for the reasons Schlesinger identifies. Alternatively, it may be because reproductive choice, access, and justice are just not part of their vision. This omission is matched by secular books on the politics of reproductive rights that fail to even mention the prochoice religious community.

Whatever the reasons, the result has been to cede the religious argument to the Christian Right and to ignore the reality of the vast prochoice religious community in the United States.





Note: Evangelical refers to protestants who identify as "born again." Other Christians include groups such as Mormon and Orthodox denominations, as well as non-white evangelical and mainline protestants. Non-Christians include groups such as Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists.

Source: PRRI September 2018 Survey.

It needn't be this way.

Christian author and theologian Rebecca Todd Peters spoke to this in 2019:

*While outspoken evangelical and Roman Catholic leaders continue to promote the idea that Christianity is anti-abortion, this belief is both a misrepresentation of Christian history and a misrepresentation of what many committed Christians today believe. According to a 2018 PRRI poll, only 14 percent of people hold that abortion should be illegal in all cases. Moreover, mainline Protestants like Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and the UCC are most opposed to making abortion illegal in all cases with only 5 percent of that group supporting a total ban on abortion.<sup>84</sup>*

Peters added that anyone considering the future of reproductive choice and justice in the United States must take to heart the idea that religious freedom belongs to everyone and not just to religious conservatives. She wrote,

*refusing to codify traditionalist, conservative religious beliefs into law isn't a violation of anyone's religious freedom. In fact, it not only protects a large majority of people in this country from the tyranny of patriarchy, it actually protects their religious freedom.<sup>85</sup>*

Carlton Veazey similarly argued in 2009 that religious freedom is essential. (This was also the year that leaders of the Catholic and evangelical wings of the Christian Right formally joined

forces to hijack the idea in the form of a manifesto titled the Manhattan Declaration<sup>86</sup>).

*The opposition to comprehensive sex education, HIV/AIDS prevention that includes condom education, emergency contraception and legal abortion comes from religious groups that claim these violate religious beliefs—the underlying message being that the only valid religious beliefs are theirs.*<sup>87</sup>

He also suggested that this was not being addressed by non-Christian Right political and religious leaders.

*The failure to appreciate and articulate religious pluralism as a powerful value, often leads to capitulation and compromise on reproductive issues with factions that do not honor the differing value systems inherent in our religiously plural society, as well as the value of religious pluralism itself.*<sup>88</sup>

Jews have also not been silent in the face of assaults on access to abortion and their religious freedom to say when life begins and the nature of choice according to their traditions. “It makes me apoplectic,” Danya Ruttenberg, a Chicago-based rabbi and author who has written about Jews’ interpretation of abortion,<sup>89</sup> told *USA TODAY* in the face of the attempts to criminalize abortion in several states in 2019. “They’re using my sacred text to justify taking away my rights in a way that is just so calculated and craven.”

“This is a big deal for us,” Ruttenberg continued. “We’re very clear about a woman’s right to choose. And we’re very clear about the separation between church and state.”<sup>90</sup>

Yet many religious and nonreligious people have been boxed into the conservative framing of pitting secular vs. religious values. Scholars at Columbia Law School have argued that this unwittingly reinforces the views of the Christian Right. “We should reject a ‘religion vs. LGBTQ/reproductive rights’ framing for religious liberty claims,” they declared. “For many, religious freedom does not conflict with reproductive justice and LGBTQ equality.”<sup>91</sup> Indeed, religious freedom and reproductive rights are not necessarily a mutual contradiction for a majority of the population and maybe even a majority of the religious community.

The fact is that many Americans derive their support for reproductive choice and justice, and LGBTQ equality, through their religious values, not despite them. They find it an affront to their religious freedom to face laws that allow businesses, health care organizations, and others to refuse to recognize the

legal and moral legitimacy of their members' marriages, performed by members of their own clergy, and access to medical care and adoption and foster care services, among other things, that are—or ought to be—equally available to all, without exception. It is also an affront to their religious freedom to be compelled to make moral decisions compromised by the unwelcome assistance or interference from the government and people of different religious views.

## CONCLUSION

The prochoice community is now considering the future in light of what has been lost<sup>92</sup>—and what more will have been lost when *Roe v. Wade* is overturned. This essay highlights a powerful source of hope and possibility whose time has come.

There is a vast prochoice religious community with a vibrant history and world changing potential. The customary public platitudes about “faith” notwithstanding, this enormous sector of American society is under-recognized, under-reported on, and under-organized. Because this is so, it is also a virtually untapped source of power and hope for the future of reproductive freedom, access, and justice. Any new long-term strategy will increase the possibility of success by recognizing that this is an opportunity to imagine—and to achieve—a far better future than many may now think possible.

The successes of the Christian Right—won with its Roman Catholic and evangelical wings united—are the result of decades of institution building and theological and political work by a well-resourced numerical minority operating with a strategic vision and theocratic intent. It is of no small historical consequence that they have twisted and abused the idea of religious freedom to establish the right to infringe on the rights of others. The Christian Right has done this in considerable part by employing the tools of electoral democracy to achieve its public policy goals. It has also waged a long-term war of attrition against prochoice religious institutions that continues to this day, bleeding members, churches, and regional groupings in the face of conflict stoked from the outside by politically and religiously motivated actors.

All this has contributed to obscuring certain stubborn facts.

**ANY NEW LONG-TERM STRATEGY WILL INCREASE THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCCESS BY RECOGNIZING THAT THIS IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO IMAGINE—AND TO ACHIEVE—A FAR BETTER FUTURE THAN MANY MAY NOW THINK POSSIBLE.**

Polling shows that both the religious and nonreligious general public is increasingly prochoice. Polling also reveals the vastness and diversity of the prochoice religious community, comprising individuals of varying religious affiliations and identities, and varying degrees of support for the right to choose. But polling is not the whole story. There are also historic prochoice religious institutions and activist networks with profound experience, demonstrated commitment, and the capacity to facilitate access to reproductive health care at a time when both the right to receive and to provide such care is under sustained and systematic attack.

Indeed. Power is not in the polls, it is in the organizing. If it is true, as a 2019 NPR-PBS Marist Poll had it, that 77% of respondents think the Supreme Court should uphold *Roe v. Wade*<sup>93</sup>, then it is also true that this reality is not well reflected in politics, policy, and media coverage. This is the challenge and the opportunity for the prochoice religious community to rise to moral and political leadership. The Christian Right has an ideological, cultural, and electoral strategy designed to accomplish their ends, and the prochoice religious community does not. This needs to change. And it could.

There is a potentially powerful cohort of prochoice religious activists and voters, who could be organized both inside and outside of their institutional homes—beyond traditional secular prochoice or religious social justice groups, and also in considered relationship with them. This prochoice religious community could draw upon a vast institutional infrastructure that still exists at the center of American religious life in many communities, in all parts of the country.

**THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT HAS AN IDEOLOGICAL, CULTURAL, AND ELECTORAL STRATEGY DESIGNED TO ACCOMPLISH THEIR ENDS, AND THE PROCHOICE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY DOES NOT. THIS NEEDS TO CHANGE. AND IT COULD.**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A project of any significant length of time and text usually benefits from the good thoughts and wise counsel of others, and this essay is no exception. And as always, there are too many who came before to whom I owe debts I cannot repay except to honor them by taking the work forward as best I can. To those who can be named for this project, many thanks go to those who have read, commented, advised, and edited along the way. These

include Cari Jackson, Lisa Weiner-Mafuz, Elaina Ramsey, Katherine Stewart, Trishala Deb, Abby Scher, and my colleagues Tarso Ramos, Greeley O'Connor, Patti Miller, and Tina Vasquez.

## **BUILDING THE CULTURAL AND POLITICAL POWER OF PROCHOICE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES: STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS**

The above analysis argues there is a vast prochoice religious community, but that it is marginalized within religious and political organizations and broadly in public life, and is thereby easily divided and kept from becoming politically powerful. Together with the nonreligious prochoice community, they constitute an overwhelming majority of the population and, potentially, the voting population. Taken together, they could become powerful. But the prochoice religious community first needs to discover itself. (To that end, PRA's "An Annotated Directory of the Prochoice Religious Community in the United States" may help.<sup>94</sup>)

To politically empower itself, the prochoice religious community needs to create organizations outside of traditional religious institutions. A significant part of the historic success of the Christian Right,<sup>95</sup> in both its evangelical and Catholic wings, has come through the organizations and actions of what are called parachurch organizations, operating across denominations—which is to say, outside of, but not necessarily in coordination or in conflict with, denominations. There are certainly already small-scale organizations and projects, but to meet the current challenges, new entities will need to be considered, developed, and scaled up to be culturally and politically significant.

The prochoice religious community needs to envision what trans-denominational organizations of its own might be like. The Christian Right has had the benefit of being more religiously and racially homogeneous. However, organizations of the prochoice religious community will necessarily be religiously and racially more diverse, and the nature of the diversity may vary, depending on locality and region. Navigating differences while building greater unity may be challenging, but the call to do so is at the core of the values of most religious communities—and this usually includes the commitment to the values of religious freedom, religious equality, and separation of church and state.

### **THE PROCHOICE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY NEEDS TO ENVISION WHAT TRANS-DENOMINATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS OF ITS OWN MIGHT BE LIKE.**

For these reasons, creating one big national organization may be an unworkable goal, at least in the near term. A more promising series of possibilities would be the creation of trans-denominational groups as state, local, or regional entities—at least as pilot projects to figure out what works and what doesn't. Although such groups would be separate, they would all need to have some common understandings about their mission at the outset. They would need to be dedicated to finding people who share a vision of creating a politically strong prochoice religious community. Some of these groups may need to be specific to a certain tradition, Roman Catholicism, for example. They might be ecumenical, involving various strains of Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and others. They might be multi-faith. Most American communities are racially and religiously diverse to varying degrees, so creating such groups ought to be possible. In the spirit of ideological diversity, some may be more oriented to a choice point of view, others with a justice point of view. Still others may want to consider a multi-issue approach, in the manner of what Religious Left organizations might be like if reproductive choice, access, and justice were part of the agenda. All should be considered, encouraged, supported, and understood to be part of a greater whole with a common mission.

An important consideration will be whether these groups would be more or less single issue, or have a more integrated, multi-issue view. For example, are reproductive rights and health care actually separate from human and civil rights and health care in the broadest sense of those ideas? These questions are already foundational to the conversation on reproductive rights and access, and they are likely to become even more so as religious organizations and leaders that have existing, deeply considered social visions begin to more fundamentally engage the politics of all this.

The mission of the groups, whatever their composition, must be grounded in the basic values of religious freedom, religious pluralism, and separation of church and state. Without this grounding, it is difficult to relate to the constitutional and legal issues, and to explain how a variety of views on abortion can or even should be accommodated in a pluralist society—even as the prochoice religious community strives to regain what has been lost, and hold to a vision of improving on what used to be.

**THE MISSION OF THE GROUPS, WHATEVER THEIR COMPOSITION, MUST BE GROUNDED IN THE BASIC VALUES OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, AND SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE.**

This brings us to the second main type of multi-faith organization: political organizations, whether state, regional, or national, that are able to develop an electoral constituency not only as a voter base but also as a permanent source of skilled political workers, candidates, and officeholders. In this vision, the knowledge and skills necessary for electoral politics must be foundational to building for power sufficient to regain what has been lost and to move beyond it. Such organizations will understand that the political education and outreach activities they engage in are ongoing processes across election cycles, and thus they need not be reinvented each election cycle or organized solely around a candidate or party.

A movement based on democratic values necessarily requires a deeply held vision and a profound knowledge of the skills it takes to sustain it and to make it so.

It is important to distinguish between this kind of political organization and traditional educational interest groups, lobbies, and coalitions. What would be different would be that these organizations would have a set of unambiguous moral principles (not policy goals) toward which they are working in the post-Roe era, and will rally people who agree with these principles; who want to culturally and politically pursue them; and seek the resources and skills to infuse them into culture, government, and law. This means creating lasting institutions and organizations to carry this forward.

To sustain a vision of building for power, it is essential not to wait for permission from existing national organizations (whether religious institutions, political parties, or advocacy groups) to begin to act. There is also no need to wait for a national organization to engage in “faith outreach” efforts. Independent entities can set their own priorities and make their own decisions, albeit in consultation with friends and allies, as appropriate. In that spirit, it will be important, for example, for groups to keep their own contact lists and ask that candidates and consultants share information and not hoard it. A predatory culture of political consulting and egocentric politicians has contributed to getting us to where we are.

All this may require creating or repurposing a third kind of organization, a clearinghouse, and a strategy and training center, to create or to point people to appropriate resources and to conduct ongoing organizer, campaign, and candidate schools. Once established, trainings can be conducted anywhere, especially as a cadre of experienced trainers is developed. These trainings would not necessarily be a substitute for existing training schools (although they could be) but perhaps more as a

## **CREATING A CULTURE OF LEARNING WILL BE ESSENTIAL.**

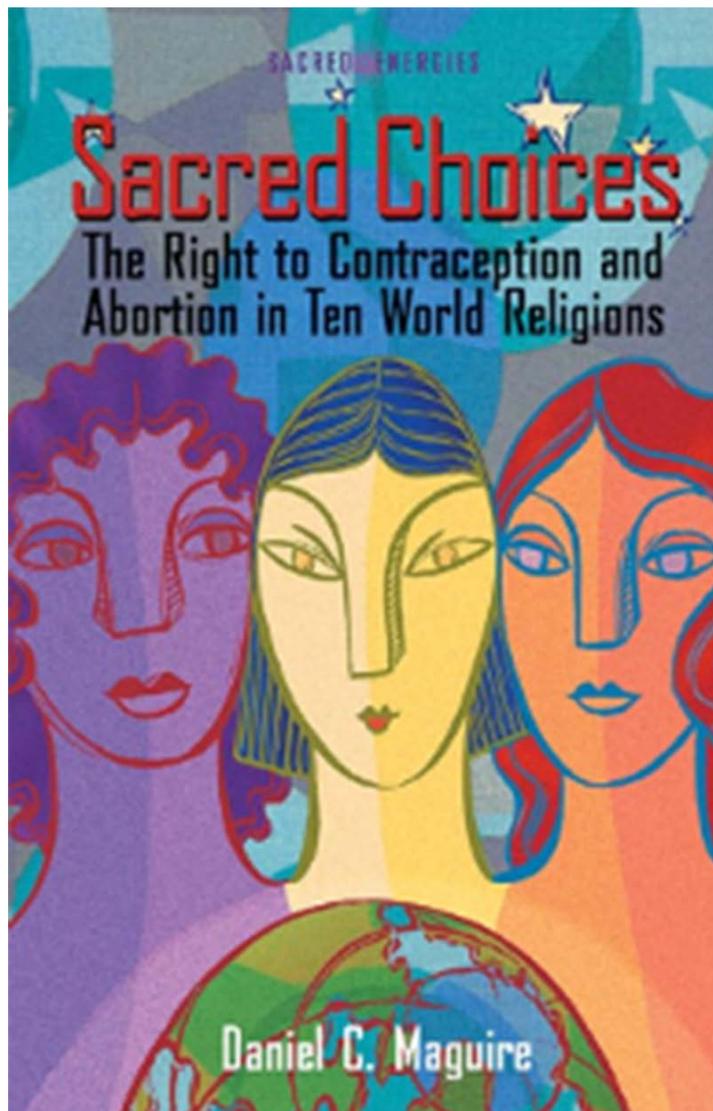
supplement to fill in the missing elements of what is needed for the prochoice religious community.

Creating a culture of learning will be essential. This will not only include education in connecting religious values to pro-choice public policy and politics, as is already commonly practiced, but ongoing education on the history and nature of the Christian Right, the antiabortion movement, and the ongoing evolution and evaluation of strategy, tactics, and campaigns, as well as the history of the prochoice religious community and the lessons learned. As in any endeavor, the competition changes and adapts to new circumstances, and all sides learn from their experiences, or risk repeating their mistakes. The prochoice religious community must have the capacity to integrate political lessons into ongoing tactical and strategic thought.

In support of such efforts, for example, the prochoice religious community may want to develop—sooner rather than later—short, well-produced educational videos aimed at highlighting prochoice religious leaders in politics instead of allowing them to be marginalized. There should be a recommended reading list. And if the existing literature is insufficient (which it probably is), the literature will need to be created by underwriting and commissioning books and articles, and their distribution for maximum impact. There should also be remote online education and training programs.

The prochoice religious community should also have its own mission-oriented online magazine. Such a publication could be located either within another publication as an incubator/fiscal sponsor, within the center, or as a freestanding startup. Similarly, it may require a specialized publishing house or imprints from several publishers to meet the needs of a vigorous new movement. Encouraging, supporting, and promoting writers in this area will be important. Arguably, the many topics related to the prochoice religious community could and should also be foci for any number of existing outlets.

These things could be underwritten by traditional philanthropies



and developed and incubated through nonprofit organizations. But they merit the attention of religious and political philanthropists as well. And while some of these things could happen quickly, most will take time, planning, and development.

In the interests of time, establishing such a center within an existing institution to serve as an incubator and fiscal sponsor might be a consideration.

This center should not be located in Washington, DC, where there is too strong a centrifugal pull into the details of policy, legislation, and the courts. The development of a prochoice religious community of sufficient cultural and political power to restore and advance what has been lost cannot afford to be mired in the contemporary details of government and related political culture. This is necessarily a matter of both grass-roots political development as well as traditional publishing, think tank, and training center type activities. The location of a center might be better in a city or state with a supportive prochoice religious community, such as Cleveland, Ohio, headquarters of the United Church of Christ. New York City is home to The Episcopal Church, United Methodist Women, and many prochoice Jewish organizations. Chicago, Illinois, is headquarters to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Chicago Theological Seminary. Boston is home to the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Episcopal Divinity School, and more.

These are just ideas and are not intended as a plan, although obviously some or all of them could become part of a plan going forward.

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# ***THE POWER OF PARACHURCH***

**A Response**

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**By Rachel Tabachnick**

This response is an elaboration on the power, possibilities, and challenges of parachurch from the perspective of observing decades of successful organizing of the Christian Right and its coordination with other conservative infrastructure.

One definition of parachurch is a “voluntary, not-for-profit associations of Christians working outside denominational control to achieve some specific ministry or social service.”<sup>1</sup> Parachurch organizations usually pursue IRS nonprofit designation as 501(c)(3) public charities. They have paralleled and sometimes exceeded the dramatic growth in the total number of nonprofits in the United States over the last forty years.<sup>2</sup> Parachurch organizations fall into numerous categories: evangelism, relief and development, education, publishing and broadcasting, advocacy, and more. The advocacy sector only includes about 5% of the larger parachurch world but includes many powerhouses of the Christian Right.

## **BYPASSING TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

Parachurch growth also has paralleled that of conservative think tanks, which began to have dramatic growth in the mid-1970s. Self-described “free market” think tanks were founded in almost every state and networked by national organizations as a way to circumvent the existing traditional political and academic institutions to bring about cultural and political change.<sup>3</sup> Decades of direct marketing to both political elites and the public has increasingly empowered this conservative infrastructure to now work inside the system, rebuilding institutions in their image.

In his book *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite*, D. Michael Lindsay describes parachurches as the “fulcrum of evangelical influence.”<sup>4</sup> Lindsay calls business leaders the “principal agents of change,” functioning as donors, directors and leaders of parachurch organizations. He describes some donors as preferring to bypass the “deliberative democratic process” of church boards to work with parachurch organizations that operate more like modern corporations.<sup>5</sup> One result, Lindsay notes, is that it is possible for these leaders to be “religiously active for years without interacting with a poor person in a religious setting.”<sup>6</sup>

**HE DESCRIBES SOME DONORS AS PREFERRING TO BYPASS THE “DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS” OF CHURCH BOARDS TO WORK WITH PARACHURCH ORGANIZATIONS THAT OPERATE MORE LIKE MODERN CORPORATIONS.**

While some parachurch organizations work in coordination with denominations, many can be described as ecumenical, transdenominational, or nondenominational. This has created space for unprecedented partnerships, including between Protestants and Catholics and interfaith alliances between Christians and Jews, for example, as well as alliances with secular entities.

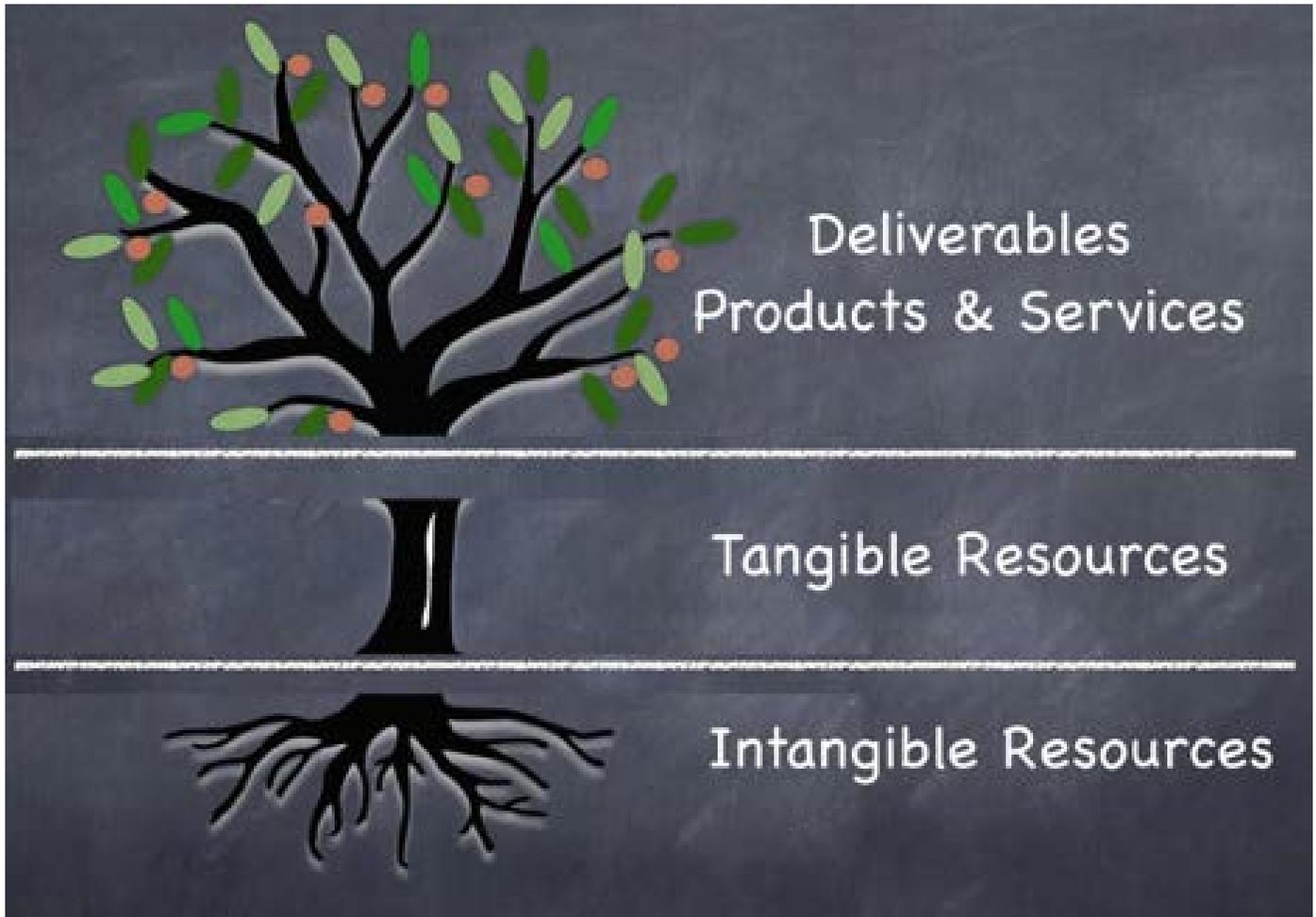
Author Christopher Scheitle, in a rare academic treatment of the topic, compares today's parachurch movement to the ecumenism of 20th century liberal and "modernist" leaders who "sought a literal elimination of denominational boundaries."<sup>7</sup> The irony of the story, according to Scheitle, is that this goal is being achieved today, but it's through a parachurch movement that is predominately conservative and evangelical and has chosen to bypass denominations altogether and "market their products and services directly to churches and individuals across denominational lines and to the unaffiliated population."<sup>8</sup> The earlier ecumenical movements were necessary to allow "individuals to unite for a cause when their churches and denominations were crippled by division on these issues." Scheitle adds, "It is not surprising that the same motivation provoked the creation of many contemporary parachurch organizations, although the issues may have changed to abortion, sexuality, and family values."

## **SIMPLIFYING THE PROCESS**

Parachurch advocacy organizations can take many forms. They may be single issue or multiple issue organizations. They may or may not coordinate with secular organizations. They have varying degrees of involvement in legislative and electoral politics. They can be local, state, regional, or national. Some direct their advocacy toward the public, while others are targeting elites. These and other choices would need to be made in the development of pro-choice parachurch advocacy organizations.

For the purposes of this response, I offer an abbreviated approach to the task of both analyzing the Christian Right's success and beginning to chart a pro-choice religious movement. I use an adaptation of a basic organizational structure tree to illustrate how conservative infrastructure has been able to dominate issues or move the Overton Window (the frame of the acceptable range of positions on any given issue) on issues where they hold a minority position, including abortion and reproductive rights.

In the figure below, the branches of the tree represent the deliverable products and services. In this adaptation, they are the entire array of everything nonprofit advocacy can possibly



produce: policy guidelines, education, media, get-out-the-vote efforts, etc. These deliverables may be directed to policy elites or the public.

The trunk of the tree represents the tangible resources. I focus on human resources and financial support. I have used “Fixers, Funders, and Fellows” for shorthand. Funders and fellows may be obvious, but fixers are the architects. Examples include Paul Weyrich, who founded many of the major bastions of conservative infrastructure, and Don Eberly, who played a leading role in establishing the Focus on the Family-affiliated Family Policy Council in Pennsylvania and presented it to the Heritage Foundation as a model for states around the nation.<sup>9</sup> Today these Family Policy Councils have proliferated throughout the country, lobbying on issues of abortion and contraception access, LGBTQ rights, and broad “religious freedom” issues under the “family values” rubric.

Of course, parachurch organizations can include a larger and different list of tangible resources.

Last are the roots of the tree, the intangible resources. These are often the least visible assets, but they are the foundations on which the rest of the organization depends. These include knowledge, vision, values and ideas.

## TRANSACTIONAL OR TRANSFORMATIONAL?

Conservative infrastructure has invested deeply in developing these roots, including a vision of the transformed world they wish to see decades down the road. The movement is not monolithic and there are bitter fights between factions, but this has allowed for these factions to determine what ideas they share at a foundational level. These ideas are then represented in issue advocacy, electoral work, and throughout the deliverables or canopy of the organizational tree.

Daniel Schultz, author of *Changing the Script: An Authentically Faithful and Authentically Progressive Political Theology for the 21st Century*, addresses the shortcomings of some of the efforts to counter to the Christian Right by both the Democratic Party and the Religious Left, including common ground efforts. He asserts that these efforts accede to the framing of the Right. “By not ‘breaking the frame’ of the debate, the Religious Left has often conceded morally unacceptable positions before the fight has even begun,” argues Schultz.<sup>10</sup>

The Christian Right must be countered with a “workable progressive theology,” says Schultz. He argues that it is not enough to just say fighting poverty is a moral value: “Voters must understand not only what the value is, but why it is important and who they should hold accountable if it is not upheld.”<sup>11</sup>

Using the example of fighting poverty, there has been a forty-year relationship between the “free market” think tanks and the Family Policy Councils in many states that could be dismissed as transactional politics, but in fact has merged into a cohesive worldview that has had transformational effects on politics. Described as “Teavangelicalism” by one author, it blends laissez-faire economics of the Tea Party with social conservatism.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, leaders of major national and international libertarian networks are calling for a rejection of Ayn Rand-style anti-religion and an embrace of religion friendly to their economic cause.

This worldview is the primary focus of parachurch entities like the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion & Liberty, which merges laissez-faire capitalism with social conservative policy and market it to Protestants and Catholics worldwide, including

through their branch a few blocks from the Vatican.<sup>13</sup> Acton initiated the gatherings and helped develop the parachurch organization that produced “Resisting the Green Dragon,” a training film widely used with churches and organizations to feed anti-environmentalism and global warming denial.<sup>14</sup> The multiple DVD set includes numerous Christian Right leaders, including Charmaine Yoest, the former head of Americans United for Life and a former Trump administration appointee to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services who is now the vice president of the Institute for Family, Community and Opportunity at the Heritage Foundation.<sup>15</sup> In the DVD set, environmentalism is described as a religion competing with Christianity and environmentalism and its advocates as the greatest threat to the poor of the world.<sup>16</sup>

Evangelical activist David Barton, a Christian nationalist who has been described as one of the most influential leaders in the Christian Right today, exemplifies this blending of far-right social values and economic policy. He says he uses abortion as a litmus test to determine if a politician will “protect your money.” Barton says, “If you don’t respect the right to life, you won’t respect property, you won’t respect protecting income, you’ll think you ought to tax people more rather than protect their income, you’ll take it from them, you won’t protect their property, you won’t protect their religious liberties, you won’t protect their right of self-defense, you’ll try to take their self-defense away from them.”<sup>17</sup>

David Barton’s words may evoke chuckles of disbelief, but this is a philosophy that has been marketed at well-funded events around the country that bring together thousands of pastors to hear Barton speak.<sup>18</sup> It undergirds sophisticated get-out-the-vote efforts and must be understood if it is to be countered.

These examples are a few among many of the ways in which parachurch organizations have played a leading role in the Christian Right’s efforts to claim ownership of religious morals and values on a range of political issues and marginalize those who disagree with them. The leaders in these examples also express sincere concerns about poverty, but the roots of their tree are deeply rooted in the sacralization of unfettered capitalism and the canopy, or the deliverables, will be a very different product from those fighting structural poverty. Electoral politics and issue advocacy at its best will not stop the Christian Right if the fight is not grounded in well-articulated values and vision.

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# ***ORGANIZING PROCHOICE CATHOLICS***

**A Response**

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**By Patricia Miller**

As Frederick Clarkson points out in his paper “The Prochoice Religious Community May be the Future of Reproductive Rights, Access, and Justice,” Roman Catholics represent a potentially fruitful area for organizing prochoice people of faith. At the same time, Catholics present unique organizing challenges. An awareness of these challenges, and potential solutions, can help guide larger organizing efforts among the prochoice religious community.

## **THE POTENTIAL POOL OF PROCHOICE CATHOLICS**

Catholics comprise the largest single religious denomination in the United States. About 21% (20.8%) of Americans identify as Catholic, which translates into 51 million adult Catholics.<sup>1</sup>

Catholics remain heavily represented in their historic home of the Northeast. Catholics comprise 42% of the population in Rhode Island, 34% of the population in Massachusetts and New Jersey, 33% in Connecticut, and 31% in New York. But other areas of the country also boast Catholic populations well above the national average. Catholics are heavily represented in important Rust Belt swing states: they comprise 28% of the population in Illinois and 25% in Wisconsin and 24% in Pennsylvania, as well as in western states with growing Hispanic populations: 34% in New Mexico, 28% in California, 25% in Nevada, and 23% in Texas.<sup>2</sup> Overall, as Pew points out, the growth of the Hispanic population is gradually shifting the center of Catholicism from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and West, which has important political implications.

What will come as a surprise to some is that the majority of Catholics are pro-choice, a finding that holds consistent across years and various polls. According to Pew, 56% of Catholics said in 2019 that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, which was far above the 20% of White Evangelicals who said abortion should be largely legal and close to the 60% of White mainline Protestants who support abortion rights.<sup>3</sup>

Even a poll sponsored by the conservative Eternal World Television Network found that 51% of Catholics believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases.<sup>4</sup> Taking even this conservative estimate of the percentage of prochoice Catholics, which is borne out by other polls, there are some 25 million adult Catholics in the United States who support abortion rights. Based on numbers alone, prochoice Catholics figure to be a major component of any prochoice religious coalition.

## THE CHALLENGES OF ORGANIZING PROCHOICE CATHOLICS

That said, organizing prochoice Catholics politically presents a number of challenges based both on the nature of the Catholic Church and its opposition to legal abortion. The first is that the Catholic Church is the only major religious denomination that is unequivocally opposed to abortion in almost every instance, making only the narrowest exceptions if a woman's life is in danger. The church teaches that any "procured abortion" is a "moral evil" and that this teaching is "unchangeable."<sup>5</sup>

This means that the Catholic Church opposes abortion even in instances when it is accepted by other religions—in cases of rape or incest or when the health of the woman is at stake. Even the exception for the life of the woman stipulates that a medical procedure to save the life of a woman can only be performed if it has the unintended consequence of ending a pregnancy, such as removing a cancerous uterus. Thus, in cases of an incomplete miscarriage, Catholic hospitals have required the fetus to expire and the woman to progress to sepsis before an abortion can take place.<sup>6</sup>

However, there is a significant body of Catholic moral philosophy about acceptability of abortion in the Catholic tradition and the primacy of conscience in moral decision-making. Organizations such as Catholics for Choice provide resources such as *The Truth About Catholics and Abortion*, *Catholics and Abortion: Notes on Canon Law*, and *The History of Abortion in the Catholic Church* that offer a fuller picture of Catholic teaching on abortion. Catholic theologians like Dan Dombrowski and Robert Deltete have explored the issue in their book *A Brief, Liberal, Catholic Defense of Abortion*.

A related question is how Catholics should apply the church's teaching about abortion in the public square. As Father Robert Drinan, then dean of Boston College Law School (and later a Member of Congress and member of the House Judiciary Committee) wrote in 1968, even if a Catholic believes that abortion is immoral, they do not have to insist that such beliefs be incorporated into civil law. "There is no such thing as a 'Catholic position' on the jurisprudence of abortion laws," he wrote.<sup>7</sup>

This suggests that a critical part of any organizing effort that will include Catholics will be to make widely available resources about prochoice Catholicism and the application of Catholic moral teachings in the public square.

Second, unlike many other Christian denominations, the Catholic Church has a centralized hierarchy in the form of the pope

and the curia whose teachings, such as the prohibition on abortion, are considered binding on all Catholics. In the past, various bishops have used this authority to suggest that faithful Catholics cannot vote for political candidates who support abortion rights. In 1998, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released a statement on Catholic voting responsibilities called “Living the Gospel of Life,” which stated that Catholics couldn’t in good faith vote for prochoice candidates, even if they were “right” on other issues of importance to the church, such as the death penalty and war.<sup>8</sup> The bishops’ governing body also suggested that individual bishops should “persuade, correct, and admonish” Catholic politicians who publicly violated the church’s anti-abortion stance.<sup>9</sup>

Since then, a number of bishops have publicly admonished prochoice Catholic politicians, most prominently when John Kerry ran for the presidency in 2004. Newark Archbishop John Myers, Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput, and Pittsburgh Cardinal Justin Rigali told parishioners that voting for Kerry was unacceptable.<sup>10</sup>

While concerns that Catholic bishops were entering the political arena in an inappropriate way have diminished much of the outright condemnation of prochoice politicians, it has not been entirely eliminated. In 2016, the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops released a “Know the Positions of the Presidential Candidates” flyer that prominently featured the admonition of the U.S. bishops’ 2015 voting statement “Faithful Citizenship” that the “right to life” was the most “basic and fundamental right.” It then went on to note the prochoice position of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump’s proclamation that he was “pro-life.”<sup>11</sup>

Such efforts are often well-publicized and may sway Catholics who are reluctant to support prochoice candidates without church sanction.

A third issue that is specific to Catholicism is the lack of prochoice leadership from either clerics or others with significant authority within the church. Unlike other denominations, no Catholic priest or nun can voice support for abortion rights, no matter how conditional. This speaks to the need to develop lay Catholic leaders who can serve as points of education and organizing within their parishes and communities.

The above considerations lead to a series of questions that are specific to the Catholic prochoice organizing context.

1. As the center of Catholicism shifts to the South and West, are there different organizing strategies that would be most effective for Latinx versus White Catholic populations?
2. What is the best way to deliver resources to educate Catholics about abortion within the Catholic theological tradition?
3. What is the best way to identify, train and support pro-choice, lay Catholic leaders?
4. What are the best organizational structures to support the development of a prochoice Catholic constituency? Catholic-specific organizations that may help support and educate prochoice Catholics; trans-denominational organizations that may make Catholics less of a target for criticism by priests or bishops; and/or virtual organizing platforms that offer anonymity?

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***BUILDING THE CULTURAL  
AND POLITICAL POWER OF  
PRO-CHOICE RELIGIOUS  
COMMUNITIES***

**Colloquium Proceedings: May 14, 2020**

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## COLLOQUIUM SPEAKERS

### Rev. Dr. Cari Jackson (Moderator)

Rev. Dr. Cari Jackson is the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice's Director of Spiritual Care and Activism. Dr. Cari collaborates with religious and community leaders, advocating for reproductive freedom as a vital aspect of human dignity and divine integrity. Cari seeks to help foster a society in which religious pluralism and cultural diversity are valued, as she believes society's greatness is reflected in its demonstrated commitment to honor, care for and nurture each individual, especially those most marginalized. She coaches leaders to strengthen their capacity and courage as agents of social healing and transformation. She is a minister in the United Church of Christ, grew up in the Pentecostal Church, and participates regularly in other spiritual traditions. Dr. Cari has a Ph.D. in Christian Social Ethics and is the author of several books.

### Frederick Clarkson (Presenter)

Frederick Clarkson is a Senior Research Analyst with Political Research Associates and author of the work being discussed in this colloquium: "The Prochoice Religious Community May Be the Future of Reproductive Rights, Access, and Justice," and "An Annotated Directory of the Prochoice Religious Community in the United States."

He is a nationally recognized expert on both the Christian Right and the Religious Left who has studied and written about religion and politics for nearly four decades. His work has appeared in numerous publications, including *Mother Jones*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Salon.com*, *Ms. magazine*, *Church & State*, and *Religion Dispatches*.

His expertise has been sought out by major media outlets from *The Guardian* to the *New York Times* to NPR. He is the editor of *Dispatches from the Religious Left: The Future of Faith and Politics in America* and author of *Eternal Hostility: The Struggle Between Theocracy and Democracy*. His articles have been anthologized in scholarly works, most recently in *Trumping Democracy in the United States from Ronald Reagan to Alt-Right*. He previously served as an investigative editor for the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and as the Communications Director for the Institute for Democracy Studies.

### Rachel Tabachnick (Presenter)

Rachel Tabachnick is an independent writer, researcher, and speaker on conservative infrastructure and activism. A former Fellow at Political Research Associates, she is the author of a response paper presented at this colloquium.

Rachel has been researching and writing about the Religious Right for two decades. Much of her work is focused on the impact of the Religious Right on science, education, foreign policy, and civil rights. She has been interviewed on radio across the nation including NPR's "Fresh Air," and her expertise has been sought and cited by numerous nonprofits and major news outlets including the *Associated Press*, *The New York Times*, *Slate*, *Salon*, *Rolling Stones*, *Haaretz*, and *The New Yorker*. She has written for publications including PRA's *The Public Eye* and was a prolific blogger at the group blog Talk to Action in the early 2000s, where she developed an international reputation for her research on Dominionism and the New Apostolic Reformation.

She is active in the Democratic Party and nonprofit organizations in Pennsylvania, where she is well-known for her presentations on the intersection of the Religious Right and conservative infrastructure at the annual statewide Progressive Summit. She was raised Southern Baptist in Georgia but left the denomination in the 1980s, following that denomination's fundamentalist shift, and converted to Judaism when she married her husband. Following her adult bat mitzvah, she was the first woman to lead the main prayer service at a large Conservative synagogue in Pittsburgh.

### Patricia Miller (Presenter in absentia)

Patricia Miller an award-winning author and journalist who writes about issues at the intersection of religion, sex, and politics. She is the author of *Good Catholics: The Battle over Abortion in the Catholic Church* and was a Senior Correspondent for Religion Dispatches. Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Salon*, *The Nation*, *Huffington Post*, and *Ms. Magazine*.

### Rev. Dr. Rebecca Todd Peters

Rebecca Todd Peters is a feminist and Christian social ethicist who serves as a Professor of Religious Studies at Elon University. Her most recent book, *Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice*, is a Christian argument for abortion as a moral good and part of her work

of developing a Christian ethic of reproductive justice as the framework for thinking about women's whole reproductive lives, from access to contraception to fertility treatments to unplanned pregnancies.

Her other books include *In Search of the Good Life: The Ethics of Globalization*, which won the 2003 Trinity Book Prize; *Justice in a Global Economy: Strategies for Home, Community and World*; *To Do Justice: A Guide for Progressive Christians*; and *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World*. She received her M.Div. and Ph.D. in Christian Social Ethics from Union Theological Seminary and is ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

### Cherisse Scott

Cherisse Scott has served in the Reproductive Justice movement for 15 years. She is the founder and CEO of SisterReach, located in Memphis, Tennessee. Some of SisterReach's work under her leadership includes their 2015 research report on the need for comprehensive sex education for southern youth of color; their Pro Woman billboard campaign organized in opposition to anti-abortion billboards erected in Memphis; and their Faith & Advocacy Training Curricula, which trains people working at the intersection of faith, social justice and religion using the racial justice lens as a catalyst for culture and social change.

In 2016, Cherisse presented to the United Nations regarding the impact of Tennessee's "fetal assault" law on Tennessee women and families. SisterReach later conducted research and released a report on the *Impact of the Fetal Assault Law on Marginalized Women* and leveraged it to inform policy and procedure change on the local, state and national levels. Cherisse and the work of SisterReach has been featured in the January 2018 edition of *O Magazine* and recognized by *Essence Magazine* as one of their 2018 Woke 100. Cherisse is featured in the 2019 premier documentary, *PERSONHOOD: Policing Pregnant Women in America*, and is a featured contributor in *Believe Me: How Trusting Women Can Change the World* (2020), a book of essays from some of the leading voices in social change. She is an ordained minister in the Christian faith, mother, singer and songwriter, poet, and national speaker on reproductive justice and other human rights violations experienced by vulnerable Tennesseans.

## Elaina Ramsey

Elaina Ramsey is the Executive Director of the Ohio Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. She has more than a decade of campaign, advocacy, grassroots organizing, and communications experience at the intersection of faith and politics. In addition to being a prolific writer, Elaina has served as editor of *Sojourners* magazine and held positions with Women's Action for New Directions and Obama for America. She is also the current Interim Executive Director at Red Letter Christians.

Elaina earned master's degrees in both theological studies from Wesley Theological Seminary and in international peace and conflict resolution from American University. She trained as an organizer in the South Bronx with the Industrial Areas Foundation and, in 2019, was recognized as a Coolidge Scholar by Auburn Theological Seminary for her work in religion and reproductive justice. Elaina is a former fundamentalist evangelical and a current member of the United Church of Christ.

## Katherine Stewart

Katherine Stewart is a journalist and author who has written extensively about the religious right and Christian nationalism. She is the author of *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, a deeply reported investigation of the inner workings and leading personalities of the movement that has turned religion into a tool for political power. The book, published in March 2020, features the development of abortion as a political focus for the Christian Right. A previous book, *The Good News Club: The Christian Right's Stealth Assault on American's Children*, is an exposé of the coordinated effort by Christian nationalists to advance their agenda through the public schools. She has been featured on such broadcast outlets as NPR, MSNBC, and the BBC. She contributes to the *New York Times* opinion section, *The New Republic*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *Washington Post*.

## PROCEEDINGS

On May 14, 2020, Political Research Associates (PRA) convened a colloquium on Building the Cultural and Political Power of Prochoice Religious Communities. As PRA Executive Director Tarso Luís Ramos explained in his welcome to the some eighty attendees who joined on Zoom to discuss strategic opportunities and challenges in advancing reproductive freedom—and to that period that most observers think is inevitable, when *Roe* itself is overturned.

Panelists included Rebecca Todd Peters, a feminist and Christian social ethicist who serves as a Professor of Religious Studies at Elon University; Elaina Ramsey, the Executive Director of the Ohio Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice; Cherisse Scott, the founder and CEO of SisterReach, based in Memphis, Tennessee; and author and journalist Katherine Stewart, author of *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*. Cari Jackson, Director of Spiritual Care and Activism for the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, served as moderator.

As Ramos noted, PRA's mission is to support movements that work to build a more just, democratic society and today's colloquium speaks directly to that purpose. He also noted that the organization has a long history of working closely with grassroots religious leaders, which is why the organization had convened the colloquium of organizers, researchers, and advocates with their own deep connections to religious communities. PRA in conversation with its invited panelists explored questions of composition and strategy in organizing a parachurch, examining the ways in which organizing a unifying body could mirror and oppose a well-organized Christian Right.

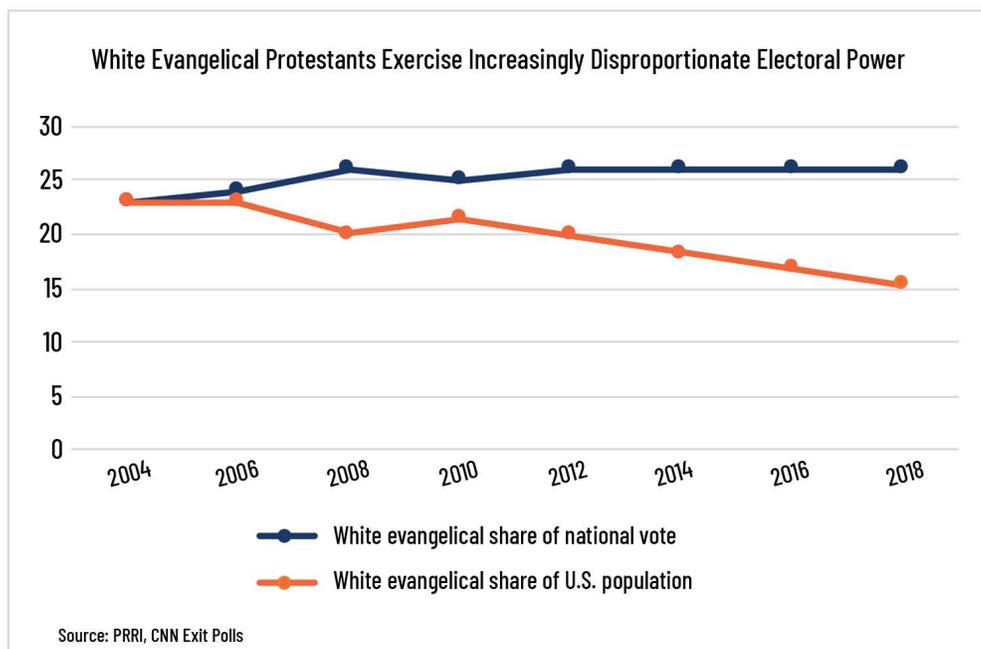
To begin the colloquium, PRA Senior Research Analyst Frederick Clarkson presented his paper "The Prochoice Religious Community May Be the Future of Reproductive Rights, Access, and Justice," which served as the anchor for the discussion. According to Clarkson, the power of the Christian Right comes not from their numbers, as the absolute number of people who identify as evangelicals has declined over time, but in their organizing prowess.

Polling consistently suggests, said Clarkson, that a majority or near majority of the religious community in the United States is prochoice. This majority, said Clarkson, helps explain how the prochoice religious community may be central to the future of

reproductive rights, access, and justice in the United States.

Clarkson argued that a coherent, sustained effort to identify and organize explicitly prochoice religious voters to create a sustainable prochoice religious movement would be a powerful counter to the Christian Right. He proposed that such a movement might consist of a number of distinct, independent organizations that are not defined by the ups-and-downs of any given electoral cycle or the tactical decisions of political parties. Such “parachurch” organizations have been used effectively by the Christian Right, he noted, to organize anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ rights electoral efforts outside of and across denominations. Focus on the Family is one example of a broad, parachurch organization that works at both the state and federal level.

Of course, Clarkson noted, there are many potential obstacles to creating such a movement, including the difficulty of organizing a Religious Left that is substantially more diverse and less homogenous in thought than the Christian Right. But if such an effort were to be possible, how that might be achieved was the focus of the discussion.



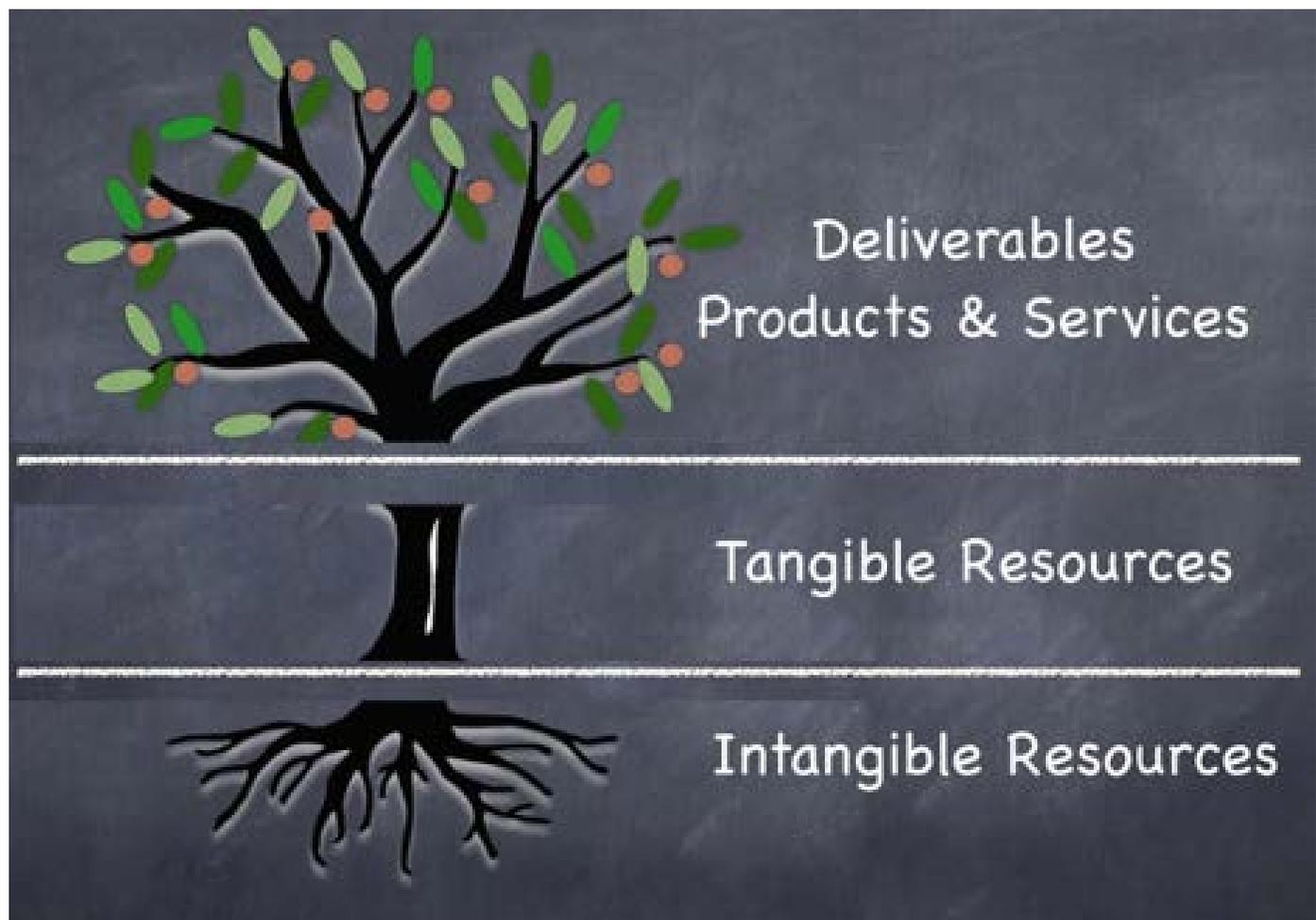
Following Clarkson, Rachel Tabachnick, an independent writer, researcher, and speaker on conservative infrastructure and activism and a former PRA Fellow, expanded on the idea of parachurch organizations.

Tabachnick defined parachurch organizations as “voluntary, not-for-profit associations of Christians working outside denominational control to achieve some specific ministry or social service.” Parachurch advocacy organizations can take many forms: they may be single issue or multiple issue organizations; they may have varying degrees of involvement in legislative and electoral politics. They can be local, state, regional, or national. Some direct their advocacy toward the public, while others target elites. These and other choices would need to be made in the development of pro-choice parachurch advocacy organizations

According to Tabachnick, conservative parachurch organizations like Focus on the Family grew hand-in-hand with free market think tanks like the Acton Institute. These two tracks eventually merged into organizations like the Cornwall Alliance, which created an anti-climate change program called “Resisting the Green Dragon,” linking environmentalism to supposedly damaging anti-family practices such as abortion and feminism. It also teaches, in its widely distributed DVDs, that environmentalism is in conflict with Christianity and free-market values.

Tabachnick used this example to illustrate the organizational structure and deliverables of a typical Christian Right parachurch organization. In the figure below, the branches of the tree represent deliverable products and services: policy guidelines, education, media, get-out-the-vote efforts, etc. These deliverables may be directed to policy elites or the public.

The trunk of the tree represents the tangible resources: human resources and financial support. This includes the people she calls “Fixers, Funders, and Fellows.” Fixers are the architects



of movements. Examples include Paul Weyrich, who founded some of the major bastions of conservative infrastructure, and Don Eberly, who played a leading role in establishing the Focus on the Family-affiliated Family Policy Council in Pennsylvania. Today Family Policy Councils have proliferated throughout the country, lobbying on issues of abortion and contraception access, LGBTQ rights, and broad “religious freedom” issues under the “family values” rubric.

Lastly are the roots of the tree, the intangible resources: knowledge, vision, values and ideas. These are often the least visible assets, said Tabachnick, but they are the foundations on which the rest of the organization depends. These resources undergird sophisticated get-out-the-vote efforts and must be understood to be countered. Electoral politics and issue advocacy at its best will not stop the Christian Right if the fight is not grounded in well-articulated values and vision, she noted.

Patricia Miller, author and journalist who writes about the intersection of religion, sex, and politics, was unable to attend and Clarkson presented her prepared response “Organizing Prochoice Catholics.”

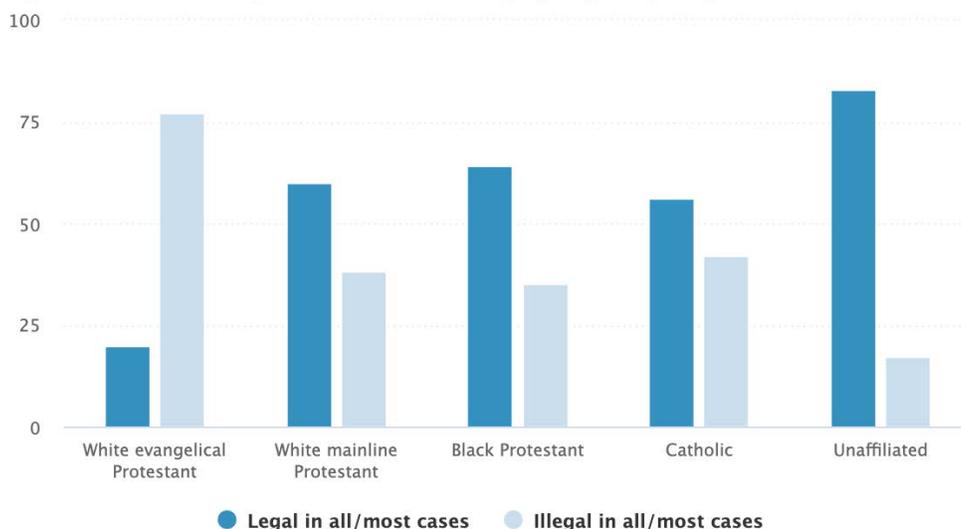
Clarkson noted that Catholics are the single largest denomination in the United States and represent some 51 million potential voters. Catholics remain a powerful electoral presence in the traditional Catholic strongholds of the East Coast and Midwest but are increasingly an electoral force in the South and Southwest.

As Clarkson noted previously, polling consistently shows that a majority of Catholics are pro-choice—56% according to the most recent Pew Poll, which is far above the 20% of White Evangelicals who support abortion rights.

Organizing Catholics, however, presents distinct challenges. The Catholic Church is the only major religious denomination that is unequivocally opposed to abortion in almost every instance.

In addition, the Catholic Church has a centralized hierarchy whose teach-

*% of U.S. adults who say abortion should be legal/illegal, by religion (2019)*



ings such as the prohibition on abortion are considered binding on all Catholics. Finally, there is a lack of prochoice leadership from either clerics or others with significant authority within the church.

However, there are also significant opportunities for organizing a prochoice Catholic population, including a significant body of Catholic moral philosophy about the acceptability of abortion in the Catholic tradition and the primacy of conscience in moral decision-making. There is also no Catholic position on the jurisprudence of abortion laws. Finally, the Catholic hierarchy has become sensitized to the issue of appearing to favor one political party over the other.

Significant questions about organizing the prochoice Catholic community include whether there are different organizing strategies that would be most effective for subsets of the U.S. Catholic community? What would be the best way to deliver resources to educate Catholics about abortion within the Catholic theological tradition? How should we identify, train and support prochoice, lay Catholic leaders? And what are the best organizational structures to support the development of a prochoice Catholic constituency?

Following these presentations, moderator Cari Jackson presented the panel with the opening question, transcribed below, of the colloquium. Clarkson's essay, Jackson noted, proposes the creation of some kind of parachurch political organization, or a series of such organizations, for the prochoice religious community. There are several different models that pilot parachurch projects could take: one might be organized around a single religious tradition; another might be ecumenical; another might be interfaith. Such groups could have a narrow agenda, could take a broader approach, or even be multi-issue organizations such as those that have powered the Christian Right (such as Focus on the Family). What do you think would be the best approach? What lessons, good and bad, can we learn from evangelical parachurch organizations?

One theme that evolved strongly from the discussion was the need to develop different strategies, and perhaps even different types of organizations, for different faith groups. One opinion that was expressed was that a multi-faith effort would be most effective in the South, where much organizing work is done across Christian denominations. At the same time, working with the issue of reproductive health or rights can be a barrier in many faith communities. For example, in the Black Christian community there is still a lot of shame around sex and abortion. Some faith leaders are reluctant to tackle these issues head on

or to align themselves with these issues publicly, so you need to find ways to reach people where they are comfortable, even if it's just being able to offer comprehensive sex education to begin with and then building community and clergy trust from there. The opinion was offered that in both the South and the Midwest, it can take people longer to get on board and that people respond more positively to a reproductive justice frame that doesn't necessarily lead with abortion. It was noted that even progressive pastors have to be very careful in talking about reproductive justice in terms of how the membership receives it.

At the same time, another panelist noted that it's important for religious leaders who are pro-choice to be encouraged to speak out because a lot of people still believe you can't be religious and pro-choice. Religious leaders need to say they are pro-choice on specifically religious grounds, so people can see the spectrum of views.

There was also support expressed for developing an explicitly evangelical pro-choice parachurch organization, which may also appeal to the growing cohort of ex-Evangelicals. "The gospel good news of abortion," as one panelist put it, that would use language Evangelicals are comfortable with to discuss the redemptive possibility and promise of reproductive justice, and show how this can offer a new way forward by recognizing the moral authority and bodily autonomy of everyone. An Evangelicals for Reproductive Justice movement, as such, would move from "fire and brimstone" to "faith, freedom and flourishing."

Another panelist expressed that such movements would be necessary to meet the goal of changing the national conversation about abortion from a "justification framework," in which women have to justify their reproductive decisions, to a conversation about the socio-culture issues underpinning reproductive justice. The primary goal of organizing, this panelist asserted, should be to change the national conversation about justification to justice. Such an effort would need a clear and focused agenda for movement building with a solid connection to the prophetic tradition of Christian/Judeo faiths.

At this point the moderator took a question about how to build such movements in rural areas. The panelists agreed that much of the focus of reproductive justice is recognizing who is on the margins, and that is especially clear in rural communities, where in addition to lack of abortion access, people also often lack access to health care and transportation. In addition, it can be very risky for people in rural communities to espouse progressive abortion ideology.

Jackson then posed question number two to the panel. Creating such parachurch organizations would involve new approaches to cultural and political thought, as well as the possible enhancement of existing organizations. If the prochoice religious community were to look in this direction, and assuming that resources would be available to do it, what are the next steps we should be thinking about and planning? What are any potential obstacles?

One panelist noted that organizing outside of traditional church spaces isn't normal for mainstream Christian churches, that that work is done by small groups within larger denominations. In addition, on the Christian Right there is a unity of thought and dogma that isn't desirable or possible, so the very nature of differences on the progressive left potentially mediates against organizing success. These differences may suggest the need for separate parachurch organizations.

Again, however, there was widespread agreement that there is no one right way to organize. What we do need to have, one panelist noted, is space for people to sit with intersectional interchanges. This could result in the creation of deep messages about reproductive justice that translate in different ways for different communities and may take the form of different deliverables such as Bible study materials, educational aids, or sermon aids. What is most needed is representatives from different communities to guide and model these efforts.

It was also argued that there are three spaces where work needs to be done:

1. ministering to and with people who need/seek abortions, even if the abortion is wanted and chosen, as the progressive left has sacrificed the opportunity to find what women need and want in the weeks and months after abortion, which is a way to help women have more positive and powerful experiences;
2. teaching congregations in progressive local churches, i.e., LGBT welcoming and affirming churches; how to have these conversations around abortion; we need new language and ideas; and finally,
3. space for progressive, public religious voices within communities; these voices aren't being heard; a widespread public prochoice campaign is needed and necessary.

Another panelist noted that if such progressive parachurch groups were to be organized, we would need bolder new organizations to focus on these issues for progressive evangelicals.

The main challenges include funding such an effort and finding an appropriate organization or structure to incubate the idea. The panelist recommended getting a working group together to develop a long-term strategy with measurable goals, including training leaders.

There is also the need to tackle racism, sexism, anti-LGBTQ bias, and explicit and implicit bias in how many “church folk” see the world. One example offered was a reproductive justice and faith curriculum called “faith and advocacy” that educates people about the progressive ministry of Jesus. We need to consider rebranding “repro” because that automatically translates into abortion care and it’s hard to get church folks to come to anything with “repro.” Examples include “Vacation Body School” that presents a progressive, comprehensive sex ed curriculum.

There was also an important discussion about communications and media structures. A panelist suggested that a central question is what kind of structures were needed to build up an army of faith-centered and faith-led activists and associated media hubs—we need a rapid response that matches the Right. One suggestion was for a news service that reaches churchgoers of all denominations with a more sophisticated perspective on repro justice issues. Another strength of the Right that should be noted, according to one panelist, is a broad network to distribute materials such as publications on pro-choice religious ethics to interested audiences.

It’s problematic, noted another panelist, that media outlets are often owned by conservatives. The question they posed is what do we need to do in terms of communications differently and how can we do it cost effectively? Potential answers include web casts, podcasts, radio, billboards. There is also a need to model people talking about having had abortions and sharing their abortion stories.

There was also broad agreement that there is a need to make more nimble use of messaging and data techniques in terms of public political capacity. This is especially important given that committed Christian Right voters are only 10% of population, but 91% turned out in 2016, which translated into 25 million voters. Because small numbers of people can have an outsized impact, there is a real need to invest in tools such as data, media, and messaging to match the Right. One panelist noted that the Right has created large multi-denominational pastor networks and delivers very sophisticated messaging and data tools, such as those that compare voter data with church membership lists. The Right is also very good with targeted messaging for specific cohorts. Its source of unity isn’t theological points; it is a common political

vision. They are willing to try different messages for different groups and work with messaging shops to do that.

Clarkson concluded by noting that the Right has turned vast diversity into commonality, but that this was a multi-decade process that allowed them to put aside differences and find shared values, and common political purposes in order to hijack democracy. Ramos concluded by thanking the panelists and attendees for their time, vision, and enthusiasm, and reminding the participants that proceedings of the colloquium would be circulated.

## **SAMPLE QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS AND OBSERVERS:**

*These really are powerful perspectives. We can ALL meet together based in shared values: Freedom, Faith, Self Determination.*

*This colloquium is a major step in the right direction, another part is understanding how the pro-life movement began.*

*This is the kind of hope-and-fire-filled language that we need in this work.*

*Love this colloquium!*

*This has been an important and informative discussion! I look forward to seeing how religious advocacy for reproductive justice can go forward and influence our national politics.*

*I want to thank all of you for this, it was very helpful and encouraging.*

*Changing the national conversation is critical...And, taking action steps that lead to equity and justice.*

*This is a powerful discussion! Thank you for organizing it!*

*If I could applaud with text, I would.*

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***AN ANNOTATED  
DIRECTORY OF THE  
PROCHOICE RELIGIOUS  
COMMUNITY IN THE  
UNITED STATES***

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**Compiled by Frederick Clarkson,  
Senior Research Analyst, Political Research Associates**

**T**his directory lists the current prochoice and reproductive justice elements of organized religion in the United States. It is intended primarily as a resource for those seeking to support these values in light of contemporary legislative and judicial setbacks, and for those seeking fresh approaches toward a better future.

If one were looking for the prochoice religious community in the United States, this is a rough map of where to find it.

Data from polling and the history of prochoice religious thought, organizing, and institutional support suggests that the prochoice religious community may be a majority or near majority of religious people in the United States. We are defining these as the members of officially prochoice groups and denominations and dissident members of antiabortion denominations, as well as religious independents of all kinds—making the prochoice religious community as broad and diverse as the country itself. Because this is so, Political Research Associates has also published a related essay titled “The Prochoice Religious Community May Be the Future of Reproductive Rights, Access, and Justice.”<sup>1</sup>

## ***HERE IS WHAT IS AND IS NOT INCLUDED IN THIS DIRECTORY:***

This directory lists those institutions and organizations that self-identify as religious in nature, or what some call “faith-based.” It includes both formal religious institutions as well as ecumenical and interfaith advocacy groups.

The institutions and organizations listed here are specifically (sometimes guardedly) prochoice and oppose legal restrictions on access to abortion care. Some take the broader reproductive justice view. Many of the organizations listed were at some point part of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), founded in 1973. Organiza-

tions came and went from RCRC over time, and some no longer exist. (RCRC itself is no longer a coalition but a freestanding organization.) Nevertheless, a history of affiliation with RCRC remains a useful indicator of some measure of interest and commitment on the part of the listed institutions and organizations. But the past membership in RCRC is not the whole of the prochoice religious community. Some groups listed in this directory were never part of RCRC. Some are new.

The directory does not include such denominationally related institutions as seminaries, publishing houses, and colleges, although those institutions may also sometimes be relevant to the breadth and depth of the influence of the denominations. Some such entities have multiple denominational affiliations, and so their inclusion here would add unnecessary complexity to the directory and the individual listings.

This directory is intended as a starting point for anyone looking into this. But its utility requires a few caveats.

It may be stating the obvious, but just because an institution has a position does not mean all members are aligned with it. Thus, not every individual in the prochoice Christian and Jewish denominations and organizations (that comprise most of the organized prochoice religious community) are necessarily prochoice. (Just as not everyone in officially antiabortion religious institutions are themselves antichoice.)

It is important to underscore that unlike many conservative antiabortion religious institutions, these denominations have democratic polities, which is to say that they elect their leaders and decide their theological and public policy positions via considered democratic processes. These positions often evolve over time and may trend in both directions.

What’s more, there are many religious bodies that do not have an official position on abor-

tion. [The National Council of Churches of Christ \(NCC\)](#) and some of its [38 member denominations](#) are in this category.<sup>2</sup> While some NCC member denominations are pro-choice, others are not or have no position, But many members of those churches without a formal position may be, as individuals, prochoice.

In any case there are, as this directory shows, many prochoice religious communities and religiously motivated activist groups. Some are mixed in their orientation, and a few are not strictly faith-based, but they are notable for purposes of this directory.

Adding to the complexity of identifying and working with the prochoice religious community is that these organizations often have differing views on a wide range of issues, from marriage equality to the politics of support for or criticism of the nation of Israel. So, while this directory focuses on matters of reproductive rights and justice, every organization has its own character, history, and priorities, some of which may conflict with those of other groups.



## PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN

**ALLIANCE OF BAPTISTS** has a virtual headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. The Alliance, which comprises some 4,500 members in 140 congregations, has been prochoice since at least 2012 and takes what

may be fairly called a justice perspective, although they did not originally use that language.

**AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES USA (ABC)**, headquartered in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, is a mainline Protestant denomination and member of the NCC, with about 1.1 million members in about 5,000 congregations. It has a [mixed view](#), acknowledging that they are “divided as to the proper witness of the church to the state regarding abortion. Many of our membership seek legal safeguards to protect unborn life. Many others advocate for and support family planning legislation, including legalized abortion as in the best interest of women in particular and society in general. Again, we have many points of view between these two positions. Consequently, we acknowledge the freedom of each individual to advocate for a public policy on abortion that reflects his or her beliefs.” ABC USA was represented on the board of directors of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (RCAR), the predecessor to RCRC, in 1983–84.

**AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE (AFSC)**, based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, reflects the Quaker public policy view of abortion, one that is consistent with contemporary definitions of reproductive justice. There are a variety of Quaker sects, totaling about 76,000 members in the United States. The

more liberal of the Quakers are members of the NCC. The AFSC incorporates commitment to the sanctity of life with support for “a woman’s right to follow her own conscience concerning child bearing, abortion and sterilization... That choice must be made free of coercion, including the coercion of poverty, racial discrimination, and the availability of service to those who cannot pay.”<sup>3</sup> ([The Friends Committee on National Legislation](#), however, states, “Members of the Society of Friends are not in unity on abortion issues. Therefore, FCNL takes no position and does not act either for or against abortion legislation.”)

**CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN**, headquartered in Elgin, Illinois, is a member of the NCC and has about 123,000 members and 1,047 congregations in the United States as of 2010. The church updated its social policies in 2017 from the standpoint that, “The question of whether or not to have a child is considered from various perspectives with various principles guiding our actions: stewardship, legacy, obedience, family, peer or economic pressures and worries, and the like. Consequently, we desire to position one another to think deeply about the consequences of decisions regarding reproductive rights.” The church did not take a position for or against abortion legislation. However, Church of the Brethren Women’s Caucus was a past member of RCRC.

**COMMUNITY OF CHRIST** (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) is a Christian denomination that broke with the larger body of Mormonism in 1860. Headquartered in Independence, Missouri, and a member of the NCC, the Community of Christ claims 250,000 members in 1,100 congregations in 59 countries. The denomination has repeatedly affirmed “the right of the woman to make her own decision regarding the continuation or termination of problem pregnancies.”<sup>4</sup>

**DISCIPLES OF CHRIST** (aka the Christian Church) headquartered in Indianapolis, Indiana, is a mainline Protestant denomination and a member of the NCC. It has a half million members in 3,000 local congregations. It has been prochoice [since 1973](#). An independent activist unit, [Disciples for Choice](#) was a founding member of RCRC. The Disciples' statements on abortion resolved to "respect differences in religious beliefs concerning abortion and oppose, in accord with the principle of religious liberty, any attempt to legislate a specific religious opinion or belief concerning abortion on all Americans."<sup>5</sup>

**THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH (TEC)**, headquartered in New York City, is a mainline Protestant denomination and is a member communion in the NCC. It has about 1.9 million members, of whom 1.7 million are located in the United States as of 2017. In 2015, Pew Research estimated that 1.2% of the adult population in the United States (3 million people) self-identify as mainline Episcopalians,<sup>6</sup> which suggests that those who identify as Episcopalians exceeds the actual membership. (The idea that identity may transcend formal membership may also be true for other mainline Protestant denominations that have experienced declines in members in the past few decades.) TEC [recognizes](#) a person's right to terminate their pregnancy and opposes legal restrictions, but it officially condones abortion only in cases of rape or incest, and when a person's physical or mental health is at risk, or cases involving fetal abnormalities. TEC was a founding member of RCRC and has several active denominational entities that are also past members of RCRC, including Episcopal Urban Caucus and Episcopal Women's Caucus.

**EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA (ELCA)** headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, is a mainline Protestant denomination and member of the NCC, with about 3.5 million baptized members in 9,200 congregations as of 2017. The church believes that "abortion

prior to viability should not be prohibited by law or by lack of public funding." The [Lutheran Women's Caucus](#) was a founding member of RCRC.

**METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES (MCC)**, headquartered in Sarasota, Florida, is an international denomination founded in 1968. It claims 222 member congregations in 37 countries, most of them in the United States. The MCC has a specific outreach to LGBTQ families and communities, [considers](#) access to abortion a fundamental human right, and in 2015 formally adopted a reproductive justice framework.

**MORAVIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA, NORTHERN PROVINCE** is a small Protestant denomination headquartered in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The Church declared in 1974 that "the Bible does not speak directly to the matter of abortion and the Moravian Church has refrained from being dogmatic when a biblical position is not clear."<sup>7</sup> The Church is a past member of RCRC and a current member of the NCC.

**NATIONAL BAPTIST CONVENTION**, headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee, is a historically Black Protestant denomination and is a member of the NCC. It claims 7.5 million members in 31,000 congregations. It has a policy of allowing individual congregations to determine their own views on abortion. According to the 2016 Pew Religious Landscape Study, 52% of historically Black Protestants believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Carlton W. Veazey, the former longtime president of RCRC, is an ordained minister in the denomination.

**PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)**, headquartered in Louisville, Kentucky, is a mainline Protestant denomination and member of the NCC with about 1,350,000 active members and 19,000 ordained ministers in 9,000 congregations as of the end of 2018. There are also hundreds of thousands of additional inactive members or otherwise in close relation to the official

church. PCUSA has been officially prochoice since 1970 and has [repeatedly](#) reaffirmed its basic position. The denomination has a pro-choice action caucus [Presbyterians Affirming Reproductive Options](#) (PARO) and along with the Presbyterian Mission Agency, were founding members of RCRC. Internal advocacy divisions [include](#) Presbyterian Women and Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns. The church-related online journal *Unbound: An Interactive Journal of Christian Social Justice* sometimes [features](#) reproductive justice work.

**[SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH](#)**, headquartered in Silver Spring, Maryland, a 21 million member denomination worldwide, was officially, albeit guardedly, prochoice since [1992](#). Its membership includes abortion providers, and abortions are provided at some church affiliated hospitals. However, those who disagree with this view have fought to have the denominational position changed. Following a [long deliberative process](#), a 2019 [statement](#) by the World Church Executive Committee shifted the church's position, advising that abortion is "out of harmony with God's plan" and that it is justified only in rare and extreme circumstances, when the decision should be "left to the conscience of the individuals involved and their families." Adventist world church president Ted N. C. Wilson explained that the statement is "is not part of the Church Manual" and is not intended to be something by which "church boards and members will judge other people." Addressing church leaders, he added, "Please instruct and encourage our church members not to do that. It is a biblical statement to inform not only the world but ourselves how the Bible speaks to us about life."<sup>8</sup> The statement takes no position on public policy.

**[UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST \(UCC\)](#)**, headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio, is a mainline Protestant denomination and member of the NCC. It has about a million members in about 5,000 congregations. The UCC has been official-

ly prochoice since the 1960s and embraces [reproductive justice](#). It was a founding member of RCRC. The retired director of the UCC's Washington office is, in 2019, the chair of RCRC.

**[UNITED METHODIST CHURCH \(UMC\)](#)**, which does not have a central headquarters, is a mainline Protestant denomination and a member of the NCC, with about 13 million members about half of whom are in the United States. In 2015, Pew Research estimated that 3.6% of the U.S. population, or 9 million adult adherents, self-identify with the UMC. This reveals a much larger number of adherents than registered membership (which may also be indicative of the broader sense of community and identification with other denominations that have lost actual members for a variety of reasons).

The UMC's official position on abortion has evolved over the years. Under pressure from a sustained campaign by internal and external Christian Right groups, the UMC went from being officially prochoice (as a founding member of RCRC) to one with a mixed view. The UMC officially withdrew from RCRC<sup>9</sup> and proscribed any UMC entity from being part of RCRC. The UMC stated in [2016](#), "Governmental laws and regulations do not provide all the guidance required by the informed Christian conscience. Therefore, a decision concerning abortion should be made only after thoughtful and prayerful consideration by the parties involved, with medical, family, pastoral, and other appropriate counsel." The denomination also seeks to prevent unwanted pregnancies and to reduce the incidence of abortion. Additionally, "We affirm and encourage the Church to assist the ministry of crisis pregnancy centers and pregnancy resource centers that compassionately help women find feasible alternatives to abortion."

However, like other denominations with stronger official positions, the view of the

membership is mixed and the denomination has been internally divided. Nevertheless it is still a big tent with some identifiably pro-choice centers. The [Methodist Federation for Social Action](#) (a founding member of RCRC) is a progressive social action caucus in the UMC with a nationwide constituency. [United Methodist Women](#), headquartered in New York City, while part of the UMC, also has its own endowment and a measure of independence. Over the years, various divisions of the UMC have been RCRC members, including General Board of Church and Society, General Board of Global Ministries, and the Women's Division.

The UMC was considering a plan for schism in 2020, primarily over matters related to the acceptance, marriage, and ordination of LGBTQ people; however, the denomination's decision-making General Conference was postponed until 2021 due to the COVID-19 crisis. It is expected that eventually there will be a two-way split, with conservative churches departing the historic denomination. It is also expected that most of the U.S. congregations will stay, while more conservative churches internationally will depart.<sup>10</sup> It may be that after all this, the UMC will someday return to a strong prochoice view.

[YWCA USA \(YOUNG WOMEN'S CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATION\)](#), headquartered in Washington, DC, reports that it serves more than 2 million women, girls, and their families through 210 local associations in 46 states and the District of Columbia. It supports abortion rights as part of comprehensive women's reproductive health care. The YWCA currently partners with Planned Parenthood nationally to connect young women with information and education regarding matters of sexual health including access to abortion services. It is a past member of RCRC.



## ROMAN CATHOLIC

[CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE](#) is a Washington, DC, headquartered education and advocacy organization founded in 1973, and it was a founding member of RCRC. It is the only openly prochoice Catholic organization in the United

States. It publishes an influential quarterly magazine, *Conscience*. A spokesperson said, "Catholics for Choice shapes and advances sexual and reproductive ethics that are based on justice, reflect a commitment to women's well-being and respect and affirm the individual's capacity to make moral decisions about their lives." They have many resources for prochoice Catholics including *The Truth about Catholics and Abortion*, which makes the theological case for how to be Catholic and prochoice.<sup>11</sup>

## HUMANIST & UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST



**AMERICAN ETHICAL UNION (AEU)**, headquartered in New York City, is a national humanist movement that is organized like a religion, with about 10,000 mem-

bers in local societies in 15 states. [Officially prochoice](#) since 1991, AEU issued a [strong statement](#) condemning the 2019 abortion ban legislation in Alabama. The American Ethical Union National Service Conference is a past member of RCRC.

**SOCIETY FOR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM**, headquartered in Farmington Hills, Michigan, is the congregational arm of the Humanistic Jewish movement, comprising non-theistic Jews organized into 29 communities or communities in formation in 19 states and the District of Columbia. It is a past member of RCRC.

**UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION (UUA)**, headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, had about 163,000 members and 55,000 church school enrollees as of 2011. The UUA was a founding member of RCRC and has an active subsidiary group, the [Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation](#), and 23 [State Action Networks](#). The UUA issued a strong [statement](#) on reproductive justice in 2015 after a four-year study and has an active [reproductive justice program](#).

## JUDAISM



Traditional Jewish teachings sanction abortion as a means of safeguarding the life and well-being of a mother. There are about 6.7 million Jews in the United States.<sup>12</sup> While the

Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative movements openly advocate for the right to safe and accessible abortions, the Orthodox movement is divided. Still, there are a number of specifically Jewish organizations, some of these ecumenical, that have historically supported abortion rights. According to the 2016 Pew Religious Landscape Study, 83% of American Jews believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

**AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE**, headquartered in New York City, is an advocacy and civil rights group with ten regional offices in the United States and many internationally. It is a past member of RCRC.

**AMERICAN JEWISH CONGRESS** is a New York City-based civil rights and pro-Israel advocacy organization, which also has a long and strong tradition of feminist and prochoice activism. It is a past member of RCRC.

**ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE (ADL)** is a New York City headquartered civil rights, anti-bigotry, and advocacy organization with 29 offices in the United States and three offices in other countries. It is a past member of RCRC.

**CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS**, headquartered in New York City, is the leadership organization of Reform rabbis in the United States. It is a past member of RCRC.

**WOMEN OF REFORM JUDAISM (WRJ)**, formerly known as the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, is the women's affiliate of the Union for Reform Judaism and represents more than 65,000 women. First publicly

supported availability of contraception in 1935, WRJ was a founding member of RCRC in 1973. WJR partners with the [Religious Action Center in a Reproductive Health & Rights Campaign](#).

**REFORM JEWISH YOUTH MOVEMENT** (formerly called the North American Federation of Temple Youth) comprises 8,500 members in 750 local youth groups and was a founding member of RCRC.

**HADASSAH** is the Women's Zionist Organization of America headquartered in New York City, has 330,000 members in the United States, and is a past member of RCRC.

**JEWISH WOMEN INTERNATIONAL**, a Washington, DC, based organization that seeks to "empower women and girls by ensuring and protecting their physical safety and economic security, promoting and celebrating inter-generational leadership, and inspiring civic participation and community engagement." It is a past member of RCRC.

**JEWISH RECONSTRUCTIONIST FEDERATION**, headquartered in Wyncote, Pennsylvania, comprises about 90 congregations in 26 states. It is a past member of RCRC. The related [Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association](#) has about 300 members and is also a past member of RCRC.

**NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN**, headquartered in New York City, claims 90,000 members in 28 states. A founding member of RCRC, NCJW [supports](#) "unrestricted abortion access for all" and has major programmatic initiatives and staff working at the intersection of religion with sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice. One of these programs is the [Rabbis for Repro](#) campaign, which invites rabbis and cantors to pledge to teach and preach about the Jewish perspective on abortion. Initial signatories represent all of the denominations of Judaism: Reform,

Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and Orthodox.<sup>13</sup>

**RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM**, headquartered in New York City, has been [officially prochoice](#) for five decades. As of 2010, there were 1,648 members, most of whom serve in the United States and Canada. It is a past member of RCRC. It is affiliated with the [United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism](#), the major congregational organization of Conservative Judaism, and had 572 affiliated congregations around the world as of 2017. It is a past member of RCRC. The related [Women's League for Conservative Judaism](#), comprising about "400 sisterhoods and synagogue women's groups," is also a past member of RCRC.

**UNION FOR REFORM JUDAISM**, officially [pro-choice](#) since 1967, has reaffirmed its position a number of times including in 1975. Headquartered in New York City, it maintains an active Washington presence in the [Reform Action Center \(RAC\)](#). As of 2013, the [Pew Research Center](#) survey calculated that Reform Judaism represented about 35% of all 5.3 million Jews in the United States, making it the largest Jewish religious group in the country. RAC partners with Women of Reform Judaism on a [Reproductive Health & Rights Campaign](#) "to provide an organizing structure for congregations, women's groups, and other Reform Jewish communities to take collective action for reproductive health and rights on a local, state, provincial, and federal level."

**WOMEN'S AMERICAN ORT** is a New York City-based fundraising organization that seeks to help educate women and girls in 35 countries in Jewish culture and academic subjects. It is a past member of RCRC.



## ECUMENICAL, INTERFAITH, & ACTIVIST GROUPS

**AMERICANS UNITED FOR SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE** is a Washington, DC, headquartered national, multi-faith, and secular advocacy group focusing on religious freedom and equality with 30 local chapters in 25 states. It actively fights for [reproductive choice](#) via legislation, litigation, and other aspects of public policy.

**AUBURN SEMINARY** is a multi-faith, non-degree-granting seminary in New York City. The school has two centuries of roots in mainline Presbyterianism, but today it sees itself “as the beating heart of the multi-faith movement for justice.” The school conducts a variety of research, publishing, and training programs and is deeply engaged in matters of reproductive justice, such as a 2019 discussion, “Body Liberation: The Audacious Spiritual Claim for Reproductive Justice.”

**CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS OF AMERICA** is an online progressive, evangelical organization, based in Chandler, Arizona. CDA says of themselves: “We are committed to reforming social injustices by working to influence the ideals of the Democratic Party and work with candidates that have both strong and principled Jesus-based values and a Progressive agenda.” Their “platform” on abortion reads in part: “We believe abortion should be legal, safe and rare. Democrats and Republicans must stop referring to this issue as ‘us vs. them’ as there are many ways we can promote both life and choice in a moderate way [emphases in the original]. We can lessen abortions and protect a woman’s right to choose at the same time. Abortions are at their lowest numbers in decades because Democrats support agencies such as Planned Parenthood and other family planning

institutions that provide free birth control and family planning. If we follow a comprehensive plan that includes access to contraception, education, adoption laws, economic incentives that assist low-income mothers, we can cut abortion rates dramatically.” CDC has repeatedly denounced Dominionism on their podcast and described the 2019 abortion ban in Alabama as an example.

**CLERGY ADVOCACY BOARD, PLANNED PARENTHOOD ACTION FUND** is part of the policy arm of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, with offices in New York City and Washington, DC. “CAB members are dedicated clergy and faith leaders from different denominations and communities throughout the U.S. who work with Planned Parenthood at the national and state levels to further the goal of full reproductive freedom for all women and men.”

**CONCERNED CLERGY FOR CHOICE**, headquartered in Albany, New York, describes itself as “a multi-faith statewide network of religious leaders committed to standing with Planned Parenthood patients and health centers across New York State.” It is an arm of Planned Parenthood Empire State Acts.

**FAITH IN WOMEN** is a state-based educational organization in Mississippi that says of itself, “Faith in Women connects faith leaders across Mississippi with the reproductive health resource and education they need to compassionately and fully serve the women in their congregations and communities. From networking events to educational trainings, we provide a range of opportunities for faith leaders to meet and learn from trusted experts as well as each other.”

**FLORIDA INTERFAITH COALITION FOR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND JUSTICE** is a statewide organization that describes itself as “a grassroots group of clergy, faith leaders and lay people who reflect diverse faith beliefs as well the diversity of our community. Through advocacy and education, the Interfaith Coalition

supports and protects reproductive health, rights and justice of all Florida residents, with a special focus on the essential health care services of the Florida Planned Parenthood affiliates. The Interfaith Coalition affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, and believes in the constitutional right of religious liberty and the right of each person to make reproductive health care decisions in accordance with their own conscience and faith beliefs, without shame or stigma.” The Interfaith Coalition plans to do congregational organizing on the model of Just Texas.

**INTERFAITH VOICES FOR REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE (IVRJ)**, launched in 2018, currently exists only online but states that its mission is “to build and galvanize an interfaith movement of progressive voices collectively working to construct new, progressive theological and ethical paradigms that affirm women’s moral capacity to make decisions that are in women’s own best interests, benefits their families, and contributes to the good of the broader community.” IVRV also states that it is “grounded in reproductive justice theory and strategy. IVRJ not only does reproductive justice work, but it strives to embody reproductive justice as the thread that runs throughout the organization.”

**JUST TEXAS: FAITH VOICES FOR REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE** is a project of the Austin, Texas, based advocacy group, Texas Freedom Network. Just Texas “supports efforts to ensure women have access to abortion and other reproductive health care services. That access requires adequate state funding and broad availability of birth control, especially for low income women.” They “oppose politicians’ attempts to codify a single religious standard that ignores the rich diversity of Texans’ beliefs about reproductive rights.”

Just Texas seeks to designate Reproductive Freedom Congregations in the state. They say that 25 congregations had received the designation as of August 2020, with many more

in process. These congregations are invited to adopt three principles: “We trust and respect women. We promise that people who attend our congregation will be free from stigma, shame, or judgment for their reproductive decisions, including abortion. We believe access to comprehensive and accessible reproductive health services is a moral and social good.”

**POOR PEOPLE’S CAMPAIGN: A NATIONAL CALL FOR MORAL REVIVAL** is a latter-day continuation of the effort led by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The campaign, led by Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II of the North Carolina-based Repairers of the Breach and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, does not have a specific position on abortion. The campaign has engaged activists in 40 states in the past two years and includes both prochoice and prolife people in their social justice efforts. They have sought to avoid letting the issue divide a unifying moral narrative for social and economic justice. However, the campaign has taken the view that the Christian Right’s (what they call Christian Nationalism’s) focus on abortion comes at the expense of poor women of color, and is thus an act of oppression and a distortion of the moral narrative. Barber expressed this view in an essay in *The Nation*<sup>14</sup> in the wake of his traveling to Alabama in 2019 to denounce the hypocrisy of antiabortion politicians who he charges are “prolife” only when it comes to abortion.<sup>15</sup> The Campaign argues that the antiabortion politics of the Christian Right are part of a long-term effort to sustain White supremacy and social and economic injustice in the United States.<sup>16</sup> Barber said in 2020, “You know where they actually started? They actually started being against desegregation and when that became unpopular, they changed the language to be about abortion.”<sup>17</sup>

**RELIGIOUS COALITION FOR REPRODUCTIVE CHOICE (RCRC)** headquartered in Washington, DC, evolved from an underground network called the Clergy Consultation Service on

Abortion formed in 1967, six years before *Roe v. Wade*. Originally named the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (RCAR)<sup>18</sup> since its founding in 1973, RCRC was the premier interfaith coalition of prochoice religious organizations. No longer a coalition, in recent years it has continued as a [freestanding](#) organization with affiliates in 12 states. RCRC maintains a list of [faith perspectives](#) in this area. In its heyday, RCRC maintained a coalition council and clergy for choice network, which had significant representation from the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, secular humanist, and other non-Christian communities. RCRC was also the home of the Black Church Initiative, a large and robust network of Black clergy committed to Reproductive Health, Rights, and Justice during the 1990s. RCRC hosted an annual Black Church Summit in partnership with Howard Divinity School.

**RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE**, which closed in 2020, was an interfaith [reproductive justice](#) think tank and educational network located in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Founded in 2001, the Institute served a network of more than 15,000 “clergy, religious educators, seminary presidents and deans, religious scholars, and people of faith who are committed to sexual, gender, and reproductive justice.” The Religious Institute maintained a [database](#) of “official positions of all major U.S. religious denominations on sexuality-related issues.” Their report *A Time to Embrace: Why the Sexual and Reproductive Justice Movement Needs Religion* also details the prochoice views of some major American religious institutions.<sup>19</sup>

**SISTERREACH**, founded in 2011 and headquartered in Memphis, Tennessee, describes itself as “an advocate for the reproductive autonomy of women & teens of color, poor & rural women, LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming people.” They say, “our Reproductive Justice and Faith work is centered in Womanist liberation-theology.” SisterReach hosted a conference on Reproductive Justice, Faith and Religion in August 2020.

## OTHER MINORITY RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS



**BUDDHISM:** There are a number of Buddhist sects comprising about 1% of the U.S. population. Generally, Buddhist belief in reincarnation leads to the belief that

life begins at conception. Buddhism generally condemns taking the life of any living thing, so aborting a fetus would not meet with easy approval. But like other religious traditions, views are evolving. One Buddhist scholar argues with antiabortion scholars saying that abortion can be “a good way to help both suffering pregnant women and at the same time is not obviously contrasting to Buddhist teachings.” She concludes that one can have an abortion and still be a good Buddhist, because the faith “allows enough freedom to choose the way. Whatever one decides, one has to be brave enough to accept the consequences.”<sup>20</sup> Evidently, most American Buddhists can reconcile traditional teaching with making a moral choice about abortion. According to the 2016 Pew Religious Landscape Study, 82% of American Buddhists believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

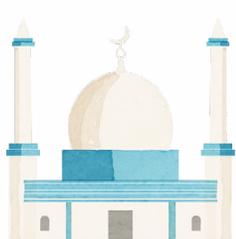


**HINDUISM:** Hindus comprise less than 1% of Americans. Traditional Hindu teachings condemn abortion unless the health of the mother is at risk because it is thought to violate the religion’s teachings of nonviolence. Hinduism teaches that the correct

course of action in any given situation is the one that causes the least harm to those involved. (In India, abortion has been legal since 1971 and is widely available, the doctrines of the majority Hindus, notwithstand-

ing.<sup>21</sup>) According to the 2016 Pew Religious Landscape study, 68% of American Hindus believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

Dr. Aseem Shukla, a physician and the cofounder of the [Hindu American Foundation](#), a Washington, DC, based religious advocacy group, took a nuanced but essentially prochoice view in a 2011 essay in *The Washington Post*. Although Hindu theology comes at it in a different way, it ends up in much the same place as leading prochoice Christian churches. Abortion is to be avoided but it needs to be up to the woman to decide and that she should not be prevented from having a legal medical procedure. Dr. Shukla wrote, “while Hindu scripture is clear on this issue, one would be hard-pressed to find Hindu spiritual leaders finger-pointing and tut-tutting on this divisive issue. For their position is very clear: if you ask, we will tell you our position, but we will not enter into your life unless you come to us for guidance and advice.” Dr. Shukla continued, “Society’s salvation lies in a progressive embrace of contraception, education and most important, frank relationships between parent and child—the essential tools to prevent unwanted pregnancies.” He decries efforts of “the far-right” to undermine public schools generally, and sex-education in particular which he sees as critical to preventing unwanted pregnancies, and thus abortion.<sup>22</sup>



**ISLAM:** Muslims comprise about 1% of the American population, but Islam does not have a single organizational authority and so has no official position. There are a range of views among scholars about

when life begins and thus when abortion is morally acceptable.<sup>23</sup> There is, however, a small movement of progressive, prochoice Muslims in the United States. [Muslims for Progressive Values](#) (MPV) is an international grassroots

advocacy group of progressive Islam, headquartered in Los Angeles, California, with chapters in [seven American cities](#). MPV says it “promotes theologically-sound frameworks for Islamic liberalism.” It helped to found in 2017 [Alliance of Inclusive Muslims](#), which, among other things, [advocates](#) for gender equality and women’s reproductive health internationally. According to the 2016 Pew Religious Landscape Survey, 55% of American Muslims believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.



**NATIVE AMERICAN:** [Native American Community Board](#) (NACB) is an intertribal advocacy group headquartered in Lake Andes, South Dakota, with a reproductive justice perspective. A

[grantee partner](#) of the Ms. Foundation and led by Charon Asetoyer of the Comanche Nation, NACB states: “Since its founding in 1988, NAWHERC [[Native American Women Health Education Resource Center](#)] has become the leading pathfinder in the country in addressing Indigenous women’s reproductive health and justice issues while working to preserve and protect our culture. NACB and NAWHERC serve reservation-based Indigenous women at the local, national, and international levels.”

They take the broad view that “Traditionally, reproductive health issues were decisions made by the individual, and were not thrust-ed into the political arena for any kind of scrutinization. The core of decision-making for the Indigenous woman is between her and the Great Spirit.” A 1991 Women of Color Reproductive Health Poll found that many Native women believe every woman should decide for herself whether or not to have an abortion.<sup>24</sup>



**SIKHISM:** There are about 700,000 Sikhs in the United States and like other Asian religious traditions, there is no central doctrinal authority. Although Sikhs believe in the equality of women,

they also generally believe that life begins at conception and that life is the creative work of a monotheistic God who is present everywhere. A strong traditional view inclined against abortion is balanced, however, by practical realities of life. The [Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund](#), a small Washington, DC, based media, policy, and education organization’s stated mission “is to empower Sikh Americans by building dialogue, deepening understanding, promoting civic and political participation, and upholding social justice and religious freedom for all Americans.”

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

Many thanks to Cari Jackson, Mollie Katz, Katharine Lannamann, Lisa Weiner-Mafuz, and especially Lucy Jones, a student at Elon University, all for providing historical materials and perspectives regarding RCRC.

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# ***ENDNOTES***

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## THE PROCHOICE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY MAY BE THE FUTURE OF REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS, ACCESS, AND JUSTICE

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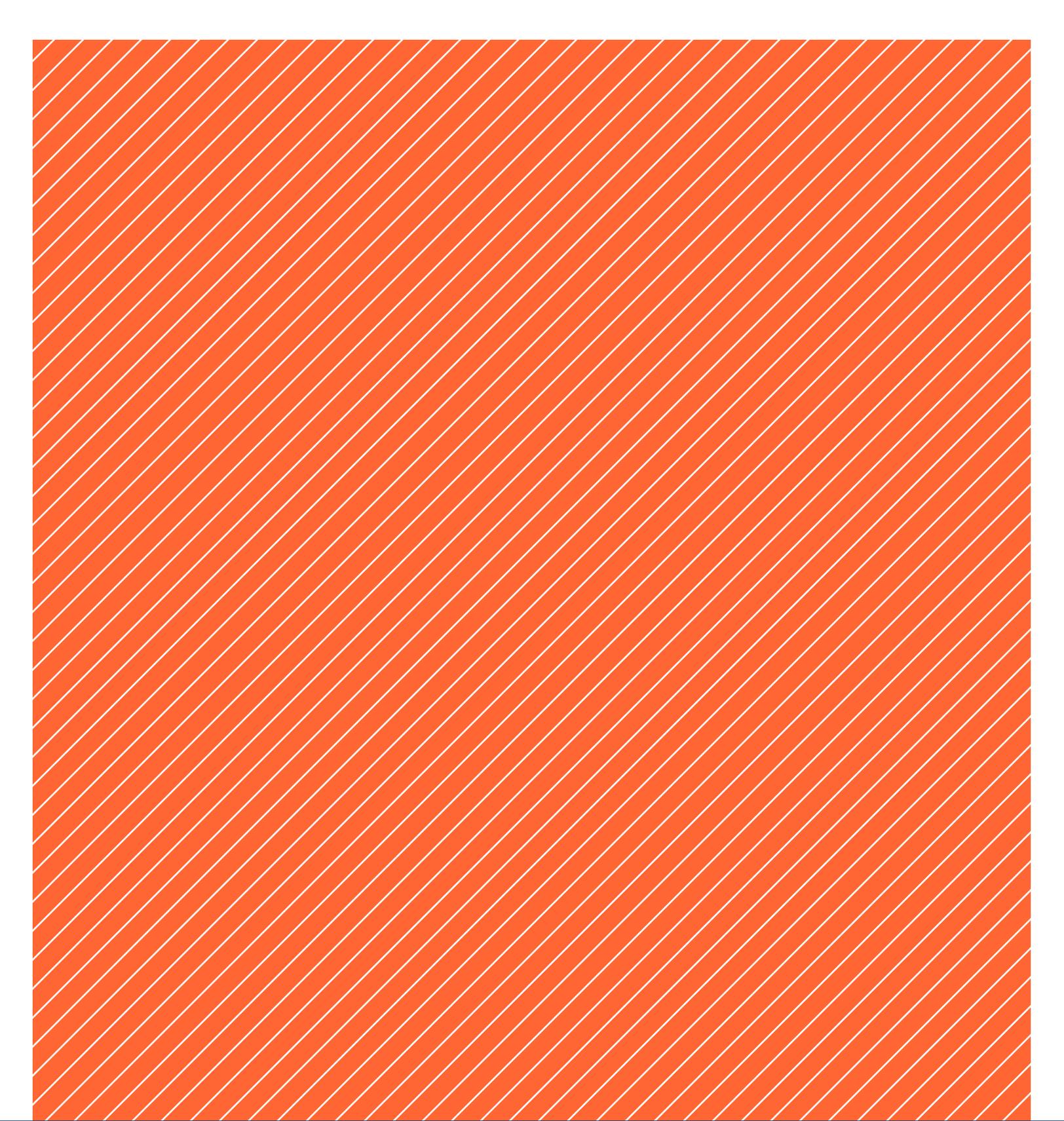
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*SEPTEMBER 2020*

