

Sacred Choices and Abortion: Ten New Things to Think About

Discussion & Action Guide

*Produced by The Religious Consultation
2005 copyright, The Religious Consultation*

Sacred Choices and Abortion Discussion & Action Guide

Table of Contents

Introduction	page 3
The Video/DVD	page 3
Facilitation	page 4
How to Watch	page 4
Chapter Summaries	page 5

Let's Talk

Theological Questions	page 9
Social Change Questions	page 9
Intimate Discussions	page 11
Action Steps	page 12
Resources	page 13

A choice for abortion is a sacred choice; it is a pro-life choice.

Sacred Choices and Abortion

Discussion & Action Guide

Introduction

The Campaign

The video/DVD *Sacred Choices and Abortion: Ten New Things to Think About* is part of the Sacred Choices Initiative that is a worldwide issues campaign aimed at expanding scholarly and lay perceptions of the positions of the world's religions on contraception and abortion. The goal is to change the discourse on family planning and open the way to a more informed and humane stance on woman's rights within a religious context. The campaign is organized by a group of international religious scholars from various religions known as The Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health and Ethics.

This remarkable documentary explores the “big lie”...that religion is opposed to a woman's right to choose. Ten insightful segments feature scholars from major faith traditions—Christian, Muslim and Jewish—as well as women and girls whose lives have been forever changed by abortion.

Both thoughtful and dramatic, *Sacred Choices and Abortion* radically reframes the debate over reproductive rights in our highly religious culture. It has been said that those who teach religious education need to carry their sacred texts in one hand and the newspaper in the other. This must be done so that religion can address, interpret and mediate contemporary society and culture with faith. The future of the world depends on our doing this.

The Video/DVD

In many ways the use of *Sacred Choices and Abortion* is like working from the inside out. It is a tool to foster understanding, create confidence, and to inspire engaging dialogues with less than like-minded people. It seems clear that in order for abortion to remain an option the public will need to mature in the ways in which it converses about the issue. At the same time the movement also needs to admit to grey areas, which nicely models deeper thinking for the “other side” as well. We cannot move from debate to policy unless our dialogue grows deeper, remains genuine, and is fully respectful of the sacred choices that we have. Dialogue does not happen in protest marches or petition signing—it happens in living rooms, churches and synagogues—in quiet conversations across this country. We see the viewing of *Sacred Choices and Abortion* as inspiring, nurturing and facilitating these conversations.

Facilitation

The facilitator of the *Sacred Choices and Abortion* screening might remind people that the DVD presents a religiously based pro-choice view that has not

been widely heard. One of the purposes of showing it is to allow people to hear this view, even if they do not agree with it. The facilitator might say that it is unhealthy when an important issue has people so divided that they cannot dialogue about it. The facilitator might also add that he/she will be neutral in their facilitation of the discussion.

In order to encourage dialogue the facilitator might ask the viewers what kind of “talking rules” will help them have a rich and caring conversation. You might want to pass an object around as a “talking stick” and set a time limit for speaking. Viewers should be encouraged to speak only for themselves. *Understanding is the main goal, not persuasion.*

Suggestions on How To Watch *Sacred Choices and Abortion*

Thomas Groome writes that “naming your own knowing” is the key to transformation. This implies that the viewer comes to his/her own conclusions instead of having the expert who tells them what to think. We all have our own experiences with faith, our religious upbringing or lack of it, and how sex and sexuality were introduced to our lives. It is important that our individual experiences are not discounted but heard. In following this philosophy of a gentle facilitation you might try the following steps. (For more detailed questions for discussion use please see section, **Let’s Talk.**)

1. Begin with a simple prayer that helps welcome the participants and sets a quiet, thoughtful tone.
2. Ask participants what they already know about abortion rights and abortion. How do they feel about abortion? Gently encourage personal stories.
3. Watch *Sacred Choices and Abortion*.
4. For a quick emotional read of the room ask participants to share two words that come to mind after watching the film. This gives viewers a way to immediately respond and allows everyone a chance to be heard.
5. Ask participants if attitudes and beliefs have changed. How have they been stirred? How and why have they stayed the same?
6. Ask them if they will move differently in the world? Will they do something differently about the issue of abortion?
7. Have at the ready a variety of resources to help instigate various actions.

The next section includes statements, facts, and questions drawn from the “chapters” in the DVD. The following section, Let’s Talk, includes theological, social change and personal questions that are extensions from the DVD.

Sacred Choices and Abortion Ten New Things to Think About Chapter Summaries

#1 Mary Had A Choice

This is the big lie—that many religions are opposed to women having the right to choose an abortion.

How is free will the doctrine of your faith community?

In what ways do women make moral decisions? How are women moral agents?

For Christians what does it mean that God *asked* Mary if she would bear Jesus?

#2 Religions are pro-choice...a well kept secret

Are you surprised at the number of religious organizations and faith communities that support keeping abortion legal?

In history some religions were clearly pro-choice. Can you give examples?

In the Catholic Church many scholars believed that life did not begin until quickening.

In Moslem historical tradition a fetus has a soul after 120 days consequently a woman could have an abortion before 120 days. Modern day Moslem theologians say an abortion is acceptable in cases of rape.

Most Rabbinical authorities would say that life begins when the majority of the fetus emerges from the birth canal. In the Jewish Reform movement psychological health issues are recognized.

What do you think of looking at the psychological health of a woman and not just her physical health?

The bible never mentions abortion.

How can a fetus be more important than a woman? Is pregnancy a means to an end?

What profound differences are there between a fetus and a baby?

#3 When abortion was illegal women died.

What would society look like if abortions were illegal and birth control was hard to get?

What would your daughter, your niece, your grandchildren's lives be like if abortion were illegal?

How would this impact your sons and grandsons?

Think about the wide spread repercussions that will happen if abortion becomes illegal. Will children be left motherless like Sharon McGee? Will children be born who are given less care than they need? Will there be more incidents of spousal abuse—what do you think?

What do you think would happen to a healthy understanding of sexuality in our society if abortion was illegal??

#4 Women are not interested in leaving the church.

How does abortion impact the relationship between women and clergy?

How can faith communities make it known that they welcome women who have had abortions or who are considering an abortion?

#5 Religious people disagree--- often quite strongly

Is there irony in an anti-abortionist activist using violence to make their point?

This chapter looks at anti-abortion extremists and how historically abortion was not such a controversial topic. Now the Christian Right has adopted this issue as **their** issue. Some of their argument is that they believe that only God creates and thus as humans we cannot take life away—that is only God's choice. What do you think of their argument?

Do you agree that it is a process of selection as to what to pick out of the bible to support your point of view?

#6 Pregnancy is at least a 25-year condition.

Bearing a child against one's will, is that enslavement?

How do you feel towards Lisa and her decision to have an abortion?

What does Daniel Maguire mean when he says that the only good abortion is a pro-life abortion?

Did Mindy's decision resonate with you? What about Iraela and her husband's decision?

#7 A nine year old girl can get pregnant

What do you think of the Catholic Church's stand regarding Rosa, the 9-year-old pregnant girl?

What could have been another way for the Catholic Church to think about this situation?

What actually makes sense to do in a child's forced pregnancy? Should religious beliefs be weighed against common sense?

Could this happen here---where a child who is raped and pregnant cannot get an abortion?

Who has the right to make a decision for a child?

What is your gut reaction to a 9-year-old child getting pregnant?

What is the best way to protect a child who is pregnant?

How did Rosa's case create a dilemma for all Catholics?

The father of Rosa said, "Only God knew how much we were suffering." How does this quote expand and deepen the discussion?

#8 Organized religion can promote guilt or healing

The church has inculcated the very guilt it points to in women who have had abortions.

Many women who have abortions are very spiritual—but yet they think they cannot turn to their faith community.

Is it in a woman's best interest for a woman to keep her abortion a secret?

What will empower women to talk about their abortions?

Does your faith community listen to women's needs and concerns?

Are women's issues discussed openly in your congregation?

This section also includes some ideas for healing like using candles, tree planting, letters of goodbye and prayers. Can you think of other ideas?

#9 It is a battle for religious freedom.

Why should we ask the government to take away our responsibility to make these kinds of important decisions? We don't ask the government to decide whether we are morally correct in participating in war, do we? We have a mechanism where the law recognizes different beliefs about killing in wartime.

Any attempt to say that abortion is murder even though Jewish Law does not say this is an attempt to restrict freedom of religion.

How can one religious interpretation wipe out other religious interpretations? Does that not go against separation of church and state?

#10 A choice for an abortion is a sacred choice.

Texts in the Quran suggest that humans need to make decisions for themselves.

God loves us unconditionally and gives us the right to make decisions about our lives.

We need to speak up about abortion. We cannot put this back into a box hoping that it will go away. We should lift the self-censure we have placed on ourselves.

A choice for abortion is a sacred choice; it is a pro-life choice.

Let's Talk

Theological Questions

How can one actually answer when life begins? How do *you* answer the question?

Can someone believe that life begins at conception and still support abortion rights? What supports that thinking?

What is the difference between a potential life and a living human?

What about the great big lie—that religion does not support the right to have an abortion? What do you think of that?

How do women make moral decisions?

How does free will play a part in understanding the right to have an abortion?

Why do you think that the bible never speaks to abortion?

How can a faith community invite women to come to them for compassionate counseling?

What signals can community leaders give in their sermons, homilies, prayers, that tell the congregation that they will be supportive of the woman's situation?

What signals do you need?

What should the role of your faith community be in this issue?

Social Change Questions

There are at least seventy-five nations in the world that have legalized abortion. Abortion is not considered a political issue; it is considered a private decision for women to make. Why do you suppose that our country is so different?

How much does the argument over the separation of church and state influence your thinking about this issue?

Thirty three percent of women will have an abortion in their lifetime. (Alan Guttmacher Institute) Where are these women in the abortion debate? How can we help them speak up?

How important do you think the abortion issue is to most Americans? Do you think the issue influences how individuals vote?

If the right to have an abortion is taken away what will happen in terms of illegal abortions and the safety of women?

How can America process the question in a way that is healing and not divisive?

What are some connections between the abortion issue and the right to die?

What does "quality of life" mean to you?

Does the issue of population control come into play for you?

What do you think life would be like in the US if there was no reproductive freedom?

Why is there now a movement to prevent the use of the birth control pills?

Is being forced to bear a child a form of enslavement?

What do you think of the film's assertion that pro-life advocates have an anti-woman agenda?

How can those who oppose the right to abortion support war? Support capital punishment?

What does "pro choice" mean to you?

What does "pro-life" mean to you?

How can we refresh the language that is used in this controversy? Do we still want to use "battle," "procedure," "woman's choice?" Don't both sides have claim to "pro-life" and "right to life?"

Are there just two sides to the issue or are there really more grey areas, and grey responses than the media and our leaders prod us to think?

In your mind, what are some of these grey areas when it comes to the issue of abortion?

If a woman is raped and becomes pregnant should society force her to continue the pregnancy by taking away her right to have an abortion?

Are there connections between the number of abortions in our society and the lack of financial and structural support that poor women and poor families receive?

Intimate Discussions

Talking with friends and family even one on one can help bridge opinions and experiences that are part of our healing and coming to terms with the issue.

In what ways has your religious upbringing promoted guilt in your life? In what ways has your religious upbringing promoted healing in your life?

Is pregnancy the essential problem, or is it the range of circumstances that a woman might find herself in? What about those circumstances? Do they include an unwilling partner, medical issues, age and maturity, support of other children, mental health issues, and domestic violence?

Have you ever known someone who had a child when they did not want to or were not ready? What happened?

Have you known someone who has had an abortion? What was the consequence? How did it positively and or negatively impact that person?

If you have had an abortion how has the information from the DVD impacted you?

If you have had an abortion how do you feel about it now?

What are some of the reasons that you or someone you know has had an abortion?

Under what circumstances would you choose abortion? Can we really know how we might react when faced with this decision?

How does stigma affect women who have had an abortion? What are ways that we can combat stigma in our own communities?

What does post abortion spiritual health look like?

How can we encourage women to share their abortion stories? What kinds of support can we give them?

How can we help pro-choice people in our community feel proud to speak out about their beliefs?"

What are some of the connections between issues of sexuality and abortion for you?

How does the policy stance of your faith community impact your feelings toward that community?

Has the issue of abortion impacted your relationship with your faith community?

How can communities of faith support women who find themselves in unplanned pregnancies?

How can communities of faith support the partners of the women who have unplanned pregnancies?

Action Steps

A Tea

Invite women from another congregation in your community to a woman's tea to discuss the issue on a personal level. In the interest of size this gathering should be no larger than seven or eight participants. Facilitation should be neutral. If participants find it helpful and healing continue to expand to other groups and or keep the same group meeting regularly.

Volunteer

Volunteer to show *Sacred Choices and Abortion* and talk about religious issues with your local reproductive health care clinic staff. Help them to know that there is a spiritual and religious tradition that does not oppose abortion.

Out of the Church Closet

Ask local pro-choice activists to come out of their religious closet. Encourage them to see that *their religious beliefs* compliment the effort to keep abortion safe and legal. Help them to lobby the head of the church to present a sermon or homily about this sacred right.

Be Our Own Madison Avenue

What are some new tag lines that would be effective to deepen the debate? If you create a good one share it with others.

Pro-choice, Pro-child
Pro-choice, Sacred Choice
Keep the right for sacred choice
My church is Pro-choice

Build a Bridge

Have people on both sides of the issue create a large poster with succinct reasons why they believe what they do. Ask them to use shades of gray, black and white, to symbolize the potency of their arguments. Hang them side by side for a focus to informal conversations.

Oral History

Grab a recorder, or video camera and take oral histories of women who have had **abortions, both illegal and legal abortions**. You could also do the same with men who have partnered with women who had abortions. Set up a screening in your church, synagogue or mosque.

Resources

Organizations and websites

The Religious Consultation On Population, Reproductive Health And Ethics

WWW.RELIGIOUSCONSULTATION.ORG

NARAL Pro-Choice America

www.prochoiceamerica.org

The Abortion Conversation Project

www.abortionconversation.com

Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice

www.rcrc.org

Planned Parenthood

www.plannedparenthood.org

Abortion Clinic Staff Blog (Note - this is not a PP site)

<http://abortionclinicdays.blogspot.com>

Resources and discussion

www.choicelinkup.com

Women tell their stories

<http://www.afterabortion.com/>

National After Abortion Talk Line

<http://www.4exhale.org>

Backline: Decision Making and Post Abortion Support

www.yourbackline.org

Online magazine of abortion stories (Spanish/English)

<http://www.ourtruths.org>

Catholics for a Free Choice

www.cath4choice.org

The Alan Guttmacher Institute

www.gi-usa.org/sections/abortion.html

Multiple perspectives presented in thoughtful ways

<http://womensissues.about.com>

Ayn Rand and Capitalism Magazine—conservative pro-choice response
www.abortionisprolife.com

Unitarian Universalist Washington Office For Advocacy
<http://www.uua.org/uuawo>

Books

Abortion in America: The Origin and Evolution of National Policy 1800-1900 by James C. Mohr

Abortion, My Choice, God's Grace, Christian Women Tell Their Stories, by Anne Eggebroten

A Question of Choice, by Sarah Weddington

Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War by William Saletan

Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States by Rickie Solinger

Behind Every Choice Is a Story, by Gloria Feldt

Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance, by John M. Riddle

Educating for Life: a Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent, by Thomas Groome

In Good Conscience, by Anna Runkle

Sacred Choices: The Right to Contraception and Abortion in Ten World Religions, by Daniel Maguire

Sacred Rights edited by Daniel C Maguire

The Healing Choice: Your Guide to Emotional Recovery After an Abortion by Candace DuPuy, PhD, and Dana Dovitch

The Story of Jane: The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service by Laura Kaplan

The War on Choice: The Right-Wing Attack on Women's Rights and How to Fight Back, by Gloria Feldt

FILM

I Had an Abortion, a new documentary about abortion and the women who made that decision. Contact: gandj@speakoutfilms.com

© *The Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health and Ethics* 2005