

Abortion – Response to Memorial from Carlow and Kilkenny Circuit

Memorial

The Carlow and Kilkenny circuit executive, present: 6, Voting: Unanimous.

The Circuit Executive has re-examined the article E.6 on Abortion in the booklet, *Methodist Belief*. In light of the Statement on the Proposed Abortion legislation for Oireachtas December 2012, we believe that the current format is flawed and does not reflect the right of life for the unborn child, nor does it reflect the true extend of the Gospel, which is one of hope, justice and healing in all situations.

We therefore would wish to remove the following statement:

“When the pregnancy is a result of rape or incest,”

We believe that every unborn child has the right to life, regardless of how they are conceived. The killing of an unborn child, should not be seen as an attempt to provide “compassion’ or “relief to a serious crime to the mother.” As a church, we should reflect God’s nature in his passion for justice and to stand for those who have no voice, in this case the unborn child. We should be prepared to support and love the woman through this most difficult time of pregnancy and birth, and the decisions she would make for the welfare of her born child, with the hope of ultimately revealing to her God’s compassion and full healing in all situations.

We therefore would wish to amend the following segment:

“Where there is risk of grave injury to the physical or mental health of the mother,”

We believe that the unborn child, through it maybe a factor in the mother's current mental health, is not the root cause. The ending of the life of the unborn child will not deal ultimately with the root causes that have resulted in the mother’s mental health.

Introduction

The Methodist Church in Ireland Conference 2014 received a memorial from the Carlow and Kilkenny Circuit Executive requesting an amendment to the booklet of *Methodist Belief* on the issue of abortion. The Conference referred this matter to the Council on Social Responsibility.

The Council on Social Responsibility are grateful to the Carlow and Kilkenny Circuit Executive for raising this important matter. The council formed a sub-committee to meet and consider these issues, leading to valuable discussion within the Council, the Connexion, with representatives from different denominations and others. The ethics of abortion have been considered and there has been significant discussion about how Methodist people can respond to the issue of abortion, both in offering counsel to those considering an abortion, and in responding pastorally to those who have aborted a pregnancy. An encouraging number of organisations and individuals offer support in these areas and they are considered below.

A point of clarification on the booklet *Methodist Belief* will be helpful. This booklet is not considered as a fixed and final position statement from the Methodist Church in Ireland. Rather, it is a very brief

summary of previous statements the church has issued and in the case of abortion, previous papers issued over decades by the Council on Social Responsibility. The booklet is therefore not well-suited to be amended as such, but these circumstances do allow a certain freedom for further discussion within the Connexion, with the understanding that a future summary booklet will include the present considerations.

The issues raised in the memorial are considered below under various headings. By way of brief summary, the position of the Methodist Church in Ireland is against abortion on demand. The Council are aware that Methodist people hold a variety of opinions on some more unusual or complex cases, such as pregnancy as a result of rape, and the Council have not sought to be a final arbiter in this. Rather, we have highlighted the opinions on both sides of the debate, with a future aim to promote further consideration of these issues within the Connexion. The importance of a positive and pastoral response to those considering or who have experienced abortion, cannot be understated.

The issues raised by the memorial are considered below.

A Loving Response to Those in Need.

The Scriptures clearly call for Christian people to love others, with a particular emphasis on the needs of the vulnerable. Therefore the Council on Social Responsibility entirely agrees with the memorial, that the Methodist Church in Ireland should seek to extend thoughtful support to pregnant women who are in need, when appropriate. This is a potentially demanding call. To provide some sense of scale of the issue, Evangelical Alliance report that there were more than 189,000 abortions in 2011 in England and Wales, and that by the age of 45, one in three women in England and Wales will have had an abortion. The UK Department of Health report that in 2013, 3,679 women residing in the Irish Republic had an abortion in England and Wales.

Some suggested avenues of support are listed below and the Council would encourage all Methodist people to consider practical support to those in need and commend the following list for consideration.

- LIFE Northern Ireland is a voluntary sector pregnancy care service, providing counselling and support for women, supported housing and education for young people. They offer counselling and support for women with an unexpected pregnancy, following a miscarriage and following an abortion. www.lifeni.org.uk and www.pregmatters.org.uk
- Ask Majella is a crisis pregnancy service based in both N. Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. <http://www.askmajella.com/>
- Surrendering the Secret is a bible study for women who regret having had an abortion www.surrenderingthesecret.com Additional abortion recovery resources can be found at www.abortionrecovery.org

- Pregnancy Resource Centre are a charitable organisation offering confidential advice and support in the areas of crisis pregnancy, post abortion counselling and general sexual health advice. <http://www.thepregnancyresourcecentre.co.uk/>
- Every Life Counts is an online resource for parents born of children born with a terminal condition. www.everylifecounts.ie
- Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep is an international charitable organisation that offer free professional portrait photographs to families suffering the loss of a baby. www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org
- The charitable organisation Care Confidential publish many anonymised stories, submitted from people who find themselves in situations of crisis pregnancy or those who have experienced a miscarriage or gone through an abortion. <http://www.careconfidential.com/PeoplesStories.aspx>

The Gospel of Hope in All Situations

The Council on Social Responsibility entirely agrees that the Gospel is an enduring hope in all situations. We believe in an all-powerful Deity and that none fall outside the reach of Divine love. We agree that through prayer and practical support, the lives of pregnant women in difficulty can be tangibly improved.

We also painfully acknowledge that, despite a firm belief in God's love and His call for support to those in need, many people find themselves in extremely difficult circumstances. In the context of abortion, it is clear that some pregnant women genuinely feel unable to continue with a pregnancy for a myriad of reasons, possibly including financial pressures, other life commitments, health concerns, lack of stable circumstances, lacking support of extended family, discovering a seriously disabled foetus etc. The Council on Social Responsibility consider these issues a sobering reality facing Christ's church, which is called to show faith by practical acts of love (James 2:17).

Emphasising the Rights of the Unborn Child, Particularly in Cases of Rape and Incest

The Council on Social Responsibility share the concern raised in the memorial about any devaluing of foetal life. The stated position of the Methodist Church in Ireland is against abortion on demand. It is reasonable to assume that many Methodist people would be supportive of this stance. There are, however, some rare and particularly difficult cases which may divide opinion among Methodist people e.g. pregnancy resulting from sexual crime. These differing opinions are represented within the membership of the Council of Social Responsibility and are briefly summarised below.

Some Methodist people hold the opinion that abortion is rarely a permissible option in these difficult cases. The circumstances may be that a woman has been deeply traumatised by a rape, and the prospect of carrying a pregnancy to term and delivering the child might bring, in some cases, unbearable anguish to a woman. Given that many early pregnancies fail to develop, resulting in undetected miscarriage, some feel that ending a pregnancy at an early stage in the case of rape may

be an act of compassion, albeit a very difficult one for all concerned. Some may feel that a woman should not have to bear the additional burden of carrying an unwanted pregnancy, brought about by a vicious and horrifying crime.

Other Methodist people will hold a different opinion in these particular circumstances, concluding that abortion is an unacceptable choice following a rape. Proponents of this view hold that the circumstances of a conception should not affect the rights and protections afforded to a foetus. They may feel that the foetus is an innocent victim in a very complex situation, and that ending the foetus's life compounds a difficult situation, adding a further moral wrong. Some consider that continuing a pregnancy in these circumstances and giving the baby up for adoption is a viable alternative in these circumstances.

There appear to be significant difficulties in legislating for abortion in the case of rape e.g. defining consent for sexual activity, legislating for those who may lack the capacity to consent to sexual activity, and providing adequate safe guards.

Opinion may be similarly divided over pregnancies resulting from incest.

Risk of Grave Injury to the Mental Health of the Mother

The Council acknowledges that some Methodists may feel opposed to abortion in the situation where a mother's mental health is deemed at risk. They may feel that the foetus' life is as worthy of protection as the mother's, and may believe that neither the mother, nor health professionals, have the right to intervene to end the life of a foetus in these circumstances.

The Council note that the wording of the Methodist Belief booklet refers to grave injury to the mental health of the mother. The Council are aware that there are serious mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia or bipolar affective disorder, which can sometime be very severely exacerbated during pregnancy, to the point of posing very real risk to the mental health and physical safety of the mother. Some of these situations can be further complicated by difficulty administering prescribed psychiatric medications during a pregnancy. Again, the Council acknowledge that there may be differing opinions among Methodist people about the acceptability of abortion in these complex cases.

Conclusion

The Council acknowledge that life is precious and that Scripture gives clear significance to foetal life, such as in the example of John the Baptist moving in his mother's womb at the sound of Mary's voice (Luke 1:41). The stated position of the Methodist Church in Ireland is against abortion on demand. The Council realise that Methodist opinion may be divided in some rare cases, such as pregnancy as a result of rape and pregnancy that risks grave injury to the mental health of the mother. The Council values debate of these important issues and will seek to raise the profile of these issues within the Connexion. Moreover, the Council would encourage Methodist people to prayerful and loving action in support of pregnant women who find themselves in need and seeking help. The Council believe that fervent debate of these complex ethical issues should be matched

with equally energetic acts of loving service in the name of Christ to those in need. Local Methodist Circuits and Districts may wish to prayerfully consider how they can respond to the issues raised in the memorial from Carlow and Kilkenny.

References <http://www.eauk.org/northern-ireland/briefings/consultation-briefing-criminal-law-on-abortion.cfm>

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/319460/Abortion_Statistics__England_and_Wales_2013.