

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON ABORTION
Presbytery of Donegal
March 25, 2008

The Charge to the Task Force:

The Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Clifton Kirkpatrick, sent a letter to the presbyteries of the PC(USA) on January 30, 2007, containing the following paragraphs:

The 217th General Assembly (2006) directed me, as Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, to send a letter to presbyteries communicating assembly actions relating to abortion.

The 217th General Assembly commended the Presbytery of Mississippi for its use of group discernment concerning abortion. At the same time, it recommended that all presbyteries create task forces to replicate their process of prayer and study, that hearts and minds may be open to God's wisdom through Scripture, other resources, and one another, and to direct the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly to communicate this action to the presbyteries.

I would encourage you to give serious and prayerful consideration to this action of the General Assembly. As you engage in such study processes, you will undoubtedly want to make use of the assembly's latest guidance on this matter that is found in the attached statement. ["On Late-Term Pregnancy"]

May God's blessings be with you as you deal with these difficult issues in the Spirit of Christ.

In response to Clifton Kirkpatrick's letter, Moderator Gail Benjamin of the Presbytery of Donegal appointed an Abortion Study Task Force on June 19, 2007. As presently constituted the Task Force includes the following members: Elder Anne DiSabatino; Elder Helen Penman; Rev. Fran Carr; Rev. Randolph Riggs; Rev. Ben Sheldon; Rev. Katie Sundermeier; and Elder Roger Stemen.

The Meetings of the Task Force:

June 2007 meeting, Bellevue Presbyterian: An organizational meeting. The Task Force agreed to an informal meeting style. It agreed that the instruction of the Stated Clerk was to follow the example of the Presbytery of Mississippi to enter a season of prayer and study. It undertook to study the report of the Special Committee on Problem Pregnancies and Abortion of the 204th General Assembly of 1992, subtitled "Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly (Micah 6:8)"; the article "What Does Pro Choice Really Mean?", Horizons May/June, 2006; and the statement "Abortion Issues" posted on the PC(USA) website.

August 2007 meeting, Bellevue Presbyterian: Ben Sheldon reported on Bernard Nathanson's book, Aborting America. The Task Force discussed the materials from the PC(USA): the report of the Special Committee on Problem Pregnancies and Abortion of 1992; and the policies on abortion posted on the PC(USA) website.

October 2007 meeting, Westminster Presbyterian, West Chester: The entire meeting was led by Dr. Charles R. B. Beckmann. He described the procedures used in abortion in detail, with accompanying texts and diagrams. He also advocated strongly that churches support care for pregnant women and their families, adoption opportunities, and especially sex education and availability of contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancies. He noted that he supported therapeutic abortion in cases where the life of the fetus or mother was endangered, but not abortion as a means of birth control.

From October 2007 to January 2008 the Task Force considered the materials supplied by Dr. Beckmann, as well as booklets supplied by advocacy groups within the PC(USA): Presbyterians Pro-Life; and Presbyterians Affirming Reproductive Options.

January 2008 meeting, Bellevue Presbyterian: One member of the Task Force moved that it ask Donegal Presbytery to overture the 218th General Assembly meeting in San Jose, CA, to establish a new committee to re-examine, from a Scriptural perspective, the entire abortion issue, as well as the present PC(USA) position paper (1992) with a view to 1) affirming that human life begins with fertilization. . . [followed by three additional clauses]. Another member presented a statement advocating the following: “. . . that the 204th General Assembly policy on abortion should stand. Those who came from across the spectrum of the Presbyterian Church met and studied and prayed and struggled to come to that very difficult but valid conclusion.” In the ensuing discussion there was a division within the Task Force over the two proposals. Lacking a consensus, the Task Force agreed that it would not recommend that Donegal Presbytery submit an overture to the 2008 General Assembly, but would prepare a final report to be distributed at the March 25 Presbytery. The report would explain on what issues the Task Force divided; and would contain some recommendations on which there was consensus.

The Task Force meetings were encircled by prayer, both corporately and individually.

The Conclusions of the Task Force:

As a task force we sought to understand more fully the complexity of conception and birth as well as the complexity of a decision to terminate a pregnancy. The Task Force reviewed the existing statement on problem pregnancies adopted by the 204th General Assembly (1992). This statement was reaffirmed by the 217th General Assembly (2006), but material statements were added to affirm the value of human life which can be challenged by problem pregnancies and late term abortions. While our decision was not unanimous, we found the recommendations of these two General Assemblies to reflect the complexity which we experienced as a study group on these issues, and we commend the study of these papers to Member Congregations of

the Presbytery of Donegal. A summary of these documents can be viewed online at <http://www.pcusa.org/101/101-abortion.htm>

The Task Force received letters from three churches within the Donegal Presbytery (the sessions of Avondale Presbyterian and Fairview Presbyterian and the pastor of Stewartstown Presbyterian) recommending that the Task Force affirm their specific positions on abortion. All of these letters promoted a position opposed to abortion. Two of these statements also stressed a strong conviction that life begins at conception and requested that the Task Force support this belief by way of overture to the Presbytery. Additionally, each letter of position acknowledged the church's responsibility to minister to and help those facing problem pregnancies.

After diligent study and debate, we were unable to reach a consensus on questions regarding the precise time at which human life begins and when an abortion is morally justified. Given the miraculous nature of life and the complexity of circumstances facing every pregnancy, we found it virtually impossible as a group to presume full knowledge of God's mind in each and every situation.

However, the members of our task force do share the following beliefs as they are based upon God's holy scripture:

God is the creator of all life. Genesis 1:1; Genesis 1:27; Ephesians 3:9; Isaiah 46:3-4

God knows each of us before we are born. Isaiah 46:3-4; Jeremiah 1:5

Each of us is valued by God. Matthew 10:30-31

We are called to love one another. John 13:34-35; Leviticus 19:18

We are to share in each others' struggles. Galatians 6:2-3

We are not to judge or condemn one another. Matthew 7:1-5; Romans 8:1

Because of our fallen nature, we acknowledge that abortion will continue to be an option for some when faced with the difficult decisions which surround continuing a pregnancy to full term or seeking to terminate the pregnancy and thereby escape the pain of the circumstances. Abortion will also continue as an option for some when the mother's life is in danger and when the viability of the child to live outside the womb is obviously compromised. Therefore, the church must become a source of unconditional love and a place of safety and security where one can come and receive non-judgmental compassion and counsel. As Christians we can offer others freedom through the love of Christ by the way we love, accept and respect the individual. A receptive and transparent Christian atmosphere opens the door for intimate relationships to form whose influence may begin to turn the tide away from convenience abortions and toward a love for and commitment to the life of the unborn.

To this same end, the church must take a more proactive role by dedicating significant resources of time, energy and money in the following areas:

Spiritual guidance and mentoring;

Education and counseling concerning sex education, contraception, and pregnancy;

Accessible and affordable contraception and adoption options;

Assistance in all aspects of the adoption process;

Financial assistance for prenatal care and housing; and,

Emotional and financial support for mother and child following the pregnancy.

God chose to give us free will in making our life decisions even though He knows the choices we will make (Deut. 30:15). We make the choices and must live with the resulting consequences. Our choice as Christians to be “Jesus with skin on” for the benefit of individuals considering abortion and to be obedient in loving them without condemnation (John 8:7-11) is directly in line with God’s Will.

The Abortion Task Force of the Donegal Presbytery respectfully submits this statement as a summation of the process we have completed over the last nine months and of the sincere beliefs and recommendations upon which our hearts and minds are unified. We also respectfully request that the Abortion Task Force be dismissed.