

# The Prochoice Religious Community May Be the Future of Reproductive Rights, Access, and Justice

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“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 cohort 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 vital for the restoration and sustaining of 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.

First a word about terms: Although the term prochoice is used broadly, 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 purposes of this essay.

One of the limitations, 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> It 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 this approach contextualizes rather than isolates abortion, thus providing what she calls a counter-narrative or a counter-framework.

“The three principles that that 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>

We should note 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 strategy of most of the antiabortion movement since the late 1990s<sup>6</sup> and it has been quite successful.<sup>7</sup> What’s more, 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 these matters so much as to suggest that there are ways forward that can and should focus on the organized prochoice religious community. This includes the prochoice religious community that has yet to be organized, but which nevertheless, 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 Argument

The prochoice religious community has deep roots and a dramatic story in the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion. Initially comprising Protestant ministers and Jewish rabbis, their services were first featured in a front-page story in *The New York Times* in May 1967.<sup>8</sup> Many of them 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>9</sup>

CCS comprised the largest abortion referral service in the United States

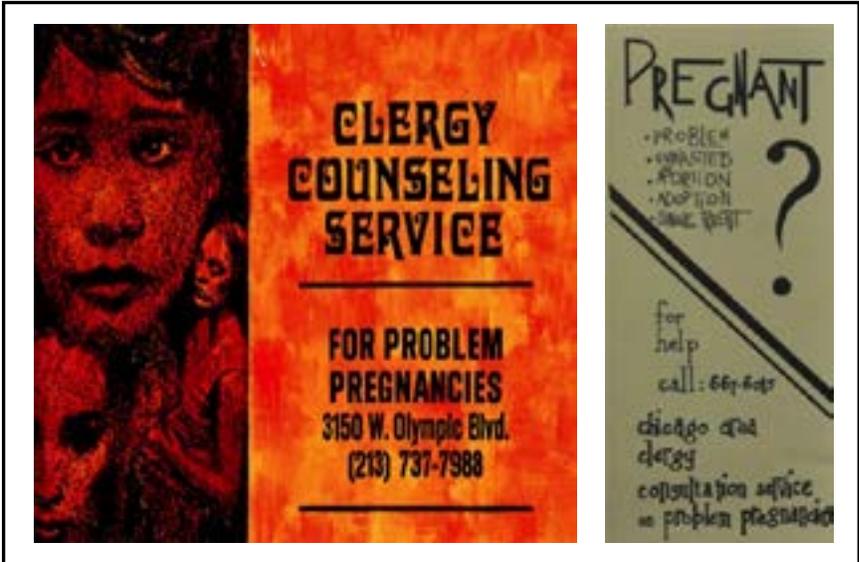


before *Roe v. Wade*, eventually comprising about 2,000 religious leaders that in addition to helping women obtain safe abortions in the United States and abroad, lobbied for the repeal of abortion laws. By 1970, abortion laws had been repealed in several states, allowing CCS members to establish their own clinics.<sup>10</sup>

The founders of CCS focused more on the pastoral obligation to help women access safe, affordable abortions than the question of morality. The practical realities for women in

need of appropriate abortion care were evident in the 1960s as thousands of women – disproportionately poor women of color in New York City alone – were dying annually from unsafe abortions.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, women of greater means were able to travel to and find ways to get legal abortions even under the limited circumstances available under the law in New York at the time.<sup>12</sup>

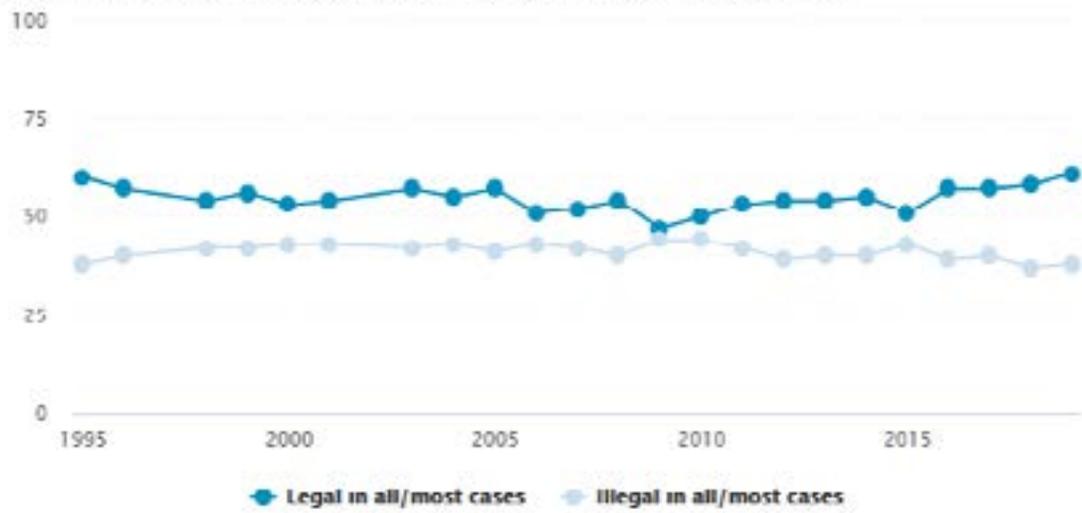
One woman who saw that *New York Times* story about CCS contacted them at the Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan, where it was just getting started. They arranged an appointment with a doctor in Washington, DC. She took the bus alone. “I don’t know what I would have done without those contacts at Judson 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. And so this was a choice that I needed and deserved, and that every woman should have, and I’m grateful that those folks at the CCS took that step and made themselves available.”<sup>13</sup>

The historic role of CCS, and the tradition and function of churches as a

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



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sanctuary from oppressive societies and governments, may provide a model for a future in which *Roe v. Wade* is overturned and criminalization of abortion occurs 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 in a variety of ways. For example, the Religious Institute, a think tank headquartered in Bridgeport, Connecticut, with some 15,000 religious leaders in its network, has consulted over the past decade with seminaries from a variety of traditions to help prepare young seminarians for the real world of counseling. Clergy are often “first responders,” the trusted counselors many go to first at a time of personal crisis.<sup>14</sup>

All 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 1995-2019 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>15</sup> Other reputable pollsters have shown similarly increasing support for abortion rights.<sup>16</sup>

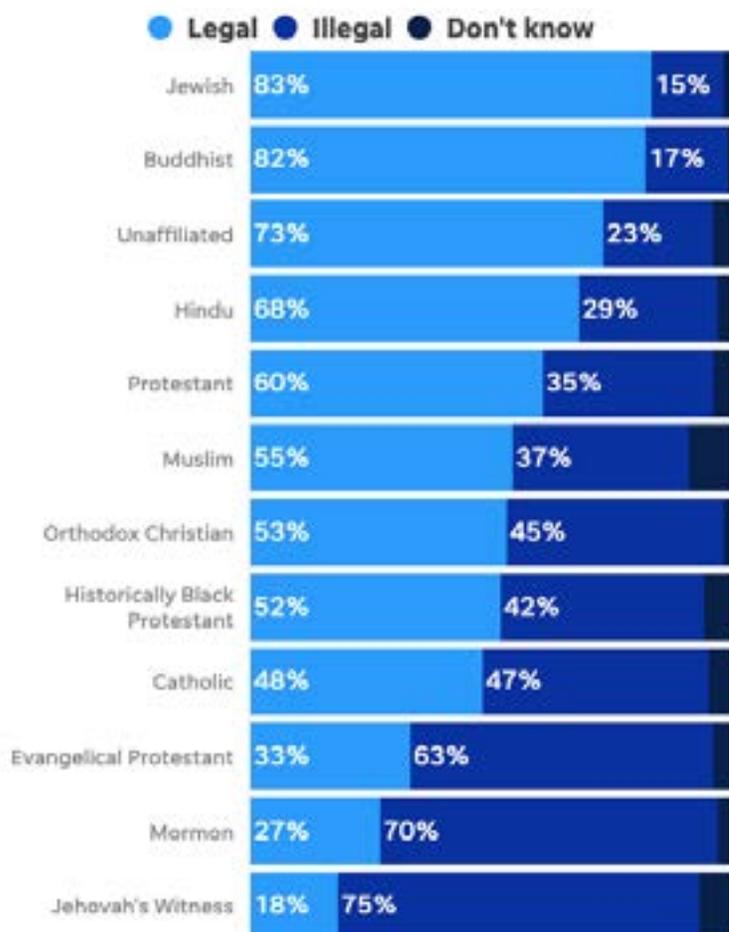
The Pew data also show that a majority or near majority of the religious community in the United States is prochoice. While the Catholic Church, by far the largest Christian group in the U.S., is institutionally opposed to abortion in all instances, Pew reported in 2019 that 56% of rank-and-file Catholics believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases. And 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>17</sup> Pew data also show that significant minorities of large antiabortion religious groupings, such as Mormons and White evangelicals, are also prochoice.

This chart, based on the 2014 Pew Religion 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.

The reality that religious people are not necessarily antiabortion and that vast numbers are, in fact, prochoice, may be a revelation to those who have been conditioned by the false narrative that people of faith largely oppose abortion. Dismantling the false narrative opens opportunities for the prochoice religious community 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-rec-

### Abortion views by religious groups

Percentage of adults, by religious tradition, who say abortion, in all or most cases, should be legal or illegal:



NOTE Percentages may not total to 100 because of rounding; SOURCE Pew Research Center's Religion Landscape Study conducted in May 2014; margins of error vary by number of people surveyed. GRAPHIC George Petras/USA TODAY

ognized, under-identified and under-organized is both the challenge and the opportunity.

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

Polling is an indication 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 seeking to build a movement find the people who must comprise it. 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 the leading denominations of mainline Protestantism as well as most of organized Judaism. Knowing which prochoice religious institutions exist and how to find the right people and clarify the role of extant religious organizations and their respective capacities for involvement in the defense and advancement of reproductive rights, access, and justice could make a profound difference.<sup>18</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 Opportunity of Politics

Once one shakes off the narrative that religious Americans are necessarily opposed to abortion, the political implications are clear. Conservative Catholics and evangelicals are outnumbered by the growing prochoice majority of religious and non-religious Americans. But, as we will see below, while the Christian Right is a well-organized minority that has achieved the heights of political power in the U.S., 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 political involvement of the prochoice religious community.

That said, a coherent, sustained effort to identify and organize explicitly prochoice religious voters would be a significant departure from the current practices of the prochoice religious community, the broader prochoice community, and broader social justice movements.

Getting to this point of departure would require recognizing three things: that the strength of the historically powerful and well organized minority we call the Christian Right remains in its organization and 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.

But arriving at this departure point can be challenging because there are

many rationalizations baked into preserving status quo thinking. For example, some have pointed to the growing Hispanic demographic as something that will counter the conservative White evangelicals and Catholics that comprise the Christian Right. Polling by the Public Religion Research Institute (PPRI) in 2019, however, should give pause to such optimism.<sup>19</sup>

PPRI 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.

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 38% of Millennials support legal abortion.

Thus, the trend on attitudes towards abortion among religious Hispanics 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), a Sacramento, California based evangelical organization headed by Samuel Rodriguez.<sup>20</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 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 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, said this can 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>21</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.

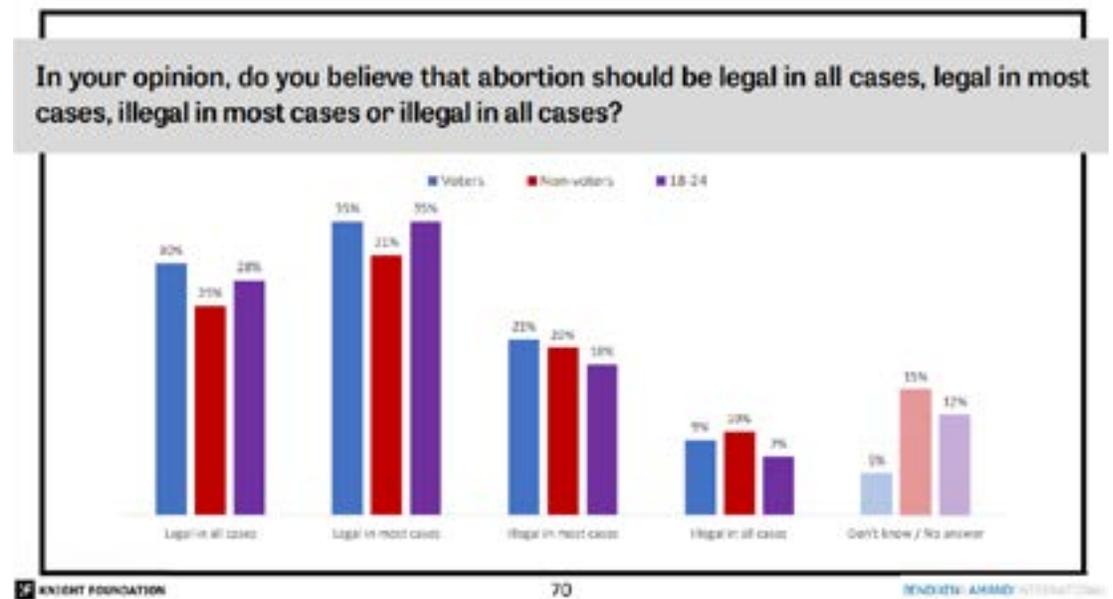
We might first acknowledge that some 100 million eligible voters did not participate in the 2016 election. This number represents those who were registered but did not vote combined with those who could have voted, but were not registered.<sup>22</sup> This matters in part because the antiabortion Christian Right is acutely aware of the large pool of potential supporters – and opponents – and over the last 40 years has aggressively sought to identify those mostly likely to be sympathetic and target them for registration, education, and electoral participation, while the prochoice religious community has not.

“We projected that there would be potentially as many as 50 million Chris-

tians 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 to 35 million who regularly don’t.<sup>23</sup>

The Family Research Council, one of the premier political organizations 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>24</sup>

These groups are also seeking to fine-tune their methods. Christian Right pollster and strategist George Barna said that it’s risky to assume that reg-



istering 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>25</sup>

Barna’s point is supported by a study of non-voters by the Knight Foundation which found that most non-voters are prochoice. “In 2016, nearly 100 million eligible Americans did not cast a vote for president, representing 43% of the eligible voting-age population. They represent a sizeable minority whose voice is not heard in our representative democracy. Most of our attention, in politics and in research, tends to fall almost exclusively on “likely” voters perceived to make the most difference in the outcome. As a result, relatively little is known about those with a history of non-voting.” While the Knight study did not focus on religious affiliation, it did find that

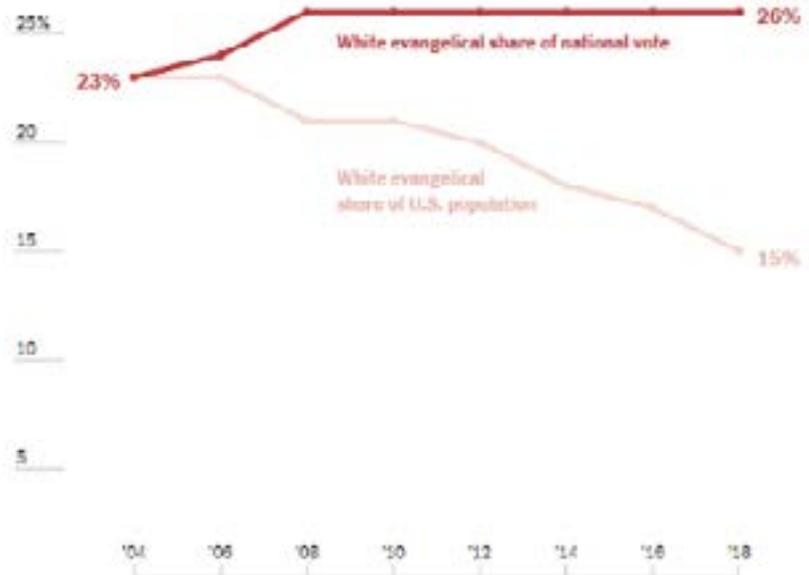
of 12,000 “chronic non-voters” a clear majority 56% - 30% believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases (others don’t know). The number of supporters rises to 63% among young people ages 18-24.<sup>26</sup>

Because of the inadequate information about non-voters that prompted the Knight Foundation study in the first place, 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 non-voting public, Pew reported, “There are striking demographic differences between voters and nonvoters, and significant political differences as well. ... nonvoters were more likely to be younger, less educated, less affluent and nonwhite. And nonvoters were much more Democratic.”<sup>27</sup> The discrepancy in the findings of these major studies underscores that while non-voters are generally not well understood, there is nevertheless data that suggest that majorities are prochoice, regardless of religious views, and illuminates why Barna advises the Christian Right to seek non-voters carefully – to avoid making unforced errors in something as 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>28</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>29</sup>

### An Increasingly Dedicated Voter Bloc

Since 2006, the white evangelical Protestant share of the national vote has been greater than its share of the population.



By The New York Times | Source: PRRI

## The Power is Not in the Polls; It’s in the Organizing

These numbers help explain how the prochoice religious community may be central to the future of reproductive rights, access, and justice in the United States. But numbers alone do not tell the story of how we got here, or how to envision a more powerful prochoice religious community.

One of the reasons for the current political situation is that there is no analogous organizing on the moderate-to-liberal part of 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 non-profit tax laws.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, The 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>31</sup> But these denominational and interfaith approaches highlight the difference with the Christian Right's comprehensive approach to politics and the piecemeal approach of others.

### The Parachurch View

Among the features of modern evangelicalism that made what we now know as the Christian Right possible are called parachurches, or parachurch ministries. These are trans-denominational organizations with a religious mission that operate outside of, but not necessarily in conflict, and often in cooperation with denominations. Among the best known of these are Youth for Christ, Focus on the Family, Youth with a Mission, and Campus Crusade for Christ (now rebranded as Cru).<sup>32</sup> Such organizations became integral to evangelical culture and their precedent helped pave the way for political organizations like 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, created a national network of public policy and electorally focused organizations, now known as the Family Policy Alliance, which operates in three dozen states and whose state organizations are also affiliated with the Family Research Council and the legal network, Alliance Defending Freedom.<sup>33</sup> Of course, later parachurch organizations brought a maturation of the concept to meet contemporary life, notably the Promise Keepers. The latter also held 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>34</sup>

One of the notable characteristics of parachurch organizations is that they were and are not usually led by clergy. For example, James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, was a pediatric psychologist and Bill McCartney,

founder of the Promise Keepers, was a college football coach. Clergy are not always natural leaders of large organizations that are not religious denominations, including political organizations. There are, of course, exceptions. It is also important to underscore that these and other such organizations draw on the individual members of conservative denominations, and are entirely separate from them.

In any case, 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 remarkable political power in recent decades.

The multi-faith, multi-racial Poor People's Campaign has the stirrings of a possible political movement outside of traditional religious denominations with its Mobilizing, Organizing, Registering, and Educating (MORE) project that plans three stops in 22 states between September 2019 and June 2020.<sup>35</sup> It remains to be seen if this can be sustained over time.

Reproductive rights, access, and justice are not a formal focus of this campaign, although, as is discussed below, the Campaign argues that the Christian Right and the antiabortion movement uses the issue to mask a racial and economic agenda that they say is inconsistent with Christian teaching and is undermining democracy. Campaign Co-Chair William Barber has called out what he says is "a distorted religious narrative in white evangelicalism that says the only thing God is concerned about is prayer in school, being against gay people, being against a woman's right to choose."<sup>36</sup>

That said, the multi-faith and multi-racial nature of the current and potential prochoice religious culture and electorate makes organizing generally more complicated than for the Christian Right. For example, the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) conducted by Harvard University found

Republicans are also 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 nonwhite Christians, and 12% belonged to non-Christian religious groups (Jews, Muslims, Hindus, etc.) or said that their religious affiliation was "something else."<sup>37</sup> This reality underscores the fact that greater religious diversity means gaining greater religious literacy and a deeper grounding in historic notions of religious freedom, religious pluralism, and separation of church and state a necessity, not an option.

It is important not to engage in false equivalences between the Christian Right and the Religious Left. The visibility of a few liberal politicians in 2019 who happened 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 exis-

tence of some politically active liberal religious leaders evidence of a Religious Left. There have always been politically progressive people who are religious and religious people who happen to be more 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>38</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 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.

This said, it is important to underscore that what is ballyhooed as an emergent Religious Left (every election cycle since 2006) by some media, pundits, and interest groups, is not necessarily prochoice.<sup>39</sup> In fact, prochoice religious people and their concerns are usually marginalized. 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>40</sup>

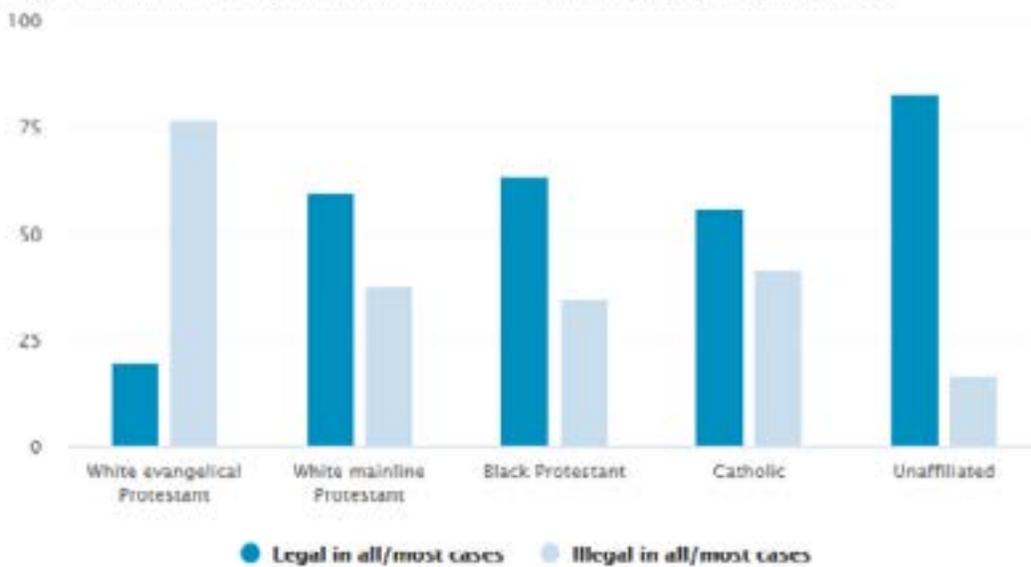
“The current and prospective Religious Left faces a significant challenge,” he added, “in how and even, for some, whether to address reproductive justice.” Veazey posed a choice that remains as true today as it was then: “The options are clear. We can continue to give lip service to the issues of reproductive 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>41</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 the Right’s successes.<sup>42</sup> Whatever organizations it developed would need to be consistent in its organization and methods with its own values. Some 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 recommendations below.)

Meanwhile, there may be an 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 part of a long-term effort to sustain White supremacy, and social and economic injustice in the United States.<sup>43</sup> Campaign Co-Chair, William 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>44</sup> Author Katherine Stewart agrees, and in her 2020 book, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, 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>45</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>46</sup>

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



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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, centered perhaps series of appropriate organizations, 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>47</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.”

Indeed, the conversations that may 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 justice religious congregations in the state.<sup>48</sup> They report that twenty-three congregations have received the designation as of the end of 2019 with 70 more in development. Similar projects are in early stages 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



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**IN THIS SACRED SPACE, WE...**

- Respect and trust women.
- Promise that women who attend our congregation will be free from stigma, shame or judgment for their reproductive decisions, including abortion.
- Believe access to comprehensive and affordable reproductive health services is a moral and social good.

*The beliefs, words and deeds of clergy and leaders in this congregation will embody these principles at all times. We pledge to make our congregation a safe, accepting space for everyone.*

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE CONGREGATION PROJECT IN TEXAS VISIT JUSTTX.ORG

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views and think strategically about how to align them to common purpose rather than seek a homogeneity we falsely ascribe to conservatives.”<sup>49</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 Democratic Party and related interest groups that may sound broadly inclusive, while omitting mention what is being excluded. This continues in the run up to the 2020 election.<sup>50</sup>

One such faith outreach effort 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>51</sup> Past has been prologue insofar as they say that Democrats should focus their message to evangelicals on efforts to reduce the number of abortions rather than criminalization of abortion.<sup>52</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 because it is a funhouse mirror image of the central strategy of the antiabortion movement since the 1990s, which has been to seek to reduce the number of abortions by restricting access to abortion services<sup>53</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 antiabortion legislative majorities in many states.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, the abortion-reduction argument fell flat in the Democratic Party.

Continuing and compounding this problem is that 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” that 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>55</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 prochoice religious electorate.<sup>56</sup>

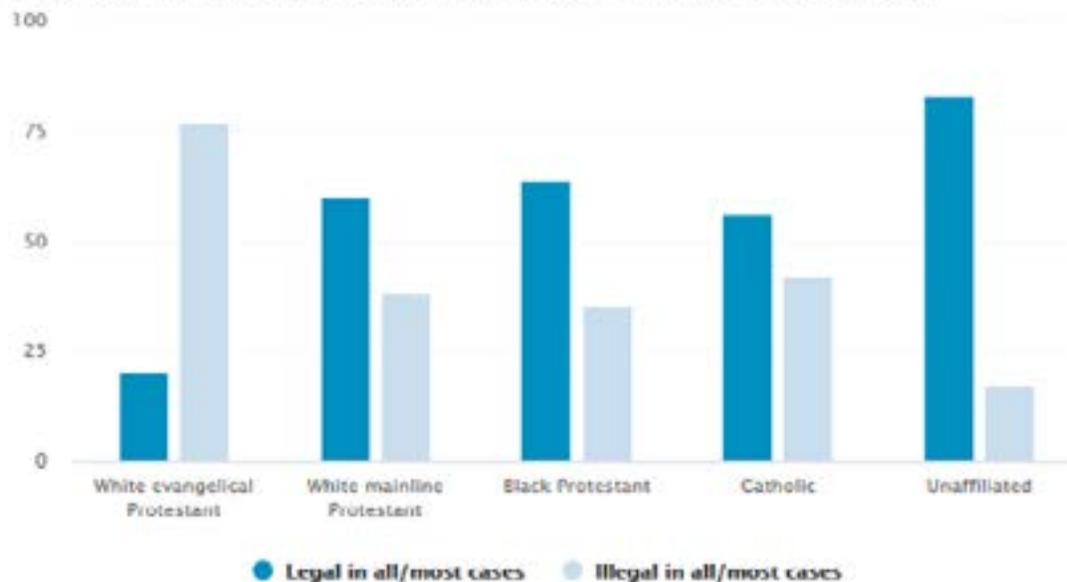
“A truly *progressive* Religious Left will need to stand its ground on abortion,” Schultz has also written, “A truly *faithful* movement will need to seek hope and freedom for women beyond medicalized regulation of their bodies. Only when we understand that women must be empowered as a principled matter of justice will we be able to break new ground on this social, political, and religious dead zone.”<sup>57</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 agree on the idea that when to have a child or terminate a pregnancy is a moral choice that women 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 this,<sup>58</sup> and 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.

## Blowing up False Narratives

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 possible, and will affect decision making going forward.

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



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To do so, we have to recognize that 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 formal prochoice positions and activities of many of the leading historic denominations of Christianity and Judaism, also helps blow-up this false narrative. It is also worth noting on this point that there are many non-believers and otherwise religiously unaffiliated who are anti-choice. Indeed, the percentage of antiabortion Nones is about the same as the percentage of prochoice White evangelicals.

## What about the Nones?

The percentage of Americans who identify as Christian has continued to fall, according to a 2019 study by Pew, while the category of the Nones — that is people who say they have no formal religious affiliation or identity — is increasing, particularly among young people.<sup>59</sup>

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. The trend that fewer people now claim a specific religious identity is part of the related trend of the steep membership losses 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. But there may be little of any consequence going on in terms of people’s values or their political or electoral behavior. According to the 2016 CCES data, only 9% of Democratic primary voters said they were atheists, while 8% said they were agnostics, and 18% identified as “nothing in particular.” Nevertheless, about half said they still attend church occasionally, and 37% said that religion is at least somewhat important in their lives.<sup>60</sup>

Pollsters have observed that the Nones “are far from a monolithic group.”

<sup>61</sup> Thus, Baylor University religion scholar Phillip 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>62</sup> (In 2012 “a third of the unaffiliated” said that religion was very important, or somewhat important, in their lives.<sup>63</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, especially since the rise of Trump; and to the ongoing Catholic clergy sex abuse scandal. So, 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>64</sup>

These caveats are important for purposes of thinking about religious community support for reproductive choice and justice. The takeaway might be: Just because people are no longer members of a denomination, or no longer identify with a specific religious tradition to a pollster, that not only does not necessarily mean that they are not religious, or that they have changed their public policy views on matters of reproductive choice (or anything else) – whether for or against.

Pew data show that as a group, the Nones are more prochoice than society as a whole and that this cohort is 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*. Putnam wrote, for example, “For the most part, 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>65</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.

And 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. The point here is that the absence of any vision or practice of electoral democracy in this sector illuminates the necessity of having the power to make much of a difference. But there is also a need for a broader political culture based on these values.

To get there it will be important to set aside the assumption that demography and polling are necessarily political destiny. The Christian Right has proven that they are not. And it is the absence of meaningful counter organizing, in the sense of encouraging the development of relevant political

knowledge, skills, and organizations to contend in the democratic marketplace that is an important part of the difference. The good news is that this is a problem that can be solved.

## The War of Attrition against Prochoice Christian Churches

The prochoice religious community in the U.S. 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 denominational 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 organizations behind this are still active and are a relevant part of the religious/political landscape.

The leader of this war of attrition has been the Washington, DC-based Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), which has been 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>66</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>67</sup>)

Conservative and prolife factions in the mainline denominations caucused with and were organized by IRD for many years under the rubric of the Association for Church Renewal.<sup>68</sup> Some of those “renewal” groups were also part of the ecumenical National Prolife Religious Council,<sup>69</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>70</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*, and out of the desire to attract Protestants, becoming ostensibly independent and ecumenical.

One telling project of the National Prolife Religious Council was a 2003 book-length critique of the interfaith Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), a Washington, DC-based interfaith coalition founded in 1973 in the wake of *Roe v. Wade*. (The founding members included several major institutions of Protestantism and Judaism.) The authors arrogated to them-

selves 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>71</sup> Of course 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.

The story of the long-term war of attrition against the prochoice denominations of mainline Protestantism. is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is important to note that once again, an outside agency commissioned a project to pick apart the prochoice religious community: in this instance by blowing up differences of views among the members of RCRC and the organization of the coalition itself. Due in part to this effort, RCRC is no longer a coalition — but 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 anti-abortionism.

Illustrative of this seeming paradox is that one of the endorsers of this anti-RCRC book, the late John Richard Neuhaus, was also a founder of IRD, while some other of the endorsers are members of the Consistent Life Network,<sup>72</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 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 Prolife 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 pro-choice Catholicism. Furthermore, they argued that in a pluralistic society, Catholics had no right to impose their values through the legislative process, likewise creating space for pro-choice 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 pro-choice.<sup>73</sup>

While working to silence prochoice Catholics, conservative elements of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops openly came alongside the Re-

publican Party to signal that practicing Catholics could not vote for pro-choice candidates. Unofficial 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>74</sup>

Catholic Vote, run by prominent pro-Trump Catholics, is tracking the cell phones of people who attend Mass in order to gather data about their voter registration status and voting history to develop profiles for targeted outreach in swing states. This method, called “geofencing,” is also being used to identify and track White evangelical churchgoers as potential voters.<sup>75</sup>

Nevertheless, more than half of Catholics say they are pro-choice. Since Catholics comprise about a quarter of the electorate, a concerted organizing effort to identify and mobilize pro-choice Catholics might prove fruitful. Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton narrowly split the Catholic vote in 2016 and Trump’s reelection campaign has stated that it intends to target older, working class anti-abortion Catholics in the Rust Belt states that won him the presidency.<sup>76</sup>

Meanwhile the stakes in the decline of the pro-choice 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>77</sup>

The decline of pro-choice religious institutions with democratic polities (in which people choose their own leaders, determine their own theologies, and develop 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 senses bastions of support for reproductive choice and justice with long histories that predate *Roe v. Wade*, some remain internally divided, due in part to the gridlock generated by internal Christian Right factions with the assistance of outside rightwing agencies. This leaves many understandably 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 theological-ly 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."

"Even as mainline denominations make statements in favor of other social justice issues," she concludes, "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>78</sup>

It is remarkable that even those who stand within the prophetic, social justice tradition are averse to addressing this. 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>79</sup>

This neglect is not limited to seminaries and denominations. Books about religious social justice often fail to incorporate reproductive justice, perhaps for the reasons Schlesinger identifies. (Or perhaps because reproductive choice, access, or justice is just not part of their vision.) But this omission is matched by secular books on the politics of reproductive rights that fail to even mention the prochoice religious community.

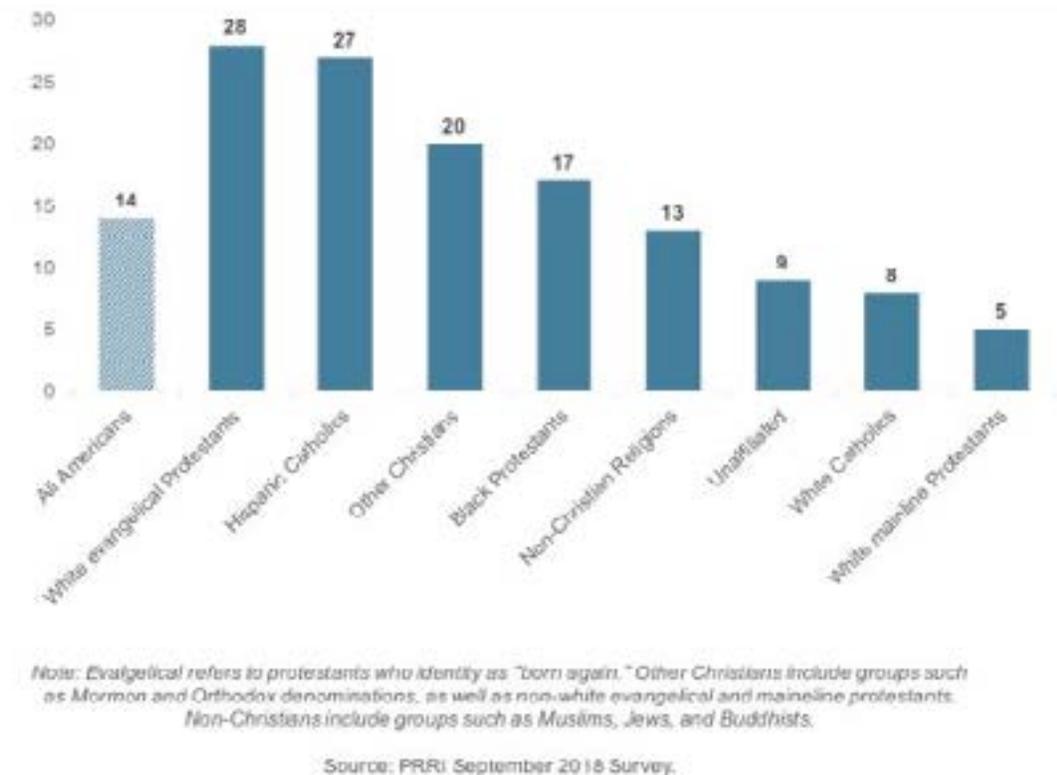
Whatever the reasons, the result is to cede the religious argument to the Christian Right and to ignore the reality of the vast prochoice religious community in the U.S. It needn't be this way.

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. And mainline Protestants like Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and UCC are the group most opposed to making abortion illegal in all cases with only 5 percent of that group supporting a total ban on abortion."<sup>80</sup>

Peters added a point that anyone considering the future of reproductive choice and justice in the U.S. must take to heart: 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>81</sup>



Carlton Veazey similarly argued in 2009, that religious freedom is essential.<sup>82</sup> (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>83</sup>) “The opposition to comprehensive sex education, HIV/AIDS prevention that includes condom education, emergency contraception and legal abortion,” Veazey wrote, “comes from religious groups that claim these violate religious beliefs – the underlying message being that the only valid religious beliefs are theirs.”

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,” he said, “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>84</sup>

In addition to Christians like Peters and Veazey, Jews have 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>85</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>86</sup>

And yet, many progressives, both religious and non-religious, have been boxed into the conservative framing of pitting secular vs. religious values. Scholars at Columbia Law School have argued that this framing 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>87</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 own 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 what to do in light of what has been lost<sup>88</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.

This essay demonstrates that 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 that 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 – its Catholic and evangelical wings

united – are the result 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 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. It 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. Polling shows that the both the religious and non-religious general public is increasingly prochoice. Polling also demonstrates the vastness and diversity of the *pro-choice religious community*, comprising individuals of varying religious affiliations and identity, 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 with 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>89</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. It is an historic opportunity for 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.

There is a potentially powerful cohort of prochoice religious activists and voters, who could be organized both inside and outside of their institutional homes – both beyond traditional secular prochoice or religious social justice groups, and in considered relationship with them. What's more, a 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.

## **Acknowledgements**

*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 replay 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 and edited along the way. These include, Cari Jackson, Lisa Weiner-Mafuz, Elaina Ramsey, Katherine Stewart, Trishala Deb, and my colleagues Tarso Ramos, Greeley O'Connor, Patti Miller, and Tina Vasquez.*

## Building the Cultural and Political Power of Pro-Choice Religious Communities: Strategic Considerations

Following from the above analysis, it's clear that 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 in alliance with the non-religious prochoice community. Combined, they constitute an overwhelming majority of the population and potentially, the voting population.

The main recommendation is that the prochoice religious community must gather sufficient cultural and political power to regain and make permanent what has been lost in reproductive rights and access in recent years -- as well as what is likely to be further lost in the likelihood that *Roe v. Wade* is overturned. To do this it will be necessary to advance a culture and politics of health care that makes reproductive health care central and not marginal, and reflects these values in law and public policy.

The following broad considerations are intended to help jump start the process of getting there.

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Generally, the prochoice religious community needs to discover itself. Since a majority or near majority of all religious people in the United States is prochoice, finding likeminded people in all parts of the country is within reach. PRA's *Annotated Directory of Prochoice Religious Organizations the U.S.* may help with that.

More specifically, 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>90</sup> has come through the organizations and actions of what are called parachurch organizations, operating trans-denominationally -- which is to say, outside of, but not necessarily in coordination or in conflict with denominations. There are certainly already small scale projects, but to meet the current challenges new entities will need to be considered, developed and scaled up to be profoundly culturally and politically influential.

***The prochoice religious community needs to envision what such trans-denominational organizations of its own might be like.*** The Christian Right has had the benefit of being more religiously and racially homogeneous while the prochoice religious community will necessarily be religiously and racially more diverse, and the nature of the diversity will vary, depending

on locality and region. Navigating our differences while building greater unity maybe 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.

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 such 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, Catholicism, for example. Or they might be ecumenical, involving various strains of Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox and others. Or they might be multi-faith. Most American communities are racially and religiously diverse to varying degrees, so creating such diverse 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 on 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 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 explain how a variety of views on abortion can 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 even on what used to be.

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 developed as a source of skilled political workers, candidates and office holders. Thus knowledge and skills for electoral politics must be foundational to building for power sufficient to regain what has been lost and to move beyond it. These orga-

nizations will understand that the education and outreach activities they engage in are ongoing process across election cycles, and must not need to be reinvented each election cycle, or organized solely around a candidate or party. But a movement based on democratic values, necessarily requires a deeply held democratic vision and profound knowledge of the skills it will take 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 principles (not just policy goals) towards which they are working in the post-*Roe* era, and will rally people who agree with these principles, want to culturally and politically pursue them, and seek the resources and skills to infuse them into culture, government and law. This ultimately means creating lasting institutions and organizations to carry this forward.

In order to sustain a vision of building for power, it is essential not to wait for permission from national organizations (whether from church or other religious bodies, advocacy groups, or political parties) to act. There is also no need to wait for a national organization to make a faith outreach effort in order to take action. The idea outlined here is different. Independent entities can 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 the creation of a third kind of organization, a clearing house, and a strategy and training center, to create or to point people to appropriate resources and 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 supplement to fill in the missing elements of what is need for the prochoice religious community.

Creating a culture of learning will be essential. This will include ongoing education in how to connect religious values to prochoice public policy and politics; and 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 that capacity and integrate it 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 and

bringing prochoice religious views into public life -- 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) that literature will need to be created by underwriting and commissioning books and articles, and their distribution for maximum impact. Eventually, 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 start up. Similarly, it may require a specialized publishing house or imprints from several publishers to meet the needs of a vigorous new movement. Encouraging and supporting 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 are things that could be underwritten by traditional philanthropies and developed and incubated through non-profit organizations. 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 get mired in the contemporary details of government. This is necessarily a matter of grassroots political development. 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 and many prochoice Jewish organizations, United Methodist Women. 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 of course, 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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# An Annotated Directory of the Prochoice Religious Community in the United States

This directory lists the current prochoice and reproductive justice elements of organized religion in the U.S. 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 towards a better future. This list may also be a classic example of something that is greater than the sum of its parts, given that reputable polling suggests that a majority or near majority of the religious community in the United States may be prochoice.

Data from polling and the history of prochoice religious thought, organizing, and institutional support suggests that the possible prochoice religious majority --which we are defining as the members of officially prochoice groups and denominations and dissident members of antiabortion denominations--makes it as broad and diverse as the country itself. The opportunity here is so compelling, that a related essay is titled "The Prochoice Religious Community May be the Future of Reproductive Rights, Access, and Justice."<sup>91</sup>

First, let's note that among Roman Catholics -- by far the largest religious grouping in the U.S. and whose leaders are 100% antiabortion, Pew reported in 2019 that 56% of rank-and-file Catholics believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.<sup>92</sup> Pew also reported that 60% of "White Mainline Protestants" and 64% of "Black Protestants" believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Pew data also show that significant minorities of large antiabortion religious groupings, such as Mormons and White evangelicals, are also prochoice.

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

Here is what is and is not included: This directory lists those 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. For the purposes of this directory, it's important to note that many of the organizations listed were at some point, part of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), founded in 1973. Organizations 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 of 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 also 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 major 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, anti-choice.) In this regard, it is important to underscore that unlike conservative antiabortion religious institutions, these have democratic polities: 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 abortion. The [National Council of Churches of Christ \(NCC\)](#) and some of its [38 member denominations](#) are in this category.<sup>93</sup> While some mainline Protestant denominations are prochoice, 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, listed at the end, are mixed in their orientation, but 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 sometimes contentious 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](#), headquartered in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, ABC 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](#), 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 U.S. 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>94</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>95</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>96</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 percent of the adult population in the U.S (3 million people) self-identify as mainline Episcopalians,<sup>97</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 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, 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 U.S. The MCC has a specific outreach to LGBTQ families and communities, and considers access to abortion a fundamental human right and in 2015 issued a statement that adopted a reproductive justice framework.

**Moravian Church in America, Northern Province**, a small 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>98</sup> The Church is a past member of RCRC and a current member of the NCC.

**National Baptist Convention**, headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee is an 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 prochoice 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, is 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 revision of the policy will be proposed at the denomination's July 2020 convention in Indianapolis.

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

[United Methodist Church](#), 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 percent of the US 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, officially withdrawing from RCRC.<sup>99</sup> And even requiring that no UMC entity could be 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 prochoice 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 is considering a plan for schism in 2020, primarily over matters related to the acceptance, marriage, and ordination of LGBTQ people. It is expected that this will result in 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>100</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 over 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 was a founding member of RCRC. It is the only openly prochoice Catholic organization in the U.S. 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>101</sup>

## Humanist & Unitarian Universalist

[American Ethical Union](#), headquartered in New York City, is a national humanist movement that is organized like a religion, with about 10,000 members 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](#), 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 passed 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 U.S.<sup>102</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 a Jewish advocacy and civil rights group with ten regional offices in the U.S. and many internationally. It is a past member of RCRC.

[American Jewish Congress](#), is a New York City-based Jewish civil rights and pro-Israel advocacy organization, which also has a long and strong tradition of feminist and pro-choice activism. It is a past member of RCRC.

[Anti-Defamation League \(ADL\)](#), is a New York City headquartered Jewish 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 U.S. 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 over 65,000 women. First publicly supported availability of contraception in 1935, WRJ was a founding member of RCRC in 1973.

[Reform Jewish Youth Movement](#) (formerly called the North American Federation of Temple Youth) comprises 8,500 members in 750 local youth groups, was a founding member of RCRC.

[Hadassah](#) is the Womens Zionist Organization of America headquartered in New York City, has 330,000 members in the U.S., 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.

[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 U.S. 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 prochoice since 1967, reaffirmed 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 it represented about 35% of all 5.3 million Jews in the U.S., making it the largest Jewish religious group in the country.

[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. 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 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](#) 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](#), 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 and is led by an advisory committee of religious leaders. It “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.<sup>103</sup> They say that twenty-three congregations had received the designation as of the end of 2019, with 70 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>104</sup> in the wake of his traveling to Alabama in 2019 to denounce the hypocrisy of anti-abortion politicians who he charges are “prolife” only when it comes to abortion.<sup>105</sup> In a speech to the Congressional Black Caucus in 2020, he further denounced “a distorted religious narrative in white evangelicalism that says the only thing God is concerned about is prayer in school, being against gay people, being against a woman’s right to choose.”<sup>106</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>107</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 90’s. RCRC had annual Black Church Summits often in partnership with Howard Divinity School.

**Religious Institute** is an interfaith reproductive justice think tank and educational network located in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Founded in 2001, the Institute says it serves a network 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 maintains 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>108</sup>

**Sister Reach**, 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 is hosting a conference on Reproductive Justice, Faith and Religion in August 2020.

## Other 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 of course aborting a fetus would not meet with easy approval. But like other religious traditions, views are evolving. One Buddhist scholar argues with anti-abortion 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>109</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 official doctrines of the majority Hindus, not withstanding.<sup>110</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 co-founder 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>111</sup>

**Islam:** Muslims comprise about 1% of the American population, but does not have a single organizational authority, so there are a range of views among scholars about when life begins and thus when abortion is morally acceptable.<sup>112</sup> There is however, a small movement of progressive, pro-choice Muslims in the U.S. [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 inter-tribal 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 Na-

tion, 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 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>113</sup>

**Sikhism:** There are about 700,000 Sikhs in the U.S. 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.”

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