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The Impact of the Abortion Debate on Peace Movement Goals

As passionate advocates of stopping wars, executions, poverty, racism, and other deadly forms of bigotry, we have noticed an obstacle we want to draw to your attention. Because polling for elections gives clear-cut numbers, they give the clearest illustration. The U.S. National Right to Life Committee has a concept which it applies to elections called the "pro-life increment" - the percentage of votes a candidate gets for opposing abortion minus the votes the candidate loses for opposing abortion. It's almost always a positive number, most commonly around 3-4%. While this won't matter in many races, in very close races, it can and commonly does make the difference.

The Wirthlin organization's exit polls for the 2004 U.S. presidential race showed this range in favor of Bush over Kerry - a race in which anti-war activists were energized to turn out against Bush. Exit polls showed the anti-abortion vote had also been energized to turn out against Kerry.

One common interpretation of this is that progressive values are all of a piece, and if people reject a pro-choice position for women's rights, then they need to be worked with so that they become more enlightened. Even if it does hurt politically in the short run, in the long run we are better off sticking to our principles.

Another common interpretation is that we are losing a large number of people of tender conscience toward the goals of the peace movement because they see us as inconsistent: we oppose killing children in warfare but not in the abortion clinic. They cannot see that "women's rights" are served because the pro-life movement is full of women who have had abortions and present it as a traumatizing experience. If we oppose violence in some cases and not in others, then the abortion-defending position becomes a double tragedy as we also lose ground in those cases because of it.

While elections most clearly show the problem, the same principle applies to educational campaigns and to one-on-one contacts. Advocacy for nonviolent solutions to problems will be most effective when that principle is applied across the board, and least effective when it's contradicted in some issues. If you doubt that, consider your own disgust at politicians who say they are "pro-life" but don't apply this to war or the death penalty; then consider if those who are anguished over the fate of small children might not have a similar reaction to people who say they are "pro-peace" but don't apply that to feticide.

Where Can Dialog Begin?

Those who follow the consistent life ethic can simply relate to pro-lifers as colleagues, but those who maintain the pro-choice position will find their effectiveness in peace advocacy with pro-life sympathizers is blocked by the perception that they support the killing of babies and are naïve about what is actually helpful to women. Some possibilities:

- Discuss the importance of pregnant women having more access to services and being treated without discrimination in the work-force and any other policy proposal or volunteer services that help women who choose to continue a pregnancy to do so. Participate in diaper drives and similar projects to show the concern for common ground.
- Commiserate with them about how terrible the media portrayals are. Stereotypes abound in the media, and frustrations are high in both the peace movement and the pro-life movement. Sharing that anger becomes another way of humanizing and relating.
- A person who cannot in good conscience make the persuasive argument for the consistent life ethic can send pro-life sympathizers on to the people who can. Below are listed some web-sites that people can be referred to; becoming familiar with them may also be helpful in any discussions.

Consistent Life: an international network for peace & life:

<http://www.consistent-life.org/>

Anthology: *Consistently Opposing Killing: From Abortion to Assisted Suicide, the Death Penalty, and War.*

Feminism & Nonviolence Studies Association:

<http://www.fnsa.org/>

Anthology: *ProLife Feminism: Yesterday and Today*
(<http://www.xlibris.com/ProLifeFeminism>)

Feminists for Life of America: <http://www.feministsforlife.org/>

Not Dead Yet: <http://www.notdeadyet.org/>

A disabilities-rights group specializing in opposing euthanasia and pressures for assisted suicide.

We are committed to the protection of life, which is threatened in today's world by war, abortion, poverty, racism, capital punishment and euthanasia. We believe that these issues are linked under a 'consistent ethic of life'. We challenge those working on all or some of these issues to maintain a cooperative spirit of peace, reconciliation, and respect in protecting the unprotected.