

## **A short summary & critique of PC(USA) policy on abortion**

The PC(USA) has repeatedly affirmed the value of human life, but it has also strenuously advocated for the right of a woman to choose to terminate unborn human life at any stage of her pregnancy. The 1992 policy document, *Problem Pregnancies and Abortion*, states that “taking human life is sin.” But it renders that statement meaningless by asserting—contrary to the overwhelming documentation of the medical and scientific communities who with one voice affirm that life begins at fertilization—that we cannot know when human life begins. The policy statement offers five possibilities for when human life begins: at fertilization, when Harvard Medical criteria are met, at “quickening,” at “viability,” and at birth.

Some have described the current abortion policy of the PC(USA) as “pro-care”. However, rather than calling churches to provide care directly, what the 1992 document urged churches to do was to “advocate” for universal health care, job training, day care, pregnancy leave, etc. in order to address economic realities that might cause a woman to choose abortion. Churches were urged to emphasize alternatives to abortion by offering adoptive services, homes for pregnant women, and emotional support for child rearing.

As to the law, *Problem Pregnancies and Abortion*, says on the one hand that “the state has a limited legitimate interest in regulating abortions” and on the other that “no law should deny access to safe and affordable services for the persons seeking to terminate a problem pregnancy.” It delineates that no law should limit “access to abortions”, “information and counseling concerning abortions,” or “prohibit public funding” of abortions. It also says no criminal penalties should be imposed against the woman choosing, or the physician performing, an abortion. The effect is that the church supports no legal protection for the unborn!

Since 1992 several statements by General Assemblies have indeed affirmed that life, whenever it begins, is a gift from God. These statements have called for “pastoral and tangible support to women in problem pregnancies” and have affirmed adoption. These statements have been largely ignored in the advocacy of the church through the Washington Office or groups such as the Advisory Committee for Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) or Advocacy Committee for Women’s Concerns (ACWC). Practically speaking few congregations *know* of these more pro-life statements of the church and no leadership is provided by the General Assembly offices to encourage local congregations to implement such support and care.

The 2006 General Assembly specifically called for the preservation and care of “viable unborn babies—those well-developed enough to survive outside the womb if delivered.” Where problems arise late in pregnancy the statement calls for the lives of both mother and baby to be considered and for the baby to be delivered alive. Although Presbyterians Pro-Life is glad for this statement protecting late-term viable babies, we grieve that our denomination is still far from a Biblical understanding of the sacredness of human life and the responsibility of the church to partner with God in the protection and nurture of life at every stage of development.