

# **ABORTION**

## **A BRIEFING PAPER**

### **1. Introduction**

The Church of England encourages its members to think through issues themselves in the light of the Christian faith and in dialogue with the Christian community. Inevitably there will be differences of emphasis or opinion between individuals. But there is a consistent Church of England position as expressed in reports and resolutions of the General Synod. In summary:

**The Church of England combines strong opposition to abortion with a recognition that there can be - strictly limited - conditions under which it may be morally preferable to any available alternative.**

The theological basis of this is that the foetus is God given life, with the potential to develop relationships, think, pray, choose and love. So as the 1983 Synod Resolution put it:

*All human life, including life developing in the womb, is created by God in his own image and is, therefore, to be nurtured, supported and protected.*

### **2. The Mother**

The mother of the unborn child needs all possible understanding and help, especially if factors connected with the pregnancy are difficult. Successive resolutions have urged the need for compassion for the mother (1966) and have emphasised that she has interests which need to be taken into account (1974 and 2002). It is the mother who is pregnant, it is she who will have to agree to an abortion if that proves necessary, it is she who will give birth if the pregnancy goes ahead and probably she who will bear the major responsibility of the future child's upbringing. Her feelings and wishes are to be fully recognised. At the same time sight should not be lost of the father's proper role and responsibilities in decision making concerning the child.

### **3. The Law**

The 1967 Abortion Act permitted an abortion legally to be carried out if there is a risk to the life or health (physical or mental) of the pregnant woman, or if there is substantial risk of a child being born with physical or mental abnormalities. In 1991 a clause in the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act lowered the time limit for abortion from 28 weeks to 24, except for severely abnormal foetuses or when the life of the mother is threatened, where there is now no time limit.

### **4. The present situation**

While abortion on demand strictly does not exist, most people who want an abortion can get it somewhere, although often not on the NHS. Over 180,000 legal abortions are carried out in this country each year.

Resolutions of the General Synod have consistently sought to narrow the grounds on which abortion is carried out and have maintained that the law has been interpreted too liberally resulting in an unnecessary number of abortions. For example the 1993 General Synod resolution reiterated its view that:

*The number of abortions carried out since the passage of the Abortion Act 1967 is unacceptably high.*

## **5. Resolutions of the General Synod of the Church of England**

The position of the Church of England is often compared to that of The Roman Catholic Church. This according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is that:

*Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognised as having the rights of a person - among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life.*

This means that direct abortion is 'gravely contrary to the moral law'. The Church of England shares this general opposition to abortion. As the 1980 statement of the Board of Social Responsibility put it:

*In the light of our conviction that the foetus has the right to live and develop as a member of the human family, we see abortion, the termination of that life by the act of man, as a great moral evil. We do not believe that the right to life, as a right pertaining to persons, admits of no exceptions whatever; but the right of the innocent to life admits surely of few exceptions indeed.*

However, as that statement makes clear, the moral legitimacy of abortion under some circumstances is recognised. The 1983 resolution of Synod, after expressing concern about the number of abortions in recent years went on to recognise:

*That in situations where the continuance of a pregnancy threatens the life of the mother a termination of pregnancy may be justified and that there must be adequate and safe provision in our society for such situations.*

The 1993 debate at Synod resulted in a motion which urged support for the medical profession:

*In efforts to ensure that when abortion has to be undertaken, it is carried out as early in the pregnancy as possible.*

It also went on to say:

*That in the rare occasions when abortion is carried out beyond 24 weeks, 'Serious foetal handicap' should be interpreted strictly as applying to those conditions where survival is possible only for a very short period.*

('Serious foetal handicap' is as laid down by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act). It should also be noted that Synod resolutions have urged protection for medical staff who, in conscience, decline to assist in abortions.

In its most recent debate on abortion, in 2002, Synod carried the following motion:

*That this Synod, being gravely concerned with the fact that in England there are currently 500 abortions every day of the year, call upon Her Majesty's Government to bring in urgent legislation to restrict the abuses of the Abortion Act, and in doing so, to give consideration to the following:*

- (a) protecting women from being coerced into abortions and providing counselling facilities to help women keep their babies;*
- (b) guaranteeing a woman's right to full disclosure about the balance of risk involved;*
- (c) protecting those women most likely to be injured by abortion, by requiring the screening of patients.*

In their consideration of abortion members of the General Synod have been assisted by carefully considered reports prepared by advisers with appropriate theological, medical and legal expertise. However, General Synod resolutions inevitably leave many questions unanswered. The Synod has not attempted to resolve all the dilemmas which arise in this area, such as when the unborn child has been conceived as a result of rape or the foetus may be known to be at risk of serious handicap. In such cases Anglicans will be agreed on the need to have regard to 'compassion for the mother and a proper responsibility for the life of the unborn child' (in the phrase used in the Church Assembly in welcoming the BSR report, *Abortion: An Ethical Discussion*), but they may come to different conclusions about the proper course of action in particular cases.

## **6. A serious and responsible view**

In an age dominated by slogans the Church of England's position is not as easy to communicate as the views of those who believe the mother has a total right to choose what she does with her own body or those who assert that the foetus has an absolute right to life. The Church of England rejects the oversimplification of the debate into 'pro choice' and 'pro life'. Its own view, as expressed through successive resolutions of General Synod, is clear, consistent and such as will commend itself to many thoughtful people outside the church as well as within. At the present time in particular it believes:

1. The abortion law needs to be applied more strictly and the number of abortions carried out drastically reduced.
2. Every possible support, especially by church members, needs to be given to those who are pregnant in difficult circumstances. The 1975 motion of Synod is as relevant today as it was then when it commended:  
*For active support to members of the Church of England the efforts of those ... working ... to provide social help and compassionate care for mothers (before and after childbirth) and children.*

Sometimes this will involve helping those who have made a considered decision to have their child adopted find suitable adoptive parents, a role in which the church has long experience. The agonising moral choice which an individual may face cannot be considered apart from the attitudes of society which may put an unhelpful pressure upon them and the social conditions in which any baby born will be brought up. As the 1980 BSR statement said

*We believe that the Church has a major task in helping our contemporaries reach a fuller understanding of our nature as sexual beings, the richness of experience it offers as well as the responsibility that it brings in its train. The Church must also stand in opposition to the restricted life chances, poverty and in particular inadequate housing and social services which continue to limit and stunt too many people's lives.*

(The resolutions of General Synod together with further background discussion are available in *Abortion and the Church*, available from Mail Order Department, Church House Bookshop, Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BN at £2.95)

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