

Advocates say ministry by churches crucial in post-Roe world

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NASHVILLE (BP)—Churches and their members have essential roles to play in helping women and preborn children in a post-Roe world, Christians involved in pro-life ministry say.

The U.S. Supreme Court's June 24 reversal of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision has given states the authority to put into effect abortion bans for the first time in almost 50 years. Nearly half of the states already have laws prohibiting abortion either throughout pregnancy or at some stage of pregnancy, although courts have blocked enforcement of some.

In states with abortion bans, the change in the legal landscape has placed a renewed focus on pro-life work—and on the ministry of the local church, Christian pro-life advocates said.

“What we want to see is the church is the first place that [a woman with an unplanned pregnancy] goes, that she feels that love and that compassion, that she feels that the church is going to be a refuge for her,” said Elizabeth Graham, vice president of operations and life initiatives for the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

Her comments came during a June 13 panel discussion about the future of the pro-life movement that took place on the eve of the SBC's annual meeting in Anaheim, Calif., and before the overruling of *Roe*.

Churches can offer community, support

Rick Morton, vice president of engagement for Lifeline Children's Services, said: "We love crisis pregnancy centers [and] believe that there's great necessity [in them]. And we believe in the church. We believe that ultimately the place that those women need—they need to be disciplined, they need to be surrounded by community—is in the local church."

Lifeline has prepared discipleship resources to provide churches with "the building blocks" to engage in ministering for the long term to women with unplanned pregnancies, Morton said.

Even before the Supreme Court overturned Roe, churches were asking how they could serve after a draft opinion annulling the 1973 decision was leaked in early May.

Churches reached out to Lifeline after the leak to say: "We are recognizing that we need to do more. And so, can you help us learn how to do more? Can you help us figure out ways that we can get engaged?" said Chris Johnson, the ministry's national director of church partnerships.

Lifeline's work includes pregnancy counseling, adoption and family restoration in the United States, with offices in 16 states. The 41-year-old ministry, based in Birmingham, Ala., offers international adoption in 18 countries.

Beginning, not the end

In some ways, this is "a beginning" and "not an end," Morton said. "Maybe some of the hope out of this actually is that there are people that are rethinking and reframing the issue in their own mind, and maybe some

folks that haven't been as active and haven't really related their pursuit of Christ and the gospel to this issue."

It may be "a beginning point" for such Christians to say, "I'll begin to get in and minister to women in crisis, to minister to those women and their unborn children, adoptive families," he said. "I think there are all kinds of people that potentially God's using this just to wake the church up."

Sometimes that ministry is simple and practical, said Lori Bova, who has participated in pro-life work for more than two decades.

"I have learned that creating a culture of life often looks like meeting needs—driving women to appointments, buying diapers and wipes, providing childcare, etc.," said Bova, chair of the ERLC trustees and a member of a Southern Baptist church in New Mexico. "We have a Savior who came to serve. It should be no surprise that this is our best means to change hearts and minds toward life, and ultimately the gospel."

Address 'systemic drivers' of abortion

Churches can seek to address the "systemic drivers" that pregnant women often say push them to choose abortion, including the need for affordable housing and childcare, as well as a sufficient salary, Graham said. Church members can provide childcare, help women find jobs, volunteer with need-meeting programs and open their homes to pregnant women to offer a "continuum of care" for the long term, she said.

"We just need to connect with her, help her to feel safe, help her to know that she has other options and to walk alongside her," Graham said. "These women know that the decision that they've made is a sin against God, but we can be there to show them compassion and grace and the cross."

Herbie Newell, Lifeline's president, said churches need to be "long-

suffering and patient” and “lean in on” God’s call to disciple women and children, “walking with them through the long term and being the place where women and children find help, healing and rescue. And that’s in the arms of the gospel and Christ Jesus.”

“One of the greatest things the church can do is to be a resource of social capital to a woman in crisis,” he said. “The truth of the matter is most of these women have nowhere to turn in their darkest hour and their need. And there need to be churches that they can turn to and that will be there and will do the hard and will do the messy.”

Partner with pregnancy resource centers

Churches can partner with gospel-focused pregnancy resource centers in serving vulnerable women, pro-life advocates said.

The centers form the “front line in this battle,” Carol Everett said in a phone interview. “I would really like to see the Baptist church come to the forefront and every church get involved with a pregnancy resource center. That doesn’t mean they have to start one. They can get involved with their local one, and then they can have volunteers in there that serve as local missionaries. It’s a wonderful place for us to act as missionaries without going to a foreign mission field.”

The Heidi Group, which Everett founded in 1995, is working to open pregnancy resource centers in unserved locations, such as the 21 counties in Central Texas and West Texas without one, said Everett, a member of a Southern Baptist church.

Pregnancy resource centers in Texas already have experienced what ministry will be like when abortion is prohibited during much of pregnancy.

The state's ban on abortion when a preborn child's heartbeat can be detected—as early as five to six weeks into pregnancy—took effect in September 2021.

That ban produced an increase of 50 percent “in girls and women walking through the doors of our pregnancy centers in Texas, almost across the board” and eventually up to 90 percent in some cities, Everett said. Now that Roe has been reversed and “people start thinking that [abortion is] wrong, we expect another rush,” she said.

Provide ultrasound tech to centers

One way Southern Baptists have supported the work of pregnancy resource centers is through the Psalm 139 Project, the ERLC's ministry to help provide ultrasound technology to pregnancy centers and train staff members in its use.

The ERLC has nearly reached its goal of 50 ultrasound placements between December 2020 and January 2023, which would have been the 50th anniversary of the Roe ruling had it not been overturned.

The Psalm 139 Project has 49 machines placed or committed to be placed by January and funding for machines to surpass that goal. Since 2004, Psalm 139 has helped place ultrasound equipment at centers in 16 states and one other country, Northern Ireland.

Lisa Cathcart, executive director of the Pregnancy Care Center in Old Hickory, Tenn., for more than 13 years, said advocating for and financially supporting pregnancy resource centers is a way churches can conduct pro-life ministry. Other ways churches can be pro-life in a post-Roe era, Cathcart said, include teaching a “whole-life, pro-life view of human dignity” to their members and ministering in a gospel-based way to the congregation, which includes post-abortive women and men.

PCC has “always worked for the dignity and welfare of both [mother and child], and our work starts with her—the woman who needs compassion, hope and practical help to consider alternatives to abortion,” Cathcart said after Roe was overturned. “Our work will continue, even increase, and we are prepared to meet this moment.”

Pro-life ministry also includes Christian families welcoming children born to vulnerable women into their homes in a post-Roe world, pro-life advocates say. Newell testified before committees of lawmakers in both Alabama houses in support of legislation to prohibit abortion.

In both chambers, Newell said, Democrats on the committees asked him: “If we ban abortion in our state, there will be more kids in foster care and there will be more kids that need to be adopted. Are there enough families?”

“And I unequivocally looked them in the face and I said, ‘If you take this bold step and you dignify life, we will be ready and there will be families for these children.’ And I wholeheartedly believe it.”