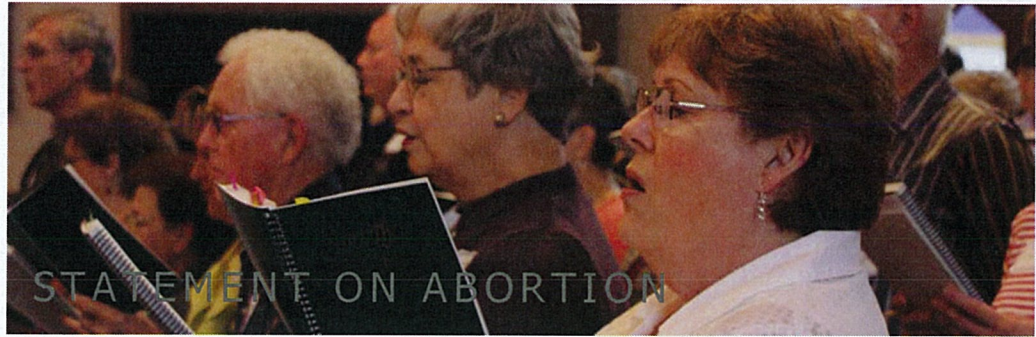




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*Based on former Mennonite Church (1975) and General Conference Mennonite Church (1980) statements.*

Adopted by the 2003 Delegate Assembly.

## I. Preamble

"We believe that God has created human beings in the divine image. God formed them from the dust of the earth and gave them a special dignity among all the works of creation. Human beings have been made for relationship with God, to live in peace with each other, and to take care of the rest of creation."<sup>1</sup>

(Article VI, Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective)

## II. We believe

- Human life is a gift from God to be valued and protected. We oppose abortion because it runs counter to biblical principles.
- The fetus in its earliest stages (and even if imperfect by human standards) shares humanity with those who conceived it.
- There are times when deeply held values, such as saving the life of the mother and saving the life of the fetus, come in conflict with each other.
- The faith community should be a place for discernment about difficult issues like abortion.
- Abortion should not be used to interrupt unwanted pregnancies.
- Christians must provide viable alternatives to abortion that provide care and support for mothers and infants.
- The church should witness to society regarding the value of all human life.
- Professionals whose ministry involves dealing with the moral dilemmas of abortion and reproductive technologies need our support.

## III. We confess

- We have failed to offer a clear voice affirming life as an alternative to our society's frequent reliance upon abortion as the solution to problem pregnancies.
- We have failed to show compassion for those who are suffering the consequences of abortion.
- We have failed to work for a just health care system that would assist poor families in caring for their children.

## IV. Commentary<sup>2</sup> (corresponding to Sections II and III)

**Human life is a gift from God to be valued and protected.**

Humanity and humans have a special place in God's creation. The Bible teaches that all human life is a gift of God and of immeasurable worth in His sight:

- The Psalmist speaks of God's intimate involvement in the creation of human life. "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well" (Psalm 139:13, 14).

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- Abortion runs counter to biblical principles which give a high value to human life. "Portrayal of God as the author and giver of life creates a general presumption against any human decision to terminate life."<sup>3</sup>
- We are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26, 27; 2:7-9; 9:6; Psalm 8).
- We are protected and admonished by the commandment, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13).
- We are instructed to act in the best interests of our neighbor (Matthew 22:39; John 15:17; Romans 13:8-10; 1 Corinthians 10:24).
- Throughout the Bible, we are called to demonstrate special concern for the defenseless, the widow, the orphan, the oppressed, the stranger, and the one who has no advocate. Though the Bible does not explicitly say so, in our day concern for the "defenseless" should also extend to the fetus.<sup>4</sup>

**The fetus in its earliest stages (and even if imperfect by human standards) shares humanity with those who conceived it.**

The Bible does not speak directly to the question of abortion. A biblical passage that indirectly speaks to the status of the fetus (Exodus 21:22-25) seems to place a higher value on the life of the mother than the fetus. For the death of the fetus, the husband is to be compensated with money, but where the wife suffers hurt or death, there shall be "life for life, eye for eye."<sup>5</sup> The Bible places a high value on the life of the fetus, though it does not necessarily support its defense to the exclusion of all other considerations.

We understand that the fetus is not just a piece of tissue to be discarded at will. On the other hand, neither is the fetus treated as a human/person in the full sense of that term. Human life begins at conception. We agree that any attempt to define the beginning of humanness at a point along the spectrum of development is a mistake, tempting as it may be.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, our martyr tradition and our hope in eternal life do not insist that human life trumps all other values.

Most people will choose the life of the mother if a choice must be made about the survival of either the mother or the fetus. In those rare situations when a choice must be made between the life of the mother and the life of the unborn child, Christians should prayerfully seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit with a group of believers committed to discerning the will of God.

Even though we wish every child to have a healthy body and a strong mind, the lack of such does not make the child less a person in God's sight. Some persons<sup>7</sup> pose a test of "personhood." For utilitarians, personhood requires higher thought processes called "preferences."

Such persons believe that since a fetus or newborn has few, if any, preferences, it should not be recognized as a person. We believe that such a test of personhood could lead to screening fetuses in order to eliminate people with disabilities or those with genetic diseases that will likely limit their life or restrict the enjoyment of life. For many families, the presence of a handicapped child has become the source of great joy. At the same time, we recognize the special challenges faced by families caring for developmentally disabled or handicapped children. We believe that the possibility of deformity or mental handicap is not sufficient reason to choose abortion.

**There are times when deeply held values come in conflict with each other.**

We stress the importance of respect for the life of the fetus. We condone abortion only under the most exceptional of circumstances. When abortion appears to be the least bad choice among several undesirable options, we stress the need for discernment in the faith community.

Because of the diversity of moral conviction in our society, we realize that what the law permits is not necessarily moral behavior for the Christian. We believe, however, that the church should witness to society in favor of the "general presumption against any human decision to terminate life."<sup>8</sup> We will offer counsel about alternatives to abortion.

While many could support legislation which seeks to curtail some types of abortion, we recognize that legislation banning all abortions will not stop abortions from happening. Instead, it places sanctions on those women who choose abortion, without regard for the fathers involved or the fact that the women are already suffering the consequences of their choice. It also disproportionately affects the poor, as those with means will be able to find ways to obtain safe abortions. Further, legislation is using the government to force others to comply with our Christian standards, something our forebears clearly rejected. We believe that the demands of discipleship are to be accepted voluntarily, not imposed legally upon everyone regardless of conviction.

**The faith community should be a place for discernment.**

We believe that the New Testament pictures the church as a community (koinonia), which seeks to discern the will of God and take responsibility as a group for decisions. The emphasis on individual rights and autonomy in our society has deeply affected our community. To call for discernment in the community of faith is counter-cultural in the extreme. We urge members of the faith community to engage in a discerning process rather than making decisions in isolation. We recognize that such a process will usually involve only a small group within a congregation. Through this process of counsel and mutual accountability the church may promote a standard without insisting on uniformity for all. The individual woman or couple must finally decide on the question of abortion. We believe the larger community should be available for counsel to those making the decision.

We urge pastors and congregations to foster a climate of openness so that these decisions can be worked out prayerfully in the context of Christian community. We believe that the community should be supportive of a

woman or couple, sharing the responsibility for, and burden of, that decision. This would include sharing in the responsibility for the care of that person or family if a continued pregnancy leads to the birth of a child that brings hardship on a family or individual.

**Abortion should not be used to interrupt unwanted pregnancies.**

We support responsible decisions to limit family size. We believe that when pregnancy is not desired, responsible men and women will take responsibility for their sexual behavior. We do not support the use of abortion as a means of birth control or for limitation of family size.

**We are committed to providing care and support for those infants who are carried to term.**

We will seek creative alternatives to abortion that will enhance the well-being of mother, father, and child. We commit ourselves to show concern for individuals who place their children for adoption. The faith community should be ready to support financially, and in other ways, the families of all children, including those who are developmentally disabled.

**The church should witness to society regarding the value of all human life.**

We will promote consistency in favor of human life along the entire spectrum of human existence. We stand in opposition to sacrifice of life in the womb, in the death chamber, and through war in all its forms.

**We commit ourselves to support professional caregivers.**

We know that the church has often left the difficult task of dealing with persons facing abortion to the professionals in medicine, law, mental health, or social work. We commit ourselves to support our professionals whose ministry includes dealing with moral dilemmas of abortion and reproductive issues. When a person for reasons of conscience chooses not to perform or participate in performing abortions, we will advocate on their behalf.

**We will advocate for a society that does not rely on abortion as the primary solution to problem pregnancies.**

Historically we have affirmed the high value of human life and we continue to do so. We express deep dismay over the millions of abortions in North America since the Roe v. Wade decision in 1973. Three of ten conceptions (approximately 1.5 million each year) end in destruction of the fetus.<sup>9</sup> On the 30th anniversary of Roe v. Wade, we restate the biblical call for preservation of life even as we recognize the difficulty of addressing moral issues by government legislation.

We recognize that within our fellowship, we hold a wide variety of convictions about abortion. We acknowledge that there are situations in which some Christians may seek abortions for what other Christians regard as selfish or inadequate reasons.

**We will act with compassion toward those who choose to have an abortion.**

We will support persons who are suffering as a result of their decision to have an abortion. We have too often failed to care, nurture, and support the mother or family with an unwanted pregnancy.

**We seek to become a more compassionate body, rather than judgmental of those with unwanted pregnancies.**

The Bible reflects an attitude of compassion toward the sinner. Jesus' harshest words were directed against the self-righteous. He warned against judging others. He spent much time with outcasts and sinners and he told those who caught the woman in an act of adultery, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). We believe that persons who have an abortion for reasons regarded by others in the Christian community as wrong should be treated with love, so that Jesus' word of redemption may become operative: "Go your way and from now on do not sin again" (John 8:11).

**We commit ourselves to work for a just health care system that will assist poor families in caring for their children.**

Because we are concerned about just health care for all, we will:

- Recognize that protests against abortion have greater integrity when they are combined with concern for all human life.
- Commit ourselves to work for a just health care system that will assist poor families in caring for their children, thus eliminating conditions that help create a culture of abortion.
- Urge our members to consider becoming adoptive or foster parents to care for abused and unwanted children.

- Become persistent advocates for a national health care policy which controls costs while emphasizing quality care.<sup>10</sup> (From MC and GC Delegate Assembly Resolutions on Health Care, 1992 and 1993)
- We believe that the use of abortion among the poor is driven at times by the inequities and gaps in the present health care system. An informed woman with financial resources has always been able to get a safe abortion while a poor woman who is less informed has resorted to abortions under expensive, dangerous, and clandestine conditions.

We affirm life even as we grieve the conditions that lead persons to consider abortion.

#### V. A call to the congregation

The congregation can be a place of healing or a hostile place for persons who have had or are considering abortion. We give a high value to life and also respond with compassion to those who may be considering abortion. We believe the body of Christ must hold these positions in tension.

We call on congregations to form caring teams who are able to walk with individuals seeking guidance as they deal with unexpected and unwanted pregnancies. If we want to create safe places in our congregations where people can talk about their problems, we must learn to listen in a non-judgmental way to those who fail to live up to their best intentions.

We call on pastors and congregational leaders to address issues of sexuality and appropriate sexual expression in sermons, in Sunday school classes, and in

premarital counseling. We believe congregations offer life to their communities by being involved in community organizations that support adoption and foster care.

We commit ourselves to provide Christian education about human sexuality for both young and old and to foster understanding of various means by which

pregnancy can be prevented when it is not desired. We commit ourselves to teaching sexual chastity before marriage and faithfulness in marriage.

We believe congregations have the ability to talk about abortion, express their commitment to Scripture, and discern its meaning for today. In many congregations, there are persons who can share their experiences of being parents, doctors, lawyers, pastors, nurses, and social workers.

A difficult moral issue like abortion requires ongoing • Kropf, Marlene Y. "How I Decided about Abortion," study and discussion. We commit ourselves to continue to Christian Living, November 1972. search for God's will in this matter even as we continue to speak out against abortion. We are sure that God's love in Revised 2001. Jesus Christ binds us together in this search: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor.13:12-13).

#### Reference Committee

The reference committee for this statement included:

- Committee members from Constituency Leaders Council: Leah Ann Alcazar, Yvonne Bailey, Elaine Good, Felipe Hinojosa, Janeen Bertsche Johnson, Ed Kauffman, Joe Longacher
- Consultants from Anabaptist Center for Health Care Ethics: Anne Hershberger, George Stoltzfus (writer)
- Staff from Mennonite Church USA Executive Board: J. Ron Byler, Kathryn Rodgers

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1. Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, Herald Press, 1995, Article VI, p. 28.
  2. All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.
  3. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* by Richard B. Hays, Harper Collins, 1996, pp. 455-456.
  4. John Howard Yoder (see recommended reading) speaks of a "prejudice in favor of the defenseless."
  5. Although this has historically been the interpretation of the text, some people interpret it to mean that there is a live birth. They therefore believe the text does not support making a distinction between the status of the fetus and the mother.
  6. See Hays, p. 455, for a more complete discussion.
  7. "Who Lives? Who Dies? The Disturbing Logic of Peter Singer," *The Christian Century*, July 3-10, 2002, pp. 24-29.
  8. See Hays, pp. 455-456.
  9. "Inconvenient Lives," *First Things*, December 1996, p. 9.
  10. See Resolution on Health Care endorsed by GCMC and MC delegates in 1992 and 1993, respectively.
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This statement may be viewed at [www.MennoniteChurchUSA.org](http://www.MennoniteChurchUSA.org). Adopted by Mennonite ChurchUSA Delegate Assembly, Atlanta, Georgia, July 2003

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