

Reproductive Justice Response to Friends Committee on National Legislation
Request for Input to Policy

May 3, 2023

From: Peace and Social Justice Committee, Bethesda Friends Meeting

We are thankful for the opportunity to give input to the dialogue on Reproductive Justice being undertaken by the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) in the light of the recent Dobbs decision overturning *Roe versus Wade*. We feel strongly that the issue of reproductive justice is just that, a seeking for justice in reproductive health issues which touches on many of the core principles outlined in "The World We Seek", FCNL's policy statement.

The "World We Seek" policy document treats the issue of abortion and reproductive rights only as a health issue with a caveat which says that since there is no consensus on the issue, FCNL cannot lobby on it. Indeed, the revocation of *Roe v. Wade* is an essential health issue, but one which has important implications for wider core beliefs held by Quakers and outlined clearly in "The World We Seek" itself.

We recognize that Americans and Friends may have vastly different beliefs and convictions on the topic of abortion and contraception. As Friends, we embrace the rights of all individuals to discernment on the best choice for them and their family in consultation with their medical providers and with discernment from the Spirit.

What we stand against here and have stood against throughout our history as Quakers is the coercive use of state power. We perceive that legislation or enforcement of prohibitions on abortion or criminalization of actions and guidance relating to contraception or abortion is coercion and undermines the rights and freedom of all who have reproductive abilities. It also disproportionately affects the poor and marginalized and people of color whose access to health care is in many cases, already second rate.

Both Baltimore Yearly Meeting and Bethesda Friends Meeting have approved minutes supporting access to abortion and the right to privacy (See Appendix 1).

Our responses to specific FCNL queries follow:

Query 1. What does reproductive health care look like in the world that you and your community seek?

- Reproductive health care should be available to all persons who need it, both in terms of economic access and insurance, and available conveniently with minimal limitations. This should include regular check-ups and access to needed therapies.
- Reproductive health care should include easy access to a variety of appropriate means of contraception. In addition, information on how the reproductive system works, common disorders, and about the risks and odds for a healthy pregnancy should be easily available. Information on health and sex education should also be available in schools.
- Reproductive health care should be available prior to pregnancy, throughout gestation, and for at least a year following any birth as well as following miscarriage, or stillbirth.
- Women who have challenges with fertility should have access to appropriate options.
- Should a woman face an unintended pregnancy or a pregnancy she does not have the resources to sustain, or in the face of serious fetal abnormality, she should have access to Plan B, and/or a means to terminate the pregnancy by medical or surgical means by safe and legal methods in consultation with her health care provider, and, as she wishes, with her family and/or spiritual community.
- People of color, LGBTQ+, and other marginalized groups should be provided full equity of medical treatment and reproductive care in all aspects, a standard for which we currently fall far short.
- Women should never have to worry that if a complication arises in a pregnancy that threatens her life or health that she would be delayed or denied the medical standard of care to treat her condition. Abortion procedures must remain available as a standard medical treatment for non-viable pregnancies, miscarriages, and cases where the life of the mother is at risk.
- Friends should work toward decriminalizing reproductive health procedures including abortion, as well as protecting women who obtain these health procedures and the health professionals and allies who provide assistance and access to these procedures.

Query 2. How are Quaker values and testimonies relevant to the issue of abortion?

We discern that our concerns on matters of reproductive health are founded in Quaker beliefs on equity, the search for a right society, and the right of individuals and communities to find Spirit led discernment on this and all issues. Quaker testimonies on Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality and Stewardship all support such a spirit-led discernment.

As Quakers we eschew unpeaceful or coercive means to an end. We affirm the value, preciousness, and dignity of life. Decisions regarding abortion are difficult and contentious, as there is a need to consider the life of a mother and a new life, and there are no easy or clear answers.

As the question of whether a fetus has a soul is a matter of faith and not fact, we feel that freedom of religion and separation of church and state and tolerance for diversity indicates that abortion is a matter of individual faith and choice. We perceive that the question of reproductive rights is one of autonomy, agency, and bodily ownership where coercion has no place. Just as we would not wish someone who felt each fetus had a soul to be compelled to have an abortion, we would not wish to have anyone pregnant compelled to carry a fetus to term.

Although we have a peace testimony, we do not reject those who serve in the military from being Quakers in good standing. In the same way, we may have differences of views about reproductive rights and choices, but that should not impede our tolerance and welcome to those who choose differently.

Quaker discernment is at the core of following the Spirit led guidance. We respect the right of each individual to discern their choices based on their beliefs, values, conscience, and relationship with Spirit. We do not believe it is for others to make or compel a choice in such a personal matter with grave and life-changing consequences.

We emphasize the importance of providing access to effective fertility management strategies, such as contraception, to enable all people to have agency over their fertility so that there is more limited need to resort to abortions to address care needs. Therefore, we believe that Quakers should advocate strongly for contraceptive coverage and availability as an unmitigated good.

We note the following developments which are contrary to what the 'World We Seek' policy document supports.

The original wording is in italics.

Part I: We seek a world free of war and the threat of war.

Section IV: Building mutual understanding and trust.

1.4.3 *"For a better world community, more attention is necessary to the human rights and economic security of women and children, including adequate nutrition, education, health care and voluntary family planning".* Currently there are legislative agendas which seek to limit voluntary family planning availability.

Part II: We seek a society with equity and justice for all.

Section II: Civil Liberties and Civil Rights

II.2.1 *"paramount need to protect and promote human rights".* Are the rights of women, particularly poor women and women of color who have less access to reproductive health care, not human rights?

II.2.2 *" we uphold the separation of church and state".* As mentioned previously this FCNL policy is not being upheld with the interests of one section of the Christian faith dominating the beliefs of all other religions. Abortion must remain legal at the federal and state level to allow for multiple belief systems to hold their own views.

Part IV. Repairing Ongoing and Historical Oppression

IV.4 *Sexism: " We strive for a society where every individual is respected, valued and celebrated equally. Equality of rights under law should not be denied or abridged".* Under Dobbs, women do not have control over their own lives and those of their families. Medical decisions relating to pregnancy, miscarriage and family planning are being set at the state level by non-medical legislatures.

Query 3. Should the FCNL Policy Statement be revised on the issues of abortion and reproductive health and abortion?

The existing FCNL policy regarding abortion and reproductive health care is inadequate to our situation following the Dobbs decision. A portion of it reads: *"Members of the Society of Friends are not in unity on abortion*

issues. Therefore, FCNL takes no position and does not act either for or against abortion legislation.” We suggest that this statement is removed. It is in any case not appropriate, as there are other issues on which there is no clear consensus within the Quaker movement, on which FCNL does lobby. It is important that the FCNL be supported to lobby against any federal ban on abortion, whether direct or indirect.

Query 4. If so, what should the Policy Statement say?

We would make few changes to the section on medical care in the policy note, although it could be expanded in other ways than suggested here. Our suggested changes to the FCNL text are in bold.

*III.2.6. Health Care. Universal access to affordable, effective, comprehensive health care is a right and is necessary to allow all people to fulfill their potential. Comprehensive health care includes primary, acute, **reproductive**, and long-term care, including prescription drugs, as well as mental health and **substance abuse disorder** treatments. To ensure access, health services should be provided where an individual’s needs can best be met. Our country can only maintain and improve the physical and mental health of its population with affordable health care that covers the entire lifespan, from prenatal to end-of-life care for all. Public health services, which protect us all, require robust federal support.*

III.2.7 Knowing that all life is precious and acknowledging the seriousness of the issues surrounding abortion choices, members of the Bethesda Friends Meeting support the availability of abortion procedures, medication, and contraception as necessary reproductive health care options. With that of God in everyone, every person of every gender and every family has the right of autonomy in personal medical decisions according to their religious beliefs.

We recognize that of God within the women who obtain these procedures and their caregivers and FCNL is encouraged to protect the right to personal discernment regarding abortion and other reproductive choices, knowing that they should never be made lightly.

Appendix 1:

*BETHESDA FRIENDS MEETING**Religious Society of Friends*

P. O. Box 30152 ♦ Bethesda, Maryland ♦ 20824-0152

Bethesda Friends Meeting
Minute: Privacy and the State
(Adopted July 17, 2022)

Friends live in the Light that there is that of God in every person, and that the spiritual journey is one of continual seeking and revelation. Often life brings us to difficult moments of decision making. We are taught to hold these decisions in the Light, seeking guidance by Spirit. Often, we turn to our community for help in gaining clarity. Bethesda Friends Meeting respects the individuality of each person's spiritual journey, knowing that decisions can lead to both endings and beginnings, often in unexpected ways.

The decision to have, or not have, children and the decision of whom to marry, or not marry, are deeply personal decisions to be made by the person or people involved, in the presence of the Spirit. With that of God, every person of every gender and every family has the right of autonomy which includes pregnancy termination.

If a Friend or couple is struggling with a question regarding these personal decisions and asks the Meeting for help, it is the practice of Bethesda Friends Meeting to provide a clearness committee or otherwise support them in their decision-making.

In our role in making public policy, Friends should also work to assure that any such decisions are decriminalized, and an individual's right and ability to carry out their decision is preserved. *This minute builds on a statement from the 1988 edition of BYM's Faith and Practice, which reads: *When the number of children exceeds the financial, physical, and even spiritual capacity of the parents, a hardship is worked on by all involved. Thoughtful decisions either to have or not to have children should be accepted and supported by the Meeting.*