Prophetic Generations: 50 Years of Choice and Justice
Sermon Guide

This year, 2013, marks the 50 year anniversary of the Unitarian Universalist Association's (UUA's) first statement on reproductive choice. Fifty years ago, we were faithful pioneers—the first religion to publicly proclaim the right of a women to an abortion—a right to her dignity and bodily autonomy. Unfortunately, that statement was no more relevant and important then as it is today.

In the 50 years that have followed the UUA’s first statement, and in the 40 years since the U.S. Supreme Court verified a woman’s right to an abortion, the reproductive rights movement has steadily lost ground. Every year since Roe v Wade, with 2013 being the worst, people who want abortions will not be able to get them. More people, this year, are at risk of serious emotional, financial, and physical harm because the procedure is unavailable. More and more people denied their right to make these sacred decisions about their bodies and their families.

Though we can be proud of our 50 year legacy of working for reproductive rights, the current reality means that we need a new strategy.

The UUA’s recent Congregational Study/Action Issue (CSAI) on reproductive justice marks a shift in our strategy. Led by coalitions of women of color, we join a movement that makes justice its goal. Beyond the simple legal right to abortion, we step out of our issue silos and fight together for the conditions needed for every person to realize their full humanity on issues of reproduction, family, and sexuality. Using the term “reproductive justice” without understanding what it actually means puts us at risk of damaging our relationships with communities of color. However, the reproductive justice framework also presents us with an incredible opportunity to combine our long legacy of working for reproductive freedom with our contemporary commitment to fighting institutional racism and oppression.

We continue our work as pioneers—we are again the first religion to endorse the reproductive justice movement. Our progressive religious voices were never so needed. Unitarian Universalists, especially UU clergy, have a role to play. Because the groups and concepts that oppose sexual health and reproductive rights are almost entirely religious, what we do as people of liberal faith makes a huge difference. States have passed over 200 restrictions on access to abortion in the last five years alone, and this downward trend will only continue if people like us don’t answer the call to action.

In faith,

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PS: If you needed yet another reason to preach on reproductive justice this fall, here’s a good one: You could win $500! The Commission on Social Witness sponsors a sermon contest every year on the themes of the current Study/Action Issues, with a $500 prize to the winner. Submissions are due March 1, 2014.

**Significant Reproductive Rights Statements by the UUA**

1963 General Resolution “Reform of Abortion Statues”
*First UUA statement passed by General Assembly in support of reproductive choice. Seven years before any other denomination passed a statement, and ten years before Roe v. Wade made abortion legal.*

1971 General Resolution “National Health Plan”
*First statement about national health insurance, includes full coverage for abortion, family planning, pre/post-natal care, etc. The UUA’s reproductive justice priorities currently include support for the Affordable Care Act and its potential expansions of Medicaid, which even today are not as progressive as this 1971 statement demands.*

1977 General Resolution “Abortion”
*In favor of Medicaid funds for abortion, paragraphs about parenting and birth control. The UUA’s reproductive justice priorities currently include advocacy against the prohibition of federal funds for abortion, which has been passed every year since 1977 as the Hyde Amendment.*

*Last paragraph hints at intersectional approach for support of all forms of reproductive health care and justice, by advocating for comprehensive sexuality education in the context of abortion. Reproductive justice is distinct from reproductive rights by its intersectional approach, i.e. attention to complex and overlapping systems of oppression and marginalization within society.*

2007 Statement of Conscience “Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society”
*Separation of church and state; democracy and public/religious discourse*

2012-2016 Congregational Study/Action Issue “Reproductive Justice: Expanding Our Social Justice Calling”
*First explicit mention of “reproductive justice”*

All statements can be found by searching for “abortion” or “reproductive rights”.
Unitarian Universalists in the Reproductive Rights/Justice Movements

Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion
Before abortion was legal, UUs helped women secure safe abortion options. In the mid 1960’s many UU clergy members joined the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion. Participating clergy referred women to safe but illegal abortion providers who took risks for themselves and their families to provide women with this service. Their actions demonstrated their individual commitment and the values of our faith. Some of the UU clergy involved in this ministry were the Reverends Farley Wheelright, Richard Gilbert, John Nichols, (the late) Peter Raible, (the late) Nick Cardell, Ralph Mero, and David Johnson.

Roe v. Wade
The case that eventually became Roe v. Wade started in Dallas, Texas, with several young attorneys who wanted a case to challenge existing anti-abortion statutes. One of them, Linda Coffee, thought she might find some possible plaintiffs at the First Unitarian Church of Dallas, which had a strong reputation in the community as being on the cutting edge of social reform. While Coffee did not find any plaintiffs—none of the church women were pregnant—she did find a group of strong supporters, especially in the Women’s Alliance. As reported in Unitarian Universalists Commemorate 34th Anniversary of Roe v. Wade Decision: “The Women’s Alliance at First Unitarian Church in Dallas was a major supporter of Roe v. Wade when it began its journey through the Texas court system. The congregation’s leaders encouraged the lead attorney, Sarah Weddington, to pursue the case even though she was beginning her career and was not sure she wanted to be involved in such a controversial case. Weddington and members of the Alliance received the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation Ministry to Women Award in 2005 for their work.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education
The first of its kind in Unitarian Universalism, the annual Fall Conference of the Liberal Religious Educators Association (LREDA) focuses on sexuality and provides resources for working with parents and youth. The conference resulted, in part, in the idea for a faith-based curriculum that addressed real life issues emerging for UU young people, which evolved into “About Your Sexuality” (AYS) and subsequently “Our Whole Lives” (OWL). OWL is an innovative and unique series of comprehensive sexuality education curricula that was co-developed with the United Church of Christ. Hundreds of Unitarian Universalist congregations use the OWL curricula every year, and many UU congregations advocate for the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education in public and private schools. Read more.

LGBTQ Justice
Unitarian Universalism is widely known for its commitment to welcome and equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals and families. From our ordination of openly LGBTQ people and our willingness to perform marriages of couples regardless of gender, to our public advocacy for LGBTQ justice and our Welcoming Congregation program, the Unitarian Universalist Association has a strong understanding of this aspect of sexual freedom. Read more.
Three Congregational/Thematic Approaches to Reproductive Justice

- **Prophetic** Reproductive justice provides a great opportunity for the faith community in the public sphere. The movement is inclusive and holistic and visionary. Unitarian Universalism is a faith defined by our individual and collective pursuits of truth, and our ability to stand by our conscience and freely-made decisions. Reproductive justice challenges us to shift from our focus on individuals and individuality to a sense of belonging, intimate community, and relationship. *What supports are needed for people to make decisions freely? When we engage in long-term movement building, how can we do so sustainably and faithfully? With whom are in partnership? How do we understand success?*
  
  - “From iChurch to Beloved Community: Ecclesiology and Justice” – Rev. Fred Muir, Berry Street Essay 2012
  - “An End to Self Care” – B. Loewe

- **Multigenerational** For some of us, the shift from reproductive choice to reproductive justice can feel overwhelming, like an idealistic mission-creep that threatens our effectiveness and decentralizes the “Get out of my uterus!” theme. Many Unitarian Universalists were active in the choice movement that was epitomized by *Roe v. Wade*. We can hear their stories and honor their work while at the same time recognizing that younger generations have a different worldview and want a more holistic approach to problem-solving. In other words, it’s not enough to address abortion in isolation. Reproductive justice invites us to open our hearts and minds to a broader range of concerns and to examine how identity—and the intersection of identities—impact access to power and resources. *What have we learned from the generations of activists that struggled to legalize abortion? What can we learn from the reproductive justice generation? How does a movement successfully transition from one generation to the next?*
  
  - “Can Unitarian Universalism Change?” – Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor, UU World, Spring 2010
  - *Multigenerational Congregations* – Judith A. Frediani

While the ‘reproductive choice’ framework sometimes denies emotional content (ie, the fetus is just a lump of cells; it’s no big deal), the RJ movement holds the dual realities that abortion can be the right and good decision, while also acknowledging that it can be extremely difficult and painful. As Rev. Barbara Condon writes in *Between a Woman and Her God: Clergy and Women Tell their Stories*, “There is a big difference between grief and regret.” Despite our relative openness on many issues, our Unitarian Universalist congregations tend to be places where people feel unwelcome to talk openly about abortion and other forms of reproductive loss. While important to respect people’s need for privacy, of course, avoiding the issue altogether also sends a message. *Where does life come from? Who suffers from reproductive loss, and when? What judgments do we or others bring to those who suffer various types of reproductive loss, and where are those judgments based? What might our community be like, were it free from those kinds of judgments about sexuality or other people’s decisions?*
  
  - *A Guide to Emotional and Spiritual Resolution After an Abortion*
  - “For All That Is Our Life” (PDF) – Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker
Why Reproductive Justice Makes Sense for Unitarian Universalists
By Rev. Rob Keithan, Director of Public Policy at the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice

1. We care about all people.
Our UU values call us to care about the real life circumstances and challenges of all people. As such, it matters—a lot—that actual access to abortion has decreased dramatically in recent years, due to the enormous number of restrictions passed at the state level and continuing financial barriers at the federal level. Abortion opponents support mandatory waiting periods and medically unnecessary ultrasounds because they significantly increase the amount of time and money it takes for a woman to secure abortion care, thus making it harder to access. Unitarian Universalists believe that it is unacceptable for our laws to willingly and consistently single out a group of people—in this case low-income women—specifically for the purpose of denying access to healthcare.

The reproductive justice approach appropriately requires us to see the bigger picture of who has access to resources and who doesn’t—and why. It calls us to understand how overlapping identities (gender, race, economic status, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc) affect the lives of individuals and communities. It calls us to see the world not only through our own eyes, but through the eyes of people on the margins. What does it mean to actually have “choice”?

2. We care about more than abortion.
While access to abortion has been—and should remain—an important UU justice commitment, our ultimate goal is much bigger: we want health and justice, healing and wholeness, for all people. We want all individuals, families, and communities to have access to the resources they need to live happy, healthy, and responsible lives. Young people deserve medically-accurate, age-appropriate sexuality education. LGBT people should have full cultural and legal rights, including adoption, marriage, and freedom from discrimination in the workplace. All women and families—regardless of income, immigration status, or other factors—should have access to all pregnancy-related healthcare, including pre-natal care, post-natal care, and abortion. Women who choose adoption or motherhood need support from their families and congregations and communities.

By keeping the focus on specific, separated issues like abortion and LBGT equality, the fundamentalist religious right keeps our attention off the core issue, which could be summed up as this: moralism v. pluralism. Moralism is the old, entrenched, often-invisible mindset that gives the right wing power—especially on issues related to sexuality. The enduring influence of moralism is why, in the 21st century, it’s not a given that health insurance plans should provide contraceptive coverage for women. The reproductive justice framework encourages us to stop working on reproductive choice/rights in isolation, but instead to see how much we have in common will other movements. For example, the people and organizations who oppose abortion tend to be the exact same folks who oppose equality for LGBT people. In both cases, because their views are grounded primarily (if not exclusively) in religious belief, rather than human rights, science, public health and welfare, or other democratic values, the right wing’s
influence depends on society accepting the notion that they deserve to have that influence. It depends on society accepting the principle that some people’s rights and access to resources can be regulated based on the strong views of one particular group, because these views—and those who hold them—are seen as “moral.” Moralism means that it’s legitimate for some people to impose their beliefs on others.

Pluralism, on the other hand, means that people get to make up their own minds, according to their own beliefs and values. Pluralism recognizes that, in the words of Francis David, “We need not think alike to love alike;” that a diversity of viewpoints and ways of being are an inevitable and beautiful part of the human condition. It is pluralism—not moralism—that is expressed throughout the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. Pluralism made and makes religious freedom possible, and pluralism makes Unitarian Universalism possible today because respect for individual beliefs and conscience is a cornerstone of our faith and our congregations.

People have different beliefs on issues related to life and parenting, and that’s perfectly acceptable. What’s not acceptable is when one group has its views written into law, such that other people are denied the ability to make their own decisions. Our laws and policies should protect the rights and abilities of each person to make decisions according to their own beliefs and conscience.

3. We recognize our unique responsibility as people of liberal faith.
Unlike the other issues on which Unitarian Universalists work, reproductive justice is unique in that the opposition is entirely (albeit not always explicitly) religious in nature. As a consequence, whether or not we speak and act as religious people makes a huge difference. This is especially true because Unitarian Universalists tend to be more progressive on issues of sexuality than any other denomination. Case in point: we were the first to formally adopt reproductive justice as a focus. We certainly have allies in groups like the United Church of Christ and Union of Reform Judaism, as well as support from individuals in many other traditions, but quite simply there is no other national denomination that can step up the way we can.

This is particularly important because the United States is a highly religious nation. While the public generally supports the separation of religion and state, people are hesitant to jettison religion entirely because they associate religion with ethics and morality (which is not entirely bad, of course). As a result, the fact that the opposition to reproductive health, rights, and justice comes mostly from religious voices while support comes from secular voices is highly problematic. So long as most people think that the only religious perspective on sexuality and reproductive justice is a conservative one, moralism will rule the day.

Religion has done a disproportionate amount of the damage to health sexuality, so it stands to reason that religious people have a particular role to play in the struggle for healing and wholeness. Fortunately, we have a truly life-affirming and life-saving message to offer.
Moralism is based on fear, shame, and self-righteousness. It’s based on regulation, judgment, and punishment. It oppresses and represses; constrains and restricts; smothers and stigmatizes.

What we have to offer is a theology of pluralism, a theology of love, a theology of liberation. Our theology says that all people have value and should be able to make decisions about what happens to their bodies. Our theology says that bodies are good, that knowledge is good, that sexuality is good. Our theology says that there is strength and beauty in imperfection; that diversity is a blessing (a part of God’s plan, even!). Our theology says that talking about sexuality is not only appropriate, but necessary in order to overcome all the brokenness we’ve inherited from thousands of years of bad theology.

Working for reproductive justice provides Unitarian Universalists and Unitarian Universalism with a golden opportunity to take our strong legacy of work for reproductive choice and transform it into what our nation deeply needs right now: more people, and especially people of faith, who are willing to challenge the right wing’s stranglehold on sexuality and create a culture where all people have the rights, respect, and resources they deserve.
Find Out More

- For more information about the rising inaccessibility of abortion, see *Troubling Trend: More States Hostile to Abortion Rights as Middle Ground Shrinks*, by Rachel Benson Gold and Elizabeth Nash.
- Find out more information on the *Hyde Amendment*, which prohibits public funding for domestic abortions.
- For a sermon archive and other resources for clergy, small group ministry sessions, a liturgical calendar, and lots of other materials, check out the *Congregational Resource Packet*. The UUA requests your email address simply for the purposes of its own data-keeping.
- See the UUA’s six-session *Reproductive Justice Curriculum for Congregations*.
- To see the UUA’s issue priorities for reproductive justice, see *Moving Forward: In-Depth Resources on Reproductive Justice*, designed for congregations that have completed the Curriculum.
- See the “Reasons for Selecting Reproductive Justice as the Next UUA Study/Action Issue” flyer distributed by advocates at General Assembly.
- Join the Reproductive Justice Advocacy Community, YahooGroup, or Facebook page to be part of the ongoing work.

- **Partners on the UUA’s reproductive justice work:**
  - Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
  - Religious Institute, Inc.
  - Forward Together
  - National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
  - SisterSong
  - And many others!