

Lessons We Learned in Social Change

Our particular struggle for social change and legal reform in relation to abortion came at a time when the youth revolution was in full swing, anti-war activity was gaining social and political momentum, and radical politics was breaking out on campuses and in the streets of this country. By comparison our campaign with its long-range "conservative" strategies and pragmatic tactics seemed almost counterrevolutionary and certainly not very significant except to a few people.

In our role of giving leadership nationally we often devised policies and followed practices that seemed unnecessarily cautious, and our critics assailed us and even our colleagues doubted us from time to time. But that cautious campaign was related to goals and purposes that were more important than political "scoring" or ideological victories. To reiterate our major reason for being, it was primarily to provide counselors to enable women to get safe, low-cost abortions with a minimum of mental anguish and emotional trauma. Secondarily, we wanted to change the laws that made our presence as counselors necessary. Socially and politically all the things we did in the Clergy Consultation Service were related to these goals and how we would effect them. In retrospect the lessons we learned in the struggle for abortion rights for women were exceedingly important and perhaps need to be recalled for whatever application they may have for other social issues or areas of social change. It is with a sense of humility that we offer these lessons, for they come from no special wisdom or political skill but from the difficult day-by-day struggle with the problem, firsthand, and the agony of decision making that could have at any time doomed what good we were doing. We realize that these cautionary notes we are offering will fall on deaf ears to those who believe that social change or legal reform comes with "revolutionary

rhetoric” or the physical destruction of one’s opponents. But if you still believe that tactics and strategy may be more important than scoring political points or scaring the establishment, then these lessons may be simply helpful hints worth heeding in the next social crusade.

When we opened the New York CCS in 1967, we were very conscious of at least three natural adversaries: the Roman Catholic Church, the medical profession, and law enforcement agencies. The natural temptation of every social reformer is to attack his enemies, the perpetrators and defenders of injustice. There is in the psychological makeup of every “crusader” a combination of righteous indignation and unflagging zeal that feeds the need to expose the enemy and put him to rout. This natural desire may interfere in ways that sacrifice the “victims” of injustice in exchange for the punishment of the “enemy.”

We found that it was hard to resist this temptation. To do so meant putting the “women-victims” before the “cause” of fighting the enemies of progress.

The Roman Catholic Church, if it decided to repeat its performance of the 1940s with its open attack on Margaret Sanger, the advocate of birth-control methods, would be an adversary of sufficient power and influence to produce pressures for closing us down before we opened up. The Protestant and Jewish clergy were in the vulnerable position of not only advocating and assisting women in an act of mortal sin contrary to Catholic morality, but we were also performing an “illegal” act. Our conviction was that this “sleeping giant” should not be awakened by our cries of social outrage; in fact, we thought that no hostile noises should be made at all. We considered our struggle at that time to be not against the Roman Catholic Church but against an archaic law (put on the books by Protestants) and an apathetic public. We gave the Roman Catholic Church the benefit of a tolerance that it seldom demonstrated. In an article that was a preamble to our action, these words set the tone for our dealing with the Roman Catholic position:

The time is long overdue for the reform or eradication of the present (abortion) law. . . . It is altogether fitting that the leadership for the reform come from the institution most responsible for its origin and perpetuation, namely, the Christian Church. As for the Catholic Church, it cannot be expected that their theology nor the ethical directions drawn from that

doctrine are going to be negated by the church fathers. However, that doctrine is applicable to Catholics and is not meant to provide any basis for civil law. . . .

As for Protestants who are basically responsible for the beginnings of the law as it now stands, we have a moral and theological imperative to correct this heartless and inequitable law against women. . . .¹

In the period of time from May, 1967, to the time the law changed in New York State in 1970, the CCS never really received hostile reactions or any public pressures from the Roman Catholic Church against the work we were doing. There was a "live and let live" attitude in our relationship that postponed for several years the all-out warfare between the Roman Catholic Church and others over the abortion issue.

The second natural adversary of clergy involvement with the abortion issue was the medical profession. This is not to say that all doctors were opposed to a change in the law or resented the fact that clergy were counseling women about a medical problem. The fact that abortion was "illegal" except for therapeutic (sic!) reasons gave the gynecological profession the excuse it needed for refusing their patients the help they required. Many doctors who are supposedly the practitioners of medical science and who pride themselves on objectivity suddenly, before this issue, became moralistic and punitive, refusing help in even the most desperate situations. We will never forget the mother whose twelve-year-old daughter had been molested by a baby sitter and had become pregnant. Fighting for the future of her child, she had pounded on every medical door she knew. At the last hospital she visited the gynecologist and the psychiatrist took the child into their office and, in order to avoid any treatment or responsibility, asked her the most "obscene" question I can remember; they said, "Dear, wouldn't you like to be a mummy?" The mother, enraged, took her child and left, finally ending up in our office.

Scenes like this, and they were myriad, gave us every reason to attack the medical profession for its cowardice and abdication in the performance of professional duties. We easily could have opened up on their immoral and inhumane actions regarding their women patients and their willingness to use an "impossible" law to avoid moral culpability and legal risk on behalf of their patients.

¹ Howard Moody, "Man's Vengeance on Woman," *Renewal Magazine*, February, 1967, p. 7.

However, those doctors were a group of people we needed. We wanted them to do pelvic examinations and prepare medical notes in order that we might serve women more effectively.

Finally, law enforcement agencies were a third natural adversary. After all, we were involved in a practice that had every possibility of being declared a criminal act. The language of the 1967 statute in New York State was at least ambiguous enough to warrant a judgment that those who openly "aided and abetted" in the procurement of an abortion were guilty of a crime. We easily could have held press conferences and issued releases telling about a group of clergy who were engaged in a dramatic act of civil disobedience, inviting the police or the district attorney to do their duty. Then when they did act, we could have attacked the law enforcement officers for going after poor women and clergy instead of tracking the Mafia and arresting "muggers." The police certainly would have complied; a minister or rabbi would have been arrested; we would have hogged the headlines for a couple of days; and some loud speeches would have been made on the persecution of preachers, but thousands of women (who subsequently went through the CCS) would have gone without help.

One lesson we learned was not to clobber the opposition and label them for what they were. Such an approach would have made us feel good at times but probably would not have served our concerns. Many a reform fight and effort for social change has gone down the drain because it is more dramatic and exciting to fight in public real or mistaken enemies than it is to do drudge work as servants of a cause, in this instance, women and their right to control their reproductive processes.

Another lesson we learned in the abortion rights struggle involved the dangers and difficulties of becoming preoccupied with a single issue, such as abortion. We had to fight continually against being labeled as experts on abortion or being thought of as social activists concerned only with abortion. The occupational disease of every social crusader for a cause is myopia.

We discovered how easy it is to slip into judging all political action or all candidates on the basis of *our* issue. We had to keep reminding ourselves that abortion is one small part of a much larger picture of family planning, population control, and ecological disaster. We met lots of people in the abortion rights movement who seemed to eat, sleep, and breathe abortion problems. These

people were so inordinately preoccupied with this single issue that they seemed not to recognize that the world was suffering from any other ills that mattered. Sometimes we wondered what these people would do if there were no longer an "abortion issue," and we felt perhaps they would retire from the human race satisfied that the millenium had come. We never believed for a moment that abortion, for instance, was a more important issue than self-determination for black communities or the rape of Indochina or fighting an unconstitutional draft or working with César Chávez to unionize farm workers. However, we never seemed to lack for reformers, whose label of arrogance is never simply attributed but truly earned, who believe that if you are not engaged in *their* piece of the action that somehow you are a traitor to the revolution.

Anyone would have to have an incredible insolence to accuse a black preacher colleague, up to his eyeballs in confrontations with community militants, of not caring about women because he refuses to take a public stand on abortion. No one has more than a fragment of the truth or a piece of the action—one small handle to turn so that some human suffering is eased, an injustice amended, or some priorities rearranged. Only an enlarged ego or fanatical fantasy can turn that single issue or reform into a major source of the world's salvation.

The time that this single-issue distortion struck the hardest was after the abortion law had changed and we were engaged in a legislative lobbying effort in New York State to defend the liberal law. We spent a number of days in the legislative halls, cornering reticent legislators running for their political lives against "Right-to-Lifers" threats. There were a number of significant bills before the legislature: bussing, desegregated housing, civil liberties issues, and many more. However, we were buttonholing and browbeating every politician only on the subject of abortion as if nothing else he did or thought mattered in that legislative session. Coming back to New York City on the plane, we sang our "*mea culpas*" because we had spent all that time and energy with politicians, even had promised to support some in upcoming campaigns, all in exchange for the *right* vote on the abortion law. We felt a little dirty at the end of the session, not because we were involved in lobbying and political manipulation, but because all of it was done on behalf of a single issue. More than ever the experience caused us to appreciate all those other people engaged in fighting for other causes.

All of us must recognize that circumstances and Providence put some of us in a particular place at a particular time. One time Bill Coffin was in the office at the height of his involvement with the draft and the war in Vietnam. And he said, "Moody, I'm glad you are doing the abortion business. I feel badly that I can't do more myself, but I refer them on to you." And Moody told Bill he was thankful for his witness and work in the anti-war movement and wished he could do more there. We ought to rejoice when our colleagues are engaged in issues other than our own that are also very vital, knowing that there are other dimensions of the human problem. Surely the immensity and complexity of the social issues that face this nation ought to protect any wise activist from the arrogance that believes only one issue is important.

Another lesson that we learned in our attempt at social change and legal reform is that neither theorizing nor theologizing is ever a substitute for immersion and personal involvement in the issue. In the early days of the formation of the CCS in New York City, a minority of the clergy thought that we ought to study the issue for a year before we took any action such as counseling women. The ancient, churchly solution to problems is to study them, appoint a committee, write a report, and file it for future reference. But we refused that well-worn path of cogitation and procrastination and plunged into the problem, comforted by Bonhoeffer's admonition, "You will not know what you will not do."

Most of the clergy had no experience with the act of abortion or of counseling with women whose pregnancy was unwanted. It was a new world, and almost every person's mind was changed by confrontation with the issue in the form of a real, live woman anguishing and anxious about how she could prevent this fateful fact from ruining her life without destroying herself in the process. She could not afford the luxury of a year's study or a few lectures in moral theology. The embryo was growing and she had to decide, and counselors soon learned that each day's delay prolonged the agony and increased the dangers. Our day-to-day work taught us how few women wanted abortions for the reasons most liberals conceded were justifiable. When we started, most of us favored some liberalization of the law, but within a six-month period every clergy (seeing between fifteen and twenty women per week) believed passionately not in liberalization but in repeal of the law. Many people heralded the reform law in Colorado as a

milestone, and it probably seemed like that to prestigious professionals, such as members of the American Law Institute who were concerned with legal niceties and the appearance of reforming the law, but who had not had experience with women seeking an abortion.

In the battle for social change or legal reform, ideology (whether textbook or mimeographed) is hardly ever a reliable index to what reform should be made. A number of theologians of the armchair variety chastised the involved Protestant clergy because they were influenced so much by their pastoral responsibilities that they had neglected the weightier matters of theological ethics. The translation of that criticism made by our theological elders meant that we were letting human pain and practical needs of women who were crying out for the right to control their reproductive functions take precedence and priority over all the preordained orders of the dogmatics we had been taught to revere. We Christian ministers, who were the repository of faith to be taught and passed along with a kind unerring consistency, had succumbed to the expediency of dealing with day-to-day realities, sacrificing ethical "principles" for pragmatics of human need. We let women's rights predominate "God's orders"; we gave the freedom of a woman to choose preeminence over the rights of a fetus to be born. We forsook the teaching of our masters, Barth, Brunner, Bonhoeffer, in order to be a pastor to women who needed us.

The history of social movements is full of people who tried reform by the book. Whether the ideology is religious or political, it seldom leaves room for the human quotient which requires compassion and empathy for persons rather than correctness of political and religious doctrine. In the fight for abortion rights for women there was no substitute for daily absorption in women's problems. That involvement taught us that the people who thought about abortion reform lacked the depth of analysis to envision the change that would be required to give women real freedom over their lives in the area of their reproductive functions.

Another lesson we learned in the growth and development of the CCS was *that reform is often the enemy of real change*. When the abortion issue was removed from hushed conversations to public debate, the solutions began to be formulated. By far the most popular and oft-proposed resolution of the issue beginning

around 1967 was the American Law Institute's proposed reform measure, which allowed abortion in instances when the pregnancy was caused by rape or incest, when the fetus was malformed, or when there was a serious threat to the health of the mother. Governor Rockefeller in 1967 appointed a distinguished panel to recommend changes in the abortion law in New York. They commended the American Law Institute's abortion reform model law, and our CCS came out against the report. The following is an excerpt from the CCS response to the governor's committee:

The report which is reported to call for "vast liberalization" will be of little help in assisting thousands of women seeking termination of their pregnancy. All the proposed measure will do is to make doctors less hypocritical, and it will only make *legal* what is being done by doctors and hospitals now. The measures proposed have the effect of putting a band-aid on a cancer. The genuine social problem of abortion requires more radical amelioration if it is to be of any real consequence!

Less than one year of experience had taught our counselors that under a so-called "liberalized" abortion law only about 5 percent of the women whom they saw would qualify for an abortion. The political pragmatist warned us that coming out for repeal of the abortion law was politically naïve and practically hopeless. But our work with thousands of women had taught us that anything less than repeal would be liberal window dressing covering a deadly status quo, and the public would be conned by the appearance of change. Many people believed that the liberalized law passed in Colorado in 1967 was a great step forward until the end of the first year when it was announced there was an actual decline in the number of abortions done. Our experience had taught us that 90 percent of the women seeking abortions would not get them under the reform law, and in addition the reform law would be as discriminatory as the old law. The people who had means, access to doctors and private hospitals, or a history of psychiatric treatment would be affected. The poor, the minorities, and the young would not be the beneficiaries of such a law. The only real change would be complete repeal of the law and that seemed too revolutionary at the time. Plenty of people were willing to settle for a little reform thus forfeiting whatever future opportunity there might be for real change. In too many movements for social change we are too quickly satisfied with small reforms, deluding our-

selves into believing that we really have changed something when begrudging legislators shift slightly the burden of an oppressive law. Sometimes even experienced activists who like to think of themselves as “political realists” are bought off with an empty promissory note.

A related lesson we learned in the work we did on abortion repeal is that changing the law doesn't cure or correct social ills; it just removes legal encumbrances. The previous chapter was a catalog of what happens once the law is changed. The elation of winning a battle for legal reform is quickly dissipated by the specter of other problems that legalization surfaces. The whole commercial referral business that we fought threatened to defeat the major purpose of low-cost abortions by adding the cost of a middleman to the price women paid for an abortion. In the “illegal days” those entrepreneurs were not around when women truly needed help to get an abortion.

Laws may be changed overnight, but their implementation may expose a host of new problems. For example, when the abortion law was repealed in New York, we faced a whole health delivery system (doctors, nurses, and hospitals) that was unsympathetic and even resisted changes in attitude and practices regarding abortion. “Illegal abortionists” in the old days would never treat a patient with the hostility and punitive attitudes accorded women in New York hospitals right after the law had changed. Laws are easily altered, but mores, taboos, and morals die very slowly. We discovered that even while the glow of a legal victory yet burned, the world of abortions had not changed much. Women wanting abortions still felt guilty and ambivalent; doctors performing them were either very greedy or felt they were violating the purposes of their medical practice; people working on abortion wards felt they were assisting in murder. The psychological and moral proscriptions that have shaped our minds on this matter will change more slowly than the laws making abortion permissible.

How short are our memories in this regard? Somehow even the most sophisticated political activists in America continue to display an enormous amount of faith in the efficacy of legal reform to correct social ills. We thought the Voting Rights Act of 1964 would give Blacks the vote immediately, or the *Brown v. Board of Education* would mean integrated quality education.

What eludes this naïve faith in legal reform to bring about social change is recognition of the immense intransigence of human beings and the social systems which they build that avoid any meaningful transformation of the status quo. When a good liberal abortion law is passed in the state capital, what remains untouched by that reform is a gigantic, conservative, and bureaucratic medical delivery system which is reluctant to shift gears and create a new mechanism that would insure *all* women an early, safe, and low-cost abortion. No wars are won in social change when laws are passed; only an important battle is won. The hard and difficult struggle is in changing minds and reshaping institutions to accommodate new possibilities that lie ahead.

The last lesson is a truism and can be stated in a single sentence: There are no final victories in social reform without continuing vigilance on behalf of the hard-won victories. In regard to the new abortion law in New York State, the most liberal and far-reaching in the nation, there are those who will not admit that this law should stay on the books. The Roman Catholic Church, led by the Archdiocese of New York and a few Protestants and Jews, has been providing large financial resources for reversing the repeal action or crippling its intent with restrictive amendments. In the next chapter we will look at the parameters of that conflict and its implications for religious peace in America.