
Guidance for health providers: **Christian scriptures on reproductive health**



Contents

02	Introduction
03	Health and Gender Equality
05	Contraception and Family Planning
09	Safe Abortion
12	Lessons Learnt
13	Further Resources
14	Bibliography

1. Introduction

Front cover

Reverend Kasiye and Marie Stopes Uganda staff talking to a community group about the importance of reproductive health

Below

Religious leader speaking at a workshop on reproductive health and rights organised by the 'People's Alliance for Reproductive Health Advocacy' on Bonthe Island, Sierra Leone

Christianity is the world's largest religion with an estimated 2 billion followers worldwide. Christians are split into broadly three denominations: Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy. All denominations believe in God as the world's creator, Jesus Christ as the saviour and the Holy Spirit as divine power. However, different denominations have variations in beliefs and in the interpretation of their faith and practices. While they all share the same sacred text – the Bible – there is no single authority that states an official religious stance on social issues.

Marie Stopes International operates in many predominantly Christian countries (e.g. Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Timor-Leste); and in countries with large Christian populations (e.g. Nigeria and India). The aim of this briefing is to present the teachings and interpretations that can support access to life-saving contraception and safe abortion services. While these topics can be sensitive and complex, there is a growing consensus of the importance and desire to promote and protect the health of women and children.

Revisiting and recontextualising Christian scriptures and finding common ground with faith-based leaders is important to facilitate access to services and to counter some of the prevailing misinformation, stereotyping and assumptions that can prevent people from seeking and receiving care. To support these efforts, we have undertaken a literature review and condensed findings into a format that we hope will be useful for our providers, and the community organisations, religious leaders and policy makers with which we work.





2. Health and Gender Equality

Health

There are many passages in the Gospels that show Jesus healing the sick or calling on his disciples to heal the sick. For example,

Matthew 8: 2-3: *and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.*

In **Matthew 10:8**, Jesus instructs his disciples, "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment."

Mark 1:34: *And he cured many who were sick with various diseases.*

In **Mark 2:11-12**, Jesus heals a paralysed man - "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them.

John 9:11: *He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight."*

Not only did Jesus and his disciples provide care and healing to the sick and needy, but the Bible also calls on all Christians to provide care and to be like Christ.

The parable of the Good Samaritan (**Luke 10:25-37**) reminds us that we should love our neighbours as ourselves. After telling this story, Jesus instructs us to act like the Good Samaritan, who went out of his way to help a man who was injured and in need.

1 Corinthians 11:1: *Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*

1 Peter 2:21: *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.*

1 John 2:6: *Whoever says, "I abide in him", ought to walk just as he walked.*

The Bible also calls for social justice and for people to bear one another's burdens. For example,

Proverbs 31:8-9: *Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

Galatians 6:2: *Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*

Micah 6:8: *He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

Above

Pastor Kainerugaba leads a community education session in Uganda



Above
Suzan works as an MSI Lady providing family planning care to women in her community in Uganda

Gender Equality

Genesis 1:26–27: *Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

This illustrates that both woman and man, equally, are made in the image of God. Some suggest that this equality is reinforced in the second creation story of Adam and Eve. When God creates Adam, he is only an ‘earthling’. It is not until the point where the second creature (Eve) is made that the earthling becomes the man. The original Hebrew makes this distinction clearer as the language changes from ‘earthling’ to ‘man’ and ‘woman’. Essentially, in the beginning of the Bible, Christianity teaches us that man and woman’s “oneness” is truer than their “twoness”.¹

Galatians 3:28: *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

Throughout the New Testament, we see Jesus treating women with dignity, as valuable people beyond their roles as wives, sisters and mothers. “He recognised the dignity of women at a time when it was easily denied to them. Jesus... saw them in terms of their identity in God, made in the image of God”.²

These verses indicate that the Bible teaches fundamental equality between men and women. But gender equality cannot be realised while women continue to lack the power to make decisions over their own bodies. Therefore, as Christianity advocates for gender equality, it can also provide an ethical basis for the realisation of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Dignity

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Chapter 1, The Dignity of the Human Person

The dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God (article 1); it is fulfilled in his vocation to divine beatitude (article 2). It is essential to a human being freely to direct himself to this fulfilment (article 3). By his deliberate actions (article 4), the human person does, or does not, conform to the good promised by God and attested by moral conscience (article 5). Human beings make their own contribution to their interior growth; they make their whole sentient and spiritual lives into means of this growth (article 6). With the help of grace they grow in virtue (article 7), avoid sin, and if they sin they entrust themselves as did the prodigal son to the mercy of our Father in heaven (article 8). In this way they attain to the perfection of charity.

To be a human is to be “a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of God’s presence, a trace of God’s glory” according to Pope John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*. This teaching grounds and projects the Christian view that each individual person possesses inherent dignity, moral worth, and eternal value. Knowledge and access to reproductive health services is essential to support the dignity of the human person by giving them agency over their health and lives.

CAFOD, the UK-based Catholic international development organisation, uses the principle of human dignity as the basis of their policy for gender equality. They believe that every human person is made in the image and likeness of God.³ Empowering women and girls, by enabling them to make choices about their fertility and reproductive health, is an intrinsic part of promoting and realising gender equality.

¹ Christian Aid, *Of the Same Flesh: exploring a theology of gender*. (2014)

² CAFOD, *Believe in change: A toolkit for the Catholic community to promote gender equality*. (2018)

³ CAFOD, *Promoting Gender Equality – CAFOD’s policy and strategy: Just One World*. (2013)

3. Contraception and Family Planning

“People will take their own decision and we cannot decide on behalf of people. As long as we educate them they can make that informed decision about their own life. All we can give is an ‘education of conscience’. The issue is not about teachings of the Catholic church because as faith leaders we can’t go beyond the gospel but we can educate people about being responsible people.”

Catholic Priest, Burundi

Modern methods of contraception did not exist in biblical times. However, there are cases where family planning has been implicitly encouraged in scripture. For example,

1 Timothy 5:8: *And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

This recognises the need for families to be healthy and provided for, and that as stewards of God’s creations, parents are responsible for guaranteeing enough resources to support their family. In order to act responsibly, people must have access to comprehensive information and services to be able to make informed decisions on how to plan and space their children.⁴

Proverbs 4:13: *Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.*

Education is highly valued within the Christian faith. Family planning empowers women and men to access education, by giving them the opportunity to understand their bodies, to plan births and to space their children so they can invest in meeting their educational needs. By allowing women to plan their births, mothers and parents are more able to feed, clothe and educate their children.⁵

Corinthians 7:5: *Don’t deprive one another, unless it is by consent for a season, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer, and may be together again, that Satan doesn’t tempt you because of your lack of self-control.*

This verse can be understood as supporting the practice of natural family planning.⁶

There are three key passages that some Christians use to demonstrate that God does not support family planning. Below we provide some alternative interpretations of these passages, which demonstrate that they do not necessarily prohibit family planning.

Genesis 1:28: *Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.*

Here, God has commanded that human beings increase their numbers and reign over the natural world. Many readings of this verse will claim that this is the primary biblical argument against family planning and contraception. However, Dr Paul Robinson of Christian Connections for International Health argues that it does not imply that God intended for this to be done without considering the need for food, space and education and that as stewards of God’s creation, we must carefully deliberate how our choices affect the earth.⁷ According to The Most Rev. Stanley Ntagali, the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, *“reproductive choices affect the well-being of individual couples, as well as the earth’s ability to thrive and support life.”*⁸

Another passage that has been used to illustrate the immorality of family planning is the story of Onan.

Genesis 38:8–10: *Then Judah said to Onan, “Go in to your brother’s wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother.” But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother’s wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. What he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also.*

Many interpretations of this passage claim that Onan lost his life for evading an opportunity to procreate. However, it is also inferred that Onan’s sin was failing to honour God’s commandment. Onan did not want to split his inheritance with a child, but he still used Tamar, his brother’s widow, for his own sexual desires. It was his rebellion and selfishness, not wasting his seed, that were punished.

⁴ Christian Connections For International Health, Why Christian Values Support Family Planning. (2017)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ National Catholic Register, A Defense of Natural Family Planning. (n.d.)

⁷ Dr Paul Robinson, What does the Bible say about Family Planning?, Health For All Nations. (2015)

⁸ Christian Connections for International Health, Pastoral Letter From Archbishop of Church of Uganda On Family Planning. (2019)

“There’s a lot of folks who are pro-choice or support reproductive dignity and freedom because of their faith and not in spite of it.”

**Rev. Katey Zeh, Baptist Minister,
CEO of the Religious Coalition
for Reproductive Choice**

Psalm 127:3–5: *Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them.*

Some claim that this is telling us that God’s children are his gift, and that we should not evade conception or plan births. However, there are many other gifts from God for which we do not follow this logic. Dr Paul Robinson argues that God gives land that produces food, and much planning is involved to achieve the harvest. Therefore, God is not explicitly warning us against planning children and that this shouldn’t be used as ethical guidance against contraception.⁹

The [Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice](#) is guided by the religious principle of **compassion** for the complex choices each individual confronts and the impact of these choices on families. They advocate that the decisions of when, and under what circumstances one chooses to become a parent are deeply personal. Their view would be that these matters are best left to a woman or couple to discern for themselves in consultation with her family, her faith and others she may bring into the conversation.¹⁰

While Christians celebrate the birth of every child as a gift from God, procreation is not an absolute obligation to be pursued regardless of consequences. Many Christians believe that it is important that parents consider their physical, psychological, social and economic conditions, and their ability to provide for their children’s health, education and well-being. Parents should deliberate the number, spacing, and timing of their children – planning together for healthy families.¹¹

[Faith-Based Coalition for Healthy Mothers and Children Worldwide](#) and [Hope Through Healing Hands](#) state that an investment in family planning is an investment that saves lives. They believe that people of faith have a duty to do what is within their power to help uplift women and their families to flourish through improved health.¹² [Christian Connections for International Health](#) echo this sentiment by committing to support family health by providing education and services that enable families to plan the timing and spacing of their pregnancies consistent with their faith.¹³

[Christian Aid](#), the UK-based organisation fighting to eradicate global poverty, reaffirms this belief. For Christian Aid, poverty is about a lack of power and in the context of reproductive health, this power is demonstrated as the means with which women and men might control their own fertility and family size.¹⁴ Having a lack of access to information, knowledge and health services restricts couples from making decisions on their fertility. This has profound effects on the lives of women, their partners, families and communities. This concept of power often manifests itself as a power struggle between men and women whereby women and girls are without a voice or control over their own bodies.

Considering the diversity of Christian community approaches to family planning, a network organisation, Christian Connections for International Health, surveyed its global members in 2008 to better understand their views and activities around family planning. 67 organisations responded and the results confirmed strongly positive views of family planning as an essential component of comprehensive health care. Arguments were made for care and sensitivity in use of terminology and appreciation of diversity among churches, but the conclusions affirmed broad support among Christian organisations for family planning.¹⁵

⁹ Dr Paul Robinson, What does the Bible say about Family Planning?, Health For All Nations. (2015)

¹⁰ Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, History. (2017)

¹¹ World Sexual Health Day, Keeping the Faith in Sexual and Reproductive Health. (2017)

¹² Hope Through Healing Hands. (2017)

¹³ Christian Connections for International Health, Faith to Action Network. (2016)

¹⁴ Christian Aid, Christian Aid’s Policy on Family Planning. (2015)

¹⁵ Huber et al., International Family Planning: Christian Actions and Attitudes A Survey of Christian Connections for International Health Member Organisations. (2008)



Above
Catholic women supporting a Catholics
for Choice march in the US to support
access to safe abortion for women
and girls

**“Reproductive choices
affect the well-being of
individual couples, as well
as the earth’s ability to
thrive and support life”.**

**The Most Rev. Stanley Ntagali, the
Archbishop of the Church of Uganda**

Catholicism and Family Planning/Contraception

At a Vatican press conference in July 1968, Pope Paul VI wrote and delivered the encyclical (papal letter), *Humanae Vitae*. From this point the Catholic Church issued a ban on artificial contraception, stating *“each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life”*.¹⁶

Much Catholic moral reasoning against family planning and contraception is based on natural law. The basic Catholic belief is that God has created everything in the universe with a particular end in mind and that human beings’ actions should therefore be in line with this natural end. According to natural law, God created sexual intercourse for, (1) procreation, the conception of a child, and (2) uniting man and woman as one flesh.¹⁷

The initial reaction to *Humanae Vitae* from Catholics was unsupportive and according to a 1974 survey, 83% of US Catholics said they disagreed with the ban. Furthermore, guidance on this has

not been consistent. In 1963 a papal commission voted overwhelmingly to recommend to the Church that any ban on contraception should be rescinded finding that many of the scientific and theological underpinnings of the prohibition on contraception were faulty or outdated. The report published by the commission said that the regulation of fertility was necessary for responsible parenthood and could be properly accomplished by intervening with natural processes.¹⁸

Other guiding principles on moral matters within Catholicism are used as a basis of support for family planning and contraception. Catholicism holds a deep regard for an individual’s **conscience**, which is the foundation of Catholics for Choice’s support for family planning, contraception and being pro-choice. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that *“a human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience”*.

¹⁶ The Vatican, www.vatican.va, *Humanae Vitae* (July 25, 1968) | Paul VI (n.d.)

¹⁷ The BBC, BBC – Religions – Christianity: Contraception. (2009)

¹⁸ Catholics for Choice, Truth and Conscience – A Look Behind The Vatican’s Ban On Contraception. (2008)

Protestantism and Family Planning/Contraception

There are an estimated 20,000 Protestant denominations, which hold a range of stances toward family planning. However, the majority increasingly support family planning and modern contraceptive methods. A 2006 *World Council of Churches* document argues that, in relation to family planning and contraception, the Church should focus on human sexuality in its rich diversity and move away from the narrow focus on normative and prescriptive guidelines.¹⁹

The guiding principle that every person has inherent worth and all are made in the image of God is what founds the UK-based organisation Christian Aid's support for family planning. For Christian Aid, the Christian faith inspires and grounds the language of rights. The organisation advocates for supporting women and men in making free and informed choices on their reproductive health, and that this is critical in order to live a life full of dignity. Their approach to increase family planning uptake focuses on giving women and couples the knowledge and information necessary for them to make more fully informed choices about their fertility.²⁰

Below
Reverend Kasirye in front of his church
in Uganda



"The evidence is overwhelming that Humanae Vitae has been an utter failure in convincing Catholics to abandon modern methods of contraception. Studies the world over show that Catholics use contraception, and use and support the use of condoms to prevent the spread of HIV. The ban has, however, prevented many women and men around the world from accessing reliable family planning methods and condoms.

It is clear to us that the Catholic church cannot move forward until it honestly confronts the paradox of Humanae Vitae: Most Catholics use modern contraceptives, believe it is a moral choice to do so and consider themselves Catholics in good standing, yet the Catholic hierarchy completely denies this reality, forcing the clergy into silence on this and most other issues related to sexuality".

Catholics for Choice²¹

¹⁹ World Council of Churches, Churches' Response to Human Sexuality. (2006)

²⁰ Christian Aid, Christian Aid's Policy on Family Planning. (2015)

²¹ Catholics for Choice, An Open Letter to the Pope. (2008)

4. Safe Abortion

“Religious leaders everywhere should help people access family planning information and services that lead to their stability and development. If a home is not stable, the church will not be stable. Church starts in a home and if people are not happy in their homes, even our churches will not be happy.”

Pastor James
Kainerugaba, Uganda

Abortion is one of the most highly debated issues within Christianity. Different denominations hold different positions with the strongest opposition coming from the Roman Catholic Church, the Maronite and Eastern Orthodox Churches, and some Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations. Protestants tend to take relatively less categorical stances.

The reality is that there are no passages in the Bible that explicitly support the argument against abortion.

The opposition to abortion primarily comes from **Exodus 20:13**: *You shall not murder*. The key issue here is then at what stage life is considered to begin. Again, the Bible does not explicitly provide an answer to this question.

As with many abortion laws that are based on the concept of ‘viability’ – that life begins at the point where a baby can survive independently of its mother – the Bible defines life as ‘*breath*’ in several significant passages, including the story of Adam’s creation in **Genesis 2:7**. God “*breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being*”. This passage suggests that life begins at birth.

According to Rebecca Todd Peters, an ordained minister and Christian social ethicist, it was not until the late twentieth century that abortion became a topic of concern within the Church. From this point, it was a political – not theological – effort that powered popular attitudes towards abortion in Christianity to change.²²

There is further biblical support for assuming a foetus is not considered to be a person. For example, in **Exodus 21:22**, under the law concerning violence, the Bible states that if two people fighting injure a pregnant woman causing a miscarriage, a penalty of a fine should be paid. This is one of the key passages used by anti-choice Christians as evidence that God is against abortion.

However, **Exodus 21:23-25** continues and lays out the penalty if the woman herself is injured: *If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, would for wound, stripe for stripe*.

If the woman dies the penalty is death, whereas the death of the foetus results in a monetary fine. If the foetus was valued as a person, then the penalty would have been much more severe. The distinction made between the woman and the foetus here contradicts the argument that a woman’s and a foetus’ right to life are equal.

The Case of Ireland

The 2016 Irish census states that 78.3% of the Irish population are Catholic.

The historic 2018 Repeal the 8th Amendment Referendum in Ireland marked a turning point in Ireland’s abortion laws and 66.5% of voters voted to Repeal the 8th Amendment and legalise abortion. The top influencing factor cited was “women’s rights to choose”, followed by “risk to health or life”.²³

In December 2018, the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act, permitting abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and later in cases where the pregnant woman’s life or health is at risk, was signed into law, and in January the following year, free abortion services commenced. The commonly held belief that one cannot be both Catholic and pro-choice was rejected.

However, though historic, what this result represents is not novel. In the fifth and sixth centuries, Saints Brigid of Kildare, Caran of Sagir, Cainnech of Aghaboe and Aed Mac Brice all recount taking part in abortions and recording them in their miracles.²⁴ At the time when the Irish Constitution recognised “the equal right to life of the unborn” to entrench the statutory prohibition of abortion, a 1997 Irish Times and IPSOS MRBI poll found that 77% of Ireland believed that abortion should be allowed in certain circumstances, 28% of which declared that “an abortion should be provided to those who need it”. Thus, there has been a longstanding dichotomy between the majority views of Irish Catholics and those of church leaders.

²² Truong, K., Why This Christian Minister Is Advocating For Abortion Rights. (2018)

²³ Leahy, P., Clear majority backs abortion on request up to 12 weeks, poll shows. [online] The Irish Times. (2018)

²⁴ Callan, M., Saints once did abortions – it was a lesser sin than oral sex. [online] The Irish Times. (2018)

It should be noted that this interpretation of **Exodus 21:22-25** relies on the understanding that the woman has a miscarriage. However, this translation is sometimes replaced with “*her fruit depart from her*” or “*gives birth prematurely*” in other translations.

Another passage that may support the view that the life of a foetus is not of equal value to that of a person is **Numbers 5:11-31**.

Numbers 5:27: *When he has made her drink the water, then, if she has defiled herself and has been unfaithful to her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain,*

and her womb shall discharge, her uterus drop, and the woman shall become an execration among her people.

In this passage, God instructs Moses on what should be done if a husband suspects his wife of adultery but does not have proof. The woman should be taken to the priest who will give her a cursed drink, and if she has been unfaithful, it appears that the drink will cause a miscarriage - it will make her “womb discharge”. This supports the idea that the life of a foetus was not considered by God to be equal to that of a person. However, it should be noted that some interpretations of this verse suggest the unfaithful wife will be made infertile, not have a miscarriage.

Page 10
Religious leaders meet to discuss reproductive health and rights at a workshop in Moyamba, Sierra Leone



Stronger together: working in partnership

Biblical references can help advocates for sexual and reproductive health and rights demystify religious assumptions and open conversations around family planning, contraception and abortion. It can be useful to revisit and reassess these texts and to explore partnerships through which we can share learnings and put faith leaders at the centre of solutions and programmes. There are many examples of religious leaders championing these issues. For example,

- The Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion was established in the 1960s in the US. By 1973, roughly 1400 clergy members across the country had helped hundreds of thousands of women access safe abortions. The group's successor, The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, advocates for women's right to choose.
- *Side by Side* is a faith movement for gender justice, a movement of faith leaders and communities drawing together faith communities in many different countries to meet challenges in bringing about justice and equality for all people, irrespective of gender.

When a position was advertised at Marie Stopes South Africa, Sister Laetitia Dlovo was worried about performing abortions, not because of her Christian faith, but because of what her loved ones would think:

“What is my family going to say? ... What about the community? What about the church?” But Sister Laetitia made her decision, “God doesn’t allow us to be judgmental. Who are we to judge other people? If you are a nurse, you are a nurse. It doesn’t matter where you nurse. It doesn’t matter who you nurse. I knew that I was doing the right thing for women.”

Sister Laetitia, Marie Stopes South Africa

Catholicism and Safe Abortion

The Vatican does not make it clear when the foetus becomes a person, and the stance is dependent on the teachings of the sitting Pope. In 1995, Pope John Paul II stated that, *“The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception”*. But in the 1974 Declaration on Procured Abortion, the Vatican declared that: *“There is not a unanimous tradition on this point and authors are as yet in disagreement”*.

Neither St. Augustine nor St. Thomas Aquinas, two of the most important theologians in the Catholic tradition, considered that personhood applied to the foetus in the early stages of pregnancy.²⁵

Canon Law within Catholicism *“provides order to the external life to the church”*. Two laws in the Code of Canon Law relate to abortion. The first, Canon 1398, makes specific reference to abortion, stating, *“A person who procures a completed abortion incurs a latae sententiae [automatic] excommunication”*. Canon 1329§2 states that *“Accomplices who are not named in the law ... incur a latae sententiae penalty attached to an offense if it would not have been committed without their efforts”*.

Catholics for Choice offers a response to these two laws. According to them, bishops can “remit” or end the penalty of excommunication for abortion in

confession. Diocesan bishops have also given priests the permission to remit the penalty when they hear confessions in the United States and in some other countries. When a priest has not been granted this permission, he should be able to explain the local procedure and assist the person in fulfilling it.²⁶

In an Apostolic Letter written in 2016, Pope Francis formally gave all priests permanent permission to grant absolution to those who confess to having procured an abortion. This shift in the Catholic Church's traditional approach to abortion was based on the power of God's mercy and a focus on *“individual acts of kindness and assistance to the poor”*.²⁷

The theory of **conscience** has been used to support the case for abortion. Catholics believe that *“the Church ... is a major resource of ... moral direction and leadership. It is the product of centuries of experience, crossing cultural, national, and continental lines”*.²⁸ However, for many Christians, a well-formed conscience reigns as the superior guiding principle on morality.

In the UK, a Clements' (2014) national survey of Catholics found that 75% of participants felt that abortion should always be allowed or allowed in some circumstances.²⁹

²⁵ Catholics for Choice, London Declaration of Prochoice Principles. (2012)

²⁶ Catholics for Choice, The Truth about Catholics and Abortion. (2011)

²⁷ Wooden, C., Pope extends special Year of Mercy provisions on confession. (2016)

²⁸ McBrien, R., Catholicism. Harper One. (1994)

²⁹ Lowe, P. and Page, S.-J., ‘On the wet side of the womb’: The construction of ‘mothers’ in anti-abortion activism in England and Wales. European Journal of Women's Studies. (2018)

5. Lessons Learnt

“Religious leaders ... have a strong potential to influence the lives and behaviour of those who follow their faith and share their beliefs. When they speak out, their messages can have a strong and wide-ranging impact”.³⁰

Lessons learnt from Marie Stopes International’s working with religious leaders include:

- **Arguing the case**
 - Start with **easier and less controversial issues** to build respect and trust. Discussing reproductive health can introduce a lot of issues which may be taboo/private – expect difficult questions.
 - Ensure that the urgency of the situation is emphasised. It may be helpful to frame this as a public health issue. Emphasise the importance of a mother’s health within the family and community. When a woman dies in childbirth, her family lose a valuable source of income and her children will be less likely to stay in school. All this means that the cycle of poverty continues.
 - When consulting with religious leaders reassure them that their opinions remain confidential unless they give their express permission for them to be made public.
 - In enlisting their support, facilitate their involvement by recognising their position and busy schedules. For example, support them with organising events or speaking slots, or travel to meet with them in their community.
 - Find ways to spend time together to nurture relationships and build trust. Dedicate long term resources to working with religious leaders. For example, through undertaking joint advocacy, inviting religious leaders on study tours or to visit clinics, etc. These can all help shift attitudes and build rapport.
 - Sensitively challenge anti-choice readings and promote alternatives.
 - It is common to encounter concerns that teaching people about reproductive health will result in promiscuous behaviour. However, increased knowledge tends to lead to reduced frequency of sexual practice and delayed initiation of sex.
- **Seek partnerships** and begin consultations as soon as possible. Faith based organisations sympathetic to reproductive health concerns are particularly well-equipped to work in culturally and religiously sensitive ways in Christian communities.
- **Values Clarification and Training** can be a very useful way to respectfully and sensitively challenge attitudes and beliefs. For example, through asking questions such as how religious leaders feel as custodians of their society or culture to see women dying from unsafe abortions or how they treat women and girls who survive unsafe abortions and are members of our communities.
- **Detangle the influence of culture, social norms and politics** – don’t assume that attitudes or beliefs are necessarily based on religious scripture. The wider socio-political context has a major impact on secular-faith partnership discussions. Regressive and authoritarian political forces which oppose human rights broadly may seek to spread falsehoods depicting family planning as anti-religious or as an attempt to reduce local populations.
 - It can be useful for secular staff to become more literate with religious teachings and ecumenical approaches to raise and strengthen combined services and advocacy.
- **Advocacy by faith leaders, female and male, at all levels** – in their congregations, communities, wider societies and internationally – can be useful in promoting **gender equality**.³¹
 - Try and find ways for **men** to take a positive role and to actively participate in providing safe childbirth and therefore reducing the idea of reproductive health as simply being a ‘women’s issue’.
- Celebrate the **successes** achieved in working together. Find **role models** to pave the way and make it easier for other religious leaders to join them.

³⁰ UN, Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes, p.6. (2017)

³¹ Side by Side Advocacy Briefing, The Role of Faith Leaders in Achieving Gender Justice. (2018)



6. Further Resources

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