

Faith-Based Abortion?

Planned Parenthood is trying to bring sex-education programs and abortion counseling into churches.

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Under the Bush administration's faith-based initiative, churches and other religious organizations could receive federal money to support their ministries to the needy. Now Planned Parenthood, the nation's biggest producer of abortions, has its own programs that it calls "faith-based initiatives" designed to forge an alliance with clergy and mainline denominations. Planned Parenthood's goal is to offer sex-education classes and abortion counseling in churches.

"We've let others define us as not religious," said James Stewart, president of Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin. "And nothing could be further from the truth." Mr. Stewart said that any congregation interested in taking part in the program could choose from a wide array of Planned Parenthood services. Those he mentioned include sex-education classes for children, distribution of contraceptives in church, and on-site clinics offering advice to pregnant church members on whether they should have abortions.

The goal, apparently, is not to cash in on new federal-funding opportunities. Rather, the organization is attempting some theological jujitsu. Up until now, religious groups have been Planned Parenthood's most effective enemies. By co-opting religion and enlisting churches to advance its agenda, the group hopes to undermine the opposition. More importantly, by garbing itself in religious robes, Planned Parenthood can make abortion seem morally acceptable, even righteous.

Plenty of churches seem willing and eager to be used by Planned Parenthood. The organization now has a Clergy Advisory Board, and its "Statement on Comprehensive Sexuality Education"—essentially a manifesto condemning sex education that teaches abstinence—has 25 pages of signatures from pastors, church workers, and theologians.

Most so-called "mainline" denominations—those who are members of the National Council of Churches—have long affirmed, as official church teaching, their belief in abortion. Many share other Planned Parenthood dogmas, such as the validity of extramarital sex and the morality of homosexual behavior.

Some of their theologians have gone even further than Planned Parenthood in affirming the sanctity of baby-killing. A number of feminist theologians call abortion a "sacrament," a gift of God (or, the Goddess), and a necessary rite of passage for a woman to attain her full

consciousness. No wonder Planned Parenthood sees America's religious establishment as a potential ally and service-provider.

What about evangelical churches? So far, Planned Parenthood seems to have made few, if any, inroads with conservative denominations. Of the signatories to Planned Parenthood's anti-abstinence statement on sex education, there were a few Roman Catholics and a few Baptists of indeterminate affiliation. Another is author Virginia Ramey Mollencott, described on the back cover of one of her recent books as a "trusted and beloved evangelical lesbian feminist."

But, as the example of Ms. Mollencott suggests, evangelicalism is changing. With the general collapse of evangelical theology, once-conservative churches are becoming more and more like the liberals.

The distinction between evangelicals and liberals has always been adherence to Scripture. Liberals pretty much gave up the authority of the Bible, letting them believe anything they want. Evangelicals have always insisted that the Bible is true.

But enter postmodernism, which teaches that a text has no determinate meaning and thus can be interpreted according to the needs of the reader, or the reader's interest group. A liberal could simply disagree with what the Bible says about homosexuality, for instance, saying that it reflects an ancient cultural bias that we are free to ignore. A postmodern evangelical, though, armed with postmodernist hermeneutics, can deconstruct what the Bible says on the subject and construct an interpretation that encourages homosexuality. The evangelical can affirm the authority of Scripture, and at the same time twist it so as to agree with the liberals after all.

In the meantime, many evangelical churches are agreeing with the defining characteristic of all liberal theology, that Christianity and the church must change in order to conform to the dominant culture. The only way to appeal to people today is to change the church's practices and to tone down its unpopular teachings, they say. That was the message of 20th-century liberal theology, and it is the message of many church-growth programs in 21st-century evangelical churches.

Although liberal churches have been spiritually moribund for the last few decades, they may be coming back. Liberal congregations are realizing that they can emulate the church-growth techniques of successful evangelical churches. Unencumbered by theology as they are, they can grow their own megachurches. Their tolerance of diverse beliefs and immoral lifestyles can only accelerate their popularity.

With evangelical churches and liberal churches growing closer together, it may become ever more difficult to tell them apart. The time may come when a once-conservative church has a Planned Parenthood clinic in its fellowship hall.