

Sermon Guide on Reproductive Justice and the Anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*

By:

Jessica Halperin
Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations
(202) 393-2255 x12, jhalperin@uua.org

Rev. Rob Keithan
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
(202) 628-7700 x28, rkeithan@rcrc.org

With assistance from: Darcy Baxter, Starr King Unitarian Universalist Church, Haywood, California
Rev. Kathleen Green, Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, New Jersey

Index

<i>Roe v. Wade</i> (1973) and Its Limitations.....	p.2
<i>Roe</i> and Unitarian Universalism.....	p.2
Reproductive Justice.....	p.3
Three Thematic Approaches to Reproductive Justice.....	p.4
Why Reproductive Justice Makes Sense for UUs.....	p.5
Fact Sheet.....	p.7
For More Information.....	p.7

Introduction

Reproductive justice offers Unitarian Universalists a unique and pressing opportunity to deepen vital relationships within the congregation and in the community, actively engage with our theology and our history as a living tradition, and offer our live-saving faith to the public sphere, both pastorally and prophetically.

Concerned with nothing less than life, death, and the most intimate of human and family concerns, reproductive justice advocacy is grounded in a vision where sex and bodies are not stigmatized and a diversity of truths are possible; where we can tell the truth about our lives and learn to hold each other in non-judgmental compassion. Unitarian Universalists have strong theological grounding to advocate for reproductive justice, given our concern for life, dignity, conscience and discernment, interdependence, and human rights. Indeed, these values have called us into the public sphere for more than 50 years: the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly passed its first statement supporting abortion rights in 1963. Unitarian Universalists were active in the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion – an underground interfaith network that helped women get counseling and safe abortions before *Roe*. Unitarian Universalists were connected to the *Roe* decision itself (see sidebar on page 2) as well as several other Supreme court cases related to sexual and reproductive justice, including *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), which legalized the possession of contraception by married couples [the Unitarian Society of New Haven helped keep the clinic running after the state shut it down], and *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1972), which legalized the possession for unmarried persons [thanks to the defiant actions of UU Dr. William Baird]. In these and countless other small moments of courage, Unitarian Universalists have been, and continue to be, leaders of the liberal religious movement for reproductive health, rights, and justice.

The UUA once again made history among religious organizations when we endorsed "Reproductive Justice" at Justice GA 2012 and chose it as the UUA's next Congregational Study/Action Issue (2012-2016). This topic, while inclusive of reproductive choice, provides UUs the opportunity to educate and act on a broader and deeper level, aligning us with a movement for reproductive justice began by women of color whose "choices" were impacted by more than the legality of abortion. Based on the human right to parent when and how one desires to, 'reproductive justice' is about the reproductive and sexual wholeness of all people and communities.

***Roe v. Wade* (1973) and Its Limitations**

With the *Roe v. Wade* decision on January 22, 1973, the United States Supreme Court interpreted the Constitutional rights to due process and privacy in ways that established a legal right to abortion. The Justices asserted that the Fourteenth Amendment, which prohibits states from “depriv[ing] any person of ... liberty ... without due process of law,” protected a fundamental right to privacy. Further, after considerable discussion of the law’s historical lack of recognition of rights of a fetus, the justices concluded that “the word ‘person’, as used in the Fourteenth Amendment, does not include the unborn.”¹

Notably, the court did NOT find that a woman’s right to choose abortion was absolute. Instead, it created a three-part framework that varies by trimester.

- **First trimester:** Since the fetus is not yet developed, the state does not have a compelling interest at stake and thus a woman’s right to privacy prohibits the state from interfering in a private medical decision.
- **Second trimester:** The state does have some degree of compelling interest, and can regulate—but not prohibit—abortion.
- **Third trimester:** The state has a compelling interest in both the life of the mother and the life of the fetus, and can regulate or prohibit abortions as long as there are exceptions for the life and health of the mother.

The *Roe* decision invalidated numerous state laws. In the years that followed, deaths from botched abortions plummeted, and the number of abortions rose exponentially. According to the [Guttmacher Institute](http://www.guttmacher.org), one of the nation’s best sources of information on sexual and reproductive health, currently about half of American women will have an unintended pregnancy, and nearly one-third will have an abortion, by age 45. [See Fact Sheet for more statistics.]

Most importantly, *Roe* did not guarantee actual access to abortion, it simply established some boundaries to how and when states could impose restrictions. Both then and now, too many women—often but not always for economic reasons—face significant obstacles to actually obtaining a safe and legal abortion. Ever since *Roe* was adopted, abortion opponents have been working to impose as many restrictions as possible, the result of which is that actual access to abortion has decreased significantly. Today, public funding for international and domestic abortions is prohibited by the Helms and Hyde Amendments respectively (policy amendments to federal budget bills which have been added every year for almost 40 years; see the Fact Sheet for more information).

***Roe* ...and Unitarian Universalism**

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.

¹ http://www.streetlaw.org/en/Page/661/Summary_of_the_Decision

In the last five years alone, states have passed **over 200** restrictions on access to abortion. The result in a major shift: in 2000, 31% of US women of reproductive age (15-44) lived in a state that was hostile to abortion (defined as having four or more restrictive laws). By 2011, that percentage had increased to 55%, meaning than more than half of women of reproductive age now live in a state that is hostile to abortion. In 2011, states passed 92 restrictions on abortion into law—nearly three times the previous record of 35. The year 2012 was the second-worst on record ever, with a total of 42 restrictions adopted.

Reproductive Justice

Epitomized by the Roe decision, the goal of the 'reproductive rights/choice' framework is the protection of a woman's legal rights to reproductive health care services, particularly abortion, via her right to privacy. Within the United States, the reproductive rights advocacy community organizes women and others to participate in legislative and electoral processes on the state and federal level. Advocacy efforts are directed at policy makers, legal experts, and elected officials. Critiqued primarily by women of color, the 'choice' framework does not begin to answer the reproductive oppressions that affect the choices that women of color make over the course of their reproductive life. From the sterilization of Native and other women, to the lack of adequate sexuality education in marginalized neighborhoods, to the deportation of immigrant mothers or the lack of legal rights of LGBTQ parents, the reproductive justice movement attests that the government, rather than staying out, must have a central role in eliminating these social inequalities. Further, advocates of reproductive justice argue that because the needs of marginalized communities in the United States - such as immigrants, people of color, poor people, young people, and disabled people - are rarely met by the current political system, what is needed are not simply changes in policies, but changes in the overall cultural and political power structure.

Within the framework of 'reproductive justice,'(RJ) the UUA works with partner organizations against the cultural, political, economic, and structural constraints that limit women's access to health care and full reproductive choice. Operating within the human-rights-based frame, reproductive justice promotes the right of people to **(1) have the children they want to have, (2) not to have children they don't want to have, (3) raise their children in safe and healthy environments, and (4) express their sexuality without oppression.** It does not isolate or pit important social issues against each other, rather it works to promote these rights across many areas: economic justice, immigration justice, eradication of violence against women, LGBTQ equality, comprehensive sexuality education, environmental justice, and others.

The reproductive justice movement formally began in 1994 when the framework was articulated at a meeting of the Black Women's Caucus in response to a contentious UN Conference in Cairo which agreed that women should be able to access reproductive health care services. The Black Women's Caucus eventually joined with other groups of women of color, becoming SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective. SisterSong is still a major player in the reproductive justice movement, along with Forward Together (formerly Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice), the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, and others. Staff from some of these organizations serve on the UUA's Reproductive Justice Advisory Group, along with UU ministers and key lay leaders working in the field.

Three Congregational/Thematic Approaches to Reproductive Justice

By Jessica Halperin

- **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

- **Pastoral** 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](#)
 - [“Sex in Church?!” \(PDF\)](#) – Rev. Rob Keithan
 - [“For All That Is Our Life” \(PDF\)](#) – Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker

Why Reproductive Justice Makes Sense for Unitarian Universalists

By Rev. Rob Keithan

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 LGBT 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.

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.

1980 General Resolution “[A Religious Statement on Abortion](#)”

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”.

The UUA’s Reproductive Justice Advisory Group

The reproductive justice movement is one that was started, and continues to be led by women of color. In order to stay accountable to that movement and to continue to find our unique role in it, the UUA convenes a Reproductive Justice Advisory Group. Members include:

- Rev. Darcy Baxter, [Starr King Unitarian Universalist Church](#)
- Moira Bowman, [Forward Together](#)
- Hilary Gray, Stewardship and Development, UUA
- Rev. Debra Haffner, [Religious Institute, Inc.](#)
- Rev. Rob Keithan, [Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice](#)
- Carol Loscalzo, [Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, NJ](#)
- Kimberly Inez McGuire, [National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health](#)
- Mandy Restivo, [Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, NJ](#)
- Monica Simpson, [SisterSong](#)

Fact Sheet about Abortion

The following statistics are from the Guttmacher Institute:

<http://www.guttmacher.org/media/presskits/abortion-US/statsandfacts.html>

- Nearly half of all pregnancies among American women are unintended, and four in 10 of these end in abortion.
- About half of American women will have an unintended pregnancy, and nearly one-third will have an abortion, by age 45.
- The overall U.S. unintended pregnancy rate remained stagnant between 1994 and 2006, but unintended pregnancy increased 50% among poor women, while decreasing 29% among higher-income women.
- Overall, the abortion rate decreased 8% between 2000 and 2008, but abortion increased 18% among poor women, while decreasing 28% among higher-income women.
- Nine in 10 abortions occur in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.
- A broad cross section of U.S. women have abortions:
 - 58% are in their 20s;
 - 61% have one or more children;
 - 56% are unmarried and not cohabiting;
 - 69% are economically disadvantaged; and
 - 73% report a religious affiliation.

From <http://hrc.nwlc.org/status-indicators/women-county-without-abortion-provider>:

- According to 2005 study, 86% of all US counties do not have an abortion provider, and 35% of all women in the United States live in these counties.

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 about the [Hyde Amendment](#), which prohibits public funding for domestic abortions.
- Find out about the [Helms Amendment](#), which prohibits U.S. funding for international abortions.
- Resources for congregations, **in order of complexity**:
 - The [Congregational Resource Packet](#) provides a sermon archive and other resources for clergy, small group ministry sessions, a liturgical calendar, and lots more.
 - The UUA's free, six-session [Reproductive Justice Curriculum for Congregations](#) organizes its easy, conversation-intensive experience on UU theological principles.
 - [Moving Forward: In-Depth Resources on Reproductive Justice](#) generously outfits each of the priority issues identified by the RJ Advisory Group with materials for education, action, and reflection. Includes a section on the Hyde Amendment and Abortion Access.
- Join the [UUs for Reproductive Justice Yahoogroup](#) or [Facebook page](#) to be part of the ongoing work.