

A close-up photograph of a person's hands clasped in prayer over an open Bible. The person is wearing a blue sweater. The background is softly blurred, showing the person's face and upper body. The lighting is warm and focused on the hands and the Bible.

# Four Gospel-Centered & Non-Political Things Every Pastor Can Do to Decrease the Impact of Abortion

By Dr. Greg Austen

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Abortion is a global issue that now affects 40-50 million unborn children every year<sup>1</sup>. As a pastor, I'm with others who see this as one of, if not, the greatest moral atrocity of our day. I want to make one thing clear, however: I understand why many good pastors choose not to talk about abortion.

I also know that, for many, it's not because they're cowards or unwilling to talk about hard things. It's because abortion is too closely tied to partisan politics and they want to have a winsome voice in their community. With the apostle Paul, their cry is, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (1 Cor. 2:2, NIV)

Again, I get their perspective and respect their priorities. In what follows, however, I want to make a research-based, gospel-centered, and non-political case for why a greater sense of urgency is needed among pastors that are skilled at attracting and speaking to those who are not yet disciples of Jesus Christ. Whether a church planter with a congregation of twenty or a senior pastor of a mega-church, here are four things every pastor can do to decrease the impact of abortion in their congregation and community.

## 1 Talk about abortion and other life issues from the pulpit and in non-political ways.

Our research shows – and other studies corroborate – that two out of five women who have had abortions were attending church at least once a month at the time of their first abortion.

If you think about it, pastors are always talking about life issues, partly because Jesus is the Life. We apply Scripture to issues affecting human flourishing from the womb to the tomb. Among these life issues (creation care, human trafficking, foster care and adoption, etc.); however, abortion will always have a special place because you can't experience the fullness God intended (Jn. 10:10) if you don't have a birthday.

Further, abortion is a problem in the church, not just "out there." Our research shows<sup>2</sup> — and other studies<sup>3</sup> corroborate— that two out of five women who have had abortions were attending church at least once a month at the time of their first abortion. We can't just delegate this sensitive issue to pregnancy centers when we have men and women considering abortion right in our midst. We need to learn to speak to the fears and idols of their hearts with compassion, hope, and help.

What's more, we need to make sure anyone who steps forward to assist those considering abortion is sensitized to this issue and trained. On average<sup>4</sup>, there are nine days between when a woman learns she is pregnant and makes a decision related to abortion. That means there is only one Sunday in that window and we need to be ready. Josh Brahm, President of Equal Rights Institute (ERI), rightly points out that pastors can literally "save lives by making a public commitment on behalf of the whole church that they will treat women who become pregnant with grace and compassion instead of shame and rejection...." Consider using ERI's "pastor's pledge" (see: <https://equalrightsinstitute.com/pastor/>). And here are three excellent examples of how to talk about abortion holistically and with the right tone:

- Roland Warren on what pro-life "victory" really looks like.<sup>5</sup>
- Pastor David Platt on "Praying and Working for Justice: Abortion"<sup>6</sup>
- Care Net's e-book, 10 Things Not to Do When a Woman Tells You She Wants an Abortion.<sup>7</sup>

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## **2** Make sure the post-abortive know their sins are not excluded from the forgiveness of Christ.

A Christian woman wrote to me recently and said, "I had an abortion when I was younger and I didn't want to do it... I will go to my grave hating myself..." In responding, I explained that, "Jesus died and went to his grave loving you and then rose triumphant from that grave. He came to justify the ungodly like all of us. It's important for you to receive that love. To say, 'I will go to my grave hating myself' is to view yourself in a different way than God views you. In fact, Tim Keller notes that "When people say, 'I know God forgives me, but I can't forgive myself,' they mean that they have failed an idol [in this case, themselves], whose approval is more important than God's."<sup>8</sup>

Pastor, consider adapting a statement like the following and using it at least once a year in your preparatory remarks before communion:

"As your pastor, I care deeply about your spiritual growth. Many of you may have hearts that are burdened with sins from your past. For some sins, it is harder for us to receive the forgiveness Christ offers than for others. Especially sins committed against the body. Sexual sin and abortion are difficult to share and receive healing for. But the cross is open to all, and the Lord's table is for all that ask for His forgiveness. There is healing available for grieving hearts that regret their involvement in abortion. Abortion is not the unforgivable sin. Our Savior went to the cross for all sins. Please come to the table and lay your burdens down."

# 3

## Take a local pregnancy center director out to lunch to encourage, show appreciation, and strengthen relationship.

Churches and centers in neighboring areas must invest time, get messy, and work together to figure out how to build bridges that are relational and effective.

Pregnancy centers are domestic missionaries doing amazing, unsung work. But often they are only focused on “the four B’s”: babies, bottles, banquets, and budgets. Of course, these are essential for sustainability, but they have little to do with discipleship. Long-term discipleship cannot happen in pregnancy center ministry without strong connections to local churches. That’s why churches and centers in neighboring areas must invest time, get messy, and work together to figure out how to build bridges that are relational and effective. The goal must be to see moms, dads, and unborn children become disciples of Jesus Christ. Again, this is impossible without local churches.

In enjoying your meal and a new friendship, discuss how you might begin to build better bridges from pregnancy center clients to the fellowship and discipleship of your local church. To find centers nearest to you, go to [www.care-net.org/find-a-pregnancy-center](http://www.care-net.org/find-a-pregnancy-center).

# 4

## Identify a person to help equip a group of first-responders in your church and think through the three areas and questions below.

Notice I did not say “You need to do this.” You have enough on your plate, and part of waiting on God’s timing in expanding ministry is training and delegating leadership to the right people. If you have that person now, great! Please see below and, to be as practical as possible, I’ve suggested a few ministry resources to go along with each:

**PREPARATION:** Is your church prepared to offer compassion, hope, and help to someone facing an unplanned pregnancy? Recommended Resource:

- *Making Life Disciples (MLD)* - this is basic training for equipping the church to minister to men and women facing pregnancy decisions. It’s available as a DVD-based kit, on RightNow Media (for those who subscribe to this service), and now as an online course that you can take individually or as a group (see <https://www.carenetu.org/library/>).

**HEALING:** Is your church a safe place for post-abortive women and men to heal? Recommended Resources:

- *Forgiven & Set Free* (for women) or *Healing a Father's Heart* (for men) by Linda Cochrane
- <http://www.abortionchangesyou.com/> This confidential space is for those who are touched by abortion, whether the experience happened recently or years ago.

**PREVENTION:** How is your church training the next generation to embrace biblical sexuality? Recommended Resources:

- [Thewholesextalk.com](http://thewholesextalk.com) This resource is also available as a bundled package with Making Life Disciples at <https://store.care-net.org/>
- See <https://axis.org/product/membership-product-for-the-sex-talk/>
- *God's Design for Sex Series*, 4 Books by Stanton Jones

Pastor, thank you for all you do and thanks for considering how critical your leadership is in mobilizing intelligent, loving, gospel-centered, and non-political ministry to the abortion-vulnerable and post-abortive. As we often say, the courts can make abortion illegal but only God through his church can make it unthinkable. Our prayers are with you and we are here to support you in any way that we can.

# References

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- <sup>5</sup> Care Net. “Care Net’s 2018 Stakeholders Meeting - What Does Pro-Life Victory Really Look Like?” Care Net. Accessed July 17, 2019. <https://www.care-net.org/abundant-life-blog/2018-stakeholders-meeting>
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