

**Reproductive Justice:  
Did You Just Send that Woman To a Church To Get Help with an Abortion?**

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

*Today, in the year 2013, when we reflect on what it means to talk about reproductive justice, we inherit a strong history. To remember how we reached this present moment, we invite you to hear ten landmark changes in the history of reproductive justice.*

*Because we have to begin somewhere, it is significant to note how long contraception has been a controversial in our nation. In the 1850s, amid opposition from conservatives and feminists alike, the first rubber condoms are mass-produced in the United States. Less than 40 years later, condoms were the most popular birth control method in the country.*

*1916 – Margaret Sanger opens the first birth control clinic in the U.S. in Brooklyn, offering counseling, birth control information, and supplies to local women. Nine days later, the police close the clinic and arrest Sanger and her staff under charges of “maintaining a public nuisance.” Has there ever been a time you or someone you know felt compelled to take a stand for reproductive justice?*

*1919 – The 19th Amendment to the Constitution passes, granting women’s suffrage. The U.S. Senate approved the constitutional amendment by a vote of 56 to 25 after four hours of debate. The measure was passed in large part due to the efforts of Lucy Burns and Alice Paul, whose organizing of picket lines outside the White House resulted in their arrest and subsequent hunger strike. Can you imagine what it must have felt like to have been alive when this shift happened. — when women were first able to cast a ballot? At the same time, how sobering to consider that women have had the right to vote for less than a hundred years in the United States of America.*

*1960 - Following harmful clinical trials on women in Puerto Rican housing projects, the first oral contraceptive is approved in the U.S. In its first four years, more than one million women use “the pill,” though it was not made available to all married women for another five years and all unmarried women for 12 years. Unlike with women getting the vote, more of you here today are can perhaps either remember a time before the pill was widely available or have friends and family who watched this change happen in our society. Can you imagine how different many people’s lives might be, including your own, without the invention and availability of “the pill”?*

*1963 – The Unitarian Universalist Association becomes the first religious tradition to officially endorse a woman’s right to reproductive choice.*

*1967 – The first of its kind in Unitarian Universalism, the annual Fall Conference of the Liberal Religious Educators Association (LREDA) focuses on sexuality and provides resources for working with parents and youth. The conference resulted, in part, in the idea for a faith-based curriculum that addressed real life issues emerging for UU young people, which evolved into “About Your Sexuality” (AYS) and subsequently “Our Whole Lives” (OWL).*

1973 – In their watershed decision, *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court decriminalizes abortion in the United States. Having ruled in previous cases, *Griswold v. Connecticut* and *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, that married couples and single people have a federally protected right to privacy, the court ruled that a woman’s right to privacy is “broad enough to encompass her decision whether or not to terminate a pregnancy.”

1994 – The framework of “reproductive justice” is coined by the Black Women’s Caucus at a national conference in Chicago, aiming to move away from “choice”-based language to integrate ideas of reproductive health with social justice — creating the combined term “reproductive justice.”

2009 – While serving as a Sunday usher at his church in Wichita, Kansas, Dr. George Tiller is shot through the eye and killed by an antiabortion activist. Tiller was the medical director of a women’s health clinic — one of just three locations in the United States where late-term abortions were available to women. His patients were almost always physically endangered by, or had extraordinary difficulty with, their pregnancy.

2012 – The UUA becomes first religious tradition to endorse reproductive justice with their Congregational Study/Action Issue, “Reproductive Justice: Expanding Our Social Justice Calling.”

*What surprised you, excited you, or challenged you about these dates in the history of reproductive justice? How has your personal experience and historical context affected your approach to reproductive justice?*<sup>1</sup>

The term “Reproductive Justice” refers to both *reproductive* health and *social justice*, similar to how we talk about working for “Racial Justice” or “Immigration Justice.” Embedded within this phrase “Reproductive Justice” is the hope of changing the broken, embittered debate between the so-called “pro-life” and “pro-life” camps. One definition of Reproductive Justice is “The right to *have* children, to *not* have children, and to parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments....”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, speaking to the inadequacy of the current paradigm, Sister Joan Chittister, a Roman Catholic nun, has said:

in many cases, your morality is deeply lacking if all you want is a child born but not a child fed, not a child educated, not a child housed and why would I think that you don't? Because you don't want any tax money to go there. That's not pro-

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<sup>1</sup> The timeline is excerpted and adapted from “Reproductive Justice: Expanding Our Social Justice Calling, Leader Resource LR 1:4.” The original version is available at <http://www.uua.org/documents/washingtonoffice/reproductivejustice/curriculum/lr1-4.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> “The right to *have* children, to *not* have children, and to parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments....” — this definition of Reproductive Justice is from SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective (<http://www.sistersong.net>).

life. That's pro-birth. We need a much broader conversation on what the morality of pro-life is.<sup>3</sup>

Reproductive Justice is an attempt to name the broad conversation that we need to have about the connections between “The right to have children, to not have children, and to parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments....”<sup>4</sup>

I will admit, however, that I cannot recall hearing the term “Reproductive Justice” before this past June, when I was in Phoenix for the annual Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly. As I walked down the hall of the Convention Center, I, along with many other people,

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<sup>3</sup> *Joan Chittister* — quoted in an interview with Bill Moyers (November 12, 2004), available at [http://www.pbs.org/now/transcript/transcript346\\_full.html](http://www.pbs.org/now/transcript/transcript346_full.html).

<sup>4</sup> The Guttmacher Institute provides the following statistics that also need to be part of broad conversation about Reproductive Justice:

- **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. *[Thus, decreasing poverty rates could also help decrease abortion rates.]*
- Some 1.21 million abortions were performed in 2008, down from 1.31 million abortions in 2000.
- **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.

For more details, see <http://www.guttmacher.org/media/presskits/abortion-US/statsandfacts.html>.

See also the <http://www.lin3campaign.org/>, “**a grassroots movement to start a new conversation about abortion — telling our stories, on our own terms...** As we share our stories we begin to build a culture of compassion, empathy, and support for access to basic health care. It’s time for us to come out in support of each other and in support of access to legal and safe abortion care in our communities.”

was handed a two-inch white rectangular button that said, “Vote Reproductive Justice: CSAI 2012-2016.” I was also handed a two-page, two-sided flyer with the headline, “[Reasons for Selecting Reproductive Justice...as the next UUA Study/Action Issue.](#)”

For better or worse, we UUs have a habit of forming acronyms whenever possible. In this case CSAI stands for “Congregational Study Action Initiative.” And at any given time, the UUA has a rolling series four CSAIs. And a majority vote of congregational delegates selects a new CSAI each year that will then receive four years of focused attention by congregations and Association staff. “Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice” ended a four-year CSAI cycle in 2011 with the adoption of a statement of conscience. And the four-year focus on “Immigration Justice” will end this summer at the General Assembly in Louisville with the likely adopted of a similar statement based on the previous four years of study, activism, and conversation. “Reproductive Justice” won last summer from a total of five total possible CSAIs. In the interest of full disclosure, this congregation did not vote for “Reproductive Justice.” We instructed our delegates to vote for the next four-years’ CSAI focus to be on “Families, Population, and the Environment.” The other three contenders were “Climate Action and Adaptation Plans: Why Greenhouse Gases and their Effects Matter to Us,” “Exploring Class Barriers,” and “Ending Slavery” by which they mean human trafficking.<sup>5</sup>

One of the driving forces behind promoting the selection of Reproductive Justice was The Unitarian Society of Ridgewood in New Jersey. Among the five possibilities, they argued that Reproductive Justice “has the best combination of urgency, grounding, accountability, fit, and opportunity.”<sup>6</sup> (And perhaps someday this congregation may be a driving force behind selecting the topic on which the UUA will spend for years studying and advocating.)

But I have taken the time to give you some background on the CSAI process because there is an important tension within Unitarian Universalism between our sense of ourselves as a *movement* and our sense of ourselves as an *association*. In another of our many abbreviations, we

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<sup>5</sup> “Delegates pick reproductive justice as next CSAI,” available at <http://blogs.uuworld.org/ga/2012/06/23/delegates-select-reproductive-justice-as-next-csai/>.

<sup>6</sup> The flyer on “Reasons for Selecting Reproductive Justice...as the next UUA Study/Action Issue” is available at [http://www.uuridgewood.org/vertical/sites/%7BB7B4E9B8-EA33-4E3E-A5DE-C3EC857FE4DA%7D/uploads/CSAI\\_talkingpoints\\_v2.pdf](http://www.uuridgewood.org/vertical/sites/%7BB7B4E9B8-EA33-4E3E-A5DE-C3EC857FE4DA%7D/uploads/CSAI_talkingpoints_v2.pdf).

often refer to our denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association, as the UUA, but if you look closely at almost all the official documents or even the homepage of the UUA website (uua.org), our denominational abbreviation should technically be UU AoC because we are officially the “Unitarian Universalist Association *of Congregations*.” And there is a sense in which we are indeed precisely that: an association of *independent, autonomous congregations*, who have covenanted together to work toward a larger cause. But there’s also a sense in which Unitarian Universalism is part of a growing movement that is more than just a connection of individual congregations.

And my choice this morning to preach about “Reproductive Justice” as well as my choice to lead a six-week class (starting this Tuesday at 7 p.m. here at UUCF) on “Reproductive Justice” is directly related to this second sense of Unitarian Universalism as a *movement*. Left to my own devices, I do not know that nine months into my ministry here at UUCF I would have chosen to preach about Reproductive Justice. Reproductive rights — and reproduction, *period* — is such a controversial, personal, and intimate subject. At the same time, given the extent to which access to abortion and birth control continue to dominate headlines, perhaps I would have at least mentioned Reproductive Justice in a sermon, but I can guarantee that I would not have elected on my own to write and teach a six-week curriculum on Reproductive Justice.

But thankfully UUism isn’t just about me! As our UUA President Peter Morales likes to say, he wants to commission a t-shirt that reads, “UU: **It’s not about you!**” As the old joke says, “**Only you can cure narcissism.**”

And one of the reasons UU congregations, including this one, pay annual dues to our district and to the national association is to pay for staff that help challenge, connect, and equip us beyond what we can do for ourselves. And the six-week curriculum we will be using is provided free on the internet for anyone to use. It was written as a regular part of the four-year CSAI cycle for whatever topic is chosen.<sup>7</sup> We offered a similar 6-week study last year on Immigration Justice.

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<sup>7</sup> The six-week “Reproductive Justice Curriculum for Congregations” is available for free at <http://www.uua.org/reproductive/calling/curriculum/>.

All this being said, we have to find a balance here at UUCF between all the issues the UUA and the many other related regional and national UU organizations invite us to focus on and the local and regional issues on which we feel led to focus. There is also the very real dynamic of **compassion fatigue**. Both individually and collectively, we have a limit on the number of people, groups, and issues that we can hold in our heads and hearts until we are saturated. And, like a common kitchen sponge, once saturated, we just can't hold any more no matter how frequently new water is added.

We've explored quite a few different social justice issues in the past few months here at UUCF both in sermons and in others studies and forums. But I wanted to be sure to spend some time on Reproductive Justice because I want to continue to draw our attention here in Frederick to some of the major trends in the larger UU movement of which "Reproductive Justice" is a significant part, at least for the next four years. Two weeks from now on Earth Day there will be another sermon with social justice themes. But next week the sermon will be on the "Spirituality of Spring," with a focus on the spirituality of creativity. And I have a sermon in the works soon on the 21st-century relevance of the Hindu text the Bhagavad Gita, as well as a sermon for National Poetry Month on "Poetically Dwelling on the Earth as a Mortal," and another sermon on "Pragmatic Buddhism." There will be other social justice sermons to come as well, but my goal is to find a sustainable balance between themes that range from justice to spirituality. And I always welcome your feedback about what does and doesn't resonate with you. (I should perhaps hasten to add that I do not intend the subtext this morning to be that I have received a large amount of negative comments about preaching too much social justice. UUs are a peace and justice loving people. But, I, like many (if not all) of you, feel the weight, responsibility, and heaviness of justice work, and my goal is to find a healthy balance between challenging us to correct systemic injustice and creating space and time for nourishing and restoring our collective spirit, which sustains our compassion and prevents burnout.

So let me set aside for now these meta-concerns, and invite us to focus for this morning on Reproductive Justice. And as we wade into this sensitive territory, I welcome you to find a time to talk to me in person if there is anything you feel like I get wrong or overlook in this

sermon or if there is something that this sermon raises within you that you would like to share with me or perhaps with a member of our Pastoral Care Team.

Talking about reproduction potentially raises such a large range of responses from joy to sadness, from pain to frustration — to all of these experiences and emotions at the same time and in the same person. But there is an even greater risk that in never raising these issues of reproduction publicly in our congregation, we lose the opportunity of supporting one another and expanding our understanding around this vital and intimate part of our lives.

Let me also say for the record that there is no required position of Reproductive Justice to be a Unitarian Universalist. And part of what we will have time and space to explore in the six-week class that begins this Tuesday is how and why we may disagree about Reproductive Justice within this congregation.

All that being said, the potential wisdom of choosing to focus on Reproductive Justice at this particular juncture is perhaps at least twofold. First, even though this past January marked the 40th anniversary of the Supreme Court’s decision in “Roe vs. Wade,” the underlying issues are far from settled.<sup>8</sup> **Looking back forty years later on January 22, 1973, one physician said, “the news came over the radio. It was just an overwhelming feeling. I got tears in my eyes....at least it was all over, finally...never again the fear, the threat of going to prison...the fear of the woman not being able to get service. It was a new day.”** And it was a new day. But fast forwarding four decades to today, and tracking the activity of state legislatures, “with 43 abortion-restricting provisions enacted just last year, **2012 has been referred to as the second-worst year for abortion rights [since Roe v. Wade].** Although that’s less than the 92 abortion restrictions passed in 2011.<sup>9</sup> And in addition to incredibly restrictive recent legislation passed recently in North Dakota and Arkansas, I saw three major headlines about Reproductive Justice

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<sup>8</sup> The physician quote is from “Roe v. Wade at 40: Carole Joffe looks back on ‘A New Day for Abortion Providers,’” available at <http://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2013/01/roe-v-wade-at-40.html>.

<sup>9</sup> “43 Abortion Restrictions Were Passed In 2012, Second-Most of All Time,” available at <http://www.policymic.com/articles/22172/43-abortion-restrictions-were-passed-in-2012-second-most-of-all-time>.

- this past Friday alone: (1) “White House Fights Catholic Church Subpoena On Birth Control,”<sup>10</sup>  
(2) “Morning-After Pill Ordered To Be Available For All Ages Over The Counter By Judge,”<sup>11</sup>  
(3) “Lucy Flores, Nevada Legislator, Receives Threats After Admitting She Had An Abortion.”<sup>12</sup>

A second reason that there may be wisdom in choosing to focus the attention of the UU movement on Reproductive Justice at this time because UUs have historically been trailblazers in the struggle for Reproductive Rights, and there may be ways in which UUs are poised to continue to contribute to future entries on that timeline that you heard in the Spoken Meditation.

Some of you may have read the article about Reproductive Justice in the Spring 2013 issue of *UU World*. The author begins with this story:

I said into the phone, “I know this is going to sound crazy. But it’s the only thing I can think of right now. There is a Unitarian Universalist church 100 miles from you. Give them a call.” This was not the typical advice we gave to women calling our national abortion hotline. Melissa lived in a big midwestern state. She had little money, two kids, and an unplanned pregnancy. The closest abortion provider was over 500 miles away. Even though Melissa was enrolled in Medicaid, both federal and local government forbade using tax dollars for abortion services. Things were looking pretty bad for Melissa. And in that moment of desperation, a moment all too common among my hotline experiences, I told Melissa to go to church. “I am really not kidding. Call them,” I said to Melissa. “Tell them you just talked to this abortion hotline and the counselor you spoke to was Unitarian and told you to call. It sounds crazy, but **this church is not like a lot of other churches. It is part of our tradition that we support women like you.** Maybe there is a doctor in the congregation. Maybe someone in the congregation knows

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<sup>10</sup> “White House Fights Catholic Church Subpoena On Birth Control,” available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/05/white-house-fights-catholic-church\\_n\\_3024899.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/05/white-house-fights-catholic-church_n_3024899.html).

<sup>11</sup> “Morning-After Pill Ordered To Be Available For All Ages Over The Counter By Judge,” available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/05/morning-after-pill\\_n\\_3019579.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/05/morning-after-pill_n_3019579.html).

<sup>12</sup> “Lucy Flores, Nevada Legislator, Receives Threats After Admitting She Had An Abortion,” available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/05/lucy-flores-abortion-threats\\_n\\_3017717.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/05/lucy-flores-abortion-threats_n_3017717.html).

somebody.” After I hung up the phone, another counselor peeked over the cubicle divider and looked at me kind of strangely. “Did you just send that woman to a church to get help with an abortion?” “Yes. Yes, I did.” . . . I did not think twice because **church was the only place my parents could send me to get a high-quality comprehensive sexuality education.** I did not think twice because **while I was growing up, my minister told stories of being part of the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion,** a pre-Roe v. Wade network of Protestant and Jewish clergy who connected women with safe abortion providers. I did not think twice because **Unitarian Universalists, Jews, and Buddhists have been even more supportive of legal abortion than those who identify as religiously unaffiliated.** I did not think twice because **the Roe v. Wade legal case was forged in the basement of First Unitarian Church of Dallas, Texas.**<sup>13</sup>

We stand on the shoulders of giants.<sup>14</sup> The freedoms we enjoy today have been hard won on the backs of trailblazers from Margaret Sanger to Lucy Burns and Alice Paul — from the plaintiffs, lawyers, and judges who were part of landmark legal rulings to nurses and doctors who put their own lives at risk to empower and stand in solidarity with an individual woman’s choice. We have inherited a strong history. At the beginning of this four-year focus on Reproductive Justice in the UU movement, what part might you play, what part might we play? I’m grateful to be with you on the journey and in the work of justice.

### **For Further Reading**

Carl Gregg, “What Did JFK, MLK, & Gandhi Really Think about Birth Control?” available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2012/02/what-did-jfk-mlk-gandhi-think-about-birth-control/>.

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<sup>13</sup> *UU World* article — “What is reproductive justice? Women need more than a right to choose. Unitarian Universalists are joining a broader movement seeking reproductive justice,” available at <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/284019.shtml>.

<sup>14</sup> *We stand on the shoulders of giants* — The 12th-century French philosopher Bernard of Chartres said, “We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, so that we can see more than they, and things at a greater distance, not by virtue of any sharpness of sight on our part, or any physical distinction, but because we are carried high and raised up by their giant size” (Fred Shapiro and Joseph Epstein, *The Yale Book of Quotations*, 57).