

Fathers learning to grieve abortion decision

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY JOHN W. KENNEDY

“Unless abortion is brought into the open and exposed, it won’t heal. It will continue to be a traumatic situation every day.”

— Mark Ring

In 2002, Timothy Hall, an attendee of Cornerstone Church in Nashville, Tenn., asked if he could be a part of the abortion recovery class Sheila Harper led for women. Even though she hadn’t thought about the impact abortion had on men, Harper agreed to allow Hall — whose girlfriend had years earlier aborted their child without his knowledge — to be part of the sessions.

Before the next course, Mike Goins, another man in the Assemblies of God congregation, asked to participate in the meetings, years after his girlfriend aborted their child. Goins, a burly NASCAR race team pit crewman, wept class after class about his failure to protect the unborn baby and leaving the decision to his girlfriend. Goins endured derisive comments from his teammates as he did homework in the flower-covered recovery guide during downtimes in the pit.

By counseling Hall and Goins, Harper understood that abortion is as much a man’s issue as it is a woman’s issue.

After more than three decades of silence, churches and pregnancy care centers are starting to minister to the often-neglected party in the abortion process: the father.

Recent research concludes men

can suffer as much emotional anguish as women because of the abortion decision. Some sense guilt for pressuring their wives or girlfriends into obtaining an abortion; others are grieved the mother of their child had the procedure without their sanction or even awareness of the pregnancy.

“Men are designed to protect their families but men have no legal rights when it comes to abortion,” Harper says. “If the man is messed up, the whole family is messed up.” While abortion recovery still is a topic few churches are comfortable discussing, it’s clear men who have been through counseling believe talking about it is beneficial. In fact, revelation of a past abortion experience to an unsuspecting spouse can be the catalyst to saving a troubled marriage.

Some men are finding help at AG churches through SaveOne, a program founded by Harper.

Even though deep down she felt wrong about it, Harper had an abortion in 1985 at age 19. For the next seven years, Harper says, she lived promiscuously and abused illegal drugs and alcohol, none of which she had done before.

Three years after her abortion, Harper became pregnant again, but knew she couldn’t go through another abortion. After giving



Sheila Harper explains the SaveOne program at an AG conference.

birth, she married the son’s father, Jackie. Because she feared Jackie would divorce her, she waited another 18 months before confessing the earlier abortion to her husband.

Ultimately Harper, 41, found forgiveness and restoration through a Bible study offered by a pregnancy care center. She began leading post-abortion recovery classes in 1999 after realizing that one in every six women in an evangelical church has had an abortion — and most of them suffer the aftermath in silence.

In 2005, Harper authored a 146-page Bible study curriculum especially for men seeking deliverance from the pain and guilt of an abortion experience. Classes run six or 12 weeks. A total of 80 SaveOne chapters have started at churches or pregnancy care centers in 18 states and three foreign countries. Hall, the first man to

take the course, and his wife, Kristy, founded SaveOne Europe and are supervising chapters while based in Slovenia.

“Most women we see say, ‘I wish my boyfriend or husband would have stopped me,’” Harper says. “But the man usually leaves the decision up to the woman.”

MISPLACED ANGER

Men who neglect dealing with abortion guilt typically experience fallout for years afterward. The number one symptom is anger, bordering on rage. They also are prone to forming shallow relationships with women, having trouble bonding with children and exhibiting workaholic tendencies. They likewise have a propensity to pornography addiction.

Greg Hasek, executive director of Misty Mountain Family Counseling Center in Tigard, Ore., says unresolved or unrecognized

grief due to abortion is often a root cause of why men become sexually addicted.

“Addiction is an unhealthy way to try to fulfill the longing for attachment that postabortive men have,” says Hasek, 44. He explains that men cling to an addiction as a way of replacing the attachment they couldn’t have with their aborted child.

Hasek’s girlfriend had an abortion when he was 22, which resulted in Hasek abusing alcohol, being depressed and struggling in relating to women and to God. For five years Hasek says he sought help without success, until an all-woman post-abortion recovery group allowed him to join.

“Our culture conditions men to be strong and to not show weakness,” Hasek says. “Showing emotion and grieving is seen as weakness, even in churches.”

At the counseling center, where men are in treatment for sexual addiction for six months to a year, Hasek makes sure those impacted by abortion have the opportunity to grieve and heal properly. That may involve giving the child a name, even if the abortion occurred 20 years earlier.

FAMILY TURBULENCE

Some men benefit from abortion counseling if they’ve never been involved in an abortion — but their wife has.

Mark Ring facilitates a SaveOne chapter with his wife, Melissa, at First Assembly of God in North Little Rock, Ark. Mark didn’t know Melissa had an abortion as a teenager until the couple had been married 18 months. Despite the revelation, the Rings endured a strained relationship for 14 years, time in which he pastored a church. The couple couldn’t pinpoint why Melissa lashed out at her husband in horrific mood swings and sank

into deep depression. But after completing a SaveOne study, the Rings realized the emotional roller coaster resulted from Melissa's unforgiveness over abortion.

"Unless abortion is brought into the open and exposed, it won't heal," Mark says. "It will continue to be a traumatic situation every day."

Not that couples who obtain an abortion are doomed to split up. Robert and Mary Cody, who attend Lake City AG in Guntersville, Ala., have been married since 1991 — two years after Mary aborted their daughter without Robert's being aware of the pregnancy. Mary told him three

Three years after they wed, the Codys accepted Christ as Savior. Three years ago they began helping others heal through Bible studies, including SaveOne.

"There are a lot of men out there hurting," Robert says. "God can bring restoration to men who will open up and talk about it."

"While we never forget our Charlotte, we are at peace knowing we are forgiven by Jesus," says Mary, 45, a church secretary and Christian radio disc jockey.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Lives are saved when a father is involved in the decision to carry the pregnancy to term. The Pregnancy

the appointment.

"Often how the potential father reacts to the pregnancy is the primary factor in pushing a woman toward abortion," says Cindi Boston, executive director of the center.

Now, a potential father is involved in a one-on-one counseling session with another man, learning information that mirrors what his mate is hearing in another counseling room from a female. A man who is able to talk with another man about his fears and concerns of raising a child is more likely to be supportive of bringing a baby into the world.

In April, the Springfield PCC launched biblically based evening classes using National Fatherhood Initiative materials, covering everything from how to change a diaper to how to handle the stress of a crying baby.

"When a gentleman makes a decision to support life, then it's our responsibility to prepare him for parenthood," says Boston, 45, a member of Central AG in Springfield. "We want to help couples communicate better, get a handle on their finances and avoid domestic violence."

"It's not just that the man pushes the woman into considering an abortion," says Jim Anderson, 34, head of the center's fatherhood program. "Many women say if their partner had shown any level of commitment in the decision they would not have had the abortion."

Not only teenagers are involved in such scenarios. The average age of those who have an unplanned pregnancy is 21, Boston says.

"We believe every father can become a solid provider for his family and can work together with the mother in the best interest of the child," Anderson says. **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



Cindi Boston and Jim Anderson have helped make the Pregnancy Care Center in Springfield, Mo., a nurturing place for prospective fathers.

months following the abortion.

"I was numb," Robert, 53, recalls. "I wanted the child."

Afterwards, Robert looked for fulfillment in illegal drugs, alcohol, promiscuity and pornography.

"But the only way to find healing was through Jesus," Robert says.

Care Center in Springfield, Mo., counseled and mentored 60 men within two months of starting a fatherhood program this year. Before, on the few occasions when a male accompanied his girlfriend or fiancée to the center, he would just sit in the waiting room during

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