

# THE SOURCE

fall 2013

## A matter of faith

Spirituality and Planned Parenthood

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# Welcome

## Our faithful supporters

Faith can serve as a vehicle to bring people together, as well as one to drive us apart, and the role it plays in discussions about reproductive rights is no different.

In my early twenties I was preparing to dedicate my life to Christ as a nun. However, the day before I was set to take my first vows, I realized that this was not my calling, and that I was there for the wrong reasons. I liked the life and work of the nuns – the commitment to serving the poor, caring for people, and living a simple, just life – but not the spiritual aspect.

Yet, some of the very convictions that had attracted me to the order were the same ones that would eventually lead me to my life's work conducting contraceptive and reproductive health-focused research, and spark my passion for advocating for sexual justice and reproductive rights.

Through my work I became increasingly more aware of what was happening around me, from watching women die from infections caused by unsafe illegal abortions, to seeing firsthand through my research how intrauterine devices were helping people. I could feel my beliefs gradually evolving, and I got involved.

For me, my support of Planned Parenthood's mission comes as part of my theology, not in spite of it. And I'm not alone. In this special issue of *The Source – A Matter of Faith* you'll meet people who come from diverse spiritual

communities. You'll get caught up in the enthusiasm of a Methodist reverend and new mother in Omaha, struck by the commitment and dedication of two congregations in Des Moines, inspired by the wisdom of a rabbi in Little Rock and motivated by the drive of a bilingual health educator in Omaha.

Of course, not all religions are represented on these pages, and the beliefs expressed do not ring true for all people of faith. Many other denominations and spiritual perspectives exist – both in support of and in opposition to Planned Parenthood – because when it comes down to it, faith, much like the decision whether to choose adoption, end a pregnancy or raise a child, is intensely personal.

While we may not attend the same house of worship or interpret the issues through a lens of faith in the same way, one thing is clear: There is broad religious support for Planned Parenthood.



**Lee Lee Doyle, PhD**

*Board Member, Planned Parenthood of the Heartland*

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## A Jewish perspective

Rabbi Eugene Levy, co-founder of the Arkansas Interfaith Alliance, often joins other clergy members in speaking to groups about how different religions define the beginning of life. According to Catholic teachings, he said, life begins at the moment of conception; for many of the Protestant faiths, life begins at viability. In the Jewish faith, it is when the head crowns – at full viability.



Rabbi Eugene Levy

“The goal for Jews is to bring God’s heavenly kingdom to earth,” Rabbi Levy said. “It’s all about making the world a better place. Being ‘pro-life,’ then, is about making life good between birth and death so the question is, what are we going to do to make life better?”

“Tikun Olam is a Jewish phrase that means ‘to repair the world,’ which suggests our shared responsibility to heal, repair and transform the world,” he continued. “The world is broken in so

many places, and it is not healed by punishing women and limiting reproductive choice. Rather, the world is healed when we get into the community and feed people, when we make sure they have access to prenatal care and to education.”

The last of those examples, education, is supremely important to members of the Jewish faith, explained Rabbi Levy, because as a group, Jews were discriminated against in terms of housing and employment, and on so many other levels for so long that they were only able to get to where they are today because of education. Planned Parenthood’s longstanding commitment to ensuring reproductive health education is available to everyone, regardless of income, race, gender identification or other demographic factor, may be one reason so many people of the Jewish faith support it.

“Whenever there is a movement – whether political, social justice, economic or literary – you will find Jews involved and, many times, leading the charge,” Rabbi Levy said. “There are many religious voices out there who like Planned Parenthood and the work it does, and I am one of them. I’ve always liked this organization, and I want to be a voice for a religion that supports Planned Parenthood.”

## WHAT CAN SUPPORTERS DO?

*“Consider that the term “life” means from the moment of birth to the moment of death, and be sure you do everything possible to make life as good as it can be for everyone in your community.”*

– Rabbi Eugene Levy

## Practicing what she preaches

Rev. Debra McKnight, associate pastor of First United Methodist Church in Omaha, grew up not understanding there were limitations placed on her solely because of her gender. She got a rude awakening in college, though, when she told the members of a conservative campus ministry of her decision to become a minister. They responded by sending her an invitation to her “wedding with Christ” – an event that would even feature cake! Uncomfortable with that reaction, Debra immediately left the group and started taking courses in women’s studies.

“That whole experience opened my eyes and gave me critical, contextual knowledge about topics I had thought about, wondered about – and some I’d never imagined. I started thinking about what the realities of being a person with a female body meant – in the past, present and future – and how the work we do in the present shapes the future of what that reality can look like.

“God is a life-giving presence, which means we can and should care for each other with compassion. Faith isn’t just an hour on Sunday morning, but in your everyday life. So, we hope people are thinking about what is life-giving and asking questions like, when do I speak up for people? How do I make sure my female colleagues are treated with dignity?

“Ours isn’t a creedal church,” she continued. “Rather, it’s a method of exploring faith together. We look not only at what scripture and tradition have to say about an issue, but where reason and experience come into play. That includes asking, where have I missed an experience that might relate to this issue?”

With two female clergy in top leadership positions, Rev. McKnight’s church in Omaha is fairly unique. Sermons frequently center on topics like the death penalty; populations facing



discrimination, such as the LGBT community, refugees and immigrants; domestic violence, and the realities of being in a female body.

“When it comes to reproductive issues, there are Methodists who come down on all points along the spectrum,” Debra said. “I believe that being absolutely pro-birth isn’t always the most life-giving choice. The church needs to be there to support people, not moralize about those choices. We hope for a world where abortion doesn’t have to happen, but we acknowledge that an absolute ban is not necessarily the most life-affirming stance, either, because it doesn’t take into account the circumstances of the woman and her family.”

*“People of faith can take courage from the prophets of ancient stories and speak up. They can let the world and our leaders know that reproductive rights are sacred and women’s health means healthy families, workplaces and communities.”*

*- Rev. Debra McKnight*

## A pledge of support

For more than 150 years, Plymouth United Church of Christ has been a pillar of the Des Moines religious community, practicing a progressive theology that emphasizes addressing social issues, including reproductive health care, equality and diversity.

“We are passionate about social justice issues that impact our community,” said Valerie Miller Coleman, minister of Community Engagement at the church. “Our faith demands a compassionate response to the hardships our most vulnerable neighbors face.”

Plymouth Church has stood strong for the work of Planned Parenthood many times over the past few years – as a supporter, friend, donor and advocate for women’s health.

“The health of women determines the health of a community. If women receive quality health care and support for family planning, our whole society rises,” Miller Coleman explained.

The church has held special offerings during the holidays for Planned Parenthood of the Heartland. Their gracious donations helped open the doors at *My Health Express*, a new walk-in health center in downtown Des Moines, and also support our Sexual Assault Response Program, which assists victims of sexual abuse.

“We’ve had record giving every time we tell our congregation their gifts will support Planned Parenthood,” Miller Coleman said.

Plymouth Church also supports Planned Parenthood’s advocacy efforts by sharing its space with activists who participate in our annual *Day on the Hill*. Additionally, the church has hosted luncheons featuring our medical providers, had members sit on our board of directors, and has encouraged its congregation to get more involved with Planned Parenthood.



“Women’s health is a crucial piece in a strong, healthy society, and we have a broad understanding of that,” said Miller Coleman. “As people of faith, we believe that abundant life is a gift from God which belongs to all people. Ensuring that all women have full access to excellent health care is essential to that vision of abundance. We are proud to support the mission and work of Planned Parenthood of the Heartland.”

Just as Miller Coleman has done, more than 3,200 members of Plymouth Church have been progressively using their faith to make Des Moines a better place. Their dedication to the community for a century and a half has helped lowa women and families of all faiths thrive.

Members of Plymouth Church present a check from a holiday offering to Planned Parenthood of the Heartland. The gift helped support our Sexual Assault Response Program, which assists victims of sexual abuse.

*Pictured from left: Former PPHeartland Board Chair Loree Miles, Tamara Rood and Shawn Burke from Plymouth Church, and President and CEO Jill June.*



## Putting her beliefs into action

Christine Jaynes Contreras' dedication to Planned Parenthood was forged as much by her family and faith as it was her passion for social justice. Her job as a bilingual health educator based in Omaha is her third stint as a Planned Parenthood staffer, and her fourth experience with our organization if you include her volunteer work.

“My parents are both Episcopal priests, and my grandparents are very progressive. Naturally, growing up in that environment helped shaped my values, beliefs and world view, as did the other progressive adults I met as I participated in various church youth group activities. As a result, I became fairly political and pretty vocal about social justice issues – including advocating for women’s rights, and women’s reproductive rights in particular.”

A member of a Planned Parenthood theater troupe during her high school years in Texas, Christine joined Planned Parenthood in Lincoln, Neb., as a clinic assistant right after college. “It was a great fit,” she said. “I was proud that I had done some volunteer work for an organization that has a mission very much in line with my degree in bilingual education and community health.”

Christine then spent five years in Mexico, teaching in English to grade school students. She also met her future husband, Mario, there. The couple moved to Colorado, where Christine found a job as a clinic assistant with the Planned Parenthood affiliate before they returned to Mexico for another three years.



These days, Christine’s personal and professional background generates enormous benefits, particularly when she works with groups in South Omaha, which boasts a large Hispanic population.

“I recently presented a program to a group of Latinas that focused on talking to your kids about sex and how to be an askable adult. Nearly every woman there said her first introduction to information about sex was on her wedding night, so they were all very interested in learning some ways to help their own children become better informed.”

Christine’s ultimate goal is to ensure that diverse populations of all cultural backgrounds and spiritual beliefs have the knowledge and information they need to make healthy, informed decisions – just as the adults in her life once empowered her to do.

## WHAT CAN SUPPORTERS DO?

*“Vote for progressive candidates who support our mission; be vocal about educating friends, family members and others about the work Planned Parenthood does; and make financial contributions to ensure the organization continues to be there for everyone who needs us – no matter what.”*

*– Christine Jaynes Contreras*

## A natural fit

When Amy Knudsen nominated Planned Parenthood of the Heartland for the second basket collection at First Unitarian Church of Des Moines, she did so because she thought the mission of the organization – which as PPHeartland’s manager of grants and prospect research she knows inside and out – aligned well with that of the church and its members. What she didn’t know at the time was that doing so would not only formalize the church’s support, but strengthen the connection between members of the congregation who were already involved with Planned Parenthood.

“It was such a natural fit,” Amy said. “I have been a member of the church since 1996, but I didn’t realize how many people were already active with Planned Parenthood as volunteers, advocates and donors.”

She wasn’t surprised, however.

“Historically, Unitarian Universalist congregations have been extremely involved in social movements, including women’s rights and support for reproductive rights pre-*Roe v. Wade*,” Amy said.

Each Sunday, First Unitarian Church of Des Moines takes up two offerings. The first supports the church’s general operating fund. The second is split between local nonprofits nominated by members and selected at the annual meeting. For the past two years, their generous support of PPHeartland has helped

provide critical health care and education services to thousands women, men and families.

However, the church does ask for something in return of the organizations they support: more ways for their members to give of themselves. It’s a request PPHeartland is happy to meet.

“Last year, PPHeartland’s lobbyist and public policy analyst in Iowa spoke to our congregation about the intersection of faith and Planned Parenthood’s advocacy work, our young leaders group volunteered at the Planned Parenthood Book Sale last spring, and many members volunteer.”

Perhaps the relationship between First Unitarian Church of Des Moines and PPHeartland is so strong because when it comes down to it, the goals of the two organizations are very similar: to welcome all and provide unbiased, compassionate care and education that empowers people to live their best lives – no matter what.



Amy Knudsen

## WHAT CAN SUPPORTERS DO?

*"My philosophy is you have to be educated. You have to learn about the issue so you can have an informed conversation with people. If you don't understand the issue yourself, it's hard to have a conversation with someone about it. You can't change anyone's mind, and they have to formulate their own opinion, but you can provide them with facts and information for them to consider."*

– Amy Knudsen

# Thank YOU!

Thank you for your steadfast commitment to the health and well-being of the women, men and families of Nebraska, Iowa, eastern Oklahoma and Arkansas. Because of *faithful* supporters like you, our patients know they can always turn to us for high-quality reproductive health services, education, and advocacy,

because there are people like you who **Care. No Matter What.**

Want to learn more about how you can get involved with PPHeartland and make a difference? Contact your local regional development director to learn more about opportunities in your community.

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