

Clergy support health issues

Family planning, basic care emphasized; "Roe" remains a key concern

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ALBANY — Pro-choice clergy members came to the Capitol on Wednesday to tell lawmakers that the fight for abortion rights isn't over as long as Roe vs. Wade is at risk from legislative trims or judicial overturn.

But with the every branch of government from Washington, D.C., to Albany in Democratic control, the members of Concerned Clergy for Choice and the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Health were pressing a complementary message: the need to provide affordable family planning and basic health care for New Yorkers facing tough economic conditions.

While pro-life advocates might see members of the clergy as likely allies on their side of the argument over abortion, the spiritual leaders who joined representatives from Family Planning Advocates of New York State emphasized that their belief in keeping abortion safe and legal stems from the same call to minister to society's most vulnerable members.

"It's easy for people to get the wrong impression about clerical attitudes toward contraception and abortion," said Rabbi Dennis Ross, the director of Concerned Clergy for Choice.

The Rev. Tom Davis, who retired in 1996 after three decades as chaplain and professor of religion at Skidmore College, joined the early pro-choice group Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion years before the Roe decision. That organization, formed in 1967, offered counseling and referrals for pregnant women in need of everything from adoption resources to help locating a reliable doctor who could perform an abortion.

Davis recalled assisting a college student who, after learning she was pregnant, was about to fly to Puerto Rico for a illegal and potentially unsafe abortion. Davis helped the young woman overcome her resistance to telling her parents about her condition.

"I learned that these situations are very complicated," said Davis, a minister in the United Church of Christ whose 2005 book "Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances" describes his own story and that of the larger movement.

Davis said that abortion will continue to divide Americans even after other "culture war" issues such as gay marriage seem likely to be resolved by demographic trends.

"I believe it's sexism that drives the issue," he said of arguments against abortion. "I can't see a smooth glide to acceptance as long as that persists."

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