



# Women's Health Matters !



## For Immediate Release

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## Clergy: Nearly 40 years after abortion became in legal in New York State, circumstances still dictate women's decisions

### Pro-choice clergy leaders in Albany today; interviews available

(Albany, NY-April 29, 2009) Pro-choice clergy leaders are in Albany today speaking with lawmakers about affordable primary health care—including family planning—as job losses rise and many lose health insurance coverage here in New York State. Key activists from the 1000-member strong, multi-faith, statewide Concerned Clergy for Choice and the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) share experiences to support access to affordable reproductive health care.

“Because of the economic downturn, communities across the state are seeing an increased demand for family planning services,” said Rabbi Dennis Ross, director of Concerned Clergy for Choice. “We’re here to urge lawmakers to support access to family planning and abortion services, sex education, and reproductive health care services—including screenings and treatment for cancer and sexually transmitted infections.”

A woman’s health and safety must be protected, that includes her right to elect or forgo contraception and abortion. “This is about safeguarding the religious liberties and moral agency of all who live in this state,” said Ross.

### A look back sets course ahead

Helping women access reproductive health care in New York State is nothing new to clergy, and several of the pioneers are here today. The Rev. Tom Davis of Saratoga Springs, for example, was one of the early organizers of the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion (CCSA) established in 1967, three years before abortion was legalized in New York State. From 1967-1970, Rev. Davis and his colleagues helped more than 100,000 women find safe, but not illegal, abortions.

“Men and women still come to their clergy today, 40 years later, to seek guidance about unintended pregnancies,” says Davis, author of *Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances*. “We tell them that no one knows the circumstances of their lives—emotional, financial and otherwise—as well as they do. We say ‘we support your right and your ability to choose what is best for you and your loved ones.’ It’s between them and their God.”



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While nearly four decades have passed since abortion became legal in New York State, the pro-choice faith perspectives on family planning issues, reproductive choice and sex education have not. It's these perspectives and clergy experiences that many policy makers here in Albany ask to hear about from religious leaders from many denominations. Today, clergy from around the state have gathered at the Capitol to share their pastoral experiences and faith teachings with lawmakers.

Two of the largest faith-based groups committed to reproductive health and justice are represented in Albany today: the statewide, 1000-member-strong Concerned Clergy for Choice, and the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, a 35-year-old alliance of religious groups from 15 denominations.

### **Clergy press for reproductive health and justice for families**

"From the very beginning of the family planning movement, religious leaders, like us, came forward on behalf of access to reproductive health care and education," Ross said. "The pressing need for clergy voices continues today, as we have an unprecedented opportunity here in Albany to shape the direction of policies that will safeguard access to reproductive health care, including sex education, contraception and abortion."

Ross went on to explain the clergy experience with a woman facing an unplanned pregnancy and her worries about providing for a child as a single mother or the pressures of earning a living. "When a woman talks to us about her decision, she demonstrates her responsibility for life and its many complications," he said.

The Rev. Douglas Marlow, Episcopalian clergyman from Watertown, N.Y. and a Concerned Clergy for Choice Advisory Board member added, "As clergy, we're here for people in their times of need; women and families tell us their stories and ask for counsel, comfort and support. Our involvement in the lives of those who place their trust in us can be a great teacher, as it will be today, as we meet with policy makers and share our experiences and faith perspectives."

"Even as anti-choice groups would impair or deny access to medical care and information, we clergy stand with the women and families so they get the medical services they need," said Rabbi Linda Henry Goodman, Union Temple, Brooklyn, N.Y. and Concerned Clergy for Choice Advisory Board Member. "And, we can tell you how important it has been for individual women to obtain access to care. New York needs laws and policies that protect the health and safety of women. That's what we'll be sure to convey to legislators in our meetings today."

### **Focus on STIs and Teen Pregnancy is timely**

Clergy leaders came to Albany as the state and nation have drawn attention to sexually transmitted infections during STD Awareness Month in April and as Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month begins this week on May 1.

"Nationwide, teen pregnancy is on the rise and there has been an alarming increase in the number of sexually transmitted infections. As religious leaders who care about our communities, we believe we need to work much harder to eradicate these infections and unintended pregnancies," said Ross. "That's one of the reasons Concerned Clergy for Choice and RCRC are here today talking with lawmakers about increasing the state's emphasis on reproductive health care and education for all."