

How a Pastor Might First Broach the Abortion Issue with His Congregation

By Reverend Paul Stallsworth

Editor's note. The following was presented at the National Right to Life 2010 workshop, "We Are the Sheep... Where Are the Shepherds?" Pastor Stallsworth, the pastor of St. Peter's United Methodist Church in Morehead City, North Carolina, is a member of the National Pro-Life Religious Council. The workshop addresses the basic question of how we can help our religious leaders speak out more directly on the abortion issue.



Reverend Paul Stallsworth

Sometimes a pastor wants to say and do more about abortion, but is opposed by influential leaders or factions within the congregation. How can we help in a situation like that?

In response to the above question, a relevant statement to an imagined congregation is attempted below.

"It is good to worship with you here, at First Church, on this Sunday morning. Today marks the end of my first year of being your pastor at First Church. My family and I are thankful to be in service to this congregation and thankful to be a part of this town.

"Last Sunday, as you may know, I mentioned abortion during a sermon for the first time. Since last Sunday's worship service, a few of you have let it be known that you did not like hearing about abortion from the pulpit. I understand that your previous pastors did not speak about abortion in their sermons, and a few of you do not want me to speak about abortion in my sermons. Here is my pastoral response to your sincere concerns.

"First, I am grateful to have brothers and sisters, in this church, who care enough about First Church to question your pastor on a matter. If you disagree with me about abortion, or any other subject, I invite you to bring your disagreement to me. Let's discuss or debate or even argue (in the best sense of the word) the matter on your mind.

"Furthermore, I promise this: whenever addressing abortion from the pulpit on a Sunday morning, I will schedule a congregational meeting that evening at which you can dissent from what I have preached. Your dissent will be invited and welcomed by your pastor, and your dissent will be answered by your pastor.

"God has called me to be a pastor with you, not a bully over you. Following the example of the Good Shepherd, I am ordained to be a servant leader of this flock. Any authority or power that I am granted is to be used for the good of this congregation -- not for my self-gratification, not for my personal agenda, not for my self-aggrandizement. Therefore, your dissent from my preaching and teaching will be taken seriously and seriously engaged.

"Second, I believe that God's love and God's law, the Bible and the Tradition, as well as moral law and natural law, challenge the Church and the society to protect the unborn child and mother. This is the Church's truth about life. My challenge is to propose to you the truth about life -- not impose this truth on you. To propose is to offer the truth about life to you, and then allow God to apply it to your hearts and minds. To impose this truth on you is to crush your conscience and perhaps your spirit. That is not my intent. My aim is to propose the truth about life to you.

"Third, allow me to speak very candidly to you. I believe that abortion is the greatest and gravest problem facing American society today. Since 1973, there have been over 50 million abortions in our country. Each year there are over one million. Each day there are over 3,000. Each abortion ends in the destruction of a tiny, innocent boy or girl and the harm of the mother. Each abortion represents an assault on the human dignity given by God to each unborn child and mother.

"Consider earlier issues. Slavery and racism were serious enough matters to be opposed by the American Church -- but not very well. The Holocaust against the Jews in the 1930s and 1940s was a serious enough matter to be opposed by the German Church -- but not very well. Abortion is a serious enough matter to be opposed by the Church today. Now it is our turn. Now it is my turn. I must try to hold up the truth of the Church's faith. This truth, that I am to hold up, shines hope into First Church, hope into the larger Church, hope into society.

"I cannot remain silent. I must speak. I will lovingly propose the truth about life. I will listen to your dissent, and I will lovingly respond to you. But I am compelled, by the Lord of life, to speak.

"Thank you for listening to my response to your concerns."

Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth is also the president of the Taskforce of United Methodists on Abortion and Sexuality (TUMAS/Lifewatch) and the editor of Lifewatch.

More helpful information for pastors (including sample sermon texts, scriptures and illustrations) can be found at our website.

<http://www.wrtl.org/resources/churchpastor>