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Democratic platform shift to reduce abortions commended

Tom Roberts | Aug. 13, 2008

New language in the Democratic Party Platform seeking a reduction in the number of abortions was hailed this week by a panel of religious and legal experts, including two long-time Republican opponents of abortion, as ?historic,? and ?courageous.? The new plank, the panelists said, provides ?common ground? for all sides in the debate to work to lower the number of abortions.

?One of the things I think is most significant about this platform is that it recognizes that there is more than one way to discourage abortion,? said Douglas Kmiec, chair and professor of constitutional law at Pepperdine University. He served as President Ronald Reagan?s constitutional lawyer and worked on some of the briefs during that period seeking an overturn of Roe v. Wade, the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion.

Elusive fifth vote

Antiabortion forces have been trying for 30 years, he said, to overturn that decision, and have failed to find ?the elusive fifth vote,? referring to the narrow 5-4 votes that have upheld Roe through various challenges.

Read an editorial that appears in the *National Catholic Reporter* dated Aug. 22: **NCR welcomes Democratic Party abortion platform shift** [1]

While overturning that decision would be important, said Kmiec, that approach ?is not intended and never was intended to close the American mind or, for that matter, the Catholic mind, to different or alternative ways to discourage abortion.?

Several on the six-person panel made the point during a conference call Aug. 12 that the platform, to be adopted during the Democratic National Convention in Denver Aug. 25-28, addressed issues of poverty, support for families, adoption and availability of health care, all described as factors related to abortion.

They are also Catholic issues, said Lisa Cahill, professor of theology at Boston College, a Jesuit institution. ?Health care, education, income support, adoption ? to Catholics these are also pro-life issues and moral issues. They?re common good issues. So as a Catholic and a feminist, I?d say it?s not only about women?s choice ? it?s

not only about entitlement programs, but it?s about the goal of enabling all women with their children to be full participants in our society.?

She said the U.S. bishops, in their voters guide, Faithful Citizenship, say ?many of the issues that impact on abortion, such as hunger and poverty, lack of health care, racism ? are not optional for Catholic voters, they are part of the agenda of human life, and they must not be neglected. So there?s a strong Catholic basis for affirming much of this platform.?

Many ways to protect unborn

She also noted that Pope John Paul II, in the encyclical Evangelium Vitae, states that whatever the laws governing abortion, Catholics have ?an obligation and prerogative to work in all kinds of ways to protect the unborn and to protect women and families, using the art of the possible.? The Democratic Party platform, said Cahill, a member of a Catholic advisory group to Sen. Barack Obama?s campaign, ?is an excellent example of the art of the possible.?

The panel was assembled by Sojourner?s, a network of progressive Christians, and the Rev. Jim Wallis, founder and CEO, said that while the language was ?a real step forward? it was a compromise with a party that still maintains unqualified support for Roe v. Wade. The plank on choice in the platform opens with ?unequivocal? support for that decision ?and a woman?s right to choose a safe and legal abortion, regardless of ability to pay, and we oppose any and all efforts to weaken or undermine that right.?

The platform also supports access to family planning, age-appropriate sex education, claiming that ?such health care and education help reduce the number of unintended pregnancies and thereby also reduce the need for abortions.?

Providing health care

Finally, the platform says the party ?strongly supports a woman?s decision to have a child by ensuring access to and availability of programs for pre-and post-natal health care, parenting skills, income support, and caring adoption programs.?

Wallis said the platform committee ?really reached out to leaders of the evangelical and Catholic communities? and achieved ?some sorely needed common ground on abortion.?

The Rev. Joel Hunter, a conservative evangelical, a Republican and briefly a former president of the Christian Coalition, said ?Barack Obama?s campaign and the Democratic Party have taken a historic and courageous step toward empowering women for an expanded range of choices and saving babies? lives by supporting mothers whose will and conscience tells them to carry their babies to term.?

He also hinted at the ?struggle that went into the insertion of the new language? between those who wanted to moderate traditional Democratic Party language and those forces in the party who see talk of reducing abortions as a possible challenge to a woman?s right to choose.

?It?s less than we want but it?s a great deal more than many people expected,? said the Rev. Tony Campolo of Eastern University, who, though politically liberal on many counts, has been a vocal opponent of abortion. In the end, said Campolo, ?the interpretation of the platform is in the hands of the candidate, Barack Obama.? Campolo said he hopes Obama continues to speak of abortion as he has in the past, ?as a moral issue, an issue of conscience,? language that is not part of the platform.

Speaking of the array of social issues affecting abortion, Campolo said, ?We can reduce abortion dramatically, maybe between 50 to 70 percent if we address these concerns.?

Chris Korzen, executive director of Catholics United, said his organization supported the language for two reasons. First, studies consistently show Americans deeply divided over abortion and supportive of ?common ground solutions aimed at the root causes.?

And second, ?we know that abortion reduction measures aimed at the root causes actually work,? he said, citing studies that show correlation between jobs and access to health care and child care to lower abortion rates.

(Roberts is NCR News Editor and can be reached at troberts@ncronline.org)

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