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Reducing angry rhetoric helped abortion dialogue

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Honest dialogue can?t always solve divisive issues, but it can create friendships across the great divides of our times.

On the eve of the annual March for Life, the anti-abortion protest taking place today in the nation?s capital, activists on both sides of the abortion issue spoke with NCR and recalled a daring, clandestine experiment they engaged in a decade ago that transformed their enemies into friends.

?There is no common ground,? said Frances X. Hogan, a Boston lawyer who has been a long-time leader in the pro-life movement and is a member of the Pontifical Academy for Life. Even so, she said, ?The idea of talking across this chasm is helpful.?

When Hogan speaks of the three pro-choice leaders who participated in six years of secret talks with three pro-life leaders, her conversation is full of compliments and sprinkled with things about her political opponents that she loves about them as people. Their dialogue culminated in a jointly-written public statement in 2001.

Melissa Kogut, former executive director of NARAL Pro-Choice Massachusetts, said the dialogue, facilitated by the Public Conversations Project, was an ?incredibly profound? experience. ?Spending time getting to know these three women helped me to see them as whole people,? she said.

Although Kogut had hoped the two sides could find at least some strategies for inching the controversy forward towards a resolution that wouldn?t compromise either side?s principles, ultimately the talks ended in stalemate.

Even so, the leaders involved in the Massachusetts project carried their new-found respect of one another into their public presentations on the issue, even before they publicly revealed their secret. When a radio show host tried to get them to attack one another on the air, ?my reaction was -- I?m just not going to do it,? Kogut said.

They hammered out an agreement on language that was acceptable, or at least tolerable, to use in describing those on the other side. They avoided demonizing people, and instead stuck to the issues.

?Screaming ?Abortion is murder? is not the answer and never has been,? Hogan said. ?We just have to restore respect for unborn life.?

The project seems to have had an effect beyond the six women involved. It was undertaken in the wake of the December 1994 rifle attacks by anti-abortion crusader John Salvi, who murdered two receptionists and wounded several other people in a crime spree that began at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Brookline, Mass., and continued two miles away at a Preterm Health Services clinic. In that volatile atmosphere, leaders on both sides of the issue had been receiving death threats.

The reduction in angry rhetoric that resulted from the dialogue of leaders may well have helped assign to history that ugly chapter in the abortion controversy. Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston encouraged the discussions and

even had all six participants over for coffee at one point in the process.

Besides Kogut and Hogan, the leaders involved in the abortion dialogue project were: the Rev. Anne Fowler, an Episcopal minister involved in Planned Parenthood and the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice; Nicki Nichols Gamble, a former Planned Parenthood leader who was director of the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy at the time; Madeline McComish, from the executive board of Massachusetts Citizens for Life; and Barbara Thorp, then director of the Pro-Life Office of the Archdiocese of Boston. All participated as individuals rather than representatives of their organizations.

For the women involved the abortion dialogue, secrecy was important to avoid having the discussions become a divisive issue among the memberships of the organizations they helped lead. But the process can also be used in open discussions and public workshops.

On its Web site, the Public Conversations Project offers free Dialogue Guides and a Toolbox of materials to facilitate similar discussions. Those tools can be helpful in approaching any divisive issue, Hogan and Kogut agreed.

Following the inauguration of President Barack Obama, Hogan said she watched as normally articulate colleagues from her everyday legal work, unrelated to abortion politics, gathered for lunch and stumbled in their attempts to discuss political differences without attacking one another personally. The tools provided by the Public Conversations Project could help with those difficulties, she thought.

When the six leaders co-wrote an article for the *Boston Globe* revealing their years of talks, George W. Bush had just taken office as president and the pro-choice side feared the actions he might take, such as reinstatement of the so-called Mexico City policy, prohibiting aid to international family planning organizations that provide abortion counseling or services. The policy was created by President Reagan, suspended by President Clinton, and was indeed reinstated by Bush.

Now the tables have turned again, and the pro-life side fears Obama will overturn the policy by executive order. Obama spoke during his campaign in favor of measures to reduce the numbers of abortions through family planning, promotion of adoption and providing social services to pregnant women, ideas that seemed to find favor with the electorate in instant polling of debate watchers.

To pro-choice Kogut, it?s an ?interesting? idea; to pro-life Hogan, it?s nothing new and has always been part of the Catholic approach.

Neither embraces the notion with the enthusiasm that might mark the approach as recently-discovered common ground. Neither expects her side to ever give up the fight. But they both recommend continuing civil dialogue and mutual respect.

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