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Guest Voices Column

Respect Life: Use Birth Control

For the second time in less than a week, Washington will again be packed with people arriving from far parts this Friday, but the faces will be less cheerful than last weekend and there will be precious little bunting or patriotic face paint. The annual “March for Life” protests legal abortion and especially the Supreme Court’s Roe versus Wade decision 40 years ago. This seems to be a set piece now - a predictable part of the winter scene on the Mall: scores of marchers full of anger, determination, focus, and a “take no prisoners” certainty.

What are the various ways to reduce abortion that these passionate protesters have advocated? A partial list includes at least the following:

- Overturning Roe versus Wade;
- Prosecuting those who perform abortions;
- Trans-vaginal ultrasounds for women seeking abortion;
- So-called “personhood” amendments; and
- Onerous building code modifications that, in essence, ask abortion facilities to be structured like mini-hospitals.

Totally absent from this list, of course, is a strategy that could be put into effect today with great promise of success: helping women avoid pregnancies that are so distressing and burdensome that abortion is chosen. In public health speak, it is called, “primary prevention.” In the real world, it is simply not getting pregnant in the first place. When women (and men) are able to avoid pregnancy unless it is actively sought and desired, abortion decreases dramatically. The way this is done worldwide is through the judicious use of various methods of birth control.

Interestingly, I think this whole scene may be starting to shift. Fully three-quarters of adults believe that policymakers who are opposed to abortion should be strong supporters of birth control. And about eight in 10 Americans favor expanding access to birth control for women who cannot afford it, with strong support across demographic, religious, and political groups.

Moreover, a number of commentators have noted in recent weeks that, given the election results last November, the Republican party is likely to seek out new policy positions to appeal to a larger number of voters - including women (or, as a wag said several years ago, “women and other minorities”). One area that has been repeatedly mentioned is asking more Republicans to take clear pro-birth control positions. Recall that it was Richard Nixon who promoted the passage of the Title X Family Planning Program in 1970, and many R’s over the years have continued such support. The intriguing thing about this idea is that a candidate who may feel very deeply that he/she is opposed to abortion can offer a remedy - old fashioned family planning - that clearly and indisputably reduces abortion without going down more contentious, disputed paths like overturning Roe v.Wade.

Mind you, there are a number of religious groups and leaders who have been clear supporters of family planning as one way to reduce abortion. For example, just a few weeks ago, the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good issued a very pro-family planning statement, “A Call to Christian Common Ground on Family Planning, and Maternal and Children’s Health.” The National Association of Evangelicals has noted that family planning is an important way to reduce abortion. And remember that even the Mormon Church is not opposed to family planning although it is clearly opposed to abortion.

Might advocacy for family planning help to increase the prevalence of common sense and common ground in our fractured nation? Wouldn’t it be great if we were to see more signs at Friday’s march saying such sensible things as “More Family Planning = Less Abortion” or “Respect Life: Use Birth Control” or “Prevention over Intervention.”