

ABORTION RECOVERY CENTERS:

The next phase of the pro-life movement

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY

For more than three decades, pro-life activists have concentrated their efforts on keeping women from making the mistake of having an abortion. However, for women who didn't heed the advice of pregnancy care center personnel, few resources have been available to deal with the fallout.

But now, 35 years after nationwide legalization of



Mary Comm has opened A Safe Place in Loveland, Colo.

abortion via the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling, women seeking relief from years of trauma after undergoing the

procedure are being helped by a nascent branch of the pro-life movement. Some involved in this emerging stand-alone phase of ministry believe it could become the nucleus of anti-abortion efforts among evangelicals.

Most local pregnancy care centers focus on preventing abortions rather than counseling those who have had one. Rather than simply being an auxiliary of existing PCCs, a handful of "abortion recovery centers" have opened in the past couple of years in different parts of the country.

ARCs are designed to help those whose decision to abort may have resulted in extensive difficulties coping with life. And the woman who aborted the baby is just one of the people needing such help.

Abortion's ripple effect may include those who felt a loss either because they coerced the decision or felt helpless to stop it: the woman's father, mother or grandparents; the baby's father or his parents; a friend; a minister; or medical personnel.

"Men and women need a place to grieve," says Kay Lyn Carlson, who opened an ARC (www.arctopeka.org) in Topeka, Kan., last year.

"Those wounded by abortion

need to find healing in Christ," says Mary Comm, who opened A Safe Place ARC (www.inourmidst.com) in Loveland, Colo., earlier this year. "By helping men and women heal from past abortions, we're helping prevent future abortions. If they can find healing, they won't fall into that trap again."

Typically, ARCs offer assistance from a professional therapist or individual peer counselor. Several weeks of support group sessions sometimes are more effective. (As James 5:16 says, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.")

Often a woman enters counseling thinking no one understands her feelings of shame and guilt because abortion is infrequently discussed openly in church settings.

"Women endure pain alone for years, and sometimes they don't know why," says Carlson, 44. "They think there is no way to relieve the hurt."

ARCs provide a Christ-centered confidential haven for recovery. The directors speak at churches, conferences, schools and women's groups. Commonly, ARCs operate on shoestring budgets,

primarily from donations by congregations and individuals.

Uncovering the wounds from abortion takes time. Sometimes it requires years — or decades — for a woman to seek help for a memory she's tried to forget. Through denial, a woman may block the experience of her abortion, bringing to a halt any kind of spiritual or psychological healing.

"The horrific emotional consequences of what an abortion can do to a person have only been apparent recently," says Sheila Harper, founder of SaveOne, a Nashville, Tenn.-based Assemblies of God ministry to post-abortive women.

Those involved in the abortion recovery movement are encouraging the American Psychological Association to include Post-Abortion Syndrome (PAS) as a legitimate malady connected with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

ARC advocates insist that PAS is real and symptoms may include depression, low self-esteem, outbursts of anger, insomnia, eating disorders, self-loathing, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual dysfunction, nightmares, an obsessive desire to be pregnant again, lack of bonding with men, an inability to maintain friendships with women, suicidal thoughts, and heightened anxiety around the due date of the aborted child.

The APA is expected to issue research findings later this year as to whether PAS should be included in its widely recognized *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. In the 1980s

the APA included abortion as a stressor causing PTSD. But by 1994 the classification had been removed.

Abortion Recovery InterNational (ARIN) is the first professional Christian association uniting efforts in the abortion recovery movement. ARIN networks ARCs with programs, health clinics, resource centers, churches, professional therapists, peer counselors, grief and bereavement mentors, awareness organizations, and research specialists as well as communities and individuals in the general public.

In conjunction with Heartbeat International, ARIN co-sponsors an annual conference at the forefront of abortion recovery that attracts nearly 700 attendees. ARIN provides education and training to establish ARCs around the globe.

"Equally important to saving babies is the need to help women, men and families who have been negatively affected by an abortion experience — emotionally, physically and spiritually," says 46-year-old Stacy Massey, president and founder of ARIN, which is based in Irvine, Calif. "If *Roe* was overturned tomorrow, we'd still have 90 million people out there hurting from abortion."

ARIN (www.abortionrecovery.org) receives more than 100 contacts a day for assistance.

CHURCH RESPONSE

Although churches overall are doing a better job acknowledging grief associated with an abortion decision, pastors can be reluctant

to raise the topic from the pulpit beyond the traditional "Sanctity of Life Sunday" sermon every January.

"The issue is deep and complex," says A Safe Place's Comm, 47. "For guilt-ridden women, it can become a stronghold that's like an addiction. It can't just be fixed



Stacy Massey leads efforts to network abortion recovery groups.

by reciting a couple of Scriptures and saying, 'Be healed.' "

Assemblies of God congregations are among the most active in the abortion recovery healing movement, Massey says, because the Fellowship clearly teaches that abortion is wrong. Denominations that may be ambivalent about abortion often don't recognize the reality of abortion's fallout on women, men and families involved, Massey says.

Still, churches are more likely

to have recovery outreaches for divorce, drug abuse and homosexuality than abortion, she says. Massey notes a Guttmacher Institute study reports that seven out of 10 women who have an abortion claim to be Christian. One in six women who attend an evangelical church has had an abortion.

“The church has a reputation



A near-fatal abortion at 17 is one of the reasons why Kay Lyn Carlson now helps others cope with past abortions.

for being judgmental of sin instead of being the first place to turn to for help,” says Harper, whose husband, Jack, pastors Crossroads, an AG church in Antioch, Tenn.

“Few Christians share their abortion experiences with other Christians,” says Comm, author of *Secret Sin: When God’s People Choose Abortion*. “Most Christians will seek help outside the church long before they will share this kind of secret with their Christian peers.”

Yet Harper and Comm believe the church is gradually becoming a safer place for women to share their abortion experiences, and ARCs will facilitate further transparency.

STORIES OF ANGUISH

Women who lead ARCs have experienced healing themselves.

At 17, Carlson went across a state line with her boyfriend and falsified her identity to obtain an abortion kept secret from her parents.

“At the abortion facility they told me, ‘This will be quick, easy and safe; you can go home and never think about it again,’” Carlson remembers. She and

the boyfriend parted ways soon afterwards.

But at 25, when pregnant with her husband’s baby, Carlson began crying uncontrollably when she saw the ultrasound. After the birth of Emily, Carlson had recurring nightmares that included baby body parts strewn in different jars. She became depressed to the brink of suicide before seeking therapy.

“It’s the most awful experience to know you allowed your child to be murdered,” Carlson says. “The hardest thing to do is to forgive yourself. But through recovery people can have restored joy from the Lord.”

Comm says she never had an abortion, but at age 21 — while calling herself a Christian pro-lifer — influenced a friend to obtain one.

“I participated as an

accomplice in a decision that ended the life of a human being,” Comm says. “If I had responded differently, she might have chosen differently and avoided destructive behaviors.”

For seven years after her 1985 abortion, Harper lived promiscuously and abused illegal drugs and alcohol, none of which she had done before.

Encouraged by her then-pastor, Maury Davis of Cornerstone Church in Madison, Tenn., Harper started her own abortion-recovery course in 2002, that now includes a 146-page Bible study curriculum for women and men seeking deliverance from the pain and guilt of an abortion experience.

Weekly SaveOne classes typically are two hours and run for 12 weeks. More than 200 SaveOne (www.saveone.org) chapters have started at churches or pregnancy care centers in 21 states and half a dozen foreign countries.

“We get into God’s Word and are passionate to see others set free from horrible bondage,” says Harper, 42.

Massey, a single mom, recovered after having two abortions — before and after the birth of her 20-year-old son, Davis.

“I have a son who has more siblings in heaven than he does on Earth,” Massey says.

Massey had her first abortion at 18 and relinquished a college scholarship. Illegal drug and alcohol use followed, along with occasional suicidal thoughts.

“All sins are equal at the foot of the cross,” Massey says. “The Bible calls us to help each other heal.” **tpe**

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