



Pro-Woman Approach for Pastors

Reaching Christians using
Vitae Foundation Research





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Effective, life-affirming strategies
to help you better communicate with
those impacted by abortion.



The world's leader in research of
abortion decision-making



The Vitae Difference

Does Harley-Davidson® sell motorcycles or freedom? The logical answer is motorcycles, of course.

Motorcycles are the tangible product Harley-Davidson® sells; however, tangible products are not what drives people's choices or what a brand is composed of.

In *The Right Brain Way*, Dr. Charles Kenny states, "A brand is created as people make an emotional connection that transforms the literal product or service into an implicit promise, that drives their perceptions, the way they feel, their behavior and their expectations."

What Harley-Davidson® really sells is *freedom*. Their brand is encapsulated in the identity of the "patriotic rebel," and they provide an implicit promise that belonging to their brand means belonging to a family who shares your core values of freedom and loyalty to one another.

Like the Harley-Davidson® example, **Vitae Foundation uncovers the emotional promise that drives people's perceptions—the way they feel and behave—regarding abortion.** Vitae's Emotional Research is far beyond statistics and surveys, rather, it uncovers the heart of the issue. Because primal drivers and emotional motivators are universal to humanity, Vitae's research is timeless.

Vitae's Emotional Research

Vitae Foundation has invested millions of dollars into Right Brain and Emotional Research and message testing. Right Brain Research, a type of **Emotional Research**, was developed by Dr. Charles Kenny, a consumer psychologist and founder of The Right Brain People®, as a methodology to uncover the emotional motivators that drive decision-making. In the beginning, Dr. Kenny and his team were commissioned by Vitae to conduct research to reveal the psychological dynamics that motivate women to feel the way they do about abortion. This innovative approach to consumer message development has been used by over 600 of the world's most successful corporations and organizations, from Fortune 500 companies to mom & pop shops. In more recent years, Vitae commissioned professional researchers at Emotional ConteXt to add to this lifesaving work.

Over the past thirty years, in-depth interviews utilizing the **Emotional Research** methodology have been conducted with hundreds of participants, including many women who chose abortion. The result of this investment is invaluable and has led to a paradigm shift in the way the way pregnancy help organizations message their position, as they embraced Vitae's research-based Pro-Woman Approach.

This unique form of research has revealed how to better communicate with those who may support abortion as a solution to an unexpected pregnancy, and move them to a more life-affirming position.

A communication strategy emerged from Vitae's first research study, "Abortion—The Least of Three Evils," that resulted in a shift to a more evidence-based messaging approach within the pro-life arena. This new language was woman-centered and non-confrontational and invited the audience to think about the message.

Vitae's lifesaving efforts continued after further research indicated that



The Methodology

Vitae's Emotional Research Process

1. Focuses on how people emotionally and viscerally feel about abortion that drives their perception and behavior.
2. Uncovers the psychological dynamics that motivate behavior.
3. Samples emotions rather than people.
4. Utilizes relaxation, visualization, and repetition to access the emotional mind. The interview takes respondents into the “mind’s eye” to visualize and relive critical decision points. Through this process, emotional motivations and barriers that influence decision-making become clear.

when a woman saw her baby on an ultrasound, she instinctively and emotionally recognized this baby as her own child and was far more likely to reject abortion and choose life. This helped lead to a worldwide effort to equip pregnancy centers with ultrasound machines, saving millions of preborn children.

Vitae shared these and other findings with Sidewalk Advocates for Life to help them tailor their message to women entering abortion facilities, and they now report having saved over 20,000 mothers and children from abortion.

Vitae's Emotional Research findings continue to be shared freely with our pro-life peers. We work with pregnancy centers, churches, medical professionals, other pro-life advocacy groups, public servants, and legislators. Our emotional data empowers them to deliver more effective life-affirming messages, supports women and families, and helps them develop communication initiatives.

Emotional Research is about understanding the decision-making process rather than trying to predict future behavior. By using the methodological process described above, this form of research helps us understand the “why” behind people’s decisions about life, abortion, unexpected pregnancy, and related issues.

Vitae Research Studies

1. *Abortion: The Least of Three Evils* (1994)
To understand why women feel the way they do about abortion and to reduce the number of people who support abortion.
2. *Its Own Time and Its Own Season* (1997)
How women make decisions about unexpected pregnancies.
3. *The Dilemma of Choosing Life* (2000)
To understand what drives teen attitudes and feelings about abortion and secondarily about sexual activity.
4. *Choosing a Life for Vitae* (2003)
A synthesis of Vitae's prior research study findings.
5. *Ready for Responsibility?* (2003)
To understand what drives young people to change or retain their feelings about abortion as they emerge into adulthood.
6. *A Higher Calling* (2006)
The Right Brain approach to understanding why women want to become pregnant and why those who don't, don't.
7. *Saving Grace* (2015)
Examining healthcare and the Planned Parenthood brand.
8. *Minority Women's Study* (2023)
A two-part study to explore how cultural factors and emotional motivators affect minority women's perceptions of abortion.
9. *Catch-22* (2023)
The perception of the abortion pill.
10. *Fighting for Control* (2023)
Why women choose to reverse their abortion.
11. *No Regrets?* (2023)
How to reach people with healing resources after an abortion decision.



Quantitative Research

- Collecting and analyzing numerical data for statistical analysis.
- Questionnaires, experiments, and structured observations.
- Acts as a “snapshot” of current cultural trends and opinions and can confirm the results and measure the intensity and frequency of each emotion identified in emotional research studies.



Qualitative Research

- Collecting and analyzing non-numerical data such as text, video, or audio to understand experiences.
- Focus groups, open-ended surveys, and one-on-one interviews.
- Acts as a way to gather in-depth insights into a program or to generate new ideas for research.



Vitae's Emotional Research

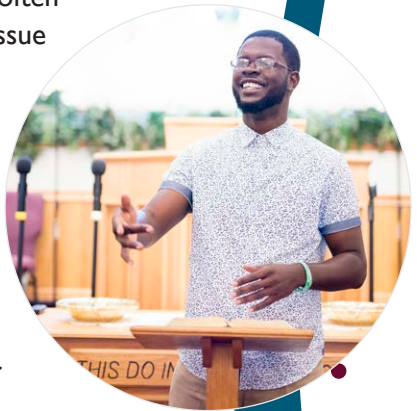
- Collecting and analyzing both numerical and non-numerical data to understand the psychological motivators and other drivers for consumer behavior.
- Long-form interviews using relaxation, repetition, and visualization.
- Since emotional motivators behind consumer behaviors don't change as the culture or other dynamics change, **this method of research is timeless**, proving itself as the premier method for creating messaging strategies.

Applying Vitae Research in the Church

To make abortion unthinkable, pastors, along with faithful Christians, serve a vital role in reaching women and men with support and truth. Through a relationship that develops over time, we must support her (and him) with so much love that they can choose to love their child enough to carry to term. How you speak about life matters. Most importantly through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and secondarily with assistance from Vitae's research and evidence-based messaging, we can empower men and women to make lifesaving decisions in faith, hope, and love.

Why Pastors Need to Talk About the Abortion Issue

As a pastor, if a life-altering issue was impacting 40-50% of your flock, would you want to know about it? Once you knew about it, would you want to address it? According to *The Study of Women who have had an Abortion and Their Views on Church*, conducted by LifeWay Research and sponsored by Care Net, four of ten women and five of ten men who participated in abortion were attending church one or more times per month at the time of the abortion. When pastors become aware of this fact, they are often unsure of how to go about addressing this issue from the pulpit or even on a personal or private level. There can be significant fear involved, as described in a 2016 Care Net Churches Blog, *5 Fears That Keep Pastors from Preaching About Abortion*. This blog was written by Mark Campbell, founder of the Vox Project whose mission is to inspire pastors to become a voice for life and it says, "It's vital that pastors not let fear keep this issue in the shadows and darkness, thus abandoning their congregations to what the world and a culture of death teaches them to believe."





“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.” (1 Jn 4:18) So, if a pastor fearlessly endeavors to bring this issue into the light, how should he begin?

- Step 1: Address the congregation by acknowledging there are women in the church who have been and are likely even now, unexpectedly pregnant
- Step 2: Make sure women (and the entire congregation) know they are loved, will not be judged, and that they can count on the support of their fellow Christians. It will also be important to explain the accessibility of practical help throughout the pregnancy. This is a compassionate and effective way to begin the conversation.
- Step 3: The pastor should gain an understanding of the psychological dynamics and emotional needs and barriers women have when they become unexpectedly pregnant, which is a prominent aspect of Vitae’s Emotional Research. The pastor’s ability to understand and share this knowledge with the congregation provides a foundation of compassion, empathy, and support for women and men facing unexpected pregnancies. It also helps all others in the church, including nominally pro-life or even pro-abortion members, see the authentic love offered by the pro-life position and get a first-hand look at how the grace of God flows through this openness to life.

The “Pro-Woman Approach”

Indeed, Vitae’s “Pro-Woman Approach,” which revolutionized the Pro-Life Movement and caused a paradigm shift in pro-life messaging, can be equally effective when speaking about the life issue from the pulpit. The key findings represents the heart of this unique research.

- Women report that the most effective communication is positive and outlines viable options for carrying her child to term without losing herself in the process. Women also feel that this message of hope is essential and respond with anger to any type of communication that is perceived as judgmental or telling her what she should do. Obviously, this initial piece of the research represents

some broad guidelines but should help establish important communication principles for pastors as they conquer their fears and begin to write sermons to bring the abortion issue into the light.

- A finding from the very first study, which was confirmed in subsequent studies, specifically focused on pregnancy, motherhood, or abortion, showed that women facing an unexpected pregnancy feel like they must choose between three evils (parenthood, adoption, and abortion). They see all three options as resulting in a psychological death of some kind. Unfortunately, they often see abortion as the least of the three evils because, although abortion is the only option that actually kills the child, they do not yet consider that child an independent person, but an extension of themselves. Abortion enables the woman to preserve the feeling that the child is still a part of her body somehow. And because of this, for her, destroying the child is more akin to self-harm than murder. Without abortion, she feels that she will be transformed by her mistakes so radically that she will be destroyed. In her mind, if she brings an “unwanted” child into the world, she must sacrifice her current self.
- On the right side of the brain, the respondents believe that abortion is wrong. However, they appeal to left brain logic or abstract reasoning to rationalize what they recognize in the right brain to be essentially wrong. Whether it's spirituality, religion, moral law, or an innate sense of right and wrong, almost all respondents acknowledge or imply there is reason for guilt to be associated with abortion. To alleviate this guilt, sadness, and anger, they adopt the psychological defense mechanisms listed below which are, tragically, major barriers to any sort of true healing.
 1. Compartmentalization: Putting experiences and feelings about having had an abortion into a compartment, a box, and hiding it away, never to be discussed.



2. **Minimization:** Trying to convince oneself that abortion was “no big deal.”
3. **Justification:** Giving reasons for doing a particular action. (It was neither good nor bad; it just needed to be done because of the current situation: finances, relationship, school.)
4. **Rationalization:** Making something felt to be wrong seem proper or more attractive. (Abortion is courageous because it helps me take care of older children or helps me be in a better position to provide for future children.)
5. **Denial:** A fifth defense mechanism was discovered in Vitae’s eleventh study, “No Regrets?” Women who have had abortions use this defense mechanism to distance themselves from any feelings of pain, sadness or regret. They assert they are “fine.” They initially deny being sad, hurt, or angry but throughout the interview process, often through a copious amount of internal struggle and tears, most respondents acknowledge significant pain and suffering. Whether they can tie it to their abortion(s) depends upon how strong their denial is. Tragically, because of these defense mechanisms, most have not been able to seek healing. Even for the few who had met with counselors, abortion was generally not mentioned or discussed in counseling sessions.

The defense mechanisms (and the unwillingness of many secular counselors to connect any negative outcomes to abortion) were strong enough to override the pain of the abortion. It’s important to note that women are, for the most part, unaware of their defense mechanisms. They do not willfully choose to engage them, nor do they know how to stop them. Pastors can help in this area, but there are barriers that must first be overcome before women feel safe enough to seek healing. We will explore these barriers and challenges in the following sections.

The Christian Reaction to an Unexpected Pregnancy

As Josh Brahm, President of Equal Rights Institute suggests, “When a young Christian woman is unexpectedly pregnant, she’s not only terrified of how

this will affect her life and what will happen if her parents find out, but she's also probably worried about what will happen if her pastor or youth pastor finds out." According

to the aforementioned 2015 study by LifeWay Research and Care Net, women considering abortion most often expect judgment and condemnation from their faith community. Only 43% agreed with the statement, "It is safe to talk with a pastor about abortion." Only 42% agreed that pastors teach God is willing to forgive past abortion decisions. As a result, only 38% agreed that churches are a safe place to talk about pregnancy options.



Brahm asserts that many churches would handle the situation of a young, unmarried woman facing an unexpected pregnancy better than these women in the study would assume. "Many churches don't shame or kick women out if they get pregnant out of wedlock. I think many churches would rise to the challenge and do a great job of supporting this woman, but she doesn't know that if she hasn't seen the church deal with this issue publicly before." (Brahm, 2018)

Pastors and all Christians can demonstrate this approach through empathy built on findings from Vitae's sixth study, "A Higher Calling.. Women who are pregnant and don't plan to be are concerned much more with their own lives than with the life that grows within them. Vitae encourages pastors to speak to women where they are by addressing their needs, not by appealing to idealistic models of morality that frightened women will ignore, or worse, see as judgmental and be pushed further toward abortion. Many respondents identify as being psychologically unprepared for motherhood. To these women, pregnancy feels like an interruption of the natural state of affairs, and abortion is the means through which normalcy is restored. It is for this reason that many women feel that they have a right to abortion.



Women who are not ready to become mothers, because they are psychologically unprepared, must perform more emotional work in order to achieve the emotional identity of motherhood. Even when they are pregnant, they do not feel like mothers. Although we can't do it for them, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we can support them in performing this work. We can't force a new identity upon them, but we can help them gradually adopt the identity of mother by helping them see that it is possible, through the love that surrounds them and the practical solutions that flow from this love.

Christians can increase the likelihood that a woman will carry her child to term by influencing all three of the primary variables in making a decision for life:

- 1) Self-Identity: does shame (of the unintended pregnancy) or guilt (of aborting her child) become the most important emotion related to her decision?
- 2) Support from influencers: Do the most important people in her life, including the father of the baby, her parents, other family, and close friends guide her toward choosing life or away from it?
- 3) Ability to accept the new identity (motherhood or birth mother/placing child for adoption) she will take on through the changed plan.

Even though it is obvious that women do not want to be preached to about abortion, we still often do it anyway. Ironically, they already believe abortion equals murder from the beginning of their decision-making process. They simply ignore it. They often wish that they had sought kind, loving, supportive, life-affirming guidance when struggling with their decision and report they would not have aborted if they had the support they needed. Again, tragically, they do not generally believe they can find this in their church.

Shamefully, for those of us who consider ourselves pro-life, it is true that 82% of women who have had abortions state they would not have done so if just one person would have supported them. (*Silent No More* by David Reardon) We must speak up! As author G.K. Chesterton



wrote in *The Man Who was Thursday*, “There are no words to express the abyss between isolation and having one ally.” Women facing unexpected pregnancies indicate they don’t want to be told they’re wrong (being preached to) but just that they’re loved and supported. The moral and spiritual issues related to a pregnancy outside of marriage can be addressed much more productively after she feels and experiences this love and support.

What is True Empathy, Charity, and Compassion?

Former 40 Days for Life President David Bereit has shared this convicting plea from an unnamed woman from the organization, Silent No More, “Twenty years ago I had my abortion. The week before I had my abortion, I was sitting in my seat in my pew at my church. The week after my abortion I was sitting in my pew at my church. For the last twenty years, I’ve sat in that same seat, in the same pew. Never once has there been a message in our church offering hope and healing, and as a result, I assumed [abortion] must not only be the unspeakable sin, but therefore it must be the unforgivable sin. If you think you are doing something compassionate by not bringing this issue up, if you think by being the priest or the Levite by avoiding it and just hoping it will go away, and you’re helping people, you’re not.” This is a powerful testimony affirming one of Vitae’s coined phrases: Love people enough to tell them the truth.

Practically, how can pastors and faith leaders carry this out? Prominently posting and consistently promoting to the congregation a statement like that which Josh Brahm proposes is a good way to start:

- Here’s what we believe: It is not sinful in and of itself to be in the state of pregnancy. The actions that led to becoming pregnant may have been sinful, but there is nothing intrinsically wrong with being a mother or with having a child growing inside your body. We love babies here, and we hate it when babies are killed.
- Here’s what we won’t do: We will not encourage anybody to have an abortion, because we believe that every unborn child is a bearer of God’s image. We will not kick a woman out of the

church for being pregnant. We will not shame her. We will not let people tease her.

- Here's what we will do: We will celebrate the life in her womb and connect her with the local Pregnancy Resource Center. We will do our best to love unwed mothers well, the way Jesus loved the woman at the well and the woman caught in adultery. We will approach her with grace and friendship. We will teach our students and this young woman how to deal with shame through forgiveness. We will throw a baby shower for her (perhaps through her small group) and celebrate the baby's birth just like we do all births in our church.



Brahm states that a common response from Christians regarding this type of approach in pro-life messaging is to object on the basis that we shouldn't condone sin. They assert that by adopting this type of compassionate, pastoral, woman-centered approach, we are automatically condoning or at least accepting premarital sex, unchastity, and pregnancy outside of marriage.

However, might it be even more likely that we would be able to restore young men and women who have engaged in sexual sin through gentleness and compassion rather than by harshness and discipline? (Gal 6:1) Might this be especially true if we have developed a deep, positive relationship with them through our public support during (or prior to) a traumatic time in their life? What if the young man and woman see us celebrating the life that is in her womb regardless of the circumstances behind how this life came to be?

Should we not take our example from Jesus in his response to the woman caught in adultery? (Jn 8:1-11) Like Jesus, we do not condone the sin and once the sinner feels loved and protected, we are able to privately say, "go and sin no more."

Dealing with the “Exceptions”

Many Christians who consider themselves pro-life believe abortion is justifiable in certain circumstances. According to a 2022 Pew Research Center survey, “America’s Abortion Quandary,” 46% of pro-lifers believe abortion should be legal if the pregnancy threatens the health or life of the woman, and 36% of pro-lifers believe abortion should be legal if the pregnancy results from rape. These are the so-called “exceptions,” and, despite only representing around 1% of all abortions in the U.S., they are often cited as reasons that abortion should be universally accessible. There are a variety of excellent resources that offer compassionate, reasonable, and compelling answers to these arguments. They can be accessed at vitaeresearchinstitute.org/education.

Like the quantitative research cited above, Vitae’s Emotional Research indicates significant support from study respondents for keeping abortion legal in the cases of rape and the health or life of the mother. We know that the Bible tells us that God hates “hands that shed innocent blood.” (Prv 6:17) We also know that preborn human beings conceived in rape or who cause medical challenges for the mother are innocent. So how do we help Christians become 100% pro-life, even in difficult cases?

In communicating with the Christian who does not have any personal experience with abortion, it is important to be aware of and able to lovingly articulate pro-life apologetics and arguments (see link above). A summary of each argument to the “exceptions” is listed below as an introduction to pro-life apologetics. Prior to preaching about them in a sermon or having an in-depth conversation with someone who is adamant that there are exceptions to being pro-life, it is necessary to move from a summary to a full understanding of each argument.

- In the case of rape/incest: The value of a human life is not based on the circumstances of their conception (rape, incest, etc.) as we are all made equal under God’s image. We agree that rape is an act of violence that was done against an innocent person, the woman. Abortion does not erase the original act of violence and can compound the problem by adding another act of violence toward another innocent person, the child.

- In the case of health or life of the mother: There is no medical reason why the life of the child must be directly and intentionally ended with an abortion procedure. If a woman develops certain serious diseases or medical conditions during pregnancy, pre-term delivery may be necessary to preserve the health or life of the mother. The American Association of Pro-Life Obstetricians and Gynecologists (AAPLOG) states:

There are times when separating the mother and her unborn child is necessary to save the life of the mother, even if the unborn child is too premature to live. In those tragic cases, if possible, the life of the baby will be attempted to be preserved, and if not possible, the body of the unborn child is treated with respect, recognizing the humanity of the life which is lost in the separation. In contrast, the purpose of an induced abortion is to produce a dead baby.

Also, treating an ectopic pregnancy (a baby growing inside a woman's fallopian tube) is not the same thing as an abortion. (<https://aaplog.org/aaplog-responds-to-facts-are-important-understanding-ectopic-pregnancy/>, 2024)

Talk to Her About Her

For those who do have personal experience with abortion and/or those who are currently facing an unexpected pregnancy, it is beneficial to start the conversation in a different place. Thirty years o. Vitae's Right Brain and Emotional Research points to a foundational but simple recommendation to "talk to her about her." Vitae research offers a glimpse into the trauma an unexpected pregnancy and/or abortion

experience is to one's identity. Thus, pro-life Christians familiar with this research are better able to empathize, listen compassionately, and offer practical help—either personally or through a pregnancy center or abortion healing ministry.

Pastors and the Christian faithful can have a major impact in turning around the tragic stereotype that



faith communities are “judgmental” or “condemning.” They can do this if they begin to “talk to her about her,” keeping a focus on her and not, at least initially, on her baby. This is what we mean by the “Pro-Woman Approach,” which also includes working to empower her to know that she is strong enough to get through this, helping her understand that being a mom is a positive thing—and she can keep her life on track. It also includes being there for her in very practical ways (jobs, housing, food, material support) and guiding her to the local pregnancy center. She knows abortion is wrong, but that’s often not enough for her to make the right decision—we need to provide her practical help. Pastors and pro-life people, please understand that “God loves you, please don’t kill your baby” is rarely compelling to her—talk to her about her. Finally, be there for her even if she makes the tragic choice for abortion. As previously mentioned, friendship, forgiveness, and compassion make it more likely that she (and he) will feel moved to seek healing, repentance, and conversion. Additionally, they may be much less likely to make another choice for abortion in the future.

Obviously, there is an important difference between this pro-life approach and traditional approaches. Other approaches often lead with the fact that abortion is immoral and evil (which is certainly true), that we must defend innocent life in the womb (also true), and that babies are a gift from God (Amen). This is why many pro-life Christians bristle at the Pro-Woman Approach. They believe that by taking the focus off the baby and placing it on the woman, we are giving up the most powerful pro-life argument: that the child in the womb is a human being, made in the image and likeness of God, with an inalienable right to life. This is a powerful argument . . . for pro-life people . . . for Christians.

This leads to an essential question in terms of pro-life communication: “Who is the audience?” If the audience is other pro-lifers, then it is advisable to use these arguments to strengthen beliefs and pro-life conviction. But if the audience is moderately pro-life people, pro-abortion people, men and women facing unexpected pregnancies, or men and women who’ve had abortion experiences, these arguments don’t resonate. It doesn’t mean they are not true. It does mean traditional pro-life arguments are not as effective in changing the hearts and minds of these particular audiences.



This is incredibly difficult for pro-lifers, pastors and faithful Christians to hear. However, after eleven research studies, thirty years and millions of dollars invested in Right Brain and Emotional Research. Vitae Foundation asserts an undeniable fact: this audience does not think about abortion the way you do! Facts, religion, and moral arguments do NOT convince them. In fact, those things can, in an unexpected pregnancy, push a woman to have an abortion.

We can summarize nearly 1000 pages of research in one sentence, “This research suggests that modern American women of childbearing age do not view the abortion issue within the same moral framework as those of us who are pro-life activists.” (“Abortion: A Failure to Communicate” Paul F. Swope, 1998) The quote, as well as, the research behind it remains as relevant, true, and applicable today as it was twenty-five years ago. This is due to the Right Brain Research methodology that deals with emotions, circumstances, experiences, and similarities between people which transcend time. This initial research and the above article, “Abortion: A Failure to Communicate,” represent a watershed moment in the Pro-Life Movement. For the first time, Right Brain Research based on consumer psychology was completed to reinforce what many in the movement had already determined, experientially. This was the idea that for pro-life messages to be effective, especially and specifically with an abortion-minded woman facing an unexpected pregnancy, we needed to focus on the woman and not the baby. And although this was difficult for many in the movement to hear at the time (and still is today), it represents an essential understanding.

Should Pastors Promote Pro-Life Laws and Regulations?

Sermons and initial conversations should not highlight efforts to limit abortion access. Most women feel that legalization of abortion allows women to have control over their lives to rectify mistakes and restore normalcy. There is greater fear now, post-Roe, that restricting abortion poses a real threat to women. Even women who were not pregnant fear too many restrictions on abortion would be detrimental to the lives of women and removes the safety net that is intended to protect their dreams and freedoms.



Women fear that without undergoing an abortion, they will be transformed by their mistakes so radically that they will be destroyed. The mere availability of abortion as a choice, and a second opportunity to exercise self-control, is so appealing to women that a dispute of its legality is faced with great opposition from many on both sides of the issue.

Indeed, findings from our fourth study, “Ready for Responsibility?,” indicate that the hearts and minds of both people who have and have not experienced an unexpected pregnancy and/or abortion are not changed when we demand they accept complete bans on abortion in the cases of rape and health or life of the mother. This type of approach tends to cause people to become more entrenched in their pro-abortion position. They see these laws as harsh and neither compassionate nor just. Of course, anti-abortion laws, just like anti-slavery laws in the late 1800s, are a necessary way to ensure the equality of all human beings and will eventually help to make abortion unthinkable, even in these difficult cases. These two approaches do not have to be mutually exclusive. Vitae’s Emotional Research simply indicates that it is more effective in initial conversations and sermons to focus first on winning hearts and minds through empathy, charity, and compassion and an ability to “talk to her about her” and then, later, broach the legal, moral, and spiritual issues related to abortion.

Reducing the Shame of Unexpected Pregnancy

Abortion becomes necessary in the mind of a woman when shame runs rampant. We need to help people understand that pregnancy, itself, is not shameful. The tiny human life growing inside the woman, no matter the circumstances of his or her conception, is made in the image and likeness of God and deserves respect . . . and life. Significantly, both the innocent preborn child and the young pregnant woman is “wonderfully made.” (Ps 139:13-14) If our daughters, granddaughters, sisters, nieces, or friends make a mistake (even a big one), do they know we are there for them? Do they know their worth in the eyes of God after making a mistake?

In the “No Regrets?” study it was pregnancy, not sex, that was seen as the first “sin” that needed to be undone by abortion. For those who did not speak in moral terms, it remained the pregnancy, not sex, which

was viewed as the “big mistake,” the “stupid” thing that she allowed to happen. Much like King David, first inviting Uriah back to his own home to “hide” Bathsheba’s pregnancy, and then feeling forced to send Uriah out to be killed (2 Sm 11:1-17), a woman dealing with extreme shame from an unexpected pregnancy feels she must eliminate this tiny life within her to hide the pregnancy. Like David does initially, she does not feel that the problematic situation was the sexual relationship but views the unexpected pregnancy as the problem.

This psychological experience backs up what we’ve seen in past studies where an unexpected pregnancy is perceived as an unnatural event, a real threat to self-preservation, and a destroyer of identity. Young girls, who may only know what Christian women should appear to be, may be more pressured to abort to maintain that appearance. Her identity as “a good Christian girl” must be defended because pregnancy outside of marriage is, to her, incompatible with that identity.

Self-Preservation of Identity

Satan’s ability to attack and distort identity and induce shame, just like in the Garden of Eden, are the prime motivators for abortion.

Vitae’s first research study “Abortion: The Least of Three Evils” revealed that women perceived a threat to a loss of identity in the face of an unexpected pregnancy. Women who became pregnant but did not intend to, did not identify as mothers or even as someone who was expecting. Environments that brought excessive attention to the baby or their status as a mother was perceived as a threat to how they perceive themselves and induced anxiety. They considered motherhood and carrying to term as death of self—both her current and future self. Abortion was perceived as the death of the preborn child. Adoption was perceived as the death of both herself and the preborn child, thus, it was perceived as the greatest of three evils. Most respondents believed that the child would be neglected or abused by their adopted parents and feel rejected, abandoned, and unloved by them. Again, this represents a “death” of both self and child.

However, adoption can be a more viable solution once the “threat” of the pregnancy is de-escalated and addressed through a compassionate, woman-focused, hopeful counseling process at a pregnancy center or with support from her family or network. Indeed, adoption is a wonderful, loving option and can be promoted quite effectively sometime after the initial, traumatic moment(s) of finding out about an unexpected pregnancy.

Self-Preservation of Their Life Plan

Vitae’s research studies revealed that women seek abortions to restore the identity they had before they were pregnant and protect their future self-identity. The future self-identity is what the young woman anticipates her career, family, or lifestyle will be like as she matures. Yet, in other studies, it was discovered that many women, even young teenagers, make a life plan. As they mature, they live out the life plan that they created as young girls. Consequently, the current self and the future self are extremely important, and women will go to great lengths, even so far as having an abortion, to protect both.

Guilt vs. Shame

“Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.” (Gn 3:7-8)

Adam and Eve wanted to hide, and they felt shame in their nakedness. They did not like being exposed. A recurring theme in many Vitae studies is guilt vs. shame. When women feel shame, they experience the fear of being negatively judged by others and rejected or shunned by them, they fear being exposed and vulnerable. She wants to hide her nakedness and not expose herself. She feels shame at the thought that external sources—parents, friends, and other significant people in her world—will judge her character negatively.

Guilt, in contrast, arises from internal messages and is an attempt for



the heart to prompt her to consider her true identity, who she knows herself to be. When women feel guilt over shame, they are more likely to carry to term, because their internal voice is stronger than their concerns about how they may appear to others.

As a church are we helping women get in touch with their internal truths or are we fostering an environment where shame is louder than guilt? It is important to note that young women who came from families that identified as Christian or “pro-life” felt more pressure to abort to protect that identity. They did not want to expose themselves or family to the shame that they felt accompanied an unexpected pregnancy. As a church what is our message from the pulpit? Or what do our programs tell women and families about women’s bodies and pregnancy? Do we subtly reinforce that getting pregnant when it negatively impacts self-identity and changes the life plan is a shameful and “stupid” thing?

Character Preservation Depends on Shame and Guilt

If character preservation is more strongly served by aborting the child and avoiding the judgment of others (shame), and all else is equal, then she will abort. On the other hand, if character preservation is more strongly served by carrying the child to term and avoiding the judgment of herself that she is a murderer (guilt), then she will choose life. This finding is also corroborated by Phase 2 o. Vitae’s “Minority Women’s Study” in that Black women felt they would be more harshly judged by society for being unexpectedly pregnant and carrying to term. Therefore, they were more apt to choose abortion for fear of the shame they would experience from external sources. Women who feel more in control in all areas of their life, however, may choose life. Women with a consistent internal sense of control over their life who can acknowledge circumstances that may be beyond their control but do not feel hopeless, are less likely to abort. If the woman feels as if she is in control and can be resilient, she will be more likely to carry her child to term. It is for this reason that we must use precise language that will speak to her needs and empower her to choose life.

Shame Exists Long Before an Unexpected Pregnancy

Many respondents in our abortion healing study, “No Regrets?” reiterated our earlier findings that to them getting pregnant was the

shameful incident and “sin.. Abortion was just the “necessary evil” to cover the shame of getting pregnant in the first place. But the shame narrative begins before women are even pregnant. Several of Vitae’s Emotional Research studies reveal that defense mechanisms and polarizing attitudes regarding abortion “rights” and “choice” are really about women feeling judged, vulnerable, and shamed for acting on sexual impulses. Young women and men feel shame about healthy sexual desires and the enemy capitalizes on this by creating confusion and has them run into the arms of the abortion provider which groom them for abortion.

Supporting Families and Teens to Reduce Shame

Every family needs to feel supported by their pastor and fellow Christians. Families should be provided with the resources they need to talk to their teens about these important issues. It is unfortunate that we continue to teach outdated and ineffective models of chastity which present a big “NO” to teens when we have a beautiful, sensible, powerful “YES” to offer them.

Modern scientific developments related to the idea of body literacy, teach that pregnancy is not shameful, but rather the female body working properly. These methods are often referred to as Restorative Reproductive Medicine (RRM), Fertility Awareness-Based Methods (FABMs), and NaPro Technology.

Of course, part of this teaching is helping young people understand how men and women are complimentary to each other and the beauty of the sexual faculty within its proper place in marriage. This is not wrapped up in the traditional language of chastity, but in the wonder and beauty of the human body. This is uniquely seen in the female body, which is designed to provide everything necessary for a new human being to flourish in the womb for nine months and then be born into the world—a miracle.

Perhaps the obvious needs to be stated: we want our young people to make the decision that God asks of all of us which is to safeguard the goodness and holiness of sex and to say “YES” to sexual intimacy only within



marriage. This is the path God has set before us to make us as joyful and as healthy as possible. His commandment here is similar to the ten He gave to Moses, which are not a list of “NO’s” but a powerful outline for humanity to thrive and flourish. They were given to the Israelites soon after escaping bondage as the way to say “YES” to ultimate and lasting personal and societal freedom (Ex 19:1-6, 20:1-17).

This important message can be used in discussions with our young people about the perfection, beauty, and health of their bodies, and especially with young women during opportunities to increase understanding of body literacy. This stands in stark contrast to the “NO” that most abstinence and chastity programs offer.

Vitae’s third study, “The Dilemma of Choosing Life,” we learned that pushing the traditional chastity or abstinence message upon young people can actually make it more likely they will choose abortion to keep secret their sexual activity or shame of pregnancy from those who provided the abstinence and chastity messages. Young women who found themselves facing an unexpected pregnancy certainly did not want to return to the person who shared the abstinence message with them.

The Power of the “Admired Woman”

It’s important to offer hope not just through words, but through the image and example of the admired woman. The “admired woman” is someone who can positively influence and inspire a young woman facing an unexpected pregnancy. Multiple Vitae studies indicate respondents are drawn to this admired woman. When the admired woman offers a path to fulfillment that does not require an abortion, the woman is far less likely to make this choice. It is extremely beneficial if you can develop



many admired women: mothers, grandmothers, older sisters, aunts, or other successful, faithful women. Churches should be speaking to their congregations about how to talk to women facing unexpected pregnancies, as well as, how to be available to young girls in all situations. It is essential pastors or youth pastors, in cooperation with parents and admired women, develop positive communication with young people prior to an unexpected pregnancy. Talking about body literacy, the beauty and healthy functioning of the human body, and the fact that the sexual union of a man and woman in marriage is a good and holy thing, is vital. Ideally, it is a relationship-based series of life-affirming, positively-oriented conversations that happen prior to sexual activity, helping young people to understand the benefits of saving sexual intimacy for marriage. This approach will help young people see the beauty of God's creation and sexual intimacy and understand how normal, healthy, functioning male and female bodies operate.

Alternatively, we also see girls and young women striving to become an admired woman themselves. The culture plays a large part in the early development of the concept of this woman in a young girl's mind. That is, the media, and modern cultural influences like movies, music, sports, and trends attempt to alter the identity of young people. However, studies show that her parents, close friends, and faith communities have even more influence. Pastors and faithful Christians can and should help women become the admired woman of their dreams and goals while developing a strong, positive sense of self.

Whether trying to become an admired woman themselves or choosing a role model to follow, young girls must be encouraged to create their admired women out of strong, faithful, resilient, and honorable women of God, many of whom are mentioned in the Bible: Ruth, Naomi, Miriam, Hannah, Esther, Elizabeth, and Mary. These admired women are a bulwark against cultural pressures because they know their worth as daughters of the King. These women can walk in the light through darkness.

Pastors and religious education leaders can lean into stories of admired women at a young age. However, they should also be sure to teach young girls that it was not the appearance of these women that made them great, but their identity in Christ. Without a firm foundation such as this, there is a risk that a young girl might choose an abortion to maintain their outward Christian appearance.



Healing After Abortion

Another benefit of employing a “Pro-Woman Approach” is the ability to keep from triggering defense mechanisms (compartmentalization, rationalization, justification, denial, and minimization) which we know are adopted by nearly all women and men who have been involved with abortion. At some point soon after the topic of life has been initiated within the congregation, it is essential to acknowledge the long-term psychological effects of abortion and point women and men toward healing.

This is a delicate issue because men and women who have had abortions do not want to be made to feel like they have something to “regret” or feel guilty for. At this point, their defense mechanisms are too strong. Specific recommendations are offered below. It is also important to make sure people who have abortion experiences (and all people in the congregation) know that abortion is not an “unspeakable” nor “unforgivable” sin, which, tragically, is what many think is Christian teaching.

Vitae’s eleventh study, “No Regrets?,” offers findings which pastors can employ to deal with the fallout from abortion in a compassionate way. An important additional note is that the majority of women we interviewed initially stated they never thought about their abortions or babies and did not feel grief about their abortion experiences. However, many broke down crying very early in the interview process. At the end of the interviews several women acknowledged this as the first time they had openly spoken of their abortions and identified it as a cathartic experience. It is truly heartbreaking that, for many of these women, an experience participating in a research interview is the closest they have come to any sort of healing or admission of deep pain and hurt.

Challenges to Healing After Abortion

We must first acknowledge that the “No Regrets?” study points out several challenges for pastors and Christians in helping women and men deal with their abortions. Most women in the study were open



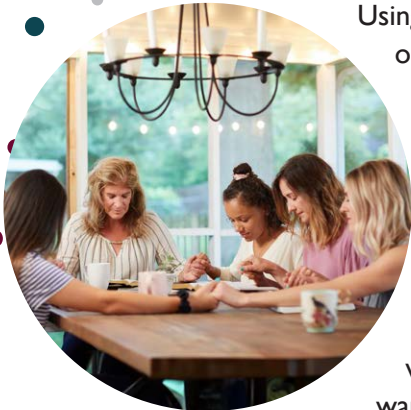
to considering faith-based healing programs, but, unfortunately, only as an option for other women. For themselves, even if they had been attending religious services of any kind, they did not imagine going to seek help from their pastor or faith community, for fear of shame. They did not want to seek healing with people who already knew them. The good news is that they did express interest in the opportunity to discuss “spirituality” or to speak with a “spiritual counselor.” This could be the opening that you are able to lead women through so that they eventually are able to return and become a part of the community again.

Additionally, the women in this study did not consider their faith community for abortion healing. Even when they found a group that touched on the abortion issue, healing was not discussed. Most women thought pastors were limited to speaking on the morality of abortion. For this reason, they asserted they would not want to seek help from an organization, place, or person, that feels overtly pro-life.

Finally, women who became unexpectedly pregnant felt like they lost their present and future selves. They had abortions to try and salvage the identity they had before they were pregnant, and it might have worked, partially. They got the degree, the job, and the future relationship and family, but they did not escape the persistent sadness, grief, and guilt. They now have to deal with a wound that won’t heal. The future self they hoped for is not quite what they thought it would be, and until they can shed the guilt and the sadness, it never will be.

Opportunities for Healing After Abortion

The good news is that out of these challenges, opportunities arise. It is true that many women feel alone and shocked by their sadness even years after their abortion. They manage day-to-day life by utilizing defense mechanisms which make it extremely difficult for them to acknowledge or discuss any pain or sadness. When they do allow themselves to come face-to-face with this emotional trauma, they feel they cannot seek support from the abortion industry or from those who believe their abortion was wrong. Yet, on some level, they long to share their story, hear that they are not alone, and become whole.



Using the Pro-Woman Approach will not only reduce the pressure to abort in the first place, by reducing the shame of pregnancy, but will also increase the chances that she (and he) will feel safe to speak to a pastor or someone in a healing ministry if they did choose abortion.

When talking to, or about, people who have experienced abortion, we want to avoid words implying judgment like “regret.” We can reach those wounded

from abortion through empathy, community, compassion, and radical solidarity. We can offer them permission to be sad and a place to tell their stories. This is the path to wholeness.

A Christian’s faith community can become known as a place of help, hope, and healing for those who feel pressure to abort, or who have been hurt by a past abortion. The church can provide for those who have encountered abortion through clear and consistent positive communication aligned with the Pro-Woman Approach.

Women facing unexpected pregnancies or women who have had abortions (and men who have influenced women to have abortions) must know that they remain part of their local faith community, and their dignity will be recognized in both word and deed. This is not the same as “destigmatizing abortion” which is what the abortion industry promotes: abortion as a good, positive choice, or a “right,” so that women don’t feel stigmatized or guilty for having made the choice. Instead, pastors should greet women and men who have chosen abortion with love and compassion. This helps to create an environment free of judgment, shame, and pressure. Again, only then are people who have been involved with abortion able to hear Jesus’ admonition to “Go and sin no more.” Pastors can speak about the immorality of abortion, but they should do so in a gentle manner, tied to the Pro-Woman Approach. Fearlessness, boldness, and gentleness represent an impactful and effective messaging approach to this difficult issue.

Addressing Women and Men After Abortion

Vitae's study on abortion healing indicates that women do not want other people to look at them and see a "post-abortive woman" or even a "woman who had an abortion," and they work actively to make sure this does not define their identity. Like the difference between a "diabetic" and a "person fighting the disease of diabetes," respondents fear the above labels so much so that they don't even permit it within their own minds or self-identification. This finding can change the way pastors, Christians, and the entire Pro-Life Movement, particularly those in after-abortion healing ministries, talk and think.

For women in the study, minimization is key. Women put abortion in its place as just one of many traumatic experiences. During research study interviews this came up during questions about counseling and why so many women do not seek help and healing after an abortion. These women are doing everything they can not to self-brand as "post-abortive." Because of this, our outreach to women who may have had abortions can be more effective when we enter through the "back door" of previously established women's groups, Bible study groups, etc. Leaders of these groups might be able to naturally bring up the desire to support women facing any type of pregnancy loss (understanding there are distinct differences between abortion, miscarriage, and stillbirth).

These women feel isolated and alone. They cannot report their suffering to abortion providers because they are told they aren't supposed to feel pain. Yet, they believe they can't talk about it with anyone who may be pro-life—especially at their church—because they fear judgment and shame. So, they box up their feelings . . . and many quietly leave their church.

Indeed, of the women interviewed who had been part of a faith community prior to their abortions, few continued to attend services after their abortions. These women, too, are in need of healing. Pastors can try to identify those men and women who have fallen away or left the church and invite them to return to find healing and restoration, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness.

Summary

Our hearts have been fashioned by the Creator and we have a universal desire to be united with God the Father. Before the fall, Adam and Eve existed in perfect union and without shame. “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.” (Gn 2:25) All of creation was in perfect order. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it ...’” (Gn 1:27-28)

Through the decision of Adam and Eve to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, sin entered the world and shame came about. Adam and Eve could no longer stand in front of God; they wanted to hide from God and themselves. “And he [Adam] said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, but I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.’” (Gn 3:10) Although they ate from the tree to secure control and protect their identity, understanding of their true identity became disordered. It was God the Creator who formed their image and gave them identity. Even though they were made in the image and likeness of God, Satan cast a shadow of doubt in the heart of Eve. The lies whispered by Satan tempted Eve to believe she could not trust God, that God ultimately did not love her, and she was not secure solely in God’s love and care. Satan hates our identity and he is jealous that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Satan wants us re-made in his own prideful image. Through casting doubt, he prompted Eve to try to take control and secure a position that would protect her identity.

Satan cannot create; he can only distort, and his tactics have not altered. Because of sin, we live in a broken world where we are easily tempted to believe in a false identity, one that we must create ourselves. We believe the lie that Eve originally believed: that we are not loved, not lovable, and that by our own actions we must secure our safety and protect our identity. We are misled to think that without exerting control, we are not safe, and we are not enough.

So many of us have a broken understanding of our identity. We don’t know or believe that we are made in His image. This is especially true for women. How many women believe they must alter their bodies

or their healthy-functioning reproductive system to feel secure and actively participate in society? Subtle and not-so-subtle lies, reinforced by the culture, tell women that they are not made in His image, they are not made by a loving Father, and they cannot trust His commands, especially His first command, “Be fertile and multiply.” (Gn 1:28) The world has told them they must manipulate their fertility to preserve their identity and security. Having inherited a fallen nature from our first parents, women and men remain susceptible to the confusion and lies of the evil one. We are looking for needs to be met and fulfilled outside of Christ, because, like Eve, we don’t trust that God the Father ultimately has our best interest in mind.

This is, in part, why Emotional Research related to human sexuality, reproduction, abortion, and life is important. It benefits us to understand what needs and promises are seemingly fulfilled with abortion and the anti-life narrative. The evil one had done his job well and his lies obscure the truth in relation to human sexuality. Therefore, we cannot lead women and men to Christ until they know and trust that it is true they were made whole—not broken—and they can trust their bodies, male and female, which were made beautiful and perfect by a loving Father and Creator.



Resources for Pastors & Churches



Sample Pro-Life Position Statement



Blog article

“One thing every pastor can do to prevent abortions in their congregation”

By Josh Brahm



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Vitae Foundation's research has caused a paradigm shift in the Pro-Life Movement in the way pro-life organizations speak with women considering abortion.

To ensure that the research continues its nationwide reach, we've assembled a team of experts who have invested themselves in the research and are passionate about sharing the research with others.

To request one of our National Outreach Team members to speak at your upcoming event, please scan the QR code or go to vitaefoundation.org/education.





We facilitate lifesaving research and apply the findings to
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