

HRTF WHITE PAPER

Human Reproduction

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Human Reproduction Task Force:

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Introduction

The scope of the Human Reproduction Task Force, as outlined by Bishop Todd Fetters, was to evaluate several sections in the Family Standards section of the Discipline, consider the subject matter they covered, and propose revisions to the Discipline regarding that subject matter. Specifically, the sections we considered were entitled Family Planning, Abortion, and Genetic Engineering (numbered ¶133-135 in the 2021-23 Discipline). Each of these sections was last revised in 1985.

While issues like abortion remain hotly contested in the wider culture, the general United Brethren position and scriptural basis for it are long-settled and well-established. In looking at the subjects of family planning, abortion, and genetic engineering, the primary focus of the task force was to propose revised language for the *Discipline* that would be both consistent with scripture and would remain relevant as science and technology continue to develop over time. This was particularly significant for the section on genetic engineering, which identifies procedures that are no longer in use and does not account for many developments in the field that have occurred during the last 35 years.

Ultimately, the task force chose to recommend a total of seven sections to be added to the *Discipline*, replacing the three current sections entitled Family Planning, Abortion, and Genetic Engineering. The seven new sections are intended to more thoroughly cover the previously included subject matter and to add explanatory language regarding both why the United Brethren in Christ Church holds the positions stated and the church's corporate responsibility regarding issues of human reproduction. This paper will provide context to the *Discipline* language proposed by the task force. The exact proposal follows the explanation in each section.

The Beginning of Life

The task force believes it will be helpful to include language in the *Discipline* that articulates what we believe about when life begins, what scripture says about how God values human life, and the obligations that stem from this. Everything else that the *Discipline* says or will say about human reproduction is grounded in our

beliefs about the beginning of life.

Christian beliefs about the exact moment during fetal development in which a human life comes into existence have changed over time, shaped by the interaction of biblical and theological concerns and under the influence of various philosophical and scientific understandings. Despite those changes in our understanding, scripture clearly teaches that God values each human being throughout their life: he creates each person in his image (Genesis 1:26-27), he sustains our lives (Matthew 5:45), he loves us so completely that he gave his Son (John 3:16), and he provides a path to salvation that entails the restoration and renewal of the whole person, demonstrated through the full, authentic humanity of Jesus himself (Hebrews 2:5-18). Because God values human beings at every life stage, we as believers should do the same.

We believe the earliest embryo is a fully human person who is fully alive until the moment of their death. This is so not because of any capacity or ability we consider essential for personhood or because of a biological function that we consider basic for human life, which has and will change as science advances. Rather, we believe the dignity and sacred value of the earliest embryo rests on what it essentially is: from the time of fertilization, the embryo is a human, integrated, self-developing person who, if given what they require to mature, is capable of developing into a fully-formed baby upon birth.¹

Believers demonstrate our esteem for life through caring for pregnant women as well as the unborn. The relationship between a pregnant woman and the life she carries is unique among human relationships. Too often, this special relationship and the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of pregnant women are overlooked when we advocate on behalf of the unborn. In fact, God values the lives of both pregnant women and the unborn just as he values every human life; neither is more intrinsically valuable than the other. The church has a particularly great responsibility to care for those who are pregnant as the result of rape or incest, or are continuing a pregnancy that places a woman's life at risk. We should be just as zealous in our care for women enduring these circumstances as we are when protecting the unborn.

¶133 The Beginning of Life

In human procreation, God invites us to participate in his good work of creation in a unique and significant way. Human life is God's gift, and it is sacred at every stage from its end to its earliest beginning. The Church bears living testimony to the sacredness of life by promoting the flourishing of every person's life through works of justice, mercy, and evangelism and by standing with and for those whose lives are vulnerable. Never is a human life more vulnerable than during its beginning.

¹ This way of framing fetal personhood is consistent with a long-standing philosophical anthropology known as the "substance view," which is closely related to other views such as the "Sanctity-of-Life" doctrine and "the human-property criterion." According to the substance view, "a human being is intrinsically valuable because of the sort of thing it is and the human being remains that sort of thing as long as it exists" (Francis Beckwith, "The Explanatory Power of the Substance View of Persons." *Christian Bioethics*, 10:33-54, 2004. See also, Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress. *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*. 7th Edition. Oxford University Press, 2013: 62-100>).

God values each human being in their full humanity at every stage of their life, which Scripture portrays in at least four ways. First, every human is made a bodied person in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Second, God provides for each person throughout the course of their life, regardless of accomplishments or faith, sustaining life by sending rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45). Third, God loves each and every human person, shown most clearly in God's saving mission through the Incarnation of God the Son: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). Fourth, God's salvation entails the restoration and renewal of the whole person, shown through the full, authentic humanity of Jesus the Messiah (Hebrews 2:5-18). Therefore, we are committed to promote human flourishing at every life stage and to protect the lives of all human persons through their entire life span beginning at the moment of conception.

God's people bear testimony to the sacredness of life by caring for pregnant women as well as the unborn. No other human relation shares the characteristics of a pregnant woman and the human life she carries: one life biologically dependent upon another human life, and neither life more intrinsically valuable than the other. The physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of a pregnant woman are significant in the best of circumstances and are even more acute in circumstances when pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, or when continuing a pregnancy places a woman's life at risk. During such unimaginably difficult times, the Church envisions and strives to embody the love and tenderness of God for the weak and the vulnerable just as it does when promoting and protecting the lives of the unborn.

Family Planning

Currently, the *Discipline* section entitled Family Planning also makes reference to adoption, but seemingly only in the case of infertility. It refers to children conceived within the marriage relationship, but because adoption is only referred to as an option for infertile couples, there is no mention of single persons adopting children, although this scenario is affirmed by ¶121 Family: Definition in the *Discipline* and has long been practiced among United Brethren members.

Certainly, adopted and fostered children are conceived outside of the marriage relationship, but these are both ways in which children may be welcomed into a family. The reference to the conception of children being only within the marriage appears to be borne out of a concern for the integrity of the sexual relationship reserved for marriage. This aspect of Christian life is covered by ¶123 Marriage, ¶124 Cohabitation, and ¶125 Illicit Sexual Relations, and the conception language here seems to imply a preference for naturally conceived children that we do not believe was intended when this section was adopted. Thus, the task force is proposing a new Family Planning section that affirms the family as the place where children are nur-

tured, acknowledges the different ways in which believers welcome children into the family, and the ability of parents to determine the number and spacing of children. We are also proposing two additional sections addressing Adoption and Foster Care, and Infertility.

¶134 Family Planning

Believing that children are a gift from the Lord, we recognize the family as an environment of unique nurture and support in which all members together pursue their calling in Christ Jesus. Children may be received into the family in a variety of ways, including natural conception, assisted reproduction, adoption, and foster care. These aspects of reproduction and growing families are some of the deepest and most meaningful aspects of our lives. In this light, they can also be the most painful, complex and difficult.

Believers may for valid reasons determine not to have children, or to place a child for adoption. For those who choose to have children, if there is a desire to time pregnancies or to space children a certain number of years apart, that is a decision parents are free to make, and through prayer and discernment they may wisely plan for the addition of any children God blesses them with. (Proverbs 16:3; James 1:5)

Adoption and Foster Care

Adoption is a concept that is readily embraced within the church, because as believers we have the privilege of being adopted into the family of God. In scripture, we repeatedly see the heart of God for the fatherless and his call to his people to fight and care for the orphan (Psalm 146:9). Both adoption and foster care are means by which we can provide for vulnerable children. While not all believers are called to adopt or foster, the church as the family of God should collectively support its members who do so. Believers should also be supportive of those who make the decision to place a child for adoption, which can be an extraordinarily difficult choice to make, even when that is the best outcome under the circumstances.

It is important to know that there are a number of avenues to family growth, even within the realm of adoption and foster care. Embryo adoption, sometimes referred to as snowflake adoption, is where an embryo is implanted in the adoptive mother's womb, followed by a normal term of pregnancy and birth. Adoption may be within the same country as the adoptive parents or may happen internationally. Adoption may happen across cultures within the same country. It may happen within an extended family or between strangers. Adoption may be open, with continuing contact with the child's birth family, or closed where there is no contact with the birth family. Foster care may in some cases lead to adoption, and other times foster parents may provide a loving home to children for a season before they return to their birth families. No type of adoption or foster care is better than any other, and all of these families need support.

Financial support for adoption is valuable to families, as it can be a costly undertaking. There can be extra expenses related to getting services for the ongoing needs of children and their families as well. Often there is some aspect of loss and tragedy included in situations of adoption and foster care, and the responsibility to provide care can be challenging and difficult. The church being equipped to help adopting and fostering parents includes understanding the emotional impact a break in attachment can have when a child experiences trauma and difficult circumstances during critical stages of development. There is an impact on the brain that can contribute to difficult behaviors. It is often easy for those not educated or familiar with these realities to approach them as a discipline problem, which can be in direct opposition to what a child actually needs in those moments to promote hope and healing. There can be a great deal of stress put on marriages and other family relationships, which is intensified when parents feel misunderstood and whose parenting is judged by others because it is necessarily different and doesn't make sense. Having those who can provide temporary care for parents to have a break can be a valuable ministry. These are some of the complicated issues that the church can become educated on and equipped in, so they can show grace and provide loving support to these children and families.

¶135 Adoption and Foster Care

As believers we have the privilege of being adopted into the family of God. In scripture we see the heart of God for the fatherless and are told to fight and care for the orphan (Psalm 146:9). The church is encouraged to do this, in parenting or support roles. Valuable avenues to family growth may include embryo, private, international, and domestic adoption, and foster care.

Often there is some aspect of loss and tragedy included in situations of adoption and foster care, and the responsibility to provide care can be challenging and difficult. The church is encouraged to be equipped, and offer emotional and financial support as they are able, in providing for the needs of these children and parents (Isaiah 1:17). In doing so, Jesus' value of children is lived out, and is considered the same as caring for Jesus himself (Matthew 18:1-6).

Infertility

Infertility is often a sensitive and emotionally charged issue, and it is important to remember that every person's journey with infertility is unique. Couples who are struggling with infertility may feel isolated, ashamed, or broken.

As followers of Jesus, we should embrace those who experience infertility with compassion and hope. Romans 12:15 encourages us to, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep." We are to empathize with those struggling by being excellent listeners and grieving, with hope, with those affected by infertility. We also rejoice with the affected couple when there are things worth celebrating, whether that be conception, contentedness that comes from God amidst infertility, or adoption.

Prayer becomes a balm to the soul amidst the throes of infertility. James 5:13-16 offers counsel to those who suffer and are sick. Infertility can fit into such a category. It is worth laying the text out here:

“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

Couples who struggle with infertility are encouraged to seek out the elders of their church to pray over them and anoint them with oil. James communicates natural reactions in verse 13: the one who suffers prays; the one who is cheerful sings; and, in the same likeness, the one who is sick seeks out the prayers and anointing of the elders. If there is a situation where the Holy Spirit reveals that sin is prohibiting a couple to conceive, they should repent together and pray for healing. If not, recall the man recorded in John 9 who was born blind. “As [Jesus] passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him’” (John 9:1-2). Sometimes it is for the sake of God’s glory that we suffer until the allotted time where mourning will be turned into dancing.

Couples struggling with infertility are encouraged to be open about it with their church community, resisting the temptation to battle alone and instead giving trusted brothers and sisters in Christ the opportunity to be a listening ear and encouraging voice in their lives. They will not have all the answers and will likely say something unhelpful, resulting in the need for grace, patience, and forgiveness; and others can learn and grow in how to respond to those who are hurting. It is better to be in community with friends who are trying to be supportive than to be alone.

Couples who are infertile are encouraged to pray and seek God’s guidance. Recalling James 5:13 again, this is a natural response to the ones who suffer. They should seek counsel from the Spirit on how to move forward in their infertility. The Spirit will lead each couple in unique ways. For some the Spirit will encourage patience and waiting, others assisted reproductive technologies, foster care, or adoption. None of these are “lesser” options, especially when directed by God.

The scope of this explanation will not go into depth on the use of assisted reproductive technologies for infertile couples. We encourage those considering assisted reproduction options to seek the Holy Spirit’s leading and conviction, which may include praying and waiting, corrective surgery, medication, or other medically assisted procedures, and responding in faith with however God leads.

¶136 Infertility

We recognize the pain and grief that accompanies infertility and empathize with couples affected by it. Couples affected by infertility may request the elders gather together to lay hands on them to pray for healing (James 5:14). Infertile couples are advised to seek the wisdom of the Holy Spirit (James 1:5) and supportive church community in moving forward with faith in considering methods to welcome children into their family, including assisted reproductive technology, adoption, and foster care.

Assisted Reproduction

Assisted reproduction includes the use of medical procedures or technology to aid human procreation. The use of assisted reproductive technology may take a variety of forms, which will necessarily change as new procedures develop. While considering the current *Discipline* statement on genetic engineering, the task force observed that the language primarily dealt with genetic engineering as it relates to reproduction. Therefore, we focused our efforts on addressing the issue of assisted reproductive technology.

The ability to use scientific discoveries to promote health and create and preserve life is God's gift to us, and an evidence of the order built into the created world. However, it is also possible to misuse this ability in ways that are selfish and harmful, and may even elevate human desires over obedience to the will of God.

A couple of methods of assisted reproduction currently in use illustrate the range of circumstances that may exist: in vitro fertilization and surrogacy. During in vitro fertilization, any number of fertilized embryos may be used. This could be done in a limited way, using a husband's sperm and a wife's eggs, so that each embryo created can be implanted in the womb with the opportunity to naturally develop. On the other hand, this procedure could involve the fertilization of a large number of embryos that, left unused, would be either perpetually frozen or discarded. In surrogacy, a woman might selflessly offer to carry a child for her sister and sister's husband. In another scenario, a young woman in impoverished circumstances could be exploited and used as a surrogate for a broker's commercial gain.

These examples demonstrate that it is not always the assisted reproductive technology itself that is objectionable. Rather, the way in which it is used may be problematic in particular circumstances. In addition, the technology available is constantly changing. Procedures mentioned in the current *Discipline* section on genetic engineering are now obsolete. Therefore, rather than addressing specific procedures, the task force is recommending principled language that will guide members as they consider using any form of assisted reproductive technology.

¶137 Assisted Reproduction

Assisted reproduction includes the use of medical procedures or technology to aid human procreation. The use of assisted reproductive technology may take a variety of forms, which will necessarily change as new procedures develop. Therefore, rather than addressing the nature of specific procedures, the church advises its members to prayerfully consider the following guidelines when deciding whether to make use of assisted reproductive technology: its use should be motivated by love; its use should bring glory to God; its use should protect and preserve life from the moment of conception; its use should promote justice toward and prevent the exploitation of each person involved in the process; and its use should protect the integrity of the family.

Abortion

The current *Discipline* language regarding abortion reads as an outwardly-focused position statement, identifying abortion as a “major moral problem in our society.” However, the purpose of the *Discipline* is not primarily to confront the secular world, but to guide believers who have chosen to join the United Brethren in Christ church in membership. As such, the task force believed that the statement should include a clear acknowledgement of the gravity of any situation in which abortion might be considered alongside our affirmation of the sacredness of life. Further, in light of the fact that those governed by this statement are those who have voluntarily joined the church and subjected themselves to the *Discipline*, and considering the fact that a decision about abortion as a life-saving measure in a particular instance may need to be made very quickly, the task force chose to eliminate the two-physician requirement in its proposed revision.

Our position on abortion is grounded in what we believe scripture teaches about the value God places on human life. A person’s value is not based on their age, ability, or parentage. Often in prohibitions of abortion there will be a blanket exception allowing the ending of a pregnancy resulting from rape or incest. However, a blanket exception such as this would imply that a person’s value is diminished based upon evil done by a biological parent. Because we believe that a person’s value is not dependent upon the actions of any other person, we have deliberately excluded a blanket exception for cases of rape or incest. Nevertheless, we recognize that there may be particular cases in which these tragic circumstances and the trauma that accompanies them may indeed threaten the life of a pregnant woman. The newly proposed language takes these circumstances into account, just as the current statement recognized the possibility of therapeutic abortion.

Furthermore, we know that women who have experienced rape or incest are in need of compassionate care, and those who become pregnant as a result may experience increased suffering. Believers are in no way immune to such suffering, but we rely on the God of all comfort to help the hurting. The church must come alongside women who are enduring this type of pregnancy with encouragement and practical help so that the life of the mother and child may both be preserved for the glory of God.

It is certainly the case that women who have been through an abortion come into the church. This may be the result of a life-threatening circumstance or due to a choice made before coming to faith in Jesus Christ. In any case, the church has a duty to bind up the brokenhearted, care for the vulnerable, and demonstrate the grace that Christ has shown toward us.

¶138 Abortion

We believe that human life is sacred from the moment of conception until natural death. Consequently, abortion cannot be recognized morally and Scripturally as a means of birth control. We are aware that any consideration of abortion occurs in a place of crisis and significant consequence, and that forgiveness is available in Christ.

The church recognizes that abortion may be medically necessary in rare and tragic circumstances, taking into account the life of the mother and baby. The church needs to demonstrate sensitivity and care toward those who have had abortions in the past in order to facilitate an atmosphere of grace and healing.

The Church's Responsibility

As with all other matters, our core convictions about issues pertaining to human reproduction must always be rooted not in political ideology or cultural norms and ideas, but in the Word of God. This remains true when addressing the topic of the responsibility of the church. A few biblically-centered core convictions can provide guidance in this matter. They are as follows: 1) the church's responsibility to love and walk with those in need; 2) our high view of the sanctity of human life; 3) the sacredness of the human body; and 4) the beauty of God's design of human reproduction.

The language for this proposed *Discipline* section was written to reveal a significant piece of what the church is called to and to help show the proactive nature of that call in loving individuals impacted by reproductive issues. God's "ask" to the church is to engage by being a support, being welcoming, offering companionship, and sacrificing for the sake of those in crisis. These tasks of loving others are interactive, taking time and energy. God is not asking that we limit our love to thinking good thoughts towards those affected by reproductive issues.

Following are a number of scriptural passages that refer to ways we can actively show love to one another.

Galatians 6:2, "Carry one another's burdens; in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." The context of this verse is helping a brother or sister in Christ through sin or wrongdoing, restoring them gently. Though many circumstances in our context with human reproduction are not inherently sinful, carrying the burden of a brother or sister until they are restored from sin (Gal. 6:1) remains relevant.

Romans 12:15, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.” Romans 12:9-21 lays groundwork for what the church is called to in interacting with others. This is another option for bearing one another’s burdens. This verse doesn’t insinuate restoring a sinful brother or sister, which may fit better with the context of reproductive issues.

Romans 12:13, “Share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality.” This is a simple hospitality verse. The context is how the church is to function, which directly correlates with what we’re writing about.

Romans 15:7, “Therefore welcome one another, just as Christ also welcomed you, to the glory of God.” Christ demonstrated extravagant welcome through inviting us into the kingdom as brothers and sisters when we were strangers, far from God. Jesus’s actions set an example for us in being hospitable people today.

Romans 12:10, “Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters. Take the lead in honoring one another.” Loving one another deeply is companionship in its truest form. The church takes joy in showing honor to one another.

Hebrews 13:16, “Don’t neglect to do what is good and to share, for God is pleased with such sacrifices.” Loving those going through trauma or crisis will take sacrifice of time, energy, and resources. Jesus says that there is no greater love than to lay down our life for a friend (John 15:13), and that we are a friend of Jesus if we do what he commands us to (John 15:14). This provides a clear calling to the church to love sacrificially.

We also understand that commitment to scripture may necessitate corporate rejection of certain medical procedures and technology even if this goes against prevailing cultural norms. Recognizing that technology advances at a staggering rate, we again chose not to list specific reproductive technologies that may be replaced quickly with others, rendering this document and the *Discipline* irrelevant. Instead, the biblical principles of a high view of God’s gift of life (Psalm 139:13-16), the sacredness of the human body (Genesis 1:26-27), and the beauty of God’s design of human reproduction (Genesis 1:28, 2:23-24) provide parameters for engaging issues and situations as the body of Christ with Spirit-guided wisdom.

The length of this paper is insufficient to articulate the range of opinion on each principle, so we will simply summarize our understanding of the principle in hopes that this brings clarity to its importance and relevance to the topic at hand:

- 1) *High view of the sanctity of human life.* It is clear that all human life is to be valued, cherished, and protected. This includes the life of the unborn. Based upon passages like Psalm 139:13-16, we believe that life begins at the moment of conception.
- 2) *The sacredness of the human body.* Genesis 1:26-27 makes it clear that humans are embodied beings. The incarnation of Jesus Christ strengthens this conviction as our Lord and Savior came and

lived on earth as a flesh-and-blood human being. When it comes to human reproductive technologies, the sacredness of the human body as designed by God must always be taken into account.

3) *The beauty of God's design of human reproduction.* Genesis 1:28, and 2:23-24 provide a theological foundation for God's beautiful and unique design for human reproduction. The male and female reproductive systems complement and complete one another in the creation of life.

¶139 Human Reproduction and the Responsibility of the Church

Scripture is clear that God's church is responsible to bring Jesus' love, light, hope, and healing to people who are hurting, struggling and in need, while also maintaining deeply biblical convictions about human life and reproduction. These two convictions are not in conflict. They are to be simultaneously embraced and held in creative tension in order for the church to be a faithful witness to the world.

Understanding the deep range of emotions pertaining to reproductive issues, the Church's commitment is to be a generous support in bearing the burdens of those in trial or crisis (Gal. 6:2; Romans 12:15), showing extravagant welcome (Romans 12:13; 15:7), companionship (Romans 12:10) and sacrifice (Hebrews 13:16) to those in need.

While maintaining our compassion and support for people during difficult and often confusing reproductive crises, we must always maintain our commitment to the authority of Scripture (Isaiah 40:8, 2 Timothy 3:16). At times this may necessitate embracing convictions that contrast with prevailing cultural and social norms, and rejecting certain reproductive technologies or procedures. It is our high view of God's gift of life (Psalm 139:13-16), the sacredness of the human body (Genesis 1:26-27), and the beauty of God's design of human reproduction (Genesis 1:28, 2:23-24) that compels us to maintain and celebrate our biblical convictions about human reproduction as we care for and value the least of these.

Conclusion

The task force is submitting this white paper and its corresponding *Discipline* revision proposals for review by the Executive Leadership Team, followed by pastors and lay delegates during upcoming regional meetings. Our goal in all of these proposals is to provide language that is helpful to all members when navigating issues regarding human reproduction, providing clear guidance for individuals, families, and congregations within the United Brethren in Christ church. We welcome the discussion this will generate as we strive together to serve the Lord in all things.

Finally, it is important to note that this proposed *Discipline* language identifies how we believe God calls

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— come together

us to live as followers of Jesus Christ. It is not a statement of what governments must do, and the task force recognizes that believers may hold a variety of positions on the proper role of government in legislating abortion or other aspects of human reproduction. We urge church members to listen compassionately to one another, speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), and maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3).