



Published in "The Chicago Tribune"
Friday, November 4, 2005

A Publication of **Rachel's Vineyard Ministries**
www.RachelsVineyard.org

Spiritual Healing After Abortions

A psychologists' retreat for those battling unresolved feelings uses religious guidance

By: Bonnie Miller Rubin
Tribune Staff Reporter

Ever since Roe vs. Wade, the Supreme Court's historic ruling that made abortion legal, most of the discussion on this issue has been loud and divisive. But Theresa Karminski Burke, a psychologist, leaves the lobbying and legislating to others. Instead, she focuses on women who have terminated an unplanned pregnancy and are grappling with feelings of guilt, anger, shame, and being spiritually adrift.

"There are just so many unresolved emotions with abortion", she said. "And because the whole subject has become so politicized, no-one talks about it. The pain just stays buried and never gets dealt with".

So she created Rachel's Vineyard Ministries, a retreat where women and men can address those feelings in what she described as a 'supportive, non-judgmental environment' that promotes healing.

What started as one support group in a friend's basement in 1994 has grown to 350 annual confabs held in 11 countries and 45 states. This weekend there are seven around the nation, including one in west suburban Warrenville.

"It's about God's love and reconciliation", Burke said from her ministry headquarters in King of Prussia, PA.

Burke a mother of five, said she has never terminated a pregnancy, but she witnessed the emotional fallout from abortion as a graduate student overseeing an eating disorder group. One woman attributed her bingeing and purging to a long-ago abortion, which unleashed a heated debate.

"It was as if a bomb went off", said Burke, who was later reprimanded by her faculty advisor for wading into such politically charged waters.

To Burke, though, it was clear that much self-destructive behavior – whether drugs, alcohol, or food – is a symptom, not the cause, of unhappiness.

“If people can’t recognize [abortion] as a source of profound grief, I don’t know what is”, she said.

Few opportunities existed to relieve people of their pain and confusion. Abortion rights groups too easily dismissed these feelings, Burke said, while some abortion opponents have viewed focusing on God’s forgiveness as a lack of commitment to the unborn.

In 1994, she published a support-group model that became the curriculum for Rachel’s Vineyard. A year later, she expanded it to a full-blown weekend event. It since has been translated into numerous languages, including Portuguese and Russian.

Typically, the retreat is designed for about 12 participants. The weekend includes psychological and spiritual exercises (which might mean role-playing or holding a bereavement doll), meditation, prayer and group discussions. A pastor or priest is usually in attendance, and readings are culled from the Old and New Testaments.

Burke said that Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist women can adopt the curriculum to fit their own beliefs. For example, “Jewish women could recognize Jesus as their brother rather than their personal savior”, she said.

“Our goal is not to convert or proselytize, but we really can’t deal with the loss of life without acknowledging the Creator of life.”

Not everyone is comfortable in a religious setting – or wants to ask God’s forgiveness.

“You can feel sad about an abortion and not regret your choice; you can feel guilt and know you’d still do the same thing”, said Aspen Baker, co-founder of a post-abortion telephone talk line called Exhale. The free, multilingual service started in San Francisco in 2002 and went national in June.

After becoming pregnant in 1999, the newly minted college graduate had an abortion and assumed she would receive some opportunity to “work it through”. When none was offered, and the only resources she could find were Christian- based, she launched her own.

“Our counseling model is to meet women where they’re at”, Baker said. Funding for the line comes from donations and from volunteer training

workshops, such as the session recently conducted at Planned Parenthood in Chicago.

Since its expansion, Exhale averages about 300 calls a month, she said. "It indicates that women don't have a lot of other people they can confide in because the topic is so stigmatized". Kim Kluger-Bell, a Berkeley, California-based therapist, concurs.

"Given the current political climate and strongly expressed condemnation of women who have abortions...there is simply too much risk of disapproval by others", said Kluger-Bell, author of Unspeakable Losses, which deals with the complex emotions surrounding infertility and miscarriage, as well as abortion.

Whatever the forum, the goal is to help participants acknowledge their loss – often years after the fact.

Leslie Graves, 49, had an abortion at 21, when she was in college, and thought she had successfully buried any signs of despair. When she got married and became pregnant with her first child, "unpleasant thoughts" often intruded on her pregnancy, but she managed to suppress them, she said.

That all changed in her late 30s, when Graves – now the mother of three children – started going back to church.

"As I reflected on it, abortion came up more and more and I felt worse and worse", said Graves, of Spring Green, Wisconsin.

In 1999, an Internet search led her to a Rachel's Vineyard retreat in Rockford.

"I went in believing that it wasn't going to be anything that would help. But as time went on, I started to have a germ of hope that maybe these intense feelings could be relieved and transformed", said Graves. She has since attended 15 retreats as a facilitator.

Bonnie Miller Rubin: brubin@tribune.com

For more information on Rachel's Vineyard, visit www.rachelsvineyard.org. For information on the retreat at Warrenton Cenacle, which begins at 5pm Friday, call...



Rachel's Vineyard Ministries

808 N. Henderson Rd.

King of Prussia, PA 19406

610-354-0555—1-877-HOPE-4-ME