Joe Sebastian

The factors involved in deciding on going through with an abortion is nothing short of complex. The circumstances and people involved are varied. And after the act, the sense of loss, regret, and guilt can be overwhelming. It was to address the trauma after abortion that gave rise to the ministry of Rachel's Vineyard.

In 1996, Dr. Theresa Karinski Burke put together a support group model/curriculum for leaders and clergy so that they could better deal with those who had experienced abortion. Out of this model came weekend retreats, which soon, through word-of-mouth extended to people who had first-hand experiences with abortion. Soon, people from across the country came to seek healing. Individuals were not limited to women directly involved with the abortion, but also other family members of the aborted child such as siblings, fathers, and grandparents.

As the ministry literature says, "the program is an opportunity to examine your abortion experience, identify the ways that the loss has impacted you in the past and present, and helps to acknowledge any unresolved feelings that many individuals struggle with after abortion. Because of the emotional numbness and secrecy that often surrounds an abortion experience, conflicting emotions both during and after the event may remain unresolved. These buried feelings can surface later and may be symptoms of post abortion trauma."

Working in youth ministry since she was nineteen, Dr. Burke has always been a group-person. She strongly believes in the power of the group. Through her research and work, she found that when women had one-on-one therapy sessions in regards to their abortion, it reinforced the shame of the act. In providing a group dynamic - which a lot of naysayers proclaimed would not work - Rachel's Vineyard provided a safe, judgment-free setting for people to share their personal experience. There was power and comfort in numbers. Since its inception and still today, retreats are filled by those seeking healing in this kind of setting.

Each retreat has Catholic priest in attendance. And one of the main objectives is to reinforce that although individuals have undergone or experienced this traumatic event, that God loves them and that God has not forsaken them. Through Scriptures, Rachel’s Vineyard helps those who seek healing to find healing in the Lord.

When the ministry began, it was run out of the Burke's home. Suffering through illness and taking care of small children for several years, Dr. Burke, nevertheless, believed in the work that she was doing. Without a non-profit status at that time, the Burke family spent their own funds to cover the ministry's costs. Mr. Burke managed a maternity home that always had half its beds free. So the weekend retreats were eventually held there.
After a few years, realizing that the work was more than she could handle alone, Dr. Burke reached out to another pro-life organization for assistance. However, sometimes when it rains, it pours, and Dr. Burke’s experience with that organization left her wanting to quit the ministry altogether.

It was God’s providence that intervened through Father Frank Pavone, the National Director of Priests for Life. Father Pavone had attended a weekend retreat and heard of Dr. Burke’s troubles. He said to her, “The work that you do is too important. We will help.” With that, Rachel’s Vineyard became a non-profit ministry of Priests for Life. Dr. Burke serves as the Executive Director.

Offering healing through God’s word, Rachel’s Vineyard is now in 57 countries, 48 states in the U.S., with 325 worldwide sites, offering 1000 retreats annually. The informational literature is being translated into 29 languages. Dr. Burke says that it is through the dedication of nearly 100,000 volunteers that the ministry has grown in such a way. Only five percent of those involved with Rachel’s Vineyard are paid staff. The remainder are those who are dedicating their time and skills to the cause of helping those affected by abortion.

God has destined certain ministries to be fruitful because the work that they do glorify His name. Tested through fire, ministries such as these, like Rachel’s Vineyard, continue to help, heal, and share the message of God’s love and salvation to all His children.

For more information or to find a local Rachel’s vineyard, visit www.rachels vineyard.org