

SURVEY OF CANTERBURY ANGLICAN WOMEN'S ATTITUDES TO ABORTION

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The attitudes of members of the Canterbury Association of Anglican Women toward abortion were sampled in a questionnaire survey. Support for liberalization of the New Zealand abortion laws was found to be inversely related to seniority. This finding was accompanied by significant differences across the membership levels in other variables, such as knowledge of the present law, perception of Anglican thinking, sources of opinions, and literature read.

During the latter part of 1971, a questionnaire survey of attitudes to abortion was conducted among its members by the Association of Anglican Women (A.A.W.) of the Canterbury Diocese*. Professor R. A. M. Gregson acted as an invited consultant throughout all stages, and supervised the analysis of results.

Sample composition and return rates. The membership roll for the A.A.W. in the Diocese totalled 6119, and a 10 per cent sample (608) was drawn, proportionally stratified for

- (1) three membership levels—entitled by the A.A.W., Senior, Intermediate, and Junior;
- (2) size of local groups within the levels;
- (3) the urban-suburban-rural character of the groups.

It should be noted that the sample was drawn on membership statistics supplied by the A.A.W. There is reason to believe that the effective criterion for deciding who is an active member is not applied in the same way at all three levels. The oldest level, the Seniors, have been identified with their church for many years. They remain members even when they are in advanced age and unable frequently to leave their homes. The stable and active age is at the Intermediate level, where the statistics were expected to be the most reliable, and where in fact the returns for the survey were highest. In the Junior level there is a tendency to recruit and try to retain members who have competing interests in their families, and who are also more mobile so that they may move out of a parish yet remain on the lists for some time. An estimate of the total active membership, using stringent criteria of 'active', was not available for the survey.

The A.A.W. has a very low proportion of members who have never married—1.3 per cent of total returns (4.1 per cent of Seniors, 2.1 per cent of Intermediates, and 0.0 per cent of Juniors). This factor, coupled with the denominational basis of the Association, precludes generalisation from these results to attitudes of N.Z. women as a whole.

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The overall return obtained was 77.8 per cent (473), with 65.8 per cent (79) from Seniors, 89.9 per cent (143) from Intermediates, and 76.3 per cent (251) from Juniors. The proportions of Seniors, Intermediates, and Juniors in the total sample were .20, .26 and .54, and the corresponding proportions in the returns were .17, .30 and .53. Higher return percentages would have been desirable, but data were sufficient to discern marked contrasts between the three membership levels. They could, however, give biased predictions of frequencies in the total Diocese, even after correction by the stratification proportions is made.

There was considerable age overlap of the three levels. However, Seniors were mainly 51-70 years (mean: 60.6 years), Intermediates 31-50 (mean: 45.7 years), and Juniors 21-40 (mean: 30.2 years). The levels were comparable in such matters as length of education, family size, and stage at which association with the church commenced, but different in that Juniors tended to have married younger. Modal length of membership in A.A.W. groups was 21 years or more for Seniors, 10.5 years for Intermediates, and only 1 year for Juniors.

RESULTS

The main trends that emerged across levels are discussed in three sections:

- (1) the grounds for abortion that were construed as desirable;
 - (2) members' knowledge of grounds for abortion at present legal in New Zealand, of the number of abortions performed per year, the Anglican position on abortion and of the organisations that favour liberalizing the law or want the law to be less liberal than at present;
 - (3) sources from which members reported receiving their opinions on abortion, and the related literature read.
- (1) **Favouring liberalization.** (Ref. Table 1: "per cent who thought it OUGHT to be legal now and in future").

The central issue of the survey was the extent to which members of the Canterbury A.A.W. desired liberalization of the New Zealand abortion laws. The relevant results are tabulated on the right-hand side of Table 1.

The clearest pattern in the data is that Juniors favoured changes most, Intermediates next, and Seniors least. When the percentages supporting each reason are used to rank the reasons, Junior and Intermediate rankings are exactly the same for 11 out of the 19 reasons. The three group rankings and the total sample ranking correlate pairwise not less than .90, which represents a general consensus in terms of the relative endorsement of the different grounds.

The presently legal reasons (2) and (3) were endorsed by over 47 per cent of the total sample. Four other reasons got higher percentages of endorsement: (1). "... rape ..."; (4). "... born deformed

..."; (11). "... low intelligence or mentally ill ..."; (6). "... under 13 ..."; (14). "... risk of death greater if pregnancy continues ... than if abortion performed." These results can be taken as an indication of the reasons respondents thought most important for consideration in any future reform of the law.

(2) Knowledge

(a) **The present law.** (Ref. Table 1: "per cent who thought it IS now legal").

Of the nineteen reasons for abortion listed in the questionnaire, only (2) and (3) can be considered presently legal.* Juniors were best informed on (2), and the Intermediates were best informed on (3).

By precedent of English case law, (1) is thought by some lawyers to be acceptable in New Zealand, and Seniors showed the greatest tendency to think it legal. Reason (13) is considered relevant by medical practitioners in New Zealand, and some Intermediates and Juniors thought this to be presently legal.

The pooled results, tabulated on the left-hand side of Table 1 show that the Seniors had the largest proportion of legally correct responses, the Juniors had the next largest proportion, and the Intermediates had the smallest. This ordering of pooled results holds whether reasons (1) and (13) are considered as legally permitted or not. But it is also the case that if pooled incorrect responses are taken as the basis of comparison, again the ordering is the same: Seniors had the largest proportion of legally incorrect responses, the Juniors had the next largest proportion, and the Intermediates had the smallest. These patterns could be due to a response set to the questionnaire and not to the legal erudition of respondents, so they must be interpreted with caution.

(b) **Abortions per annum.** Respondents were asked to estimate the number of legal and illegal abortions per year performed in New Zealand. In general, estimates were well below what are thought to be the annual rates.* Illegal abortions have been variously estimated at between 4,000 and 11,000 per year in New Zealand†. The biggest proportion of respondents who answered this question thought there were as much as twice as many illegal abortions as there were legal abortions. There were 80.6 per cent of Seniors, 81.4 per cent of Intermediates, and 80.0 per cent of Juniors who estimated 1,000 or fewer legal abortions per year, whereas approximately the same proportions, (76.5 per cent Senior, 80.8 per cent Intermediate, 84.4 per cent Junior) estimated illegal abortions to be 2,000 or fewer.

* See Crimes Act 1961, Secs. 159, 182-3, together with *R. v. Newton and Stungo* (1958), *Criminal Law Record*, 469; "... 'health' includes both physical and mental health."

† "Report of a survey on abortion in N.Z. conducted for the Abortion Law Reform Association of N.Z. Inc.", National Research Bureau, January, 1972.

(c) Anglican thinking. (Ref. Table 2). The Intermediates and Juniors answered a question about Anglican thinking on abortion more frequently than Seniors, and different statements were checked by the three levels. Moving from Senior across Intermediates to Juniors, fewer statements were endorsed, i.e. the percentage of multiple answers decreased. Respondents who checked a single statement showed a preference for statements (6) or (4). Juniors endorsed only these two statements more than the Intermediates or the Seniors, indicating that Juniors construed the teaching of the church in simpler terms.

(d) Perception of organizations. Respondents were asked to indicate which of the following groups in New Zealand they thought might seek to have abortion laws made more liberal in the next five years, and which might seek to have the law made less liberal:

(1) Anglican organizations, (2) Roman Catholic organizations, (3) Other Christians than the above two, (4) Non-Christian groups such as Humanists, (5) Young people's organisations, (6) National party, (7) Labour party, (8) Women's organizations.

Seniors, Intermediates, and Juniors alike indicated that they thought the main groups seeking liberalization of the law were young people's organizations and non-Christian groups. The main difference was the higher percentages of Intermediates and Juniors who endorsed Women's organisations compared to the Seniors (19.0% Senior, 57.3% Intermediate, 63.3% Junior; $p(\chi^2) < .001$). More Juniors and Intermediates than Seniors checked Roman Catholic groups as the main organisations seeking to have the law made less liberal (7.6 % Senior, 20.3% Intermediate, 23.9% Juniors; $p(\chi^2) < .01$).

(3) Sources and literature.

(a) Sources of Christian teaching. Respondents were asked to indicate which of the following had been their sources of Christian teaching about abortion:

(1) Clergy in discussion, (2) Clergy in sermons, (3) Devotional literature, (4) Women's magazines, (5) Newspapers, (6) Television and radio, (7) Medically qualified friends, (8) Other women in discussion, (9) A doctor in consultation, (10) Some other resource.

"Newspapers", "television and radio", and "other women in discussion", as against specifically church or medical sources, were reported to have had greatest influence, particularly for the younger women. For alternative (5) the percentages were Senior 25.5%, Intermediate 38.5%, and Juniors 49.4%; $p(\chi^2) < .001$. For alternative (6) the percentages were Seniors 26.6%, Intermediates 28.7%, and Juniors 48.2%; ($p(\chi^2) < .001$). "Other women in discussion" was reported

* There are no officially agreed estimates. The difficulties of deriving accurate figures is illustrated in *Crime In N.Z.—A Survey of Criminal Behaviour*, Dept. of Justice, 1968, pp.289-300.

by Juniors (40.6%) and Intermediates (39.2%) as a more common source than by Seniors (26.6%).

(b) **Literature read.** Respondents were asked if they had read literature published by the following groups:

(1) The Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child, (2) The Abortion Law Reform Association of New Zealand, (3) Overseas organizations concerned with abortion law, (4) Family planning organizations in New Zealand.

Percentages of responses were generally low—5.2% to 31.5%. The percentages for the four types of literature showed (4) to have been read more than the other three types by Juniors, [(1) 10.8%, (2) 5.2%, (3) 5.6%, (4) 31.5%, $p(\chi^2) < .001$]. Intermediates also reported having read (4) more than the other three, [(1) 8.4%, (2) 8.4%, (3) 9.1%, (4) 18.9%], whereas Seniors reported having read (1) the most [(1) 24.1%, (2) 7.6%, (3) 13.9%, (4) 20.3%]. This is an interesting result because the Seniors are themselves generally past the age of child bearing. Comparisons across the levels showed that significantly more Seniors than Intermediates or Juniors reported have read (1) (Seniors 24.1%, Intermediates 8.4%, Juniors 10.8%; $p(\chi^2) < .01$), and more Juniors than Intermediates or Seniors had read (4), (Seniors 20.3%, Intermediates 18.9%, Juniors 31.5%; $p(\chi^2) < .05$).

SUMMARY

Over 200 cross-tabulations were computed during data analysis, but membership level was found to be the most significant variable. The main result was that support for liberalization of New Zealand's abortion laws declined with increasing level of seniority. The grounds asserted by the majority to be the most important for consideration in any revision of the law were, in order of priority:

(1) when pregnancy results from rape, (2) when the child is likely to be born deformed, (3) when the woman is of very low intelligence, or mentally ill at the time of conception, (4) when the woman is under 13 years of age, (5) when the risk of death is greater if the pregnancy continues to full term than if an abortion is performed.

The lower the age of the respondents, the more likely they were to:

(1) endorse the church's teaching in simpler terms, (2) endorse abortion as a medical problem on which the church gives guidance, (3) construe women's organizations, young people's organizations, and non-Christian groups as seeking liberalization, (4) construe Roman Catholic groups as seeking to have the law made less liberal, (5) report the newspapers, television and radio, and women in discussion as the main sources of their opinions about abortion, (6) have read

Family Planning literature, and not to have read the literature of the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child.

Results of this survey show a less liberal picture than that of the national survey* where the sample reflected the age, sex, and religious affiliation in the whole New Zealand population. Our results depict a group within one denomination that is very diverse in its beliefs and attitudes, but which, over all, is more conservative than the more comprehensive sample of the national survey.

* See footnote P.52.

SUMMARY TABLES

In the following tables, N = 79 for Seniors, 143 for Intermediates, and 251 for Juniors.

χ^2 s were used for the significance tests, and the convention of * for $p < .05$, ** for $p < .01$, and *** for $p < .001$ is followed. A full set of Tables is available from the author, c/o. Department of Psychology and Sociology, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

TABLE 1
REASONS FOR ABORTION

Q. 15: "Abortions may be legally performed at present in New Zealand on some but not all of the following grounds. We would like you to say what you think are legal grounds, and what *ought* to be legal grounds if the law were changed. (You may wish to remove some of the present grounds, and/or to add new ones.)"

1. When the pregnancy results from rape.
2. When the woman's physical health is in danger.
3. When the woman's mental health is in danger.
4. When the child is likely to be born deformed.
5. Because the family circumstances would be made too difficult financially by another child.
6. When the woman is under 13 years of age.
7. When the woman is over 45 years of age.
8. When the woman already has five or more children.
9. When the pregnancy results from a failure of contraceptive precautions taken by the woman.
10. When the woman is unmarried and emotionally immature.
11. When the woman is of very low intelligence or mentally ill at the time of conception.
12. When the doctor in good faith decides an abortion is desirable.
13. When there is a risk of suicide by the woman.
14. When the risk of death is greater if the pregnancy continues to full term (nine months) than it is if an abortion is performed.
15. At the woman's wish and for no other reason in the first eight weeks of pregnancy.
16. At the woman's wish and for no other reason in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.
17. Only with the consent of both two doctors and a priest or clergyman.
18. If recommended by a panel of social workers after interviewing the woman at her request.
19. Only with the consent of the father-to-be.

REASON	% who thought it IS now legal			% who thought it OUGHT to be legal now and in the future		
	Snr	Int	Jnr	Snr	Int	Jnr
1.	39.2	30.8	21.9**	57.0	69.9	75.3**
2.	53.2	65.7	74.1**	49.4	51.7	45.8
3.	44.3	60.1	53.4	50.6	53.1	51.4
4.	16.5	21.7	20.3	45.6	61.5	67.7**
5.	2.5	4.2	3.6	16.5	32.9	27.5*
6.	16.5	16.1	10.8	38.0	58.0	59.0**
7.	6.3	2.8	4.0	10.1	29.4	30.7**
8.	3.8	1.4	3.6	7.6	21.0	21.1*
9.	0.0	0.0	1.6	5.1	9.1	15.5*
10.	5.1	2.8	2.4	29.1	25.2	35.1
11.	10.1	15.4	11.6	46.8	62.2	59.4
12.	35.4	32.2	29.1	43.0	45.5	42.6
13.	7.6	11.2	11.2	32.9	38.5	39.0
14.	24.1	33.6	36.7	39.2	55.9	55.8*
15.	0.0	0.7	0.8	1.3	7.0	13.1**
16.	0.0	0.7	0.8	2.5	6.3	9.2
17.	11.4	11.9	12.4	27.8	30.1	20.3
18.	3.8	3.5	2.4	15.2	22.4	15.9
19.	6.3	2.1	1.6	1.3	14.7	16.3**

TABLE 2
ANGLICAN THINKING

Q. 19: "Which of the following statements do you think most closely states present Anglican thinking on abortions as a moral problem?"

	%Snr.	%Int.	%Jnr.
1. Abortion is a personal decision for a woman to make after consulting her conscience and after prayer.	5.1	9.8	9.2
2. Abortion is a problem which must exercise the faith of both the woman and the doctor involved.	6.4	9.1	4.0
3. In matters such as abortion a woman's first responsibility is to the law, and then to follow her conscience.	1.3	4.2	7.2
4. The teaching of the church is clearly against abortion because it involves the taking of life.	15.4	16.8	20.3
5. Early in pregnancy the church has no advice, later the woman is advised to consider the unborn child and its spiritual welfare as well as her own.	0.0	2.1	5.2
6. The actual abortion is a medical problem, but the woman's attitude to it is a religious problem on which the church offers guidance.	17.9	21.7	26.3
Multiple answers.	38.5	32.9	22.3
No response.	15.4	3.5	5.6**