

Seeing abortion access as a blessing

“Abortion is not abstract,” says Katey Zeh, CEO of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. “It happens within the context of a real person’s life.”

by [Annelisa Burns](#) in the [January 2024](#) issue



Minister and writer Katey Zeh (Photo by John Noltner)

*Katey Zeh is CEO of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, a multifaith organization that advocates for safe and legal abortion access, provides spiritual companionship through abortions, trains faith leaders and activists, and more. Zeh is an ordained Baptist minister, a writer, and a member of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America’s clergy advocacy board. She is author of A Complicated Choice: Making Space for Grief and Healing in the Pro-Choice Movement and Women Rise Up: Sacred Stories of Resistance for Today’s Revolution.*

## **Tell us about the origins of the RCRC.**

Our roots go back to the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion of the late '60s and early '70s. These were clergy who helped people get access to safe abortion care pre-Roe. They saw that people were suffering and dying from a lack of access to safe abortion care, and they felt like it was their call to care for their community. Since 1973, we've expanded our mission and changed our name from the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

## **What do you do?**

A variety of things. We bless abortion clinics. We work with faith leaders, giving them the language and understanding so they can become advocates in their own communities. We train a new generation of activists and have a whole program for students. We also train people who regularly come in physical contact with people having abortions, like abortion doulas, on how to be there if people have spiritual questions about what's going on, so they can do that work without going to seminary.

We also provide spiritual companionship, walking alongside people before, during, and after their abortions. Nowadays, it's often virtual through our spiritual companion site, [abortionswelcome.org](http://abortionswelcome.org). I also have people who just show up in my DMs on Instagram needing a space to share their experiences. That looks like me just receiving the story and affirming it, or doing phone calls with people who are struggling with their decision and offering a compassionate ear that assures them that they're loved and that they know what they need.

## **What is reproductive justice?**

In the early 1990s, a group of Indigenous women created a reproductive justice framework. Around the same time, a group of 12 Black women, who called themselves the "Mothers of Reproductive Justice," came up with a framework of their own.

The tenets of reproductive justice now include the right to have children, the right not to have children, the right to parent your children in safe and sustainable communities, and the right to bodily autonomy and pleasure. Bodily autonomy and pleasure are more recent additions. It's an intersectional frame, inclusive of racial justice, economic justice, LGBTQ justice, et cetera.

However, while the RCRC is informed by this reproductive justice framework, we actually don't identify as a reproductive justice organization.

### **Why is that?**

Reproductive justice organizations are primarily led by people of color. We don't want to co-opt other people's frames or language. Although I've also heard some reproductive justice leaders say that everybody needs to be using this frame! To me, the most important thing is how we align with these values in the work that we do, whatever we call ourselves.

We identify primarily as a faith-based organization. There are very few of us who do this work. Our multifaith approach and our roots in faith tradition are unique.

### **Can you say more about the importance of accounting for intersecting identities and lifting up marginalized people in this work?**

It comes from a liberation framework: How do we center the people who are most impacted by injustice? Those are usually people who are living at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression at the same time. People of color, immigrants, young people, queer people, people living with disabilities, poor people—they are all already coming up against a lot of barriers just to exist. Making sure that they have access to affordable, culturally competent care is important. If they have access to it, then everybody else does.

Intersectionality also means looking at not just abortion care but all of the other things that are connected to our reproductive lives. We need a lot of things to thrive. Folks who are marginalized lack access to the things that they need to thrive, and that includes abortion care, but there's a whole lot more.

### **Why do you think so many people assume an opposition between Christianity and abortion?**

White Christian nationalists deliberately placed abortion at the forefront of the political agenda as a way to bring people together—people who would otherwise not agree—to vote. They've put forward a dominant narrative about Christianity and abortion: that they're antithetical to each other, that to be a true Christian means that you vote a certain way and hold this particular belief. And this has won them many elections. We're all subject to this narrative—no matter what tradition we

come from or what our personal beliefs are—that “Christians are antiabortion.” But we know that statistically it’s not true. The majority of people of faith in the US, including Catholics, identify as pro-choice.

### **Is there a theological argument for being pro-choice?**

The mysteries around when life begins and when it ends and what it means are ancient and timeless. These are *the* questions about what it means to be human. I think there’s a lot of hubris in being so clear about when life begins or what it means. These are beautiful mysteries that we just honestly don’t have the answers to. In the Christian texts, while people will point to things, in reality there’s nothing specific about abortion or fetal life at all.

What is very clear, from my perspective and from the perspective of people whose legacy I stand on now, is that there are people in our communities who need access to abortion care and who are suffering because they can’t get it. As a person of faith, there is nothing unclear about the call to care for my neighbor—to be compassionate—in the scriptures. Jesus cared for the person in front of him who was being oppressed by state-sanctioned rules that did not honor their humanity. Jesus asked what they needed and centered that person rather than abiding by rules that might’ve limited what he was able to do for them in terms of their healing.

### **When you put it like that, it sounds so clear and simple.**

It is for me! I’ve never really had that internal struggle: Is this something I should support or not? For me, it’s just always been crystal clear because of that call to ministry, of caring for the person who’s in front of me.

### **How did you come to this calling?**

As a Yale Divinity School student, I did a training session with the RCRC. Afterward, I asked the nearest Planned Parenthood if I could do a tour. When I arrived, these protesters outside assumed I was there to have an abortion. I experienced abortion stigma directed at me. I also realized I wanted them to know that I wasn’t there to have an abortion—an internalized stigma I had to work through.

Inside the clinic, I was amazed at how kind and loving the staff were. I thought it was so messed up that the Christian people were outside being awful while the ministry was happening inside.

I started volunteering in the recovery room. One day they needed me in the procedure room, so I went and held patients' hands. This was a transformative moment for me, to be there for people in the middle of their procedures. I was super awkward and I didn't know what to say or do—and that was OK, because at that moment, all that was required of me was my presence.

**That's a powerful example of embodied ministry.**

It really does feel like my call to ministry, just being in that procedure room. When I get caught up with the abstract stuff, I think about all of the people I met there and the people who have told me their abortion stories since then, and I understand that abortion is not abstract. It happens within the context of a real person's life.

**What kind of language do you use when speaking about abortion that's both trauma-informed and destigmatizing?**

I wrote my second book because I was tired of the two binary stories about people's abortion experiences—either it was the worst thing ever and they regret it, or it was no big deal, like getting your tonsils out. Those stories can be true, but most of the people I talk to are somewhere in between.

For me, the pro-choice/pro-life labels aren't especially helpful. They're abstract. What I am is pro people's abortion stories and pro allowing the person in front of me to name what the experience means for them. What does this mean to you?

I talk about abortion as a blessing. People have told me that it saved their lives or was a catalyst for them to make changes. I know that's not true for everybody, but I think it's really important to use positive language. It's like being pro-divorce. Divorce is painful for many people, and it's amazing when you need it. Even if the experience is painful or complicated, in the end, having access to it is a blessing.

**Can you say more about the kinds of intense emotions people associate with their abortions?**

Simply accessing abortion care can be traumatic because of all the barriers that are there and all of the stigma. What's traumatizing about abortion is, for the most part, the stigma.

It's really important for people, as they're having an emotional experience around an abortion, to start recognizing that some of those emotions are informed by the

stigma, and to start connecting their normal human feelings about making a big decision to a narrative they've been told about abortion. We've got to create more space for people to feel emotions. When you make any big decision, it's normal to feel grief and relief at the same time. That doesn't mean it was a bad thing; it just means it was a human thing.

### **It's a rough time to be working for abortion rights. How do you stay hopeful?**

You have to realize that there is a reality beyond the political realm. There are people who will always make sure that people who need access to reproductive health care will get it. We know that to be true historically, since biblical times. Politics, though important, are not the only reality.

I also remember that there are many, many people alongside me who are doing this work. It's not just on me and my organization. Hope is a communal discipline. I don't feel hopeful every day. There are days when I can't get out of bed, but I know that someone else got out of bed. And tomorrow, I'll be ready and maybe they can take a break.

I think that's part of being a person of faith: you trust that, as long as I'm answering my calling, in community, we are going to get there.

### **What are some concrete steps that people who want to support abortion access can take?**

It's important for everybody to think through the messages that they got, implicit or explicit, about abortion that they need to work through before they do anything else. Having those conversations within your own friend group, family, community—that's really where this stuff starts to change.

Abortion funds are great organizations to support, because they really have been doing this work on the ground for a long time. The National Network of Abortion Funds has a list so you can find funds in your area.