



Many women attending and serving in our churches have had one or more abortions. ●

How can the church help these wounded women heal?



the lost VOICES

By Pat Layton

I can't do this! I can't be in a Bible study with all these godly women. I don't fit in here, Sandy thought, wiping mascara-stained tears from her face. I've had four abortions. How can God forgive that when I can't forgive myself? These women would be appalled if they knew my secret.

Can you picture the church, God's family of faith, as the scariest place in the world to share your deepest secret and greatest pain? Perhaps you can. Today, many women attending and serving in our churches carry the secret of a past abortion. Women shackled by guilt and shame, guarding the secret in self-imposed isolation. I know this is true because for years, like Sandy, I was one of them — until a dear sister in Christ and a loving church showed me the path to God's healing and His redemptive plan.



The Truth About Abortion

The Bible clearly states that every unborn child is specifically and purposefully created by God (Genesis 1:26; Exodus 20:13; Psalm 22:9-10; Psalm 139:13; Jeremiah 1:5). Not one is an accident, regardless of human perception or behavior. The value God places on the sanctity of human life rings consistent throughout Scripture.

After learning what God's Word teaches about life, at first I felt more shame, more condemnation. However, God gently and purposefully began to show me that His truth is meant for conviction, not condemnation, and would lead me to healing, restoration, and life-saving action. God began to unfold more and more truth that would eventually set me free from all shame. All fear. All hiding. Free to blossom as I experienced healing.

And He used a Christian sister to do it.

After meeting me at a women's retreat sponsored by our church, Ann saw the pain in my face and heard the fear in my words. Although I tried hard to remain isolated, she continued to draw me out, to show that she cared, until finally, one day, I summoned the courage to tell her my story, my entire story. I will never forget calling and asking her if I could come over to talk.

She had a pot of coffee waiting.

As I poured out my heart, my past, my pain, my loss, my sin, Ann did everything right. She had not experienced abortion but was a beautiful example of the grace and love of Christ in

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the flesh. Her actions and response gave me hope for forgiveness and healing — and her example of sisterhood in Christ placed me on a path that would bring me to where I am today, ministering to post-abortive women. (See sidebar "6 Things My Friend Did Right.")

Together, Ann and I studied and learned more about abortion — and how so many of our sisters, Christian and not, are affected by this modern-day holocaust. God began to show us how these women — filled with loneliness, fear, and shame — are hiding in church pews, small groups, and Bible studies, some even leading those studies. Ann and I learned ...

- nearly half of all pregnancies are considered unplanned, four out of 10 of these end in abortion;¹
- since the legalization of abortion in 1973, Americans have aborted an average of 1.3 million children per year, resulting in more than 50 million abortions. On average, 3,700 babies are aborted in the United States every day;²

6 Things My Friend Did Right

1. She pressed into God for her own healing and restoration, allowing Him into the secret places of her heart so she would be a ready vessel for His use. She taught me early on that you cannot give what you do not have (Titus 2:3-5; Ephesians 4:15).

2. She stayed in God's Word, studying His truths so she was prepared to lead me into His precepts (Proverbs 27:17; Proverbs 13:20; 2 Corinthians 1:4).

3. She responded in love, not judgment. Although abortion was not a personal experience, she had experienced other sin and loss that



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she was willing to share (1 Peter 3:8-9; Proverbs 17:17; Romans 12:10; James 1:19).

4. She didn't pretend to have all the answers, but she was ready and willing to help me find them (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10; Hebrews 10:24-25).

5. She let me tell my story. She listened, she cried with me, and she offered me hope (Romans 12:15; Romans 15:7; James 1:19).

6. She provided a safe place I knew I could trust. She kept my confidence until I was ready to share my story with others (Proverbs 17:9; Proverbs 27:6).

From the Heart of a Pastor

I cannot even begin to express my gratitude for the *Surrender the Secret* ministry, which has impacted our church family in ways that I couldn't have imagined. Over a year ago, my wife, Carrie, approached me about a burden the Lord was placing on her heart for women suffering from post-abortive issues. She had found the study *Surrendering the Secret* and wanted to lead a group for our church and community. I agreed, all the while doubting anyone would attend. Although I knew there must be women in my congregation who had abortions, to imagine any of our core members being in that group was difficult.

Carrie began to speak about this to our church and slowly women began coming to her in private, sharing about personal wounds from past experiences with abortion. Several of these women were part of our church's core group. The number of women in my church who have been affected by abortion surprised me. The most amazing part was seeing many women, who previously had been on the fringe, blossom as they experienced healing. Some who had never been active in our church have become leaders with new, shining countenances. Several have had the courage to share their stories with our church family and have begun ministering to other women with the same hurts.

As a pastor, it's absolutely necessary to be strong in the biblical stance of resisting abortion; that's the easy part. Being strong for those who need healing is harder, but the reward of seeing hearts restored and women becoming fully alive is measureless.

Brian Bond
Senior Pastor
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- 37 percent of women who have had an abortion identify themselves as Protestants;³
- women who have undergone post-abortion counseling report major reactions to abortion: depression, loss of self-esteem, self-destructive behavior, sleep disorders, sexual dysfunction, chronic problems with relationships, personality changes, anxiety attacks, guilt and remorse, and difficulty bonding with later children.^{4,5}
- women who abort are five times more likely to report subsequent drug or alcohol abuse than those who deliver.⁶
- in one study women who had abortions were 160 percent more likely than delivering women to be hospitalized for psychiatric treatment in the first 90 days following abortion or delivery.⁷

I realized that many Christian women were hiding behind the same shame and fear that were closing off my heart,

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blocking my freedom in Christ and keeping me in bondage. I knew God was calling me to share my story.

It was Ann who gave me my first audience.

I thought I might die, be burned up in a cloud of smoke, but I prepared myself and met Ann and a women's ministry leader for lunch. As I shared my abortion story with a second woman, she shared her story right back. Then she

showed me the Scripture that tells us God wants to use our stories for His glory (Revelation 12:11).

The Church's Historic Opportunity

Since those days, God has used my life and my testimony to launch Life Impact Network (lifeimpactnetwork.org). He has opened doors for me to speak to thousands. He has enabled me to write a Bible study for post-abortive women called *Surrendering the Secret* (LifeWay), which is read worldwide. And He has given me countless opportunities to encourage women to open up about the past for His use and blessing. He has allowed me to become that mentor who sets the stage for another woman to take her place in God's great drama. Just as the Scripture tells us in Psalm 30:11: "You turned my lament into dancing; You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness."

It's the church's responsibility to provide a safe, healing environment in which restoration and reconciliation can occur.

I'm now living my journey with God surrounded by Christian sisters who have my back and my heart. I mentor and pour into some, and I drink from the rich wells of experience and wisdom of others. I've learned that woman-to-woman ministry is a non-negotiable. We need one another for healing, restoration, support, and hope. I've watched the ministry of post-abortion recovery blossom and spread as women simply share their stories and open the way for personal transparency.

The definition of the word *transparent* is "to let light shine through." That is my desire and my hope. Ephesians 5:13-14a tells us, "Everything exposed by the light is made clear, for what makes everything clear is light."

The church has an historic opportunity to offer restoration to the millions of women and men who have experienced abortion, as well as to share truth with those who do not understand what God's Word teaches about the sanctity of all human life.

I've come to believe that the enemy's victory in the legalization of abortion isn't just the 50 million innocent lives lost but rather the lost voice of the healed and forgiven church.

Jesus said, "If you continue in My word, you really are My disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31b-32). The church is God's plan for life. And we, the church, have the opportunity to help set people free, to change what Satan has meant for evil. We have the opportunity to open the door for women and men to speak about the pain of abortion. We have the opportunity to expose the darkness to the light. This step has a purpose far beyond reopening old wounds or spilling our dirty laundry for others to see. The purpose of sharing our past pain and sin is to offer recovery, freedom, healing, and hope.

God never intended us to struggle alone. People need one another and are designed for strong relationships. Amazing things occur when two or more people grasp hands and hearts and share their pain together.

Remember Sandy? Just as Ann reached out to me, Susan Sorenson, the women's ministry leader of Northern Hills Church in Brighton, Colo., reached out to Sandy. The two are a perfect example that as we openly share our loss and pain, God is in our midst. He does amazing things with those who are humble and open to His supernatural surgery of the heart.

"In the spring of 2008, we began our first 'Surrendering the Secret' group and Sandy participated with her whole but

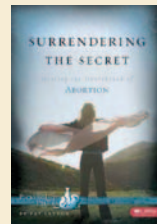
broken heart," Susan says. "Currently there have been nearly 50 women who have attended a *Surrendering the Secret* study group, and Sandy has facilitated and mentored some of these women. She's a beautiful example of God's redeeming love. She has been redefined, reassigned, and gives Him all glory for her rescue. This ministry has set the bar for transparency in our faith, and I'm forever a changed woman because of it."

Someone once said that hurt people hurt people. When those injured by abortion find forgiveness, healing, and wholeness, they break the cycle of hurting others as well as themselves. Families can be restored, marriages saved, and churches can be made whole again. As women reach out to women to nurture one another, we see Ecclesiastes 4:9 come to life: "Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts."

New Voices

Since the day I shared my story with my friend Ann 24 years ago, I've come to believe that the enemy's victory in the legalization of abortion isn't just the 50 million innocent lives lost but rather the lost voice of the healed and forgiven church.

Surrendering the Secret (LifeWay)



This 8-week Bible study, which includes a DVD, leader guide, and member book, focuses on 8 foundational steps for post-abortive healing:

1. Share the story — Post-abortive women need to tell their stories to people they trust.
2. Look at the truth about abortion — How does God view abortion?
3. Deal with anger — Acknowledging and releasing anger is important in order to heal.
4. Pursue forgiveness — God wants post-abortive women to forgive and receive forgiveness.
5. Walk through grief and guilt — Confronting the truth requires acknowledging the loss of a child.
6. Exchange bondage for freedom — God can transform every heart and mind given to Him.
7. Conduct a memorial service — A time of remembrance helps women know they are loved by God.
8. Share through healing — Women who have been healed and forgiven are ready to be used by God.



5 Things Your Church Can Do

1. Educate and equip pastors, ministry leaders, students, Christian counselors, and caregivers about abortion and its aftermath.
2. Readily and openly display your church's availability to minister to those affected by abortion through visible literature, website paths, Bible studies, testimonies, and open communication both inside and outside the church.
3. Allow those who have been healed to champion pro-life causes in your community, state, and nation that will allow the world to hear God's truth about abortion from a biblical perspective and love-based voice.
4. Support and encourage those in your church family who are willing to share and offer Bible studies. This is a lonely and tough ministry. They need your encouragement and open endorsement.
5. Support your local pregnancy resource center and post-abortion recovery efforts with your prayers, finances, and volunteers.

As I have ministered to thousands of women, I've seen the trend and the effects of the missing voice of the church. Although we've heard many sermons that rightfully reveal God's Word about life, we've had far fewer messages about the path to restoration and healing from abortion. Without question, the laws allowing abortion need to change; but a great place of power comes in healing in and through the church. Galatians 6:1b tells us: "You who are spiritual should restore [her] with a gentle spirit." It's the church's responsibility to provide a safe, healing environment in which restoration and reconciliation can occur. I've seen pregnancy center volunteers come from the church who are willing to share their abortion stories and restoration with strangers but never reveal the truth about a past abortion to Christian friends, pastors, or even family members. Many Christian men and women continue to believe abortion is the unmentionable sin, thereby leaving the truth of God's restorative power hidden underneath the pews.

After all these years of ministry, I still find that although statistics tell us 37 percent of women who have had abortions identify themselves as Christians, the testimony of Christians who have been forgiven and set free from the heartbreak of a past abortion continues to be a soft cry versus a mighty roar.

Thirty-eight years after the *Roe v. Wade* decision, we're in desperate need for the word of our testimony, declaring the truth about abortion, God's redemptive healing, and a clear plan of restoration and hope.

Today, Susan Sorenson has embraced the challenge and incorporated *Surrendering the Secret* into her church's Bible Study menu. Sandy has moved through the healing process and is now leading the healing study. Their voices are being heard. Is yours?

Citations:

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