Talking with the enemy

PROLIFE

Frances X. Hogan

Madeline McComish

Barbara Thorp

GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS/BARRY CHIN

For nearly six years, leaders on both sides of the abortion debate have met in secret in an attempt to better understand each other. Now they are ready to share what they have learned.

By Anne Fowler, Nicki Nichols Gamble, Frances X. Hogan, Melissa Kogut, Madeline McComish, and Barbara Thorp

PROCHOICE

Melissa Kogut

Anne Fowler

Nicki Nichols Gamble

On the morning of Dec. 30, 1994, John Salvi walked into the Planned Parenthood clinic in Brookline and opened fire with a rifle. He seriously wounded three people and killed the receptionist, Shannon Lowney, as she spoke on the phone. He then ran to his car and drove two miles down Beacon Street to Preterm Health Services, where he began shooting again, injuring two and killing receptionist Lee Ann Nichols.

Salvi's 20-minute rampage shocked the nation. Prochoice advocates were grief-stricken, angry, and terrified. Prolife proponents were appalled as well as concerned that their cause would be connected with this horrifying act. Governor William F. Weld and Cardinal Bernard Law, among others, called for talks between prochoice and prolife leaders.

We are six leaders, three prochoice and three prolife, who answered this call. For nearly 5½ years, we have met together privately for more than 150 hours – an experience that has astonished and enriched us. Now, six years after the shootings in Brookline and on the 28th anniversary of the US Supreme Court's landmark Roe v. Wade decision, we publicly disclose our meetings for the first time.

How did the six of us, activists from two embattled camps, ever find our way to the same table?

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Getting it started

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In the months following the shootings, the Public Conversations Project, a Boston-based national group that designs and conducts dialogues about divisive public issues, consulted many community leaders about the value of top-level talks about abortion.

Encouraged by these conversations, the project in July 1995 invited the six of us to meet together four times. The meetings would be confidential and we would attend as individuals, not as representatives of our organizations.

Since that first fear-filled meeting, we have experienced a paradox. While learning to treat each other with dignity and respect, we all have become firmer in our views about abortion.

Our talks would not aim for common ground or compromise. Instead, the goals of our conversations would be to communicate openly with our opponents, away from the polarizing spotlight of media coverage; to build relationships of mutual respect and understanding; to help deescalate the rhetoric of the abortion controversy; and, of course, to reduce the risk of future shootings.

Still shaken by the murderous attacks in Brookline, we each agreed to participate.

As we approached the first meeting, we all were apprehensive.

Before the meeting, the prolife participants prayed together in a booth at a nearby Friendly's. Frances X. Hogan, a lawyer and president of Women Affirming Life and executive vice president of Massachusetts Citizens for Life, worried that a dialogue with prochoice leaders might generate "a scandal if people thought I was treating abortion merely as a matter of opinion on which reasonable people could differ."

Madeline McComish, a chemist and president of Massachusetts Citizens for Life, had a "gut fear of sitting with people who were directly involved with taking life."

When we face our opponent, we see her dignity and goodness.

Barbara Thorp was "deeply anguished over the murders at the clinics." She feared that "if lines of direct communication between prolife and prochoice leaders were not opened, polarization would only deepen." Despite misgivings, Thorp, a social worker and director of the ProLife Office of the Archdiocese of Boston, was "anxious to meet the other side."

The prochoice participants were also skeptical and concerned. As president and CEO of the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts, Nicki Nichols Gamble was directly affected by the shootings. Although she felt that dialogue might help, she "wondered if the talks would divert my energies from coordinating my organization's response to the shootings and from assisting in the healing of my employees and their families."

Melissa Kogut, newly appointed executive director of Mass NARAL, the state affiliate of the National Abortion Rights Action League, wondered how she would "justify to my board and colleagues spending time on something that arguably could be futile."

The Rev. Anne Fowler, rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in Jamaica Plain, believed that her perspective as a Christian leader who is prochoice would be essential, but worried that her viewpoint might not be respected by either side. "However, as a priest, peacemaker, and activist, I had to accept this invitation."

The two facilitators who would moderate all the meetings were also anxious. Laura Chasin, director of the Public Conversations Project, "was afraid that talks might do more harm than good." Susan Podziba, an independent public policy mediator from Brookline, recalls, "The threat of violence was palpable. What if the wrong person found out about the dialogue?"

The first meeting took place at the project's office in Watertown on Sept. 5, 1995, a sweltering Tuesday evening. "I had wanted to wear my clerical collar, but it was too hot," recalls Fowler.

That first discussion was grueling. We could not agree on what to call each other. All but one of us were willing to use each side's preferred designation, in virtual or actual quotation marks: "prolife" and "prochoice."

Our first of many clashes over language, this disagreement remains unresolved. To this day, Gamble still cannot call the other side prolife because "I believe my cause is also prolife," she says. This stand frustrates Thorp and her colleagues. "I have tolerated Nicki's refusal to call us prolife but, frankly, it angers me. I wasn't eager to call Nicki's side prochoice, but I did it because it seemed to be necessary for showing respect and for moving the conversation forward," Thorp says.

Kogut questioned her own willingness to agree to these terms, "but I came to two conclusions," Kogut says. "To proceed with a civil dialogue, we needed to call each other what we each wanted to be called. Second, over time, I began to see 'prolife' as descriptive of the others' beliefs — that life itself, more important than the quality of life, was their preeminent value."

We also struggled over how to refer to what grows and develops in a pregnant woman's womb. The prochoice women found "unborn baby" unacceptable and the prolife women would not agree to "fetus." For the sake of proceeding, we all assented, uneasily, to the term "human fetus."

These opening exchanges brought us to the heart of our differences. Nerves frayed. The chasm between us seemed huge.

To help us listen and speak across this divide, ground rules were critical. We would seek to use terms acceptable (or at least tolerable) to all participants. We would not interrupt, grandstand, or make personal attacks. We would speak for ourselves, not as representatives of organizations. Most important, the meetings would be completely confidential unless all of us could agree upon a way to go public.

We also made a commitment that some of us still find agonizingly difficult: to shift our focus away from arguing for our cause. This agreement was designed to prevent rancorous debates.

And indeed, we believe this ground rule has been essential to the long life of our dialogue. Knowing that our ideas would be challenged, but not attacked, we have been able to listen openly and speak candidly.

But it has not been easy.

"From the beginning, I have felt an enormous tension, Hogan says, "between honoring the agreement to not argue for our position and my deep hope — which I still feel — that these women for whom I have such great respect will change their minds about abortion."

Our ground rules also required us to refrain from polarizing rhetoric. In one early session, we generated a list of "hot buttons" — words and phrases that make it almost impossible for some of us to think clearly, listen carefully, or respond constructively.

Prochoice members are inflamed when called "murderers" or when abortions are likened to the Holocaust or to "genocide." Prolife participants are incensed by dehumanizing phrases such as "products of conception" and "termination of pregnancy" that obscure their belief that abortion is killing.

We also discussed stereotypes we thought were applied to us by people "on the other side."

Prolife participants feel maligned when characterized as religious fanatics taking orders from men, or as uneducated, prudish individuals, indifferent to women in crisis and to children after they are born. Prochoice members are offended by labels such as anti-child, anti-men, anti-family, elitist, frivolous, self-centered, and immoral.

Despite the strains of these early meetings, we grew closer to each other. At one session, each of us told the group why she had devoted so much of her time, energy, and talents to the abortion issue. These accounts — all deeply personal — enlightened and moved us.

After the fourth meeting, we agreed to extend our sessions

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/BARRY CHIN

Clockwise, starting with facilitators Laura Chasin and Susan Podziba, whose backs are to the camera, the Public Conversations group comprised Barbara Thorp, Melissa Kogut, Madeline McComish, Nicki Nichols Gamble, Fran Hogan, and Rev. Anne Fowler.

Who's doing the talking

The Rev. **Anne Fowler** is rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in Jamaica Plain and a past member of both the board of directors, Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts, and the board of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

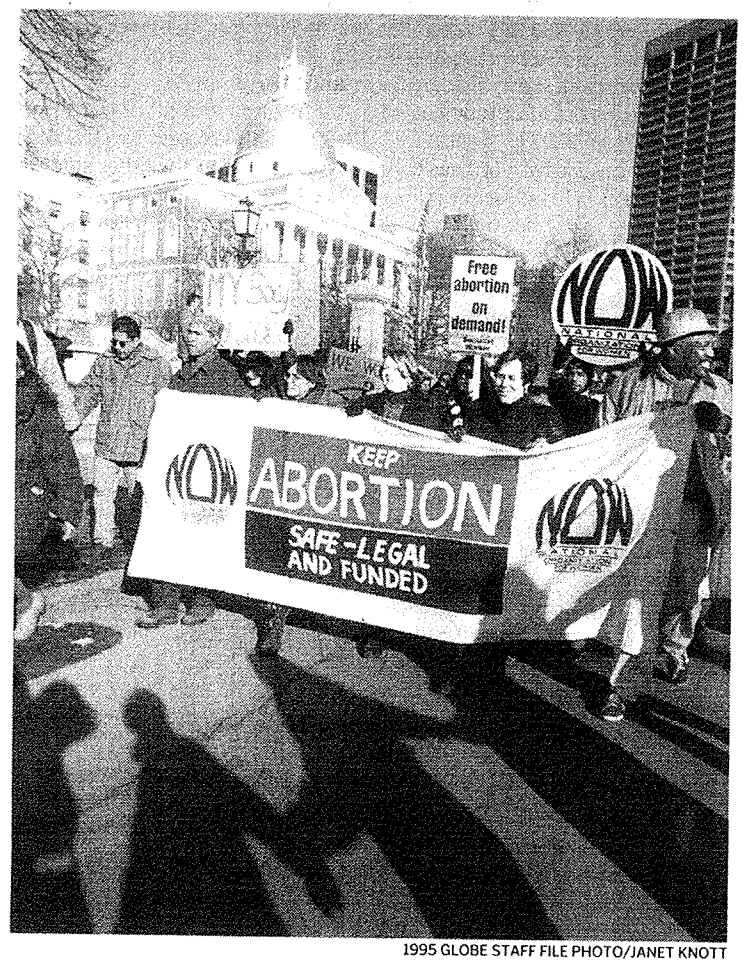
Nicki Nichols Gamble served as president and CEO of the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts from 1974 to 1999. She is a director of the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy and of IPAS, an international women's reproductive health care organization, and volunteers for the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Frances X. Hogan, a partner at the law firm of Lyne, Woodworth & Evarts, is president of Women Affirming Life and consultant to the Pro-Life Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Melissa Kogut is executive director of Mass NARAL, state affiliate of the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League.

Madeline McComish, a chemist, is past president of Massachusetts Citizens for Life, serves on its executive board, and is chairman of the North Suburban Chapter of Massachusetts Citizens for Life.

Barbara Thorp has been director of the Pro-Life Office of the Archdiocese of Boston since 1985 and is on the executive boards of the National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation and Healing, the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment, and Women Affirming Life.



1995 GLOBE STAFF FILE PHOTO/JANET KNOTT

Prochoice advocates marked the first anniversary of the 1994 clinic shootings with a march that wound past the State House.

Prochoice

The prochoice members of the group describe their views this way:

We recognize no single, universal truth that determines our moral decisions. On the contrary, we must consider a broad range of values whenever we seek to make wise, ethical, and compassionate choices. We respect a woman's moral capacity to make decisions regarding her health and welfare, including reproductive decisions.

A woman's choices reflect how she weighs her various life circumstances: her important relationships, her economic, social, and emotional resources and obligations, her health, her religious or philosophical beliefs, and the well-being of others for whom she has responsibility.

We live out our destinies in a world of vast and profound complexity, where claims upon our compassion and our judgment compete and often conflict. A woman respects the preciousness of human life by acknowledging and honoring the intricate tapestry of her relationships and commitments; indeed, we believe that the complexity of human life can be a source of moral wisdom and courage.

Talking in spite of differences

Continued from preceding page

through the one-year anniversary of the shootings — an occasion, we feared, when tensions over abortion might ignite in Boston.

On the evening of Dec. 30, 1995, about 700 people gathered at Temple Ohabei Shalom in Brookline to honor the memory of Lowney and Nichols. All our prochoice participants attended the service. Fowler and Gamble officiated. In the solemn crowd were Podziba, one of our facilitators, and two of our prolife members, Hogan and Thorp, accompanied by David Thorp, her husband.

"Seeing the other members of the group walk in was one of the most meaningful moments of the service for me," Fowler recalls.

In her remarks, Gamble expressed gratitude "for the prayers of those who agree with us and the prayers of those who disagree."

Fowler, in her sermon, reminded us of the "God who calls out to all who love peace." She drew from the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, saying "and new things have sprung forth in the year since Lee Ann's and Shannon's deaths. Much has been transformed, and much will be."

We have glimpsed a new possibility: a way in which people can disagree frankly and passionately, become clearer in heart and mind about their activism and, at the same time, contribute to a more civil and compassionate society.

Indeed, to those of us involved in the confidential dialogues, much had been transformed. By the time of this sad anniversary, each one of us had come to think differently about those "on the other side."

While we struggled over profound issues, we also kept track of personal events in one another's lives, celebrating good times and sharing sorrows. As our mutual understanding increased, our respect and affection for one another grew.

This increased understanding affected how we spoke as leaders of our respective movements. The news media, unaware that we were meeting, began noting differences in our public statements.

In an article after the first-year anniversary of the shootings, Globe reporter Don Aucoin wrote, "Has the past year brought the lowering of voices . . . called for by Cardinal Law, Governor William Weld and others? The answer seems to be a qualified yes, at least among some activists."

The article quoted Gamble as saying, "There are numbers of people on both sides of this question who have tried to be thoughtful about the rhetoric they use."

Gamble added that she was hearing fewer uses of such labels as "baby-killer, murderer, Nazi."

In the same article, Hogan is quoted as saying she uses "prochoice because that is what they want to be called. I have a basic respect for the person, even though I don't agree with or respect the position."

Thorp, too, was quoted. "This call for a lowering of voices sent a signal that we really needed to listen to each other with care and respect. I'm more mindful now than I've ever been of speaking in love, speaking in peace, and speaking in respect to anyone, no matter how wide the differences are."

In a National Public Radio interview about the anniversary, Hogan explained that while she believed that abortion is killing, she did not call it murder. Hogan also said, "Toning down the rhetoric is critical. It's not just better manners, but it turns out it's also better politics. . . . We reach people we may never otherwise have reached with the message."

A growing trust opened a 'hot line' channel of reliable communication between us. The prolife leaders alerted Gamble when there was a possibility of imminent physical danger.

Kogut felt and acted differently when she appeared with prolife spokespeople on news shows and at speaking engagements. Kogut recalls, "I was struck by the media's desire for conflict. One host of a radio talk show actually encouraged me to attack my opponent personally."

In early 1996, we continued to meet, anticipating that the upcoming Salvi trial would present new challenges to protect activists and the public from danger.

At one point, prolife advocates acted to keep proponents of violence away from Massachusetts. In February 1996, the Rev. Donald Spitz, head of ProLife Virginia, made it known that he was planning to come to Boston to show support for what he had called, according to the Globe, Salvi's "righteous deed."

McComish wrote a letter to Spitz, signed also by Hogan and Thorp. "Your public statements on the acceptability of violence . . . are counter to everything that the prolife movement represents," McComish wrote. "At this very difficult time, you are not welcome in Massachusetts."

Spitz and several of his allies objected to McComish's charge. They suggested that she was betraying the cause. But he did not come.

A growing trust opened a "hot line" channel of reliable communication between us. The prolife leaders alerted Gamble when there was a possibility of imminent physical danger. "It lowered my anxiety — and moved me deeply — to know that there were people on the other side who were concerned about my safety," Gamble says.

Throughout these 5½ years, though external events claimed much of our attention, we managed to explore many aspects of the abortion controversy, such as when life begins, the rights of women, the rights of the unborn, why women get abortions, and the aftermath of abortion.

We spent especially tense hours discussing the issue that prochoice members describe as "bans on certain abortion procedures" and that prolife participants call "partial-birth abortions." We also probed a host of other complex and challenging subjects: feminism, sex education, euthanasia, suicide, the death penalty, the role of law in society, and individual responsibility.

When addressing divisive topics, we expected to disagree. But at times, conflicts caught us by surprise — flaring when one side unwittingly used certain words in a way that struck the other as presumptuous or offensive.

One provocative word has been "violence." While the prochoice leaders use it to refer to shootings and other attacks on clinics, doctors, and staff, the prolife activists believe that abortion also is a violent act.

In writing this article, we came to an impasse when one side mentioned the Declaration of Independence. The prolife participants wished to cite the Declaration as a presentation of their core belief that the right to life is inalienable and self-evident. The prochoice members passionately objected to what they saw as an appropriation of a document that they also cherish. To them, the Declaration affirms every person's right to life and liberty.

In these and all of our discussions of differences, we strained to reach those on the other side who could not accept — or at times comprehend — our beliefs. We challenged each other to dig deeply, defining exactly what we believe, why we believe it, and what we still do not understand.

These conversations revealed a deep divide. We saw that our differences on abortion reflect two world views that are irreconcilable.

If this is true, then why do we continue to meet?

First, because when we face our opponent, we see her dignity and goodness. Embracing this apparent contradiction stretches us spiritually. We've experienced something radical and life-altering that we describe in nonpolitical terms: "the mystery of love," "holy ground," or simply, "mysterious."

We continue because we are stretched intellectually, as well. This has been a rare opportunity to engage in sustained, candid conversations about serious moral disagreements. It has made our thinking sharper and our language more precise.

We hope, too, that we have become wiser and more effective leaders. We are more knowledgeable about our political opponents. We have learned to avoid being overreactive and disparaging to the other side and to focus instead on affirming our respective causes.

Since that first fear-filled meeting, we have experienced a paradox. While learning to treat each other with dignity and respect, we all have become firmer in our views about abortion.

We hope this account of our experience will encourage people everywhere to consider engaging in dialogues about abortion and other protracted disputes. In this world of polarizing conflicts, we have glimpsed a new possibility: a way in which people can disagree frankly and passionately, become clearer in heart and mind about their activism, and, at the same time, contribute to a more civil and compassionate society.

The writers invite readers interested in sharing their reflections to contact them directly at leaders @publicconversations.org.

Editor's note: *Although the Globe's stylebook does not allow the use of "prochoice" and "prolife" (preferring instead such terms as "abortion rights advocates" or "abortion foes"), an exception was made in this article to better reflect the views of the authors.*

MCFL

Massachusetts Citizens for Life, Inc.

January 25, 1996

Reverend Donald Spitz
Pro-Life Virginia
P.O. Box 2876
Chesapeake, VA 23327

Dear Reverend Spitz:

We have been informed that you are intending to come to Massachusetts for the John Salvi trial. Your public statements on the acceptability of violence do not represent the views of the pro-life movement - rather they are counter to everything that the pro-life movement represents.

At this very difficult time, you are not welcome in Massachusetts.

Very truly yours,

Madeline McComish
Madeline McComish
President, Massachusetts Citizens For Life

The undersigned leaders of pro-life organizations in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts support this request.

Barbara S. Thorp
Barbara S. Thorp, Director
Pro-Life Office of the Archdiocese of Boston

Marianne Rea-Luthin
Mariann Rea-Luthin, President
Value of Life Committee

Frances X. Hogan
Frances X. Hogan, President
Women Affirming Life

Schrafft Center, 529 Main Street, Boston, MA 02129-1101 • (617) 242-4199
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24 hr. Pro-Life News Service 242-4589

One result of the conversations: a redoubled commitment to stop the violence.

Prolife

The prolife members of the group describe their views this way:

We believe in one universal truth. We three, as Catholics, believe that each human life has its origin in the heart of God. This divine genesis of the human person calls us to protect and respect every human life from the moment of conception to natural death.

The truth regarding the intrinsic dignity of the human person can also be understood through reason and scientific principles of human reproduction and genetics. Indeed, faith and reason resonate, both affirming the inviolable truth that every human life is inherently sacred.

Abortion kills the most vulnerable member of the human family: the unborn child. The right to be born is the most basic of human rights. If it is not protected then all other rights are threatened.

We understand, all too well, the often desperate and overwhelming circumstances that some pregnant women face. We remain committed to creating an environment in which no pregnant woman feels that she must choose between her own well-being and the life of her child. It is an utter failure of love and community for a pregnant woman to feel that abortion is her only choice.

GLOBE STAFF FILE PHOTO/EVAN RICHMAN

Prolife forces rallied on Boston Common in October, days after the Food and Drug Administration approved RU-486 for prescribing to women seeking to abort pregnancies.