



Life-giving way

Common Ground? Seeking an Australian Consensus on Abortion and Sex Education

Editors: John Fleming and Nicholas Tonti-Filippini 2007
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THIS IS AN IMPORTANT BOOK which above all explores two major developments for the Australian pro-life movement.

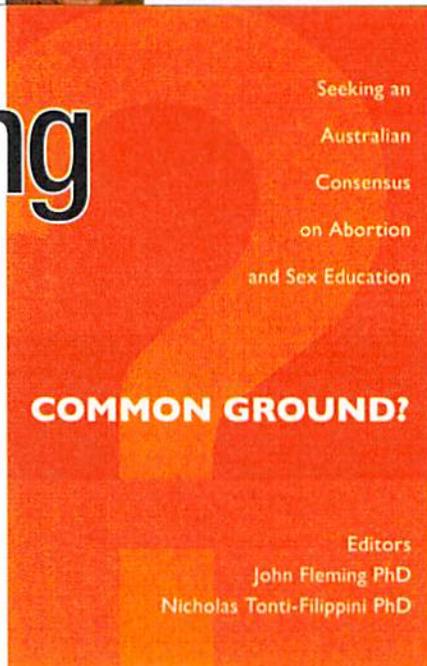
The first of these movements began in the United States in the 1990s. Pro-life researchers observed that while most Americans accepted that an unborn foetus is truly a human being, this was not leading to any significant reduction in the number of abortions. They also found that many women would carry their child to term if they received appropriate support.

From these observations, women-centred pro-life strategies were developed. These focus on the harm that abortion does not just to the foetus but also to the woman who aborts. They seek to give women real choice by reducing the pressures on them, and by providing practical assistance during and after pregnancy. They promote better social policy that truly supports and empowers women. And they offer compassion and assistance to women

who are suffering because of abortion.

This book reports the hopeful news that, because of these women-centred strategies, there has been a significant reduction in the number of abortions performed in the United States. It also reports that these women-centred strategies are now being developed in Australia too. Significantly, it notes that these new strategies complement rather than replace traditional pro-life strategies and arguments.

The second development which this book reports is arguably even more important. Thanks to an anonymous donor, Southern Cross Bioethics Institute was able to commission a major four-stage research project to explore in depth the attitudes of ordinary Australians to abortion and a number of other issues including sex education and stem cell research. This research was conducted between 2004 and 2006.



Almost without exception, political debates about abortion in Australia have been between passionate pro-choice advocates and equally passionate pro-life advocates. In these confrontations, there has been no room for compromise, and both sides have sought total victory for their cause. By contrast, this research reveals that ordinary Australians are deeply ambivalent about abortion. On the one hand, somewhere between 62 and 69 per cent of Australians would not restrict women's access to abortion. On the other hand, 61-65 per cent of Australians think that the number of abortions in Australia is currently too high.

Significantly, 87-88 per cent of Australians support finding ways to reduce the number of abortions. 95 per cent of the population supports sex education in schools to reduce both unwanted pregnancies and abortions. When a woman is pregnant, 98 per cent of Australians believe that she should have access to counselling, either face-to-face or by a telephone help line. Somewhere between 95 and 98 per cent believe that this counselling should provide information about the abortion procedure, the risks involved, the alternatives, and help to cope with any pressure to abort. Seventy-seven per cent of the population want this information to come from an independent counselling service rather than an abortion clinic.

Common Ground argues that public debate and public policy about abortion in Australia should move beyond the 'winner-takes-all' confrontations of the past, and instead seek to build consensus based on the views and concerns of ordinary Australians. Yet there is more to the book than just this – it includes many more statistics on the views of ordinary Australians, a literature review on effective sex education and an extensive review of social science research about abortion. One chapter argues compellingly that the right to life recognised in international law extends to the unborn; another draws on the Australian Constitution to defend the right of those with religious views to participate in public debate.

Especially at this time when Victorian abortion law is being reviewed, this fine book provides much to reflect upon. I recommend it to anyone who seeks a life-giving way forward on the all-too-often contentious issue of abortion. ■

Fr Kevin McGovern is the Director of the Caroline Chisholm Centre for Health Ethics, which is sponsored by Victoria's Catholic hospitals.



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