

## **Our Choice: The Post-Abortion Struggle of Evangelical Women**

by Kylie Garner

**Lake Forest, Calif.** – Monday nights are busy nights for Saddleback Church, a 20,000-person-strong Evangelical phenomenon that meets on an (expanding) 120-acre campus and attends to the “unsaved” or “hurting” through its 200 ministries. By 7 p.m., the Celebrate Recovery men’s program gathers in room 305; two doors down, the women’s program begins to set up chairs for their own meeting. What Celebrate Recovery calls “hang-ups” – addiction and substance abuse, sexual abuse, the use of pornography – will be confronted through Bible study and prayed over by those who are trying to reclaim their lives through these God-centered recovery meetings. Near the main Worship Center, the members of the Campus Cleaner Ministry are in the middle of their work as the literal servants of God. They clean bathrooms and vacuum floors, pick up trash, and stack chairs in quiet anonymity. Walking briskly past these cleaning ministers are those involved with Walk and Worship. They maintain their temples by listening to the up-tempo power chords of Christian rock, efficiently losing weight while glorifying Christ. Dozens of walkers spill down the stairs of an outdoor amphitheatre – laughing, warming up – and stream past the tiki-decorated high school worship venue, the sandy volleyball court and, lastly, a leafy enclave that hides a small circle of chairs. Six women and a few men stand in small clusters near these chairs and seem ill at ease – shuffling awkwardly when the Walk and Worship squad praises its way past. This shuffling movement is mirrored by the jerky bopping of pink, blue, and yellow balloons that float above the heads of the

women who hold them. These bright, festive party decorations are at definite odds with what they represent tonight: in fact, the balloons are airborne symbols of aborted fetuses. This is a memorial service for these fetuses, and it has to be moved somewhere more private, so the small group helps to pick up the chairs. The women grasp their balloon strings even tighter and some balance potted plants and boxes of Kleenex in their hands as they make their way to a more isolated part of the campus searching for a quiet corner that will be safe from the traffic of curious spectators.

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Kathy Palmer is a founding member of Saddleback Church's Post-Abortion Support Group and co-leads it to this day. She lives with her daughter and granddaughter in a small, stucco home a few miles from Saddleback and across the street from a peaceful nature reserve. It is a lovely, bright morning when she answers her door yelling at an obese border collie named Buddy to "stop that yapping!" Kathy is in her late fifties with graying, cropped hair and a wry way of flipping her hand at things she thinks are bunk. She props her small feet up on her coffee table, leans back in her chair, and explains that in 1996 God called her to start the Post-Abortion Support Group at Saddleback Church. Kathy had just completed an Abortion Recovery program at a different church – 28 years after her own abortion procedure – and was inspired to comfort other Christian women who felt the same guilt, remorse, and shame that she did. She feels that she is in a unique position to share God's true character with women who often believe they have committed an unforgivable sin. "My husband was a military man, an alcoholic, abusive. He gave me an ultimatum between keeping him or the baby. It would have been our fourth child...at that time an abortion cost \$110, but his military

medical insurance covered it... I chose him [Kathy and her husband have since divorced]. I've regretted it ever since...I mean, I killed my baby. I often wonder if we just didn't have that insurance if we would have kept that baby."

Today, Saddleback Church is considered one of the most influential megachurches in the world with a highly visible pastor, Rick Warren, who writes *New York Times* bestsellers and consorts with the likes of Rupert Murdoch and President Bush. Nestled within the affluent foothills of Orange County, Saddleback Church is led by, and consists of, politically conservative Christians who are Biblical literalists. They essentially follow the theological dicta of the Southern Baptist Convention (with which they are loosely affiliated). However, Saddleback also prides itself on its more liberal approach to certain social issues. The congregation is constantly being challenged to live up to its title as a "hospital for the hurting," which necessitates compassion for all people no matter their beliefs, stories, or sin. MaryAnn Webb, who splits her time between being Pastor Rick Warren's assistant and a co-leader of the Post-Abortion support group, explains via e-mail that, "Saddleback is actually criticized many times for swinging against conservatism in that we have a ministry to homosexuals, drug addicts, and those ingrained in pornography." Post-abortive women are also classified as "hurting." Advertising for the group is limited to Saddleback's weekly church bulletin under the headline "Post-Abortion Healing." Although the print is small, Saddleback's mega-huge congregation of 20,000-plus guarantees a goodly amount of exposure for it. Women meet for two hours once a week for about three months and follow a Bible study, complete with homework, written by one Linda Cochrane and titled *Forgiven and Set Free*. (Other titles by Cochrane include *The Path to Sexual Healing* and *Healing a*

*Father's Heart: A Post-Abortion Bible Study for Men.*) The Bible study completes itself about three times a year depending on how many women call Kathy and, on average, 6 to 15 women attend the sessions. Occasionally, the study has to be cancelled because not enough women call. Kathy pointedly states, "We think a lot of women don't want to be seen or known for having an abortion. They don't step forward. To Christian women this is like an unforgivable sin and, especially in the church, there is a lot of shame surrounding it."

According to Kathy, the first meeting is usually the most difficult. The women are cautious; many of them have never shared their experience, not with spouses or mothers or best friends. Although the confidential nature of the meetings restricted me from attending, I imagine that after so much hiding, a feeling of naked exposure must pervade the living room where they congregate. Kathy explains that after opening in prayer and listening to soft worship music the rules of the group are outlined – the strictest confidentiality, no meeting or talking about the group outside of the meetings – and then Kathy, MaryAnn or other leaders volunteer their own stories. One by one each woman confronts her darkest shame in the telling of her own abortion narrative. As Kathy describes it, instant intimacy springs from the intensity of released emotions as tears of relief, of rage, and shame are freely shed. Patterns emerge: for example, many women were not Christians when they had their abortions. Many were very young and frightened of their parents, in love with deadbeat boyfriends and too high to care, or simply clueless about birth control. Some were married, or in committed relationships, and simply could not afford a child. Extreme exceptions include Kathy's story of a devoutly Christian couple that became pregnant on their honeymoon and were terrified of idle chatter at

church – pre-marital sex, a shotgun wedding – so they decided on an abortion. “Can you believe that?” asks Kathy. I admit I cannot.

The preface of *Forgiven and Set Free* states: “This Bible study was formed out of a personal desire to see women freed from the bondage of guilt and grief that follows an abortion...I realize there are women who seemingly have no regrets about choosing abortion and who have no apparent signs of physical or psychological side effects. This Bible study was prepared for the women who have experienced some degree of remorse of regret.” A majority of the women who contact Kathy or MaryAnn are Christians, some newer than others, and a slim minority “have chosen Jesus as their Savior during the group once they realize He is the source of the forgiveness they are seeking,” according to MaryAnn. But the internal turmoil is what unites them. The first chapter is titled “How Do I Know Where I Need Healing?” and the last is simply titled “Acceptance.” Between these bookends, halfway through the study, lies chapter three: “Relief and Denial.” According to several women I spoke with, politics were never discussed in the meetings. Arguments involving Wade, Roe, and “reproductive rights” would be jarringly out of place; Bible studies are about converting people’s souls, not their political parties. Interestingly though, chapter three lists “common statements heard from women in the denial stage (after their abortion)... and how the Bible responds to each of these statements.” For example, the common assertion “I just terminated a pregnancy, I didn’t kill a baby” is countered with the verses of Psalm 139: 13-16:

For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.  
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.  
My frame was not hidden from you

when I was made in the secret place.  
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,  
your eyes saw my unformed body.  
All the days were ordained for me  
were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.

For the members of the Saddleback post-abortion group, then, man has no right to destroy a creation of God. Every zygote is a miracle as cells double, quadruple into God's image – holy writ stamped upon our DNA. If you believe the Bible is infallible, your conscience cannot support abortion.

Saddleback's biblical approach to abortion is in line with that of many post-abortion support groups, which are generally run by fundamentalist religious organizations such as Rachael's Vineyard, A.R.I.N, Ramah International, and Silent No More. Often, these groups transform any symptom of post-abortion depression, or simply confusion, into a product of one's denial of sin. The only, truly non-religious program in the United States created to deal solely with Post Abortion is 4exhale. A program created in 2001 by Aspen Baker, it addresses the needs of women who do not have a fundamental religious viewpoint (nor want one) but still need therapeutic, confidential help after their abortions. Baker, a Berkeley grad, was inspired to create the program after having an abortion in college and finding only religious centers to turn to in the midst of her personal upheaval. It is the only post-abortion support group number that Planned Parenthood call centers give out over the phone if they refer you to any. Online there are several testimonial websites that also counter the claim that all abortions harm women, though these sites are far outnumbered by anti-abortion sites. Many of these positive abortion sites are run through pro-choice advocacy agencies or pregnancy clinics, but

there are a few created by concerned women acting alone – Imnotsorry.net is one of these – that contain archives of positive abortion experiences posted by users. Many women write on these websites that they feel relief and only relief after an abortion and never for a moment doubt that they made the correct decision. And just as these personal sentiments strike a political note, so do post-abortion support groups, which challenge the feminist view of abortion as an unfortunate but defensible choice. Further, arguing that abortion hurts women has proven to be a potent argument against the procedure. Unlike defending the rights of fetuses, which can turn too philosophical or religious for some, arguing for the protection of women is something concrete for “victims” who can be both seen and heard.

But politics is not the topic at hand in an interview that I conduct with Patty, a charismatic 43-year-old, who agrees to meet me at the Starbucks near her home in Irvine. She has been attending Saddleback since 2000 but only recently completed the post-abortion support group. As she relates her experiences outside Starbucks, she never removes her sunglasses. Her raspy voice never wavers in its conviction, though the tone lowers slightly when she is speaking of other women’s pain. I imagine, behind the dark lenses, her eyes are just as full of conviction and compassion. Patty was 14 when a Planned Parenthood pregnancy test came back positive, and feeling it was impossible to tell her alcoholic mother or emotionally abusive father, she secretly got an abortion. As an adult, Patty had often seen the Post-Abortion Healing advertisement in Saddleback’s bulletin, but it had never “called out to (her).” But on Mother’s Day 2006, it finally did: “It was a Mother’s day service in 2006, and I cried the whole service because it was all about loving your children and the mother-child dynamic. I have suffered from

depression since I was a teen and was on anti-depressants since 1994. No one asked me if I had ever had an abortion- never came up from counselors. I would see mothers with their babies – why can't I do that?" (Patty has been rendered infertile by untreated pelvic inflammatory disease.) She yearned for what was on stage that Sunday. The support group helped define shadowy feelings Patty harbored that she had "done something wrong." Patty believes the group helped her see "...the foundation of God's character: loving, gracious, merciful – that God forgives me. And the reality of abortion! You murdered your child, that is how it hit me. But that God loves me so I can forgive myself. You go through the study and it becomes more clear." Kelly (who asked that her name be changed for the purposes of this article), a soft-spoken 46-year-old who still looks and sounds like a shy teenager, also attended Saddleback's post-abortion support group and tells a similar story. Kelly was born to a traditional family in Mexico but moved to the US when she was 12. She began breaking away from her "Catholic upbringing" and by 19 had had two abortions by a boy who "paid the clinic but I knew wouldn't stick around." Because Kelly was not religious, she never placed her abortion in a moral or religious context until she began attending Saddleback. "I kinda knew it was wrong but I didn't want to think about it too much. I didn't connect God and the baby had a spirit and that it was wrong. I didn't feel at the time I was killing a human being. I started reading the Bible and attending church and it was like 'Wow, I never thought about it that way.' When I saw the bulletin I thought 'Yes, this is what I need!'"

At the end of ten weeks there is a traditional balloon-release ceremony where women are encouraged to name and choose a sex for their fetuses. The literal separation of the balloon from their hands allows them to grieve for something they feel they were

never properly allowed to grieve for. There seems to be no complex psychological reasoning behind the success of the release; there is only the simple buoyancy of a balloon rising into the heavens against the heaviness of burden these women feel. Kelly spoke haltingly of the letter she wrote for the ceremony addressed to her two babies. In the letter, she asked for their forgiveness. Part of the curriculum is to pray that God will “reveal your babies to you,” and certain women report Heaven-sent dreams disclosing the look and sex of their aborted fetuses. During separate interviews, both Kathy and Patty tell me how the balloon-release also works well to relieve the grief felt after beloved pets pass away. It helps them accept separation, they say. It helps them let go.

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After a few words from Kathy, each woman in the group is handed a Bible verse that was chosen specifically for them and a white rose to symbolize Christ washing them clean. One by one, the ladies stand in front of each other and recite poems they have written to their babies, letters addressed to “My Two Little Angels.” The plants are donated to the church in the name of the babies- to be planted somewhere on campus and grow. “Amazing Grace” begins to play softly in the background, *Amazing Grace/How sweet the sound/That saved a wretch like me*, and women slowly begin to loosen their grip on the balloon strings that are either attached to a pink balloon for a girl, a blue for a boy, or a yellow for unknown. Some women hold several balloons and on every single one is written the phrase “I will hold you in heaven.” As the song fades, the women decide to release their balloons in unison so that all “their babies can go to heaven together.” “Amazing Grace” is replaced by a certain silence, the muffled sound of cars on the 241, birdsong, the sound of a buzz saw carried up from a construction site, and

then, together, the women let go. Every person lifts back her head and strains to watch the ascent until the latex colors are just specks against the lingering light of the day, and then they are not even that, they are gone. Afterward, the women hug each other and wipe away tears. A peace descends. In separate interviews after the service these women used the same words to describe the memorial to their unknown, unseen fetuses – “powerful,” “beautiful,” “an absolute freedom.” An absolute freedom, their feet still planted firmly on the ground.