

The Hidden Agenda of Crisis Pregnancy Centers

by Allison Kruse

On your way out the door you'll be given a bible, loaded down with pamphlets explaining "God's" disdain for sexual activity outside of wedlock, and handed a flower or delivered a prayer. You can expect these tokens from a Crisis Pregnancy Center (CPC), but don't expect to walk away with an understanding of viable options for an unintended pregnancy.

CPCs are valuable resources for those with Christian or pro-life beliefs. For Christian women experiencing an unplanned pregnancy, CPC support groups abound, including one for both men and women experiencing post-abortion emotional trauma. Most CPCs are staffed with friendly, empathetic people who commit much of their time to a cause that is intimately significant to them. In addition, CPC services (counseling, pregnancy testing and support groups) are usually free.

Although they're largely staffed with friendly "counselors" and offer free pregnancy testing, CPCs push a hidden agenda: deter women from having abortions. Abundantly located in college towns across the country, CPCs are a network of clinics founded and run by pro-life organizations. Moreover, they don't openly state that they are substantially anti-abortion or that their services focus more on religious beliefs than objective information.

Once inside a clinic, however, determining the basic agenda of a CPC can be accomplished by reading their readily available, highly emotive, anti-abortion propaganda. Although their services are neither insulting nor particularly intrusive for Christian women seeking an affirmation of their beliefs, they are not nearly as comprehensive, useful, informative nor as objective as non-religious clinics like Planned Parenthood.

"Women who call express to us that they've received misinformation from CPCs," says Heather Tate-Boldt of Fort Collins' Planned Parenthood. These women are sometimes annoyed with their experience at a CPC, frustrated that they were unable to attain tangible, unbiased information.

Barbara Baldwin, director of Colorado National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (CONARAL) says, "What's most distressing is that [CPCs] don't openly state that they have an anti-abortion agenda, luring women into free counseling that is mostly emotionally upsetting if not personally obtrusive."

For many women, free services are the allure of CPCs. The ease with which clinics can perform pregnancy testing allows "these centers, which are located close to campuses, to offer free pregnancy testing and, in turn, to target young, college-aged women," Baldwin says.

Compared to non-religious clinics like Planned Parenthood or a health department, CPC facilities are mediocre at best. "[CPCs] are not medical service centers," adds Baldwin. They're staffed by minimally trained people "and almost never have a nurse practitioner or a physician on site." They need not have sophisticated equipment or medical staff to offer pregnancy testing, because general pregnancy tests are

easily performed using over-the-counter kits. So, when medical services are offered, the pregnant woman is sent to a medical facility that performs the clinical diagnoses.

Although CPCs do not directly state their agenda, they can be identified using certain criteria. In the yellow pages, they are listed under somewhat vague titles like

"abortion alternative." Their names are sometimes obscure—in Fort Collins, for example, The Alpha Center for Women is a CPC; Birthright has a less ambiguous name. Their waiting rooms are stocked with *Christian Women Today*, *Family Circle*, and *Parenting*—all of which tout the glory of motherhood. And they will often hand you a pocket-sized bible as you leave the clinic.

For some, visiting a CPC could be a successful choice, but it is important to note that these clinics tend to provide women with misinformation. The pamphlets they distribute dote on the emotional trauma of having an abortion, the increased risk of breast cancer that accompanies an abortion (a claim that has not been accepted in medical circles, as it is based on a study that used a sample size too small to be conclusive), and the possibility of death during abortive procedures. (While abortion-related death is a rarity

and is, in fact, less likely than death during childbirth—it is mentioned emphatically to deter women from seeking an abortion.) And although emotional well-being is indeed a valid consideration in the choice to have an abortion, it is nearly the only aspect of an abortion that CPC counselors mention when speaking of the procedure.

Receiving misinformation at the Alpha Center for Women often extends to a recommendation to undergo an ultrasound. At the Alpha Center, an ultrasound is considered a practical measure of determining whether the fetus is healthy, because "there's a 30% chance that the baby would be miscarried anyway." Accordingly, a woman might find solace in the fact that the fetus is naturally aborted, absolving her from the responsibility of aborting the child herself. What the pro-life counselors don't

mention is that genetic abnormalities and/or problems with a fetus are found during the second and third trimesters, using a process called amniocentesis. As a result, ultrasounds are routinely done prior to abortion in the interest of verifying gestational age but not much more.

When I visited the Alpha Center under the auspices of experiencing an unintended pregnancy, the only non-anecdotal information I was given regarding abortion was a pamphlet called *The First Nine Months*. The pamphlet chronicles the exact stages of fetal development from day one—with the joining of sperm to ovum—to month nine, when the infant's heart is pumping 250 gallons of blood per day. The pamphlet features large, detailed pictures of a fetus sucking on its thumb in embryonic bliss. The kind of insensitivity it takes to shower a non-Christian woman in the throes of a crisis pregnancy with this kind of pro-life, "educational" material is astounding.

Beyond supplying misinformation and dubious statistics, the CPC counselor asserted that her own experience with abortion left her emotionally bereft, submerged in feelings of guilt and loss. Her experience with miscarriage, however, did not include a similar sense of loss. After all, she said, the miscarriage was "God's" decision, not hers. In her opinion, there was no need to grieve a child that God chose to abort.

The "informative" segment of my session was minimal, leaving much time to explore my "relationship with God" and my counselor's experiences with the power of prayer. It hardly mattered that I expressed my established beliefs regarding "God" and religion, nor that I had objections to being instructed on such personal issues. I was, nonetheless, subjected to my counselor's personal beliefs for over an hour. After she insulted me with her extreme evangelism, she continued to relate her own experiences with abortion, emphatic about the emotional trauma she endured.

Yet, I have to congratulate my Alpha Center counselor, who was very experienced in each area of the crisis pregnancy. She had an abortion, experienced miscarriage, married a man who fathered a child out of wedlock, and was herself a successful product of adoption. Had I been looking for emotional and theological support, I'd have been deeply grateful for our counseling session.

Despite friendliness and emotional fervor, however, it is difficult to overlook the fact that CPCs are not open about the religious bias of their services. Women seeking candid information, objective advice and reliable expertise can be assured that a CPC offers none of these.

CPCs are not merely free pregnancy testing centers—they are pro-life organizations with Christian ideals, actively supporting an agenda that not only abhors abortion but will do its best to dissuade women from seeking one. For Christian women seeking support, CPCs enthusiastically provide it. Visiting a non-biased clinic to receive accurate, objective information, however, would be advantageous as well.

As citizens of this country, we have the extreme privilege of access to information regarding choice, abortion, birth control, adoption and safe sex—without political gagging. If we are willing to defend our rights to such information, we should be willing to be exposed to the information and make informed, empowered and adequately prepared decisions. ■

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