

# Reducing Abortions

**Jim Wallis, the Democrats and the reproductive rights debate.**

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**NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE**

Updated: 11:37 AM ET Jun 27, 2008

Jim Wallis devoted a significant chunk of his latest book, "The Great Awakening," to outlining his views on abortion. The evangelical leader wrote in favor of "protecting unborn life in every possible way, but without criminalizing abortion." And when he talks, people listen; the editor of [Sojourners](#), a magazine that champions "the biblical call to social justice," Wallis is a leader of a liberal wing of the evangelical movement.

So Wallis was a bit confused when he saw those same views on abortion making news on Wednesday, first in an [ABC News article](#) and then on Good Morning America and in the [blogosphere](#) the next day. The stories reported that Wallis wanted Obama to add a plank to the Democratic Party platform urging a reduction in the number of abortions performed. "I've been talking to Barack for 10 years and didn't start any new initiative lately," says Wallis. "I've been on record for years supporting a new approach." Wallis told NEWSWEEK that he isn't all that interested in revising Democratic Party ideals. "If either platform discussion moves in that direction, it'll be a big news story for a few days and then the candidates will run on whatever they want to run," he says.

That's not to say Wallis doesn't care about the candidates' take on abortion. He's just interested in something more ambitious than an edit of the party plank: a reshaping of the debate. "There's a new position waiting to be taken that responds to where most Americans are at," says Wallis. "They want to reduce the number of abortions." He's pressing both parties and their candidates to shift the focus of the abortion debate to this particular area, where he sees room for common ground, and move away from the often-vicious pro-life vs. pro-choice debate. "One side shouts 'baby killer,' the other side yells 'misogynist,'" he says. "That's not helping very much."

Could it work? Can activists and legislators on both sides of a heated debate find common ground? NARAL Pro-Choice America and Planned Parenthood, both committed to supporting a woman's right to choose, say they're just as committed to preventing unintended pregnancies in the first place. "That position actually embraces people who are on both sides of the abortion debate," says Donna Crane, policy director for NARAL Pro-Choice America. She cites a number of politicians who are adamantly pro-life but very supportive of legislation that targets the reduction of unintended pregnancies. But David O'Steen, executive director of the National Right to Life Committee, received Wallis' proposal less enthusiastically. "I have not seen the pro-abortion side agree with the pro-life side on anything that would actually reduce the number of abortions," he says. O'Steen says that pro-choice politicians consistently block legislation that could reduce the numbers, like requiring women to have an ultrasound prior to an abortion. "I think saying they want to reduce abortions is empty rhetoric," says O'Steen. NEWSWEEK's Sarah Kliff spoke with Wallis about what's wrong with the abortion debate today, where he'd like it to head and potential roadblocks in getting there. Excerpts:

**NEWSWEEK: What do you make of the current debate over abortion? What frustrates you?**

**Wallis:** This divisive battle occurs every four years and never in between. Nothing changes, people win or lose elections and then it goes away. The debate is narrow, just pro-choice and pro-life. Right now we're shouting at each other.

**How would you like to see the issue approached this election cycle?**

Pro-life and pro-choice groups can support abortion reduction. There's common ground in supporting aid to low-income women, preventing unwanted pregnancies, reforming adoption to make it easier. All of that would dramatically reduce abortion. Most people who have different views on *Roe v. Wade* can agree on these things. ... I don't expect, nor am I calling on, the Democrats to criminalize abortion. They can hold to their pro-choice principles and still commit to

abortion reduction.

**How are evangelicals thinking about the abortion debate in light of the election?**

It's part of a broad conversation about the sanctity of life. Iraq is a sanctity-of-life issue. Darfur is a sanctity-of-life issue. And this is a sanctity-of-life issue. ... It's not one of my main message points when I'm on the road, but it often comes up in a question-and-answer session. The crowds that are there are pro-life and pro-choice. And when I bring up the idea of abortion reduction, of finding common ground by moving to higher ground, most people say, "Yes, we could get behind that." They're asking, "Why don't political leaders suggest that? Why doesn't anybody speak for that? Why don't we hear that from the other side?"

**Large pro-choice groups like Planned Parenthood and NARAL both focus on reducing and preventing the number of unplanned pregnancies. But abortion reduction says something else—it could mean reducing through prevention, or through tighter restrictions. What do you mean by the wording?**

Everybody tends to agree that preventing unwanted pregnancies is a good thing. I'm saying, let's take it to the next step and say that abortion reduction is a good thing too. It's about providing options—not taking away a woman's right to choose, but making things like adoption easier. It's like the movie 'Juno,' where you give a woman a chance to make a different kind of choice. There she chose to bring a child to term and put it up for adoption. ... By making adoption easier, you're not taking away her right to choose.

**Abortion reduction can also take a number of different forms in terms of education. One person might think of it as abstinence education, while another might see it as teaching teenagers about condoms and birth control. Are these details that you think you could see consensus on?**

If we as a society say we want to commit to abortion reduction, or even just prevent unwanted pregnancies, everyone agrees with that. How do you do that? You might see a Planned Parenthood focusing much more on unwanted pregnancy prevention. Down the street you might see a pregnancy crisis center, which is talking about other options like adoption. I think both of those can be part of the solution ... abstinence is one element; education about birth control is another. How do you balance them? That's the conversation we need to talk out.

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