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OPINION

Peaceful abortion dialogue is shaky but real

With Obama's support, it's time to revive a conversation between opposing sides.

By Susan Koscis
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WASHINGTON - Searching for common ground on abortion isn't new. What is new is that the president of the United States is talking about it and calling for it. That kind of support has the potential to help change the tone of the entire debate.

Fourteen years ago a group of abortion rights activists and antiabortionists participated in the first national meeting of the Network For Life And Choice. The Network – active between 1993 and 2000 – endeavored to transform the dynamic of the abortion debate in the US by establishing a platform where the opposing sides could listen to each other's positions and beliefs, and look for overlapping values, goals, beliefs, and interests.

I was a dialogue facilitator at the national meeting in 1995. The weekend began with high tension and anxiety. Neither group was comfortable and it seemed that no one was at ease being there. Yet people came perhaps because they realized there was an opportunity before them.

The network had developed a highly structured dialogue process that kept abortion rights and antiabortion participants engaged in a series of increasingly difficult and emotional questions. It began with simple "getting to know you" questions that were designed to build trust slowly, and then progressed to deeper levels of dialogue that went to the core of why people believed and felt as they did.

It worked.

Over the weekend, distrust and resentment begin to melt. I heard people tell each other that they had never understood the "other" side until then.

At the end of one session, I saw a well-known antiabortion advocate emotionally embrace a physician from rural Alaska, who had just told about her experiences as the only ob-gyn doctor for miles around. On occasion her practice was called upon to provide abortion services. She tearfully explained that she endured threats to her life and to the lives of her husband and children. Her young daughters were picked on and

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called names at school.

No matter which side of the debate people were on, everyone in that room seemed to know that the hateful behavior that typified interaction between the two sides was wrong, and that they had to find better ways to deal with their differences. In that moment, the positions that people brought to the weekend shifted slightly toward each other.

The abortion rights advocates learned that they needed to engage with the "other" side, and that both sides needed to recognize each other's humanity.

It took courage to show up, to expose deeply held beliefs, and to speak openly with people with whom one strongly disagrees. Through this process, the participants gained tools to transform a shouting match into a productive space for dialogue.

The dialogue led antiabortion and abortion rights activists to identify and approve a series of concrete and mutually satisfactory recommendations:

1. Reduce and prevent teen pregnancy;
2. Make adoption more accessible and available as an option;
3. Increase child-care options for women who choose to give birth;
4. Reduce the conditions that lead to a high abortion rate (for example, balance between work and family);
5. Combine forces on legislative proposals, such as assistance for drug-addicted women, sex education in schools, and welfare reform to minimize hardships on working mothers.

The network existed for several years but never realized its goal of transforming the national debate on this issue. This is primarily because of a lack of resources. Funders were interested in supporting one side of the debate or other. And certainly timing played a part. The American public was not in a place to move beyond the polar extremes on this issue and there was no president to call for civil discourse.

The idea of the network was ahead of its time. With President Obama raising the issue of finding common ground on abortion and with lessons from the network experience in place, its time has arrived.

In his recent speech at Notre Dame University, Mr. Obama said that both sides of the abortion debate must engage in a dialogue with "open hearts."

"Maybe we won't agree on abortion, but we can still agree that this is a heart-wrenching decision for any woman to make, with both moral and spiritual dimensions," he said. Keeping his audience in mind as well as those poised to pounce on every nuance, the president embraced an inclusive approach and counseled, "When we open our hearts and our minds to those who may not think like we do or believe what we do – that's when we discover at least the possibility of common ground."

Just days ago, a Kansas doctor who performed abortions was murdered. It may seem that things have not changed since the Network for Life and Choice ceased their work. But now, we have a president who

his back

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understands that no matter how deeply we may disagree on deeply felt issues, we can come closer to understanding one another and recognizing what we share. It is only by standing on common ground that we can begin to resolve the issue.

Susan Koscis is a director at Search for Common Ground, a nonprofit organization specializing in global conflict resolution, which sponsored the Network for Life and Choice. This was originally written for Common Ground news service.

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