

the new 'abortion ad'

Karim Fouad Alber considers our response

On 24 May 2010, Marie Stopes International (MSI), a group known for providing abortion services, ran the first 'abortion ad' in the UK on Channel 4. In the UK, MSI accounts for about one third of all abortions performed.¹ While the advert itself does not explicitly mention or promote abortion, both Channel 4 and the Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) have received hundreds of complaints after airing the advert.² I have found

that many Christians who care deeply for the wellbeing of both women and their unborn children have very different opinions on how to respond to such a development. This article aims to provide some key points to keep in mind when deciding how to respond as a Christian to decisions undertaken or public policy that we may disagree with, and then explores some of the reasons Christians will give justifying whether or not we should complain against the airing of the advert.

what is your motivation?

'Do everything in love', was one of Paul's last reminders in his first letter to the Corinthians.³ Too many times Christians have portrayed a terrible image of hatred and prejudice because they failed to keep love as the motivation of their actions. Demonstrations on the street with placards proclaiming 'Abortion is murder' or 'God hates homosexuality' are not acts of love. Jesus came to save people, not condemn them.⁴ Whatever you do, it should be done in a way that seeks people's best interests; this includes relieving the psychological burden that



many young women already feel when undergoing abortion, not adding to it.

expect some opposition

On the other hand, that does not mean that Christians should idly stand back and never do anything that may be found to be offensive or unacceptable by people in society. Jesus warns that it is inevitable that people will not understand us and will hate us for who we are and what we do.⁵ This does not

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mean that you should go and seek deliberate confrontation, but do expect that people may disagree, and even try to subvert you when you act out your faith. We are fortunate that it is not our lives that we are risking when we do so, as some of our Christian brothers and sisters have to do abroad, but nurse Caroline Petrie's case (who faced suspension last year after offering to pray for her patients) was a clear example of the kind of opposition that we may face in acting out our faith in the UK.⁶

what would Jesus (want me to) do?

The popular wristband that many of us may have worn carries the WWJD message to remind us to ask ourselves what would our Lord and Saviour do when confronted with a situation warranting a decision. As medical students, we need to think how this applies to us in each of our own individual lives.

Each one of us has been placed in a unique environment, with our own gifting that we are expected to put to use. One could metaphorically label this as our own personal 'kingdom'. Bringing in the kingdom of God to our lives means allowing his effective will to be carried out across our own lives, or 'kingdoms'. In order to do so, each one of us *must* study scripture and spend time in prayer. In other words, to know God's will you must first spend time getting to know God and reading his Word. As David once put eloquently, 'your statutes are my delight; they are my counsellors'.⁷

As medical students, we need to be aware of which specific areas we can engage in to further God's kingdom. Many times this will involve getting

involved in student societies or unions, helping make a positive change. Getting involved in decision-making bodies or other influential groups in the medical profession, such as the British Medical Association (BMA), is often a good start. Keep in mind that God looks for those who are obedient, not just high achieving. Each one of us should seek to obey him first in the little things, and then he will take us on to bigger things.⁸ Lastly, we should all make sure that we make an effort to study and think through the ethical dilemmas that we will encounter in our profession. Personally, a great start for me has been reading John Wyatt's book *Matters of Life and Death*⁹ and doing an ethics-based student-selected component was a huge help. More recently I have found reading some of the articles in *Triple Helix* helpful in providing insight on how Christian doctors are tackling tough decisions today, especially when it comes to abortion requests.¹⁰

why would Christians complain about the MSI 'abortion ad'?

The advert by MSI has led to some Christians deciding to make a formal complaint to the ASA. As a result, the ASA may

initiate an investigation to see whether the commercial has breached the advertising code.¹¹ Christians may often feel that abortion is morally wrong; however this alone is not a

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good enough reason to warrant a complaint to the ASA. This is because the ASA only investigates cases that may be in breach of their guidelines, which do not include laws of morality. As Christians, we ought to be sensitive to the world we live in, and avoid being blunt or sounding intolerant as that will often cause more damage than good.

More importantly, if the advertisement is found to target and result in an increase of young women using the abortion service offered by MSI, then it would not be unreasonable to demand that the service offered should undergo high levels of scrutiny before being offered. Having an abortion may have negative medical consequences, and this has been noted by non-

Christian physicians too.¹² Even though association does not necessarily mean causation, it can be reasonably asserted that it would be irresponsible not to disclose the fact that a woman may be potentially at higher risk of mortality and serious morbidity, including psychological harm, after undergoing a termination. An advert that aims to see an increase in the use of a service carried out without properly informing women about potential consequences should not be aired. Lastly, one controversial point that could be made on the subject is by questioning the legal status of carrying out an abortion and subsequent advertisement. If it can be proven that women would be at less risk if they continued with a pregnancy to delivery as opposed to terminating, then one of the legal grounds permitting terminations in The Abortion Act (1967)¹³ could be questioned.

why would Christians not complain?

On the other side of the discussion, I have found that some Christians will find themselves not compelled to make a formal complaint. This is not due to apathy or lack of a move in conscience. Indeed,

doing nothing about an outstanding problem is the cause of much suffering and evil in the world. As someone once put it, 'all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing'.¹⁴ It is more the fact that they do not feel that it is the best way to implement a change. There is a huge lack of knowledge in the world today of God's message of grace and hope, and for many Christians the proclamation of this message in as many ways as possible becomes their priority.

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Creative ideas of reaching out to young people and mothers in need are being proposed. Why not air our own adverts or short videos on *YouTube*? Last year's infamous atheist bus adverts were then followed by similar Christian ones, which in my experience provided for good opportunities to engage non-Christian friends in positive discussion. Support and counselling services by Christians are more available now than ever before. There are

now over 160 Christian Crisis Pregnancy Counselling centres available across the UK.¹⁵ A confidential helpline and websites are also available to women nationwide, with the aim to help women make unbiased and informed decisions. These centres offer support to post-abortion clients, many of whom are in great distress and largely ignored by society around them. It is alternatives like these that many Christians believe are the true and only way to minister effectively to women in need, and not by making a formal complaint.

Lastly, since the advert itself does not directly mention abortion, some may conclude that there is no reasonable ground to denounce the airing of the advert. To do so may seem overly aggressive and contrary to what some Christians may feel is appropriate.

final comments

Christians in the early church in Rome could not agree on issues regarding the Sabbath and permissible food. While laying out the correct theology in his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote that 'each one should be fully convinced in his own mind'¹⁶ when reaching a conclusion.

The advert run by MSI is yet another example where there is no clear answer to how Christians should respond.

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As medical students, we ought to equip ourselves by studying the law and ethics surrounding controversial issues. Moreover, as Christians we should strive to seek God's will and always

petition in prayer that the Holy Spirit will bring about true change in people's hearts. In the end, if you have truly submitted yourself to God and believe you are acting in love and humility, then take courage and persevere in your decision. God promises to work all things for good for those who love him.¹⁷

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