

AIDING OR ABETTING ABORTION?

Jeanette Ucci & Terry A. Wolfer

“You aren’t goin’ to leave me, are you?” Cali Nelson called out plaintively.

The waiting room of the Planned Parenthood surgery clinic was full but the mood subdued. Throughout the room, young women shuffled noisily through pages of well-worn women’s magazines, pretending not to pay attention. An older man stared with too much intensity at a picture taken of the ground breaking ceremony for the clinic. A young couple in the far corner made no effort to avert their attention. They just stared, waiting. Really, everyone was waiting.

I’m a social work STUDENT! Erika Burkholdt tried to sort through her thoughts. I certainly don’t want to disappoint a client. She’s counting on me. This is what self-determination is all about, isn’t it? Besides my field instructor asked me to be here and I agreed. How can I back out now? How can I not follow through?

Erika saw the nurse shift her position, but it was not an impatient gesture. Cali started rocking as she stood by the door waiting for Erika to join her. “Come on. Let’s go!” Cali said loudly enough to startle a woman sitting nervously next to the door.

Oh, God, Erika thought to herself, I just don’t know what to do. What’s the right thing to do?

Kansas City, Missouri

Located in western Missouri across the Missouri River from Kansas, Kansas

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City was a sprawling city of about 440,000 people. Its population was approximately 60% Caucasian, 31% African American, 2% Asian and 7% Latino. The Caucasian population was predominantly middle-class, and there was a definitive line between the haves and have-nots.

A solid Midwestern kind of city, Kansas City nevertheless included a red light district. But the district was understated compared to most such areas. The prostitutes did not dress in provocative clothing. No one stood conspicuously on a street corner or strutted around the block. Nothing was that obvious. The women and men engaging in prostitution were typically dressed in ordinary clothing and their behavior was equally ordinary. Still, many of them were addicted to crack.

New Way-Kansas City

New Way-Kansas City (New Way-KC) was a faith-related organization with offices throughout the Midwest. New Way-KC's main office was located in an old nine-story hospital building, and surrounded by working-class African American neighborhoods. The main office sat about five minutes from the red light district and a strip of the downtown area where gay and transgendered men were prevalent. New Way-KC also operated from two additional smaller buildings in the community.

In other cities, most New Way program directors were ordained ministers and New Way employees were devout Christians who took a "faith first" approach to provision of social services. New Way-KC was the exception. The Executive Director of New Way-KC was a professional administrator who provided oversight to direct service providers at many different divisional programs based outside of Kansas City. The Director hired social service professionals who did not necessarily take a faith-first approach to services.

The organizational and cultural difference between New Way-KC and other New Way facilities was sometimes a point of contention. For example, New Way-KC had won the New Way Excellence Award in 1995. However, the Executive Director of New Way had received several letters of protest from other New Way facilities, because New Way-KC's programs were sometimes staffed by professionals who were less overtly religious. Some of the letters had suggested, "They shouldn't have won because their staff are not religious or spiritual enough."

In 1996, Murray Pendergast was the head of the Social Service Division at New Way-KC. Pendergast, who was working toward a PhD in social work, had worked

for New Way for many years, and had been instrumental in establishing many of the social programs there.

Pendergast supervised three directors: Molly Shaw, Director of Youth and Family Programs (YFP); Amy Landon, Director of Homeless Programs; and Margarite Pittman, Director of Senior Programs. YFP housed a variety of programs including Quick Start (an educational program for pre-school children), Open Door (a residential program for pregnant teens), Homebuilding (a family preservation program that intervened with abusive families in the community), Safe Haven (a counseling and housing program for homeless women and abused and neglected children), and the Lighthouse Program (designed to help men and women and their children through the process of coming out of prostitution.). The Homeless Programs provided food, housing, and other types of material assistance. The Senior Program provided housing for senior citizens throughout Kansas City. All of these programs were staffed by professionals, and most of the staff had either an MSW or a master's degree in another human service field. Outside of the Social Service Department, however, most New Way social programs typically employed only a few professionals and more paraprofessionals.

In general, staff members of the social service programs believed that high level administrators did not truly understand the nature of the work that the social service staff members performed. They sometimes said half-jokingly, "Oh, those administrators upstairs, they don't really know what we do down here." The numerous programs at New Way-KC operated almost like separate agencies, with each program having its own budget.

The Lighthouse Program

During the summer of 1996, the Lighthouse Program had three staff members. The Program Director was Stacey Dalpaz. Tammy Thomas was the case manager, and Erika Burkholdt was an MSW student completing a block field placement at Lighthouse, following her first year of full-time coursework.

The program was initially established in 1987 by an Episcopal congregation but New Way-KC assumed leadership in 1989 due to financial difficulties and neighborhood safety concerns at the founding church. When New Way took over the program, they fired the director, who had been quite popular with the program's clients. This caused considerable discontent among some clients.

Approximately one-third of Lighthouse's \$100,000 annual program budget was

funded through Kansas City United Way. A private, anonymous donor provided about \$50,000, and New Way provided approximately \$15,000. These contributions were highly valued because many funders were hesitant to support programs associated with prostitution, even if the goal was to help clients find alternatives to sex work. Lighthouse paid rent to New Way for its operating space. The Lighthouse staff had access to a van and some agency cars that New Way owned.

Many of the program's clients had initially been recruited through a weekly treatment group that the staff members offered in a Kansas City prison. Lighthouse was one of the first programs in the Kansas City area to bring such groups into prisons. The group, jokingly dubbed "the ho group" by participants, was designed specifically for men and women who had engaged in prostitution. The group's purpose was to help the members get out of prostitution. Nearly 90% of the clients of the Lighthouse Program were women, and many of the male clients were gay. The program staff provided case management services for clients (and their children) so that when they left prison, they would have housing, substance abuse treatment, counseling, and other supportive services. The rest of New Way staff viewed Lighthouse as the "weird" program in New Way, or "the odd child in the bunch." The Lighthouse staff thus believed that it was best just to keep to themselves.

Stacey Dalpaz, MSW, Director of Lighthouse Program

Since earning her MSW, Stacey Dalpaz had worked 12 years in sexual trauma services. Energetic and idealistic, Stacey was very committed to her job as supervisor of the Lighthouse Program. As the founding supervisor, she had begun with no staff members and carried all of the work of the program single-handedly for one year. She seemed to go out of her way for clients, often providing them with her home phone number so that they could get in touch with her at any time, if needed. Stacey often worked 6 or 7 days per week, and spent many late evenings at the Lighthouse office as well. At times, she would become very ill, missing work for about a week at a time. She had been diagnosed with lupus. Stacey was known to drop everything in order to assist a client. Her dedication was evident in the positive things that many clients said about her work.

Stacey had many professional and personal strengths. She could see the positive side of almost any client or situation, and would not refuse services to potential clients. This was especially true of former Lighthouse clients who had relapsed and now were in need of services again. She was willing to work with clients on

whatever difficulties they were experiencing, and assisted them in identifying their strengths. She was open to discussing spiritual issues with clients, if this was important to them, and went out of her way to learn about types of spirituality that were unfamiliar to her. Stacey was also quite receptive to suggestions from her student intern, Erika Burkholdt.

Erika Burkholdt

A 25-year-old Caucasian woman, Erika Burkholdt had earned her undergraduate degree in Sociology from Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. Her undergraduate program had been unique in that the student-faculty ratio was only 16 to 1, faculty taught all courses, and students had an opportunity to develop projects and work directly with a faculty member to complete the project. The liberal-minded climate at Benedictine College mostly appealed to Erika but contrasted with her traditional Catholic upbringing. Following graduation, Erika had worked for two years as a Life Skills Trainer at a non-profit home for juvenile boys in a small town in Missouri.

In August of 1996, Erika began a field placement following completion of her foundation-level MSW coursework at the University of Missouri at Columbia. She interviewed with Amy Landon at New Way-KC, and was told that she would be assigned to the Lighthouse Program. Erika knew that she would be working with women and men (and their children) who were getting out of prostitution.

When Erika began her field placement at Lighthouse, she received little orientation during her first week. However, she was excited about working with a new and challenging population, and took the opportunity to jump right into things. She quickly noted the absence of a filing system and intake forms, and began by putting together a data sheet that she could subsequently use for intakes.

A Morning Telephone Call

On a Wednesday morning in late August, Erika was still at home getting ready for her third day of placement when the telephone rang at about 8:45 a.m. It was Stacey, Erika's supervisor from Lighthouse.

"Good morning, Erika. This is Stacey. Listen, I have an assignment for you that I wanted to get to you now because I'll be out of the office this morning. I need you to go by and pick up Cali Nelson at her home this morning at 9:30. Do you

remember, she's that client I mentioned yesterday? Cali has an abortion scheduled at Planned Parenthood this morning at 10:00, and it turns out that I can't take her. You can stop by the office and get the agency car. Cali lives at 135 Hamilton Street."

"Okay, Stacey . . .," Erika responded tentatively.

"Thanks, Erika. This is a big help. It's really important."

Hanging up the phone, Erika wondered whether student interns typically received this type of task during their first week of placement. Still, she did not want to disappoint Stacey, and figured that perhaps this must be normal.

Although she had not yet met Cali Nelson, Erika remembered what Stacey had mentioned about her the day before: Cali was a 33-year-old Caucasian woman who had been a client of the Lighthouse Program for several months. She had two children—a 7-year-old daughter and a 3-year-old son—and lived with her husband. He had reportedly thrown her out of the house several times for using drugs but had taken her back in each time. Cali had a history of prostitution, had been incarcerated, and was addicted to crack. She was now 6 months pregnant with her third child. Stacey suspected that Cali had gotten pregnant from her crack dealer rather than her husband. Stacey had also mentioned that Cali sometimes mistreated her daughter. Nevertheless, Stacey believed that Cali was very intelligent, and would have had a lot going for herself, had she not become addicted to crack.

As she finished getting ready and then got into her car and drove to the Lighthouse office, Erika felt slightly nervous. *This is my first time going to pick up a client by myself*, she realized. *I've never met Cali. I wonder what she'll be like.*

In the car, Erika's thoughts soon turned more somber, *I can't believe I'm doing this. A fetus is a baby, and abortion is killing. This is absolutely crazy. Why did Stacey put me in this situation? Well, I guess I'm just giving her a ride, though*, Erica rationalized. *I remember Stacey said yesterday that she does all the counseling for clients, so I guess that would include any type of abortion counseling. Still, though, I really don't want to do this, but I can't say no to Stacey either. I don't really have a choice.*

Arriving at the Lighthouse office, Erika saw that there was no one else there. She went downstairs to check out the keys to the New Way car, and then went outside to find it.

I've never been in this position before. I mean, should I really be helping someone to get an abortion? As Erika weaved through traffic, thoughts cluttered her mind. *I'm just not sure how I feel about this. But I guess if Stacey said to, this must be typical at Lighthouse.*

Erika was thankful that she knew about where Hamilton Street was located, and calculated in her mind how to get there. She drove through the city to Hamilton Street, and parked in front of the building labeled 135. The house was a large dilapidated gray structure. *This place looks like it could blow over any second if a high wind hit it*, Erika thought nervously as she walked up to the front door. Through the closed door, Erika heard a woman hollering. When she knocked, the hollering stopped and a woman, dressed in a bathrobe, answered the door. The woman had apparently been hollering as she struggled to dress a young girl who stood next to her.

“Good morning.” Momentarily startled because the woman looked twenty years older than she expected, Erika asked, “Are you Ms. Nelson?”

“Yeah, that’s me,” the woman responded, and resumed dressing the child.

“I’m Erika Burkholdt, from Lighthouse. Stacey Dalpaz called me this morning to come and give you a ride to the doctor’s . . .”

“Yup,” Cali interrupted, nodding in recognition. “I’ve got an appointment over there this morning. Just give me a minute to finish getting ready, and then I’ll be right out.”

“Okay,” Erika nodded, “I’ll be in the car.” Before turning to walk down the porch steps, Erika noted that the house was in disarray. There was an unmade bed in the middle of the living room, and Cali’s raised voice now mixed with fresh cries from the child.

Several minutes later, Cali came out of the house, and got into the car with Erika. “How’s Stacey doing?” Cali asked. “Boy, I just love her. Thank God for Stacey. What would I ever do without her? Thank God for Lighthouse, giving me a ride to Planned Parenthood.”

Glancing sideways, Erika noted that Cali’s whole body trembled as she spoke, and she rocked back and forth in the car seat. Cali spoke rapidly, and her thoughts seemed scattered.

I wonder if she’s high right now? Erika wondered warily. At least she’s not being aggressive.

As Cali talked excitedly about Stacey and the Lighthouse, Erika’s thoughts drifted. *Even though I was raised to believe that abortion is killing, I know that I’m pro-choice. People don’t have any business telling other people how to run their lives. But I would never have an abortion myself. So why am I helping Cali to get one now, I mean, if this is killing a baby? Or is this just fostering Cali’s right to self-determination?*

Realizing that she was unsure of the final turns to Planned Parenthood, Erika asked Cali, “Um, how do we get there now?”

Cali motioned her through several turns, and soon they were approaching the Planned Parenthood office. Erika saw that there were several picketers lined up outside the office.

"Hurry, we gotta run past those people!" Cali said excitedly as Erika parked the car.

Oh, crap, Erika thought. I hope they don't see me. Erika had begun to feel increasingly conflicted during the car ride, and this was making things worse.

As Erika and Cali walked across the parking lot, the picketers yelled at them, "You're gonna burn in hell, you baby killers!"

I'm totally embarrassed to be here, Erika thought. Maybe they think I'm having an abortion. This completely goes against my beliefs, like I'm some kind of a hypocrite.

Although Cali seemed to ignore the picketers, Erika could not. *Gosh, they're sure making this worse, for us and anyone else. Even though I don't want to be here, women shouldn't be harassed like this. This is already a hard enough decision for women who need to be here. Anyway, it's not like those signs will change anybody's mind.*

As they walked into the building together, Erika thought, *I'm really not sure that I want to be doing this.*

Obviously familiar with the agency, Cali stepped up to the reception window and spoke to the woman behind the desk. "I'm here for my abortion," she began, with what seemed to Erika like unnecessary loudness, "got a 10:00 o'clock appointment."

As Cali continued speaking loudly to the receptionist, Erika began to feel embarrassed about her tone of voice. After they were sent to the waiting room, Cali continued speaking to Erika and anyone else who would listen.

Erika tried to listen, but she was embarrassed by Cali, and her own thoughts were racing. *I mean, yes, I AM pro-choice, but yet I've always known that I would never have an abortion myself . . . And now here I am, helping someone to get an abortion, I mean, I just don't know if I feel right about this. . . . This seems like a big deal, I just don't know."*

As she pondered the situation, Erika wished for some way to separate herself from Cali's action. *I really don't feel comfortable going into the back with her when she actually has the abortion, Erika thought. It just doesn't feel right to me, being here at all. Maybe it is right, but I just can't do that. On the other hand, I'm a student and a responsible person, so if Stacey's told me to do this, I guess I should do it. I don't want to disappoint her the very first week of my internship. What kind of a first impression would that be? And if this is in my internship description, then I should do it, I guess. Then Erika*

realized, *but I really have no idea what my job description is anyway . . . maybe this is what a social worker should be doing for a client . . . but for me personally, I'm just not sure if I should be supporting someone who's getting an abortion.*

At that point, Erika remembered another factor. *Isn't New Way opposed to abortion? Although Stacey had not said anything about that, Erika thought she remembered reading it when she was researching the agency before interviewing for a placement. If that's true, then what should I do? Could I get into trouble with New Way for taking a client to have an abortion?*

Erika's confused thoughts were interrupted by Cali, who was again rocking in her chair as she had been in the car. "Gosh," Cali said to no one in particular, "what in the WORLD would I do without Stacey and Lighthouse. I really need to get this abortion . . . If my husband finds out I'm pregnant, he'll kick me outta the house."

Then, looking straight at Erika, Cali said, "I'm so glad you gave me a ride. I don't have anyone else . . . Hey, could you come back with me when the nurse calls me? I'd just feel better if someone else was back there with me, and you seem pretty nice."

Erika felt her stomach twist into knots. "Maybe . . .," she began, feeling that she needed to give Cali some kind of response.

Overlooking Erika's hesitation, Cali turned away and began talking to another patient.

Should I be doing this? Erika wondered. And what am I supposed to say to her afterwards? How can I help her deal with the abortion if she wants to talk about it? What if she asks me my opinion?

"When am I going to be seen?" Cali hollered impatiently at the receptionist.

Feeling trapped and embarrassed, Erika thought, *I wish I could just die right here . . . or crawl under the couch.*

A moment later, Cali hollered again, "Can I get some water?"

A fetus is a baby, and abortion is killing. Erika's thoughts raced. I don't feel comfortable with this. It just doesn't feel right for me. I don't want to support someone who's having an abortion, because I wouldn't do it myself. I had no idea that my own values would end up playing so heavily into this internship, and on only my third day! I mean, is Cali's pregnancy a life or not? When does a fetus become a baby?

On the other hand, if this is what Cali wants, isn't my job as a social worker to help clients find resources to meet their personal needs and goals? Shouldn't I be fostering Cali's right to self-determination? And what about disappointing Stacey? Plus, Cali already has two children, and it doesn't seem like she's taking care of them. If she does have this baby,

it will be addicted to crack because Cali's still using . . . and it probably will be abused all through its childhood. . . . Gosh, what should I do? Cali and Stacey are counting on me . . .

Erika's thoughts were interrupted when the office door opened and a nurse appeared. "Cali Nelson," she called, "you can come on back now."

Cali stood up to go, and then looked at Erika. "C'mon, aren't you coming back with me?"

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Grappling with Faith: Decision Cases for Christians in Social Work presents fifteen cases, specifically designed for the case method of teaching and learning, which will challenge and stretch Christian social work students. These open-ended cases present students with the ambiguities and dilemmas of social work practice, and provoke active decision making. Each case provides the focal point for stimulating, in-depth class discussions. These discussions require that students use their knowledge of social work theory and research, their skills of analysis and problem solving, and their common sense and collective wisdom to identify and analyze problems, evaluate possible solutions, and decide what to do in these complex and difficult situations. Based on field research, the cases portray the actual experiences of some Christians in social work.

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—David A. Sherwood, Ph.D., ACSW
Editor-in-Chief, *Social Work & Christianity*

The beauty of the decision case method of teaching is that it forces students to grapple with real cases in a safe learning environment. The excellent pedagogical tools and teaching notes help instructors guide students toward productive discussions about issues of concern to Christians. I highly recommend this collection to teachers who are serious about providing opportunities for deeper learning about practice dilemmas that Christians in social work will face.

—T. Laine Scales, Ph.D.
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