

Response to the accusation that Planned Parenthood is a racist organization

By Rev. Paul Jersild

The following comments are a response to the recently revived claim by some in the anti-choice community that Planned Parenthood is a racist organization, attempting to convince African-American women to have abortions. The article that prompted the concern on this matter addresses Planned Parenthood's founder, Margaret Sanger's relation to the black community. It is a 17-page, single-space paper posted on the website of "Concerned Women for America" on May 10, 2001. The author is Tanya L. Green and the title, "The Negro Project: Margaret Sanger's Eugenic Plan for Black Americans." I'll focus on this article in my remarks here, but I also want to mention a couple of articles that just appeared last week that accentuate the current importance of this topic. One is an article by Errin Haines in the Huffington Post, dated February 15, entitled "Atlanta Anti-Abortion Billboards Cause Controversy, Say Black Children Are An 'Endangered Species.'" It's an attack on Planned Parenthood. The other appeared in the *Virginian-Pilot* last Friday, February 19, with the headline, "Clerics call for state to stop funding Planned Parenthood." The article refers to a group of conservative clergy lobbying in Richmond against the funding of Planned Parenthood, claiming that it is a racist organization. Erin Zabel has called it to your attention and has responded in a subsequent article by the same reporter in yesterday's *Virginian-Pilot*.

For most of us, perhaps, this argument that Planned Parenthood is a racist organization going back to its founder is something new in the strategy of the anti-abortionists. Actually it isn't all that new, but it hasn't been used as much in their propaganda. We're quite used to hearing the accusation that Planned Parenthood is an "abortion factory," but we're not so used to hearing that one of our secret goals is to reduce the black population.

It will be helpful to start off with some background information that I gleaned from the book by Tom Davis, *Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances*. Davis is a United Church of Christ (UCC) clergyman and has been a member of the national board of Planned Parenthood. He points out that Margaret Sanger and birth control advocates were in a precarious situation in the beginning decades of their cause and sought alliances with those whom they thought could be helpful to them. One of the "less wise alliances" as Davis puts it, was their involvement with the eugenics movement. You're familiar with this term, but just to give you a quick, one-line definition: Eugenics comes from the Greek language, meaning "good birth," and it refers to "the scientific attempt to improve the human race by encouraging the reproduction of the fittest people and discouraging the reproduction of the unfit." The fact that in the twenties some 75 percent of American colleges offered courses on eugenics is an indication of its general acceptance at the time.

A significant number of prominent and respected people in the scientific and political communities supported a eugenics program that led to about half of our states (including Virginia) passing sterilization laws. Many other countries passed similar laws. They were aimed at mentally incompetent people and those with genetic diseases, but Davis notes that they were also used to restrict the immigration of some ethnic groups. While these laws were not specifically aimed at minority groups as such in our country, it was certainly an unspoken agenda for many people among the white majority. All of this seems quite strange to us today. In light of what happened in Nazi Germany with their eugenics program, which was designed to implement a blatantly racist ideology, it seems horrendous to us that any of our states would assume the power to decide who was fit to reproduce. Following World War II and public awareness of the German situation, support for eugenics programs waned considerably. Yet in 1956 there were still 27 states that had sterilization laws on their books, but they were not being enforced.

For Margaret Sanger, Davis sees two reasons for her making overtures to eugenics advocates. First, they were making it “socially acceptable to talk about sexual reproduction, and second, they were scientific authorities of a kind, respected and in a position to bring some of that respectability to the birth control movement.” (35) As I mentioned, Sanger has been attacked before by anti-choice writers for her views on eugenics, trying to paint her as a racist. There are several works that have detailed her views, and the important thing is to recognize that she opposed the state using its power either to encourage the fittest people to reproduce or to keep the unfit from reproducing. In her autobiography Sanger wrote these words:

“Eugenicists imply or insist that a woman’s first duty is to the state; we contend that her duty to herself is her first duty to the state. We maintain that a woman possessing an adequate knowledge of her reproductive functions is the best judge of the time and conditions under which her child shall be brought into the world. We further maintain that it is her right, regardless of all other considerations, to determine whether she shall bear children or not.”

Clearly Sanger espoused what Davis calls “voluntary motherhood.” She was confident that the cumulative result of the decisions of individual women would lead to an improvement of humanity. My understanding is that for Sanger, sensitive counseling with women whose progeny were likely to be significantly compromised was the appropriate ethical action, rather than applying legal coercion. To her, the motivating force was always the welfare of the woman, and any outside assistance was to be directed to that end, whether it led to an abortion decision or a decision to give birth.

Now just a few comments on that 17-page paper. I mentioned that it was posted at the website of Concerned Women for America, which was founded in 1979 by Beverly LaHaye, wife of Timothy LaHaye who was a co-founder of the Christian Coalition and has been a prolific author (I suspect that we are all somewhat familiar with his work). According to Wikipedia, CWA was

founded in response to the activities of the National Organization for Women (NOW); its stated purpose is to “bring Biblical principles into all levels of public policy.”

Despite its appearance as an academic, scholarly work (there are actually 94 endnotes listed), this paper is much more of a propaganda piece. It relies heavily on statements of Rev. Johnny M. Hunter, national director of LEARN, which stands for Life, Education and Resource Network. LEARN bills itself as the largest black pro-life organization and if you go to its website you are quickly switched to blackgenocide.org. Author Green’s primary sources for her references to Sanger are a couple of books by George Grant: *Grand Illusions: The Legacy of Planned Parenthood* and *Killer Angel*, a biography of Sanger. Grant is notorious for his malicious and grossly one-sided treatment of both Planned Parenthood and Sanger. Davis doesn’t bother to even mention him in his book, and no genuine scholar would take him seriously. The publisher of his work, located in Franklin, Tennessee, is an ultra-conservative Christian organization dedicated to its own agenda. Looking at the argument of Ms. Green, it takes the form of a syllogism: First, eugenicists in the early twentieth century espoused the racial supremacy of the “Aryan” race (identifying Americans with the German experience), second, Margaret Sanger aligned herself with the eugenics movement, *ergo*, Sanger was a racist who sought to contain the so-called inferior races through birth control and abortion. There is no interest in listening to what Sanger actually says, and when she is quoted, the worst possible inference is always made. This paper does not warrant serious attention, but unfortunately that doesn’t mean it hasn’t wielded considerable impact – it’s still being circulated. Nonetheless, one has to turn to more objective authors who are not driven by ideology or a particular agenda.

In closing I’ll just mention one more thing. Ms. Green has to acknowledge a point that would seem to pull the rug out from under her argument, and that’s the fact that many notable figures in the black community were ardent supporters of Margaret Sanger. W.E.B. Dubois, one of the most famous black persons in American history, who among other things helped to found the NAACP, served on an advisory council on behalf of Sanger’s work in Harlem, together with a host of black physicians, social workers, ministers and journalists. Other leaders of note who supported Sanger were Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., pastor of Harlem’s largest church, and Charles S. Johnson, the first black president of Fisk University, and Adam Spingarn, president of NAACP. The only way that Green can account for this fact is to claim that these prestigious, educated persons were in effect hoodwinked by Sanger (“charmed” by Sanger is the way she puts it). But even to suggest this is an all-too-obvious insult to the intelligence of these black leaders. I don’t know about Ms. Green’s own ethnicity, but – dare I suggest it? – her treatment of black leaders could well be seen as an expression of her own prejudice.