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I'm voting only pro-choice

■ The religious right, by turning personal matters into political issues, has forced me to this point.

By DEBORAH STEELY
Special to The Observer

Where I came from, we did not believe that it was our place to divide the sheep from the goats. I am a fourth- (at least) generation Baptist, and in my family, the Baptist principle of tolerance was raised to a high art. "We don't," my parents said, "drum somebody out of the human race because they don't agree with us."

Imagine my surprise, then, when I recently discovered that somewhere along the way I had become that supremely intolerant creature, a single-issue voter, and that my single issue was abortion rights — or, more accurately, what that issue stands for.

Abortion rights was never supposed to be an electoral issue, and Planned Parenthood — at least after dispensing and discussing contraceptives ceased to be a crime — was never supposed to be in the thick of political battles. We were supposed to be a quiet, professional health-care organization.

That might have been the dream, but since the rise of the religious right, intensely private matters of reproductive rights and health have moved to the center of the political stage. In the past 15 years, we've seen firsthand how lawmakers who think they've been called to make this a "Christian nation" can affect our ability to provide those professional health-care services that we stand for and that our clients depend on.

In the face of that new reality, millions of Planned Parenthood staff, board members, donors, volunteers and patients have very reluctantly become interested in the political arena.

That's a new and somewhat uncomfortable place for us, but the religious right has changed all the old rules.

In my grandmother's house

Time was that people who were against contraceptives just didn't use them. People who were opposed to abortion didn't have one. And, while they might have disapproved heartily of anyone who did, it would never have occurred to them to translate that into a criminal code.

My grandmother would have been one of those. She would not permit in her house a deck of cards with "face cards" in it. For her, a one-eyed jack and the king of hearts were, literally, instruments of the devil. She also disapproved of dancing of any kind, round or square (imagine what she would think of Madonna); "mixed bathing," the scandalous practice of letting boys and girls go to the swimming hole together; smoking;

drinking; women wearing pants; and swearing, which included much of my vocabulary.

My grandmother was the staunch Baptist wife of a Baptist preacher and a deeply devout Christian. Her horror of face cards was rooted in her reading of scripture. She was forthright in stating her convictions, and it was understood that, while in her house, we were expected not to play cards or engage in what she deemed to be cussing.

It would never have occurred to my grandmother to launch a crusade to outlaw things that she herself would not permit.

She would never wear pants herself, but she understood the difference between what her beliefs required of her, in her own house, and what she could expect the law to require of others. She would have been affronted by the religious right's crusade to make this a "Christian nation." She expected Christians to be light and leaven, not Pharaoh.

Pursuing a simple goal

Until the rise of the religious right, this was our approach to abortion, too.

Before the religious right made its seductive appeal, we would have maintained that the religious affirmation "life begins at conception" did not automatically entail a legal sanction against abortion. Even if abortion itself was utterly unthinkable, Baptists as a body would have insisted (in fact did insist) that only our moral suasion, not the power of the state, should be used to discourage, restrict and regulate the practice.

Like my grandmother, we would have been abundantly clear about what was expected within our own households, but unwilling, by force of law, to tend to the business of any other family. Some Baptists — myself among them — still are.

So how did I come to be a single-issue voter? As reluctantly as Planned Parenthood entered the political fray.

The religious right has finally forced me to draw a line in my political sand. I'm voting this November only for pro-choice candidates. I want abortion rights, sex education and family planning to be so matter of fact and taken for granted that no one would ever again think of turning such personal matters into a political issue.

I do not want to live in a "Christian nation." I do not want the smooth, soothing, treacherous snake oil of the religious

right. I'll never vote for anyone who would deny me my right to be Baptist or Buddhist. I think my grandmother would be proud of me.

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The Rev. Deborah Steely, a Baptist minister and the daughter and granddaughter of Baptist ministers, is executive director of Planned Parenthood Public Affairs of North Carolina.



Steely

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Event marks 20th anniversary of Roe vs. Wade

Planned Parenthood of the Southern Piedmont and Carolina Mountains and its Citizen Action Campaign will hold a reception for people who have worked in the past 20 years to keep abortion legal.



Social notes

GIGI GUYTON

It will follow a panel discussion, "Where Do We Go From Here?", on Thursday. The event marks the 20th anniversary of the Supreme Court case Roe vs. Wade.

Panelists include **Susan Hill**, president of Women's Health Organization, a national abortion services provider; **Dr. Takey Crist**, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at East Carolina University and UNC-Chapel Hill and director of the Crist Clinic in Jacksonville, N.C.; and the Rev.

Deborah Steely, Baptist minister and executive director of Planned Parenthood public affairs in North Carolina. **Charlotte Brody**, president of Planned Parenthood, will moderate.



CATHERINE BAUKNIGHT

Sandra Levine with violinist Isaac Stern at a fund-raising reception following Stern's performance on Jan. 8. Levine was chairperson of the event, which raised \$50,000 for the Performing Arts Center.

The discussion begins at 7:30 p.m., at St. Martin's Episcopal Church, 1510 E. Seventh St. Both the discussion and the reception

are free. Details: 377-0841, to 5 p.m. weekdays.

Republican women meet

District Court Judge **McKnight** will give his perspective on domestic violence at the lotte-Mecklenburg Republican Women's Club buffet luncheon Jan. 26. The meeting begins at noon at the YWCA, 3420 Park Road. Cost: \$7. Details: 554-6178.

time.

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Social Notes appears each Tuesday and Saturday in the living section and each Thursday in the Connect. Send news of upcoming events at least three weeks before the event to Social Notes, The Charlotte Observer, P.O. Box 32188, Charlotte, N.C. 28232. Please include daytime telephone numbers.

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Minister defends

By KAREN HARRISON
City Editor

NEW BERN — The efforts of the religious right to ban the availability of abortions goes against the long-standing practice of separation of church and state, a Raleigh minister said here Friday.

The Rev. Deborah J. Steely, of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh and coordinator of the N.C. Chapter of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, spoke to the New Bern Civitan club at its weekly luncheon meeting.

Steely — a fourth generation Baptist minister — characterized herself as a "Southern Baptist in my bones," but took issue with the abortion stand of television evangelist Jerry Falwell and others — a stand that she said she believes goes against the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state.

"The issue is far larger than the individual lives of individual women," Steely said.

The Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights is a national organization made up of various religious persuasions, Steely said, dedicated to preserving women's freedom of choice on abortion.

Steely said she grew up in Wake Forest and had never known or been exposed to illegal abortions. "I didn't understand the panic, the desperation of those women who could not support a pregnancy."

She described her pro-choice stance as one rooted in an intellectual experience — her belief of the historical commitment of the separation of church and state.

"As long as I can remember church and state don't mix," she said, giving a brief history of the early Baptists who were persecuted in England and who wanted to be free of an establish-