

Safe, legal and rare

From the Editors in the [December 26, 2012](#) issue

Most Americans are morally uncertain about abortion. Absolutists exist—like the defeated U.S. Senate candidates in Indiana and Missouri who would have prohibited abortion even in cases of rape—but they represent a minority view. Forty years after *Roe v. Wade* declared abortion a right, most people occupy an uneasy (and unspecified) middle ground: they want abortion legal in most cases or illegal in most cases, but either way they want to qualify their stance in some way.

Over the years, mainline Protestants have expressed their own reservations and qualifications. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for example, declared that “the strong Christian presumption is that . . . all life is precious to God [and so] we are to preserve and protect it.” Therefore “abortion ought to be an option of last resort.” Voicing a similar position, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America urged the church to “seek to reduce the need to turn to abortion as the answer to unintended pregnancies.” Churches that backed legalization did not want abortion to be a routine means of birth control.

On those Christian grounds, it is good news that abortion rates in the United States dropped 5 percent in 2009 (the latest year of reporting) to the lowest rate in 40 years—15 abortions per 1,000 women of childbearing age. Rates have generally trended downward since 1981, when they peaked at 29. Health officials attribute the recent drop to more widespread use of contraception, especially by teens, and the use of more effective types of contraception.

U.S. abortion rates remain high, however, compared to other countries where abortion is legal. In Belgium and Germany the rates are below 10 per 1,000 women, and in the Netherlands, where abortion is freely available up to 21 weeks, the rate is 5, the lowest in the world. The Dutch have achieved that low rate through widespread education about family planning and easy access to contraception and by inculcating a general understanding that abortion is an irresponsible means of birth control.

Mainline Protestants' nuanced position on abortion may not bring people to the barricades, but it points to a coherent, responsible policy. As the example of the Dutch and as the trend in the U.S. abortion rate show, it is possible to move toward a society in which abortion is safe, legal and rare.