



BEYOND HER YES

Reimagining Pro-Life Ministry to **Empower Women**
and **Support Families** in Overcoming Poverty

Marisol Maldonado Rodriguez

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In memory of my mom, Felicita,
whose face I see in every woman I serve.

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Foreword

Life after yes. Since saying yes to the role of director for a small pregnancy resource center in northern New Jersey fifteen years ago, I have seen the amazing potential of the Church—with a capital C—to extend hope and practical help to under-resourced, overwhelmed parents. Hope and help that save and change lives. Through the selfless generosity of countless individuals and churches, God has grown Lighthouse Pregnancy Resource Center to serve more and more women and couples facing unexpected pregnancies.

As we were being led to open the first pregnancy center for Paterson, our state's third-largest city and one of its most challenged urban areas, God led us to Marisol Rodriguez. This divine encounter included her three equally passionate collaborators in the founding of RENEW Life Center—Evelyn, Michele, and Sanyika. These women were familiar with the good work of pregnancy centers because they had served in them. But they also knew there

was more good work that needed to be done after the precious “yes” was delivered into the arms of a courageous mom.

The services of a pregnancy center typically extend through pregnancy and a child’s first year of life. But the complex issues and deep needs of under-resourced parents extend back several generations—and without extensive intervention, they will ripple forward to the next generations. Marisol and the cofounders of RENEW Life Center had experienced generational and situational poverty in their own lives. This gave them understanding, empathy, and a burning desire to equip other parents in poverty to thrive as they raise the next generation.

Lighthouse and RENEW joined forces to address the immense challenges mothers face as they struggle to say yes to a new life. We suspected we would be better together, and five years later, it seems we were right. We are *all* better together. God has made us so we need each other.

If your heart is already saying, *Yes, I want to do more for struggling parents and their children*, you will love this book’s practical applications. If you have said yes to a life of following Christ but have never considered your responsibility to parents in poverty, I ask you to read this book with an open heart. And most of all, I pray God will use you—as He has used Marisol—to make a wonderful difference in this world.

Debbie Provencher
Executive Director, Lighthouse Pregnancy Resource Center

1

What If Our Pro-Life Perspective Is Too Narrow?

May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears.

Nelson Mandela

As someone who had served in pro-life ministry for over a decade, I never thought that my view of pro-life ministry was too narrow. I was the client services director of a pregnancy resource center located in a large city in New Jersey. I had served as a volunteer there for almost ten years before I took on the director's role, and during that time, I thought I had developed a pretty good understanding of the pro-life cause and the many issues surrounding it. When I thought of pro-life ministry, I mainly thought of the abortion-minded women

who came to the pregnancy center. My focus was to lead those women to choose life.

I was also concerned about sharing the gospel and with spreading the abstinence message to prevent teen pregnancies and to prevent repeat pregnancies for women who had already experienced an unplanned pregnancy. I was happy that we could supply them with diapers, wipes, and baby items, but what I did not know was that these women needed so much more than that initial material support.

On November 2, 2010, I received an email from one of our clients. She had been abortion minded when she visited us, but with counsel and encouragement from one of our volunteers, she made a choice for life. She had a college degree, she had a full-time career-path job, and she was a go-getter. So what I read in her email really rocked me to the core. Here is her message, shared with her permission:¹

Subject: please advise me

Hello Marisol,

How have you been? I've been trying to stay close to God and do His will, but things seem not to be going as planned. I'm five months pregnant, and I'm scared. My debt-to-income ratio is so close that I'm living paycheck to paycheck, and I haven't found a way to budget getting any supplies for the baby to come. I'm not sure what I'm having (boy or girl), but I've been feeling depressed, and I've been crying a lot. I'm not sure where or who to turn to because my family has become too busy for me. I'm already stressing out due to my insta-

bility, and to add to the matter, my mom will not be able to babysit for me while I'm at work. I'm at my wit's end trying to plan and be able to survive on my check while providing for this baby that God put here for some reason.

I'm very sad because when I first spoke to Janet I was walking a thin line with the decision of having this baby, and now that I've made this decision, I'm not sure what to do to continue moving forward. Is there any way you can help me? Do you know where I can get the baby supplies, breast pump stuff, furniture, babysitting services, anything (quality materials and services for a low price)? I would like the baby to have something even if I have nothing. I have a TV that sits on top of a milk crate. I'm sleeping on a bed that hurts my back, and it's mismatched; one part is full, the other a queen, the base doesn't fit. I'm grateful I'm not sleeping on the floor. I don't want to be a failure, but I'm lost. Can you help me get back on track?

Amanda

I was stunned. I could not wrap my head around what I'd just read. I could sense her pain through her words. Initially, I was angry at myself—how did I drop the ball like that? I thought that because she had an education and a career, she would be okay. Pregnancy outside of marriage would put her in some difficulty; that was to be expected. But what I didn't think about was the fear and loneliness she was feeling. Worst of all, at five months pregnant, she was beginning to regret choosing to have her baby because she felt alone in that decision.

The email broke my heart, and Amanda's fear was well-founded, as there was a 40% chance that she would end

up in poverty. What she earned as an elementary school teacher was fine for a single person, but for a family of two, it was far below what she needed to survive. That got me thinking: If this woman, who was much farther ahead educationally and economically than most of my clients, was struggling so badly, what was happening to my typical client? The thought scared me. The women I had seen week after week, month after month, for more than a decade felt like they were still sinking, and I hadn't realized it.

Although pregnancy resource centers provide expecting moms with many of the material items needed to care for a newborn baby, not all centers are able to provide them in the same capacity. The pregnancy center I worked at did not have the material resources that Amanda needed at that time. Her email was the impetus for me to take a closer look at what happens in the lives of women in poverty who choose life for their babies.

I believe pro-life Christians are right to make a focused effort to reach abortion-vulnerable women and save pre-born babies' lives. To that end, concerned Christians have relied heavily on pregnancy resource centers, which have some great success stories resulting from their diligent efforts. But our lifesaving efforts should not end with the saved life of the baby. We need to look at the big picture of the woman's life and her baby's future and seek to understand her context, the circumstances that make her abortion-vulnerable, and what she needs after she says yes to her baby's life. We have to consider the root of the problem—poverty itself—and how to alleviate it.

As I examined the traditional pro-life approach more closely, I realized that we had been shortsighted, and some of our foundational assumptions were rooted in four misconceptions:

1. *After a woman chooses life, she's going to be okay.*

If I put myself in the shoes of a mother with a pregnant teenager or young adult daughter, I know I would do whatever it took to protect my grandchild's life and my daughter's future. But not every young woman facing an unplanned pregnancy has that type of support. A woman in poverty with a pregnant daughter could protect the life of her grandchild by encouraging her daughter to choose life, but she may not be able to help protect her daughter's future. Very often, the grandmother does not have the education or resources to do that.

According to the website *Single Mother Guide*, "Among children living with mother only, 38.1% lived in poverty."² Additional research from the *National Vital Statistics Report* shows that the educational level of parents, particularly unwed mothers, is a key indicator of a child's likely educational level as well as other socioeconomic outcomes that will negatively affect them over the course of their lives.³ Not only do these children have the disadvantage of being born to parents who have low levels of education, but because they are unmarried, the familial support structure is also greatly compromised.

2. *A pregnancy resource center is an all-encompassing solution.* It's not, and it's not meant to be. Pregnancy centers are more like medical triage units than long-term support. They are lifesavers, and they do a great job. Many of them have extended their services to include parenting classes and material support in the form of diapers, wipes, formula, and other basic baby items, but typically their services end a year after the baby is born. What happens after that? How does a young mom with a limited education learn to parent a difficult teenager? What about all the financial, emotional, and spiritual support she'll need along the way?
3. *A woman and her baby can survive on government assistance.* Besides the fact that this is not true, is that all we as Christians want? Do we want the woman and her baby to merely survive? To barely get by? I don't think that's what God has commissioned us to do. He has called us to abundant living, and we're called to share that abundant life with others.

Gone are the days of blanket “welfare” in which all of an individual's basic survival needs were taken care of for the duration of their child's life. However, there are partial forms of government assistance, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps; Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), formally known as welfare; and Temporary Rental Assistance (TRA). They are not

all-encompassing programs but create some sense of stability.

As of March 2022, “a majority (62%) of SNAP households with children were single-mother households,” but “only 11% received cash benefits from TANF.”⁴ Essentially this means that close to 90% of individuals who need additional financial support do not receive it. Housing support has limitations of up to two years—if it’s available at all. With rising food costs and lack of access to full-service grocery stores in poverty-riddled areas (often known as food deserts), there is much less support and opportunity for a viable lifestyle. I don’t mean to suggest that financial security or high levels of wealth are the answer, but a dignified quality of life and a spirit of hope are not unreasonable minimums to be met.

4. *Only unmarried and non-Christian women are abortion-vulnerable.* I have seen many couples at the center who are married or engaged and are considering abortion. Why? Because they’re just not ready for a child right now, they want to buy a house first, or they want to pay off their student loans or get their careers off the ground.

I also know firsthand that a woman can regularly attend church and still be considering an abortion. I believe one of the main reasons many women consider abortion is they fear losing something else that is very important. A woman in church has the same fears as others (losing

financial stability, her education, a relationship, etc.), plus the added fear of judgment and being ostracized from her church family if she reveals her pregnancy. If she's a young woman and her parents hold a position in the church, then she fears the shame the pregnancy will bring on her family and the impact it will have on her parents serving in the church.

Despite the evidence to the contrary, it's easy to hold these misconceptions, especially if one hasn't experienced poverty. RENEW cofounder Sanyika Calloway explains:

Those who have never lived in poverty don't know the hurdles, the boundaries, and the detours that having an unplanned pregnancy place on a woman in poverty. So it's easy to assume or think that once she chooses life, she's going to be okay, but she's not going to be okay because she comes from a background of poverty. She has a limited education, limited options, limited life experiences, and greatly diminished chances for change, progress, or success.⁵

If a woman comes from a middle-income background and becomes pregnant as a teenager or college student, she will most likely have the support she needs to finish her college education. Her parents will rearrange their schedules, hire babysitters, and provide financial support. They will do whatever it takes to ensure she has a stable

future. But if a woman doesn't have that support system as a pregnant teenager or young adult, then high school stops and college never begins. Instead, she enters a cycle of hopelessness and despair where one poor choice warrants another, and she doesn't know the way out. Moving beyond that reality becomes the exception rather than the rule.

Living in poverty does not merely mean struggling to provide basic needs due to a lack of financial stability. It is an all-encompassing condition that affects how a person feels, how they think, how they form relationships, how they function as parents, how they practice self-esteem, how they view their own future and the future of their families, and how others view them.

Addressing poverty is important because women in poverty are targeted for abortion. We have to understand what poverty is like for individuals and for families if we want to better understand what they truly need to not only choose life but also lead an abundant life. When we are looking at them through the lens of our middle-class lives, we assume that they have the opportunity to make the same choices we do but choose something different. This is not the case. When we understand the reality of poverty, we will have a greater impact on saving lives. We will be able to see the whole picture of the woman's life, not just her unplanned pregnancy and the next few choices in front of her. We'll have an idea of what her history may be and the possible course of her future. Then we can better address and quell her fears of the life of poverty she may feel trapped in.

According to research compiled from national studies, in 2020,

Almost one third (27.7%) of single mother families were “food insecure,” about one-ninth (11.7%) used food pantries, one third spent more than half their income on housing, which is generally considered the threshold for “severe housing cost burden.” Families headed by single mothers are among the poorest households, [and] more than a third lived in poverty, and as such, are extremely vulnerable to homelessness.⁶

If we care about the pro-life issue, we have to care about poverty. Period. They are inextricably linked. Can you see that if we separate the two, we’re only doing half the job God has called us to? It’s no wonder we will throw our hands up in disbelief when the same girl keeps coming back pregnant again and again.

The majority of unplanned pregnancies and abortions happen to women in poverty. If we want to stop or reduce unplanned pregnancies and abortions among this population, we must address poverty itself. Poverty is not a religious issue, although Philippians 2:4 tells us, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” It’s not a political issue, though we should vote for leaders who support our biblical view. Fundamentally, poverty is an economic issue.

After that harsh but necessary wake-up call from Amanda’s email, I began to look more closely at the lives of my clients. I noticed things I never had before, although

they were obvious all along. Without even knowing it, I had gotten into a pattern of seeing only the problems I expected to see, rather than seeing each new individual as exactly that—someone I had never met before, with their own set of struggles, fears, doubts, and worries totally unique to them.

Perspective is a powerful thing, and once we see something with a new awareness, it's hard to unsee it. The vast majority of women who walked into my center lived in poverty. Although I had been raised in poverty in that same city, I had forgotten what it was like for my mother to raise eight children completely on her own. I felt the Lord telling me I had to remember the shame, fear, and frustration of being poor. In that remembering, the Lord broke my heart, then built me back up and gave me an expanded calling.

Generational and Situational Poverty

I've been speaking of poverty in general terms, but I would like to make some important distinctions. There are two types of poverty: generational and situational. Women experience generational poverty when they come from a background of poverty for two generations or more. Situational poverty is when an event such as the loss of a job, an illness, or a divorce throws a person into poverty. When a woman experiences situational poverty, it's easier to get out because she has the skills, contacts, and resources to get back on her feet with some effort and time. When a woman comes from generational poverty, she doesn't have

any of that. She faces a huge knowledge gap because the life skills she needs to overcome poverty are not covered in school, not modeled by her family, and not seen in the lives of those she interacts with, and so they're not known.

Middle-income families naturally pass down to their children the skills needed to live productive and economically stable lives. In poverty, the skills that are passed down are based on survival. That's what a woman's parents know how to do well, and that's what is taught or, in most cases, caught through the experiences of her life. So while middle-income families often experience greater cycles of wealth creation, families in poverty often experience greater cycles of entrenched poverty. However, we can use the unplanned pregnancies women are facing to save lives, save souls, and interrupt poverty patterns for generations to come.

I love Isaiah 58, in particular verses 6–9:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with
shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and
blood?
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;

then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear
guard.

Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am
I. (NIV)

God gives us clear instructions on how we should address those facing poverty and oppression. He then tells us why we should do it—because our well-being is tied to theirs.

Bringing Options to Light

Often when I sit across from women considering an abortion, the stories I hear are the same. She had a dream. Maybe her goal was to be the first person in her family to graduate from high school or college. Perhaps it was to have a career and help her mom and siblings have better lives. She aspires to something that no one in her family has ever been able to do. She hasn't seen it role-modeled. She doesn't know how to get from here to there. But what she's sure of is that this pregnancy will put an end to her dream.

At that moment, we as the Church have the opportunity to tell this woman that there's a third option—an option where she can choose life and her dreams as well. But we have to show her that it is possible. If she's willing to do the hard work of bringing a child into the world, raising that child, and pursuing her goals, then there are people who will come alongside her in solidarity, providing consistent

support and resources to help her make her dream a reality. When we show her that we are the guardians of her dreams and the shepherds of her soul, we show her that we love her, her baby, and their future. They all matter to God and to us.

The Difference One Church Can Make

I was born to a single woman in Puerto Rico who already had six children. Her life was hard. She was orphaned by the age of nine, she never went to school, and other than cooking, cleaning, and raising children, she didn't have any particular work skills. She was wholly dependent on the man in her life for survival.

My father, the latest man in her life, was an abusive, violent man, but she was thankful that he kept her and her children fed, housed, and safe from *other* predators. In 1965, my father brought us all to New Jersey. Here, in one generation, the course of life for my mother's descendants changed forever! Her children went from being another generation to experience abject poverty, no education, and no marriages to being educated and skilled professionals, spouses, and homeowners who never spent a day on welfare once they reached adulthood.

How did she do it? She didn't. At least not on her own. She stepped into a church, and that made all the difference in our world.

My mother was introduced to the Lord in Puerto Rico by a neighbor named Doña Mery. My older sisters told me that she was a very kind older woman with long white

hair in a bun. Every time Doña Mery saw my mother outside hanging laundry on the clothesline, she would come out to tell her about Jesus and invite her to church. After many of these conversations, my mother accepted her invitation and went to church with her. That day was the beginning of a new life for us.

When my family arrived in New Jersey, the first thing my mother did was look for a church. She found a small storefront church in Newark. It was a poor church, it didn't have many resources, and there were only a couple of middle-income families who were part of the congregation. But the members were kind and made us feel welcome.

At that time, we lived in a tiny two-bedroom apartment. My mom converted the dining room into a third bedroom for herself and my father. The kids were crammed into the other two bedrooms. That was my life. We barely survived, but life was the same in every other house in our neighborhood, so I thought it was normal. What I knew wasn't normal was my father's violent and erratic behavior, but I never spoke about it. In fact, I don't remember us talking about it at home among ourselves either. That was just the way he was, and we accepted it. We kept our heads down and our mouths shut and stayed clear of him as best we could. That is, until our church got involved in my mother's life.

The more the congregation found out about what was happening in our home, the more they got involved. The women rallied around my mother with love and support. As the pastor made a plan to have my father removed from

the home, others in the church taught my mother about social services and how to apply for them so that she didn't have to rely on my father for survival. Otherwise, she would have never agreed to have him taken from our home.

I was only a little girl, so that plan to have him removed wasn't discussed with me, but I remember the day it was put in motion. Our pastor sat nervously on our couch, waiting for my father to come home from work, while two police officers were stationed outside our home in case things became violent, which most certainly they would. I remember my mother was very scared; she was terrified of my father. But she put her trust first in God and then in her new family.

Although there was much fear and chaos, the plan worked. My father got the message that my mom was not alone anymore, and she was not fair game for his rage and abuse. There was now a group of people who surrounded her and supported her. The few times he attempted to make his way back into our home, he was reminded that things had changed. A new life had begun for us. And all it took was the body of Christ to see, listen, and take action boldly. From then on, my mother and her children were finally free of the tyranny of my father.

Although she probably did not feel that way at the moment, my mother was one of the lucky ones. Raising eight children as a single mother might not have sounded like a dream arrangement, but she was surrounded by people determined to love, protect, and nurture her and her family. They kept away the elements that threatened to disrupt her making progress. Her blessing was in finding

the church before the situation got so bad that the way out was no longer clear.

Just as important as the church's role was my mother's desire to have a better life and her willingness to work for it, even when times were tough and things seemed impossible. She was willing to accept that the way out of poverty was not by finding a man to take care of her but rather by empowering herself to work out of the situation and empowering her children to never have to live the same life.