

Hope and Healing in Loving Arms:

The Crisis Pregnancy Centre of Winnipeg and Rachel's Vineyard

*How can we help women, and men, affected by abortion, infant death or a miscarriage?
How can we lovingly support pregnant women to encourage them to view their pregnancy as a hopeful situation, and not an occasion to consider having an abortion?*

Juergen Severloh, director of the Crisis Pregnancy Centre, and Chris MacKay, director of Rachel's Vineyard Ministries, will be speaking at Life's Vision Annual Fundraising Lunch on February 22 (1). They discuss the challenges and rewards associated with helping a particularly vulnerable group of people.



The staff at Crisis Pregnancy Centre (left to right): Juergen Severloh (front), Sarah Severloh (seated), Heather Wiebe, Sharon Boothroyd, Marlene McNabb, Marita Malo (seated) and Chris MacKay.

The Crisis Pregnancy Centre of Winnipeg

Founded in 1985, the Crisis Pregnancy Centre of Winnipeg welcomed 2140 women in 2019, all seeking support in what is more often than not a highly difficult and precarious situation: the unexpected pregnancy.

Women are greeted by the ten counsellors that form the core staff. These committed Christians describe themselves as “missionary staff”, which means that each of them raises funds to pay for their own salaries. Assisting the core staff is a bevy of some thirty volunteers.

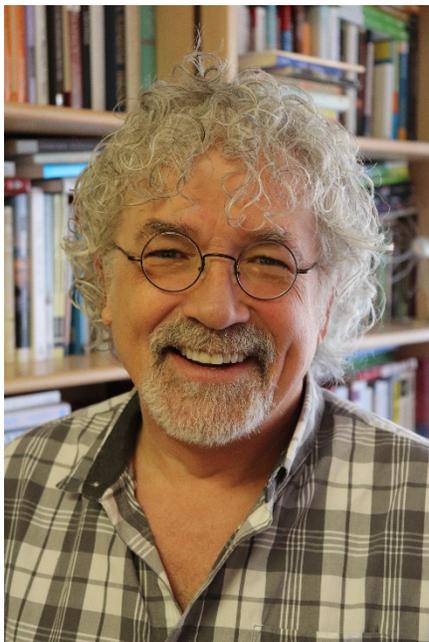
“I raise funds by asking family and friends to help, notes Juergen Severloh. I also knock on the doors of pro-life business. It’s a challenge, but a beautiful one. When people understand what we do, they are generally supportive and willing to help.

“I got involved with the Crisis Pregnancy Centre right at the beginning, in 1985. At the time, American theologian Francis Schaeffer wrote a series of books and films called *How Should We Then Live?*, which was quite influential. The Pregnancy Centre Movement began. Today, we’re one of 70 centres in Canada, and there are around 4000 in the States.

“We’re all connected, and all have the same quality controls. We’re all Christian, and all pro-life. We won’t recommend or support abortions.”

For Juergen Severloh, the key to helping women during a crisis pregnancy is “above all, understanding”.

“A woman in a crisis pregnancy is not thinking about abortion or life on an abstract moral basis. She’s thinking about *her* life – her future, her reputation, her social connections, her employment, her finances. In crisis, everything seems to be in jeopardy because of her pregnancy. And yet, she can’t yet see her child. Hear it or hold it in her arms.



“So, the choice is seemingly easy. In her anxiety about the future, either the woman dies to herself, or her child. Of course, God seems to have put something maternally beautiful in women. And so, we hope that the pregnant woman will come to see that her child is made in the image of God.

“That’s our challenge. At first, our work is to rehumanize the woman, to bring her back to a truer sense of identity that God has for her. And not necessarily using spiritual language either. It all comes down to understanding. We just have to love her well and accompany her through a difficult time.

“To do that, we initially try to make a superficial connection. It may sound trivial, but we find something about her that is beautiful: her eyes, her hair, her

glasses or her fabulous shoes. We let her know that. We offer her coffee or tea, and a nice place to sit. The Centre always has low lighting. We create a calm, accepting space. Because you must realize that for her, the adrenaline is pumping. She's in crisis. This is the biggest thing in her life so far. And she's scared.

"Our job is to mediate that fear. To slow it down, to breathe it down. To let her know that it's safe here.

"Then we work at what we call *layers counselling*. Slowly, we get to the heart of what she's living and feeling, which is riskier because we are slowly exposing her vulnerability. Ultimately, we ask, *Why are you wanting to do this thing?* You can't ask too early. You'll come across as judgemental. And you'll lose her. She'll leave and never come back. And abort her child.

"So, when we finally get to the *why*, we accept whatever she tells us, which often can be something like *I want to have an abortion because I'm afraid my life is going to end*. We don't affirm that statement. We don't believe it's necessarily true. But we can understand the feeling.

"And the loneliness of the situation. I can easily understand that in today's hookup culture, the rate of absentee fathers is increasing. I can understand why she feels alone, abandoned. Our counsellors understand that fear. So, we stay with the fear, and sit with the woman and move progressively into exploring the nature of her fear. *What is going on in you? What do you believe about yourself?* She might think she won't be a good mom. Ultimately, we get to the heart of the matter with her, whatever that may be. And we get to really connect with her. And then she can begin to think about her situation in a fuller way, a more positive way, a clearer way. Because crisis brings blinders.

"Seeing more clearly is just the beginning. The pendulum of emotions will continue to move back and forth. She'll have beautiful dreams about her baby, then nightmares. And that's okay. We want her processing her experience. Because our pro-abortion culture really doesn't want a woman to process anything."

"*Pro-choice*. That's an anachronistic little phrase. It doesn't jibe with our time anymore. In 2020, there's no such thing as pro-choice in the world of abortion. It's pro-abortion all day long. Our hookup culture had enabled men to leave pregnant women. And pregnant women are invited to celebrate abortion. To brag about it on t-shirts. Recently, a Hollywood actress receiving an award bragged that she wouldn't have gotten the award without having had an abortion."

With each visit to the Centre, progress is made. The woman makes the tentative decision to carry her baby to term. The Centre connects her immediately to a doctor, so she can obtain straight medical facts about her pregnancy, and to properly monitor her baby's health.

Juergen Severloh: “We also get her right away to an ultrasound, which we pay for. She gets a photo and a DVD of the baby. Ultrasound has been a game changer. It’s a life-affirming experience. The same with doppler tones. We give the woman the equipment so that she can go home and explore the sounds of her body, and the heartbeat of her child. Even if she hasn’t fully decided to keep the baby, these tools can trigger serious thought, and intense positive feelings.”

As the woman’s pregnancy progresses, the Centre meets with her regularly, often on a weekly basis.

“When she has the baby, our client has all sorts of support lined up. We connect her to the parenting programs Nobody’s Perfect and Triple P Positive Parenting. She learns cooking, economics and how to interact with her child.

“We also connect her to a different community. We try to break the cycle of poor choices of friendships that a lot of our clients are in. And our volunteers are there to help her. The result is often incredibly astonishing. Some of our clients have become our good friends. We meet regularly. Some have been friends for thirty years!”

Rachel’s Vineyard Ministries

Director of Rachel’s Vineyard, Chris MacKay is also the Infant Loss Co-ordinator at the Family Support Centre of Winnipeg, a part of the Crisis Pregnancy Centre of Winnipeg.

“I started at the Crisis Pregnancy Centre in 1987. My work with Rachel’s Vineyard came later, in 2005. At its core, Rachel’s Vineyard takes care of women, and sometimes men, who have experienced all manner of infant loss, such as miscarriages, still births, infant death and abortion. We do this through counselling and special retreats. At any given time, we can have 20 clients.

“Abortion is the big piece of the work we do. I have a team of four counsellors. Two do post-abortion counselling; two specialize in other forms of infant loss. We welcome clients at the Centre, and also visit women’s corrections facilities, to visit those there who have known infant loss. We try to establish a connection in prison, so that when they no longer incarcerated, they will already feel comfortable visiting us at the Centre.

“All our services are free and confidential. Confidentiality is key. We have women whose pain and loss are recent, and others that have experienced loss thirty or forty years ago and are very nervous and unsure because they think it’s too late for counselling. But it’s never too late.

“Often, those who come immediately after an abortion are very distraught. They can’t work or go to school. They can’t function. They’re in a very traumatized state.

“Most of the time, a woman wants to discuss her feelings of shock, grief and loss one on one. They can’t talk about it with family or friends. Or if they do, it’s on a minimal and superficial level. To have a safe and comfortable place to come to is huge for our clients. We can build trust with them over the course of several visits. And then they can begin the challenge of working out their grief.

“A huge part of a woman’s reality in 2020 is that most don’t know that help is there for them. It’s important to let the general public know that we’re here. Otherwise the only comments a woman will get are the well-meaning ones from family, friends and colleagues who tell them *It’s okay, you can always have another baby*. They’ll say things like that that dismiss or minimize the grief a mother – or father – is experiencing.

“Or they don’t take the loss seriously at all. One of the reasons, I think, why abortion has become thinkable, is that miscarriages are too often dismissed. If that 12-week old fetus isn’t important or valued, then abortion is feasible. There’s no value in that little growing life.

“Instead, at the Centre, we ask women *how* they are feeling. And then we listen. We have a compassionate curiosity when someone is going through the depths of grief. Because that little life *was* and *is* important. Culturally, we all need to connect with that child. Then we’ll truly understand that life begins at conception.”

Abortion, like all infant loss, is devastating. Many women experience emotional symptoms, such as guilt and shame, or lowered self-esteem. Women also develop eating disorders, workaholicism or discomfort around children. Symptoms can also be physical, such as sterility, sexual problems and an increase of miscarriages.

“The symptoms can also be spiritual, notes Chris MacKay. Women can feel condemned and experience an inability to accept God’s forgiveness. There can be a lot of self-loathing.

“There can also be numbness. My role is to guide the women I welcome into helping identify their feelings. I help them explore. I don’t tell them what to feel. I simply give them the time and space in which to do that for themselves, and I help them ask the right questions in order to heal. I help them connect the dots, but they must be willing to



connect the dots in order to do the work. The hard work of turning their grieving into mourning.

“The greatest reward for me is watching God work in somebody’s life. I have seen women come in so broken, so full of self-condemnation that I couldn’t imagine them moving forward. Then, with time, I get to watch God rebuild their self-identity into His. God comes alongside to say *You’re valuable, because I value you. You made a mistake. You are not a mistake.*

“If they are willing, and ready, I also invite ten women to participate in a special Rachel’s Vineyard retreat. There’s lot of work beforehand to get them to a public meeting with other women who have lost a child like they have.

“We meet in a small space, at a faith-based centre. It’s a faith-based retreat, with Scripture readings, prayer, meditation, ritual and candles. All the participants know full well that the retreat will involve a Christian perspective. Participants need to be open to the Scriptures. If they say yes to the experience of a retreat, it can be a very therapeutic, healing process. And it can also bring them closer to Jesus.”

For information on the Crisis Pregnancy Centre of Winnipeg, visit their website: www.pregnancy.ca

For information about Rachel’s Vineyard Ministries, visit their website: www.rachelsvineyard.org

(1) Winnipeg Life’s Vision Annual Fundraising Lunch – February 22, 2020

Our theme will be **Hope and Healing in Loving Arms** 10:30 – 11:30 AM “What is Rachel’s Vineyard?” Presentation by Chris MacKay (**This session is free to attend**) 12 noon - Lunch - keynote speaker Juergen Severloh, Executive Director of Crisis Pregnancy Centre of Winnipeg. Holy Eucharist Parish Centre, 460 Munroe Avenue. Tickets \$25. Table of 8 \$175. Register at lifesvision@shaw.ca or 204 233-8047 **Donations of new baby items for the crisis pregnancy centre are appreciated! To view poster, [click here](#).**