

Religious leaders call for action on New York City's high abortion rate

NEW YORK – New York City has one statistic in particular that it can't be proud of and needs to change, according to local religious leaders: 41 percent of pregnancies in the city end in abortion, almost double the national rate.

In the Bronx, the borough with the highest rate, the figure is 48 percent – nearly half of all pregnancies. The statistics were among those released in late December by the New York City Department of Health, which also reported that 87,273 abortions were performed in the five boroughs in 2009.

New York Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan was among a group of Catholic, Protestant and Jewish religious leaders who gathered at a Jan. 6 news conference at the Penn Club in Manhattan to focus attention on the city's abortion rate and to call for efforts to reduce it.

"That 41 percent of New York babies are aborted – a percentage even higher in the Bronx, and among our African-American babies in the womb – is downright chilling," Archbishop Dolan said.

"The New York community is rightly celebrated for its warm welcome to immigrants, for its hospitality, sense of embrace and inclusion, and gritty sensitivity for those in need," he continued. "But we are tragically letting down the tiniest, most fragile and vulnerable: the little baby in the womb. ... I invite all to come together to make abortion rare, a goal even those who work to expand the abortion license tell us they share."

The news conference was sponsored by the Chiaroscuro Foundation, a private, nonprofit organization, and was led by its president, Sean Fieler. He said that the organization will spend about \$1 million this year to aid pregnant women.

Archbishop Dolan, in his remarks, stated that the archdiocese continues its commitment to help expectant mothers.

“A quarter-century ago,” he said, “Cardinal John O’Connor publicly stated, ‘Any woman who is pregnant and in need can come to the church and we will help you,’ a pledge Cardinal (Edward) Egan, and now I, reaffirm.”

He listed the ways that the church helps: through Catholic Charities, adoption services, lobbying on behalf of pregnant women and the mothers of infants, support for alternatives to abortion, health care and “education of youth for healthy, responsible, virtuous sexual behavior.”

Responding to a question, he summed up the message of the church to pregnant women: “If we can help, let us know. We’re here. You’re not alone.”

Also among the speakers were Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn; the Rev. Michel Faulkner, founding pastor of the New Horizon Church and president of the Institute for Leadership, both in Harlem; Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel of Agudath Israel of America; and Leslie Diaz, a spokeswoman for Democrats for Life, wife of state Sen. Ruben Diaz and pastor with him of the Christian Community Neighborhood Church in the Bronx.

Speakers noted the disproportionately high abortion rate among black and Hispanic women. Rev. Faulkner said, “All New Yorkers need to know that abortion has become the leading cause of death among African-Americans.” The abortion rate in the black community in the city is 60 percent, he noted.

“My people, the African-American people, did not ... endure 300 years of slavery and 100 years of Jim Crow law to face genocide in the 21st century,” he said.

Expressing alarm at the overall abortion rate, he said, “We as moral and religious leaders need to stand together for life.”

Diaz noted that in her home borough of the Bronx, the abortion rate is 48 percent for all pregnancies, 49 percent among Hispanic women. She added that those statistics “should not be tolerated in a civilized society, not even by those who call themselves ‘pro-choice.’”

“It is the members of the minority community – my community – that are greatly impacted and affected by abortion,” she said. She added that it is “black and

Hispanic women who turn to abortion as their only choice.” She called for women to be given information that will help them to make “better and healthier choices.” The ultimate goal, she said, must be “ending the practice of abortion.”

Bishop DiMarzio mentioned that New York City in 1986 introduced sex education in schools “perhaps devoid of any moral content” and started handing out condoms in schools in 1991. That approach “will not stop abortions” and may have increased them, the bishop said. Young people must be given reasons “not to engage in sex outside of marriage,” he said.