

Ivy League Scholar Devotes His Life to Ending Abortion After Hearing a Word From God

By Josh Shepherd

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As America's pro-life movement advances to protect mothers and pre-born children, many work daily on diverse efforts — in crisis pregnancy centers, in churches praying faithfully, on the mission field, in public policy groups... in a thousand other places.

One common need for pro-life advocates is unimpeachable research: interpreting data on the number of abortions, abortion rates, and the effectiveness of pro-life advocacy to save lives. On the last point, any serious scholar will uncover the work of Michael New, Ph.D.

After earning degrees from Dartmouth and Stanford, New held a postdoctoral position at Harvard University before moving to his current teaching role at the University of Michigan–Dearborn. He also serves as an Adjunct Scholar with Charlotte Lozier Institute, the research and education arm of Susan B. Anthony List.

In an exclusive interview, New discusses how faith sparked his deeper involvement in defending pre-born lives, what research says on banning abortion after 20 weeks, why libertarians need a big tent, and more.

Bound4LIFE: Dr. New, the path of Ivy League research scholars is not typically to address abortion-related issues with statistical analysis. Does your interest in life issues pre-date your academic career?

Michael New, Ph.D.: I was not really involved in pro-life issues until I went to college. In 11th Grade, they showed the movie *The Silent Scream* — and I began to view abortion as a terrible injustice, but I still wasn't motivated.

In college, I got involved in a conservative group on campus which set me down the road toward becoming a pro-life activist.

I remember one day I was sitting in Mass, and it hit me like a ton of bricks: life is a really important issue. It wasn't like the capital gains tax or term limits or the 15 other things I'd been researching. Surely saving pre-born lives is the most important.

Being a college student, I thought the best thing I could do is start a group. I spoke to my priest, who told me about another student trying to get a group off the ground; we joined forces, and I never looked back.

Bound4LIFE: How did this new outlook influence your research work?

Michael New: That took a little longer. As a graduate student at Stanford, my dissertation dealt with state-level budget rules and fiscal limits.

I was lucky to be at Stanford, for two reasons. First, Stanford is very quantitative — they insisted on a lot of statistics and methods courses, which worked out well for me. Second, the school's social sciences departments are much more ideologically diverse than many others are.

In my research I noticed that these fiscal limits, put in place in the 1970s, were often ineffective. Many of these so-called "limits" were poorly designed or had various problems that limited effectiveness.

After I earned my Ph.D., I had a fellowship at Harvard. Following the state-level taxation study, somehow the thought occurred to me: I hope these state laws pro-lifers are working so hard to pass are doing some good.

Analyzing the issue of abortion with state-level data had never really been done, partly because it was tough to get a good data set: what states had passed what laws at what time.

Back then only NARAL tracked this data, in a report called Who Decides? issued annually. Yet getting all their reports over many years proved difficult; NARAL did not provide copies to the Library of Congress, nor did they make archives available online.

I found out in a roundabout way that there were archives I could access — at the Women's Library at Harvard. All the Who Decides? reports were right there waiting for me, which was very fortuitous.

So I had the initial study ready in 2003 and a few people looked at it, but no one really wanted to publish it.

Bound4LIFE: Ultimately, how did your first study of pro-life laws get published and noticed by the media?

Michael New: That fall Harvard brought in a number of visiting fellows, one of whom was Stuart Butler of The Heritage Foundation (now of The Brookings Institution). At his weekly seminar on health policy, we developed a friendship and I told him about this study.

Butler was intrigued, scholars at Heritage were interested, yet they had never done a study on life issues before. To make sure there were no mistakes, they actually had a staff member reconstruct my data set from scratch.

That study released in January 2004, to a lot of response. It showed clearly that public funding restrictions, parental involvement laws and informed consent laws all have effects in bringing abortion numbers down. Using a similar research model, I've updated the study a few times — most recently in a September 2014 report.

I figured the pro-life movement would appreciate the study and I'd move on; you know, pat me on the head and go about their day. It did not work out quite that way.

At the time, the pro-life movement did not have many proactive social scientists — no one critiquing studies that Guttmacher Institute and other groups were publishing. From time to time, I would get requests from people, "Hey, could you take a look at this study and give some feedback?" I was happy to do that.

National Review Online showed a lot of interest in my writing and research. Within a few years, I became an NRO blogger: summarizing my own research, as well as writing quick, punchy critiques of studies being published with a pro-abortion bias.

Bound4LIFE: Many pro-life advocates may not know you're affiliated with Cato Institute, a libertarian-based think tank. As an adjunct scholar, you've written much about the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR) in Colorado.

Michael New: You know, as bad as the media is about inaccurately reporting on life issues, the amount of misinformation they've spread about TABOR has probably been worse.

At Cato Institute — which takes no official position on abortion — there are a fair number of people sympathetic to the pro-life position. It's never really caused tension.

I've occasionally had people at libertarian gatherings who wouldn't talk to me due to my work on pro-life issues. To which I say, Libertarians ought to have a big tent. You win by addition and multiplication, not by subtraction and division. It's a lesson we need to take to heart.

Bound4LIFE: Right now in Washington, the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act remains a topic of hot discussion. What is your view on this proposed policy from a research perspective?

Michael New: Focusing attention on late-term abortion is smart, both for political and policy reasons.

The open discussion of partial-birth abortion in the mid-1990s fundamentally changed the debate. Public opinion shifted after that debate started, as they saw pictures of aborted pre-born children even in mainstream media. It became hard to avoid, which led many people away from a hardline pro-abortion stance.

On this ban after 20-weeks development, demographics that are not typically pro-life are supportive. Several polls show women are more likely to support a 20-week ban than men. The data show there isn't an age gap: young people are as likely to support this proposal as folks of an older generation.

I find it interesting to see how pro-abortion groups are reacting. A number of states have passed a 20-week ban on abortions — based on the pre-born child's pain capability as well as dangers to the mother.

Most of these are not being challenged in court. Perhaps these groups realize they would lose a legal challenge, which would set a "bad precedent" in their thinking. Even though they are making statements against the laws, they are generally not contesting the 20-week ban in the states.

It's wise to advance on a policy with broad support, which the issue of protecting pain-capable unborn children certainly has.