

Rachel's Vineyard Outcome Study

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June 21, 2004

The Rachel's Vineyard weekend retreat for healing after abortion has been spreading rapidly during the past seven years with numerous trained retreat teams in place throughout the U.S., as well as many international locations including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Cameroon, Africa, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and Russia. Numerous other locations are in a start-up process as the ministry realizes a 40% annual growth rate. Rachel's Vineyard has already offered Spanish language retreats in the U.S. Hispanic communities, with work in progress to establish Rachel's Vineyard in Latin America. The accelerating number of retreats available for international locations and in a number of languages can be attributed in part to women and men, who themselves have found the retreat to be exceptionally helpful and so, in turn wish to help others.

During this time of rapid growth, it seemed timely to do an outcome study to determine what the general effects of the Rachel's Vineyard process has been. The method chosen was that of a survey participated in by a large group of retreat alumni from different locations throughout the USA. These are women and men who have attended the retreat but also have had some time elapse since their attendance. They offered us an opportunity, therefore, to better evaluate the long-term negative or positive effects of the retreat.

To accomplish this, 10 typed surveys were sent out to 20 retreat leaders with the request to send the surveys by mail to a sample group of past retreatants whom they had permission to contact. Surveys were also sent out directly to an email cyber community of 63 retreat alumni. The survey provided information on how to return the survey to be addressed to John Bosco Institute which would independently evaluate the results. The survey indicated that names were not required and that in any case, individual surveys would not be released to Rachel's Vineyard team leaders, only summarized results. They were told that no identifying information would be shared outside of John Bosco Institute.

Out of 263 surveys sent out a total of 241 people responded to the survey, from 22 different U.S. states, with respondents from more than 22 different retreat teams though the exact number cannot be determined. One question asked people to name the location where they attended the Rachel's Vineyard retreat and most people identified the city and state. Others only listed state and not city, or the name of the retreat center. This makes it impossible to know with certainty how many teams were represented in the survey, since, for example, there are cases when the same team does retreats at more than one city. But we do know there were 22 different states represented, and more than 22 different retreat teams.

All of the 241 people did experience an abortion of their own child. There were 231 women and 10 men. The survey form gave instructions that men were to answer for

themselves (not for their partner) regarding the abortion of their own children and how it affected them.

There were 384 total abortions with one person not reporting a number of abortions. **The average number of abortions was 1.6 abortions per person. The range was from 1 to 8 abortions. One hundred forty-four people (60%) reported one abortion only, while 96 (40%) reported multiple abortions.**

History of Mental Health Treatment Following Abortion:

Of the 241 people reporting, 169 (70.1%) answered Yes to question number five: they have had mental health treatment at some time after their abortion. Seventy-one answered No, and one person did not answer. **This is 70.1% of those reporting who required mental health treatment at some time after their abortion.**

History of Suicide Attempts Following Abortion:

Of the 241 people reporting, 199 answered No to question #6 regarding suicide attempts, and **42 (17.4%) answered Yes, admitting to a suicide attempt** at some point after their abortion. [The survey asked, “Whether or not you received treatment, have you ever made a suicide attempt any time AFTER your abortion? (yes or no)].

History of Suicidal Thoughts Following Abortion:

Of the 240 people answering question #7 regarding suicidal thoughts, [“Did you have thoughts about suicide at any time AFTER your abortion (yes or no)?”], **157 people (65%) answered Yes.** (One person did not answer this question, thus the total is 240 instead of 241.)

History of Self-Mutilation Following Abortion:

Of the 241 reporting, **22 people (9.1%) answered Yes** to question #8, “At any time since your abortion did you ever cut yourself with the intention of hurting yourself but not as a suicide attempt (just to hurt but not kill yourself)?”

History of Alcohol or Substance Abuse Following Abortion:

Of the 241 reporting, **117 (48.5%) answered yes to alcohol substance abuse**, question #9. Additionally, several people gave hand-written comments admitting to other addictions such as “food addictions.” These were not counted and tallied since we had not asked about these additional, separate issues.

It is important to recognize that this group of 241 people who responded to the survey is a group that has experienced significant mental health problems subsequent to their abortion. Note that 70.1% required mental health treatment, 17.4% made suicide attempts, while 65% reported suicidal thoughts. Recall that 9.1% reported acts of self-mutilation and nearly half (48.5%) reported problems with alcohol or substance abuse. This does not “prove” that the abortion caused any of these problems, but it is important nevertheless to recognize that those responding to this survey report having had these problems.

Organizations which are considering possible sponsorship of the Rachel's Vineyard retreat, sometimes raise the question, "How will this retreat affect women who are suicidal or who may have mental health problems?" The concern is not for the "worried well" who may want to attend a retreat for personal growth or for closure on a grief issue. Rather, the concern is, what if seriously depressed people come to this spiritual retreat? What if people come to a retreat who are experiencing significant, though perhaps undisclosed, mental health problems, even suicidal thoughts or a history of suicide attempts? Will these people suffer more or improve with the Rachel's Vineyard retreat? Can this population safely participate in a retreat?

Up to this point, our survey was indicating that the particular group who were responding is an appropriate group for the questions that we wished to answer. These are women and men who have experienced significant, serious problems following their abortion(s). Now let us examine their perception of benefit or harm from the retreat.

Of the 241 who responded to the survey, 240 said Yes to question #10, that they had been on the Rachel's Vineyard weekend retreat. One person said No, but that person reported having been on the RV in the weekly support group format; therefore she was kept in the survey, though she did not rate this question as to how much the weekend helped her.

An important question relates to the time lapse between the completion of the retreat and the completion of the survey. There have been questions as to whether individuals might report a good experience immediately following a retreat, but with the passing of time might find that the Rachel's Vineyard did not provide as much lasting benefit as had been originally hoped. This is a common doubt related to spiritual experiences in general, independent of the specific situation for those who are post-abortive. It is a phenomenon known as "post-retreat euphoria."

With this in mind, question #16 asked for the date they attended the Rachel's Vineyard weekend retreat, from which we could calculate the amount of time that had passed.

Of the 240 who had completed the weekend retreat, 142 (58.9%) were filling out the survey more than one year after their retreat; and of these, the average was 3.1 years post-retreat. Indeed one woman reporting was 12 years post-retreat.

Eight people could not remember when they attended their RV (though since they could not remember, it would seem not to have been recent).

11 people reported attending a retreat within the one month or less from the time of the survey, only 4.6% of the total.

Of those in the 1-10 month range, there were 80, and the average was 4.8 months.

In question #10, therefore, we were confident to ask those who answered Yes to attending a retreat, to also indicate on a scale of - 5 to 5 whether it helped or hurt, with negative 5

denoting very harmful; negative one denoting a little harmful; zero, neither harmful nor helpful; one, a little helpful; and five denoting very helpful. We asked them to type in a number showing how much the Rachel's Vineyard retreat hurt or helped them personally: -5 -4 -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3 4 5.

Of the 240 who attended the weekend retreat, three people did not give a rating: in other words, 1.25% of those surveyed did not rate this question. Of the 237 who did rate, the most frequent response was "5": in fact 196 out of 237 answered "5" when they rated their experience of being helped by Rachel's Vineyard. This is 82.7% of those who gave a rating. The average rating of the 237 who gave a rating was 4.75. There were no negative ratings given of the Rachel's Vineyard weekend retreat. [The ratings ranged from 196 people (82.7%) rating 5, 26 (10.9%) people rating 4, 14 (5.9%) people rating 3, and one person (less than 1%) rating 1, for a total of 237 and an average of 4.75.]

Not included in the above is the one respondent who attended the Rachel's Vineyard weekly support group. This person rated her experience as 5 using the same scale, but was not included in the averaging above since she was reporting on the support group rather than the weekend retreat.

The survey, then, gave us statistical information for what we were already perceiving in our personal contacts with women and men who have attended Rachel Vineyard retreats. The retreat proves to be a substantially helpful experience not only for a short time after the retreat but even for the distant future. This does not surprise us because we have also perceived that the Rachel Vineyard retreats, both in their purpose and in their method, accord with the parameters of Christian faith.