

Testimony in Favor of HB 36, the Pastor Protection Act

Offered by Pastor Bill Giallourakis

I appreciate you making arrangements to hear my input today on the Pastor Protection Act, and I thank you for your service to our state and its people.

As a Christian and a pastor, I believe it is of the utmost importance to protect my freedom and the freedom of my congregation to hold and practice our sincerely held religious beliefs, without threat of civil or criminal liability. As such, I am in favor of House Bill 286, the Pastor Protection Act.

I have an unusual background that adds some insight into my testimony today. I was born and raised on the west side of Cleveland, and have spent the majority of my adult life here in my home state. As a teenager, I was a co-founder of one of the first Gay-Straight alliances in north east Ohio in my alma matter of North Olmsted High School. I have been to school board meetings, parades, and Human Rights Campaign dinners where my fellow students and I received a standing ovation by thousands for our work promoting respect and tolerance for LGBTQ people. I even enjoyed a financial scholarship connected to my activist work that assisted me in attending Ohio State University. And while my worldview has taken a different path, I have not forgotten the people I met and the things I learned during this time.

I in no way bring these things up to brag, but rather to convey that I have a unique understanding on this issue, and that I am in no way motivated by hate or fear.

I support the Pastor Protection Act because I believe that religious liberty is in danger. There is a strong and widespread dialogue about discrimination in our culture. And as we try to find our way through this issue as a people, it is quite possible, if not probable, that we will overstep a boundary in the name of protection and tolerance for LGBTQ people to the detriment of millions of Americans with sincerely held religious beliefs that are incompatible with a homosexual lifestyle or union. Whether you agree with those religious beliefs is not the question

– the question is, “Are people free to hold those beliefs and live according to their consciences?” For if any of us is denied the freedom of conscience, we are all placed in danger of the same fate.

Opponents of this bill have stated that it is redundant legislation, and that pastors are protected by the First Amendment of our constitution. However, we live in a day of uncertainty. The literal, face-value meaning of our founding documents are being called into question, being considered living documents – not in the sense of being amended through prescribed legislative processes – but being reinterpreted by activist judges. I am grieved to say that we are at a point in our society where freedoms, even such as those the First Amendment guarantees, must be reiterated explicitly to protect the freedoms it embodies.

We have witnessed in recent years, in our country and elsewhere, how people have been held accountable civilly or criminally for refusing to provide a service connected with a same-sex marriage. Even though these people had sincerely held religious beliefs that were not compatible with facilitating a same-sex marriage, they were forced to either violate their consciences or face repercussions. These were individuals and service providers, and the question that follows is, how long will it be before churches are viewed as just another form of service provider and forced to make the same decision. It is not a far leap.

As a gay rights activist, it was my goal, and those alongside me, to normalize the homosexual lifestyle in every aspect of society. If today I was promoting the equality of same-sex unions with heterosexual unions, as I once did, I would not settle with anything less than complete acceptance by the culture at large. Until same-sex marriage had equal footing with heterosexual marriages, I would keep pushing. This is still the mindset of LGBTQ activism. Therefore, I cannot believe that pastors and churches will continue to be protected without specific legislation to shield them.

In light of all that I’ve said, I would like to ask you to support House Bill 36, the Pastor Protection Act, and do all that you can to bring it into finalized law – not because of a hatred or fear of anyone, but because of a love for liberty and freedom of conscience. Thank you.