



Representative Nino Vitale
Ohio House District 85

Sponsor Testimony on HB 36
February 8th, 2017

Good morning Chairman Ginter, Vice-Chair Conditt and Ranking Member Boyd. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on House Bill 36 titled the Ohio Pastor Protection Act. This is a short bill, just over a page, which does one thing: it protects pastors and church property from being forced to perform wedding ceremonies, which are against their religious beliefs. There is really nothing more to it than this. My reason for writing this bill is to stop a litigation war in Ohio. This language may sound a bit dramatic, but we live in an increasingly secular and pluralistic society where there are many belief systems. I believe Ohioans want to live in a state where ideas are proposed, not imposed on them.

One question everyone should ask is: don't we have religious freedom in the First Amendment and in our Ohio Constitution? Unfortunately, the answer is maybe. The reason I say maybe is based on the recent *Obergefell v. Hodges* court ruling from the summer of 2015 and comments written in the opinions by the Supreme Court Justices.

Chief Justice Roberts wrote: *"Unfortunately, people of faith can take no comfort in the treatment they receive from the majority today. The First Amendment guarantees, however, the freedom to "exercise" religion. Ominously, that is not a word the majority uses."*

Justice Clarence Thomas wrote: *"It appears all but inevitable that the two [homosexual rights and the exercise of religious freedom] will come into conflict, particularly as individuals and churches are confronted with demands to participate in and endorse civil marriages between same-sex couples..."*

...the majority's decision short-circuits that process, with potentially ruinous consequences for religious liberty."

So how is this playing out?

New York Times Headline: *Christian churches 'must be made' to affirm homosexuality, Christian churches "must" be convinced, or coerced, to change their teachings on sexual morality.*

Measures and proposals affect churches directly. Municipalities such as Hutchinson, Kansas, and Jacksonville, Florida, have considered ordinances that would force churches that rent property to the public to allow same-sex marriages on that property.

A judge ruled in 2012 that a Christian retreat house in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, must permit same-sex couples to perform ceremonies on its premises.

This past month in New Jersey, a woman sued church property, a Christian hospital for citing religion as the reason the hospital refused to perform his transgender surgery and named the local pastor in the lawsuit. In looking up the hospital's location on a maps program, I found 8 other hospitals and outpatient facilities within 20 minutes of this location and over 45 facilities inside of 45 minutes.

No matter if you support someone's lifestyle or not, I do not think anyone, from a social group nor a religious group, should impose their will on someone else. I would just as easily stand here and fight against trying to force an Ohioan to go to a Catholic Mass or force participation in what are known as "Sword Drills." Sword Drills are popular in certain Protestant communities as a way to learn the books of the Bible.

We live in a pluralistic society, but I do believe this means we can live in harmony, even though viewpoints on life and morality may be very different. People of good will must find a way to live in harmony or we will tear the very fabric of our society apart. If we disagree with someone, are we going to turn to the heavy hand of the courts to work it out, or worse yet, the violence that we see in our own streets? If someone does not wish to perform a marriage ceremony, I would hope we want to live in a state where all parties have basic respect for one another. I hope both parties would move on to find and work with people who will accommodate them without the use of governmental force, courts and fines.

I am looking to make Ohio a place where Ohioans propose their ideas, and do not impose them by courts, by laws or by violence. I in no way, want this bill to be seen as discrimination against any type of group, as I personally believe all men are created equal, and I do not believe in creating laws or carve outs in laws that favor one group over another for any reason. All deserve equal justice and treatment, but I also believe we should want an Ohio that does not force people through courts, fines and threats, to require religious clergy or church property to be used in a way not aligned with their beliefs. I know many churches that have many diverse belief systems and feel people of all backgrounds can find clergy and property that will accommodate them no matter their desires.

While some may say that we don't need this law or it's redundant, I think it's clear from the statements mentioned above, that people who have been in and study the law for their entire lives see serious danger ahead. Let us avoid this danger in Ohio, and create an environment where we propose our ideas and do not impose them on others or minorities through the force or courts.

The Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life states: for now, the most likely challenges for churches could arise in grayer areas of the law, such as rental of church basements or retreat camps owned by religious nonprofit groups.

Similar legislation has already been signed into law with overwhelming bi-partisan support in Texas, Oklahoma, and Florida. It is currently in various stages in the states of Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama.

Many Ohio faith leaders and parishioners see rapid cultural and legal changes that point to looming threats to the free exercise of religion, despite First Amendment protections. I think the turnout of almost 40 pastors who came to testify on this bill in the last General Assembly show they see a real threat. This new bill just makes it clear, in this time of uncertainty, that Ohio clergy and Ohio church property remain protected from these types of legal challenges.

State Rep. Celia Israel, a Democrat from Austin, Texas, said in a released statement that she believes it's possible to support both equality and religious liberty. "Texans are ready for equality, and if this measure gives pastors a peace of mind, I welcome it becoming law."

The freedom to worship and the free exercise of one's religious beliefs are the bedrock of our country's foundation. In fact, one of the Founding Fathers, Patrick Henry stated, "*liberty is the direct end of government.*" For many that liberty is played out in our ability to freely worship and practice religion without threat or force. Religious leaders in the State of Ohio must be absolutely secure in the knowledge that religious freedom is beyond the reach of government coercion and courts imposing heavy fines, which could bankrupt a faith community just by the initial costs of having to defend their beliefs.

Another quote worth mentioning is from the leader of one of our two parties, who recently ran for the most powerful office in the world. Hillary Clinton stated..."deep-seated cultural codes, religious beliefs and structural biases have to be changed."

I also give you this quote.... "If today I lived in a country where certain principles dear to the Christian Faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's anti-religious laws." – *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* - Martin Luther King

Twenty-seven Ohio House members have signed on in support of this bill. The question to ask is: do you, honorable members of this committee, think religious communities with the church properties they occupy should be forced to do something against their religious beliefs or should Ohio's faith communities be provided clear and concise freedom by you, its government? Will you protect religious liberty?

I ask for your support and a yes vote and I am happy to answer any questions from the committee.



Washington, D.C. Offices:
1901 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Suite 201
Washington, D.C. 20006

Michigan Offices:
P.O. Box 131098
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48113

Arizona Offices:
123 W. Chandler Heights Road
No. 11277
Chandler, Arizona 85248-11277

Main Tel: (855) 835-AFLC (2352)
FAX: (801) 760-3901
Email: rmuise@americanfreedomlawcenter.org

New York Offices:
640 Eastern Parkway
Suite 4C
Brooklyn, New York 11213

California Offices:
21731 Ventura Boulevard
Suite 180
Woodland Hills, California 91364

Writer's Direct Tel: (734) 635-3756

David Yerushalmi, Esq.: Licensed in Washington, D.C., New York, California & Arizona
Robert J. Muise, Esq.: Licensed in Michigan

January 18, 2017

Representative Nino Vitale
77 S. High Street
11th Floor
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Re: Support for the Ohio Pastor Protection Act

Dear Representative Vitale:

I am writing today in support of the Ohio Pastor Protection Act. This bill is not only timely, it is much needed. Today, perhaps more than any other time in our nation's history, religious liberty is under attack. And it is under attack by those who seek to impose their political agenda upon people of faith.

Our Founders understood the importance of religious liberty by enshrining its protection in the First Amendment. Unfortunately, that protection was severely eroded by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1990 decision of *Employment Division v. Smith*, 494 U.S. 872 (1990). In *Smith*, the Supreme Court held that "the right of free exercise does not relieve an individual of the obligation to comply with a valid and neutral law of general applicability on the ground that the law proscribes (or prescribes) conduct that his religion prescribes (or proscribes)." *Id.* at 879 (quotations and citation omitted). This was viewed as a departure from the standard set forth in cases such as *Sherbert v. Verner*, 374 U.S. 398 (1963) and *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972). In response, in 1993 Congress enacted statutory protection, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), in an effort to restore the strict scrutiny test for claims arising under the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment.

As a result of the *Smith* decision, a person cannot bring a First Amendment free exercise challenge to a “neutral law of general applicability” even if that law imposes a substantial burden on the person’s religious exercise. As a consequence, *Smith* eviscerated the protections of the Free Exercise Clause. That is why, for example, Hobby Lobby’s successful challenge to the HHS mandate was decided under RFRA and not the First Amendment. See *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, 134 S. Ct. 2751 (2014). However, RFRA only protects against burdens on religious liberty imposed by the federal government.

Presently, the Ohio Constitution still provides religious freedom protection against laws that burden religious exercise, regardless of whether these laws are neutral and generally applicable. In *Humphrey v. Lane*, 89 Ohio St. 3d 62; 728 N.E.2d 1039 (2000), the Ohio Supreme Court rejected the *Smith* approach to interpreting the Ohio Constitution’s protection of religious freedom. However, even under *Humphrey*, the religious adherent would lose if the challenger can show that the restriction on religious exercise furthers a compelling state interest and is the least restrictive means available of furthering that state interest. *Id.* at 69; 728 N.E.2d at 1045. In other words, there is no guarantee that the Ohio Constitution will provide the immunity from legal action that the Ohio Pastor Protection Act provides as a matter of statutory law.

Unfortunately, today, judicial activism in this area of the law is the norm and not the exception. See *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 135 S. Ct. 2584 (2015) (striking down, *inter alia*, Ohio’s law which provided that “[a] marriage may only be entered into by one man and one woman”); *see id.* 2612 (Roberts, C.J., dissenting) (“The majority’s decision is an act of will, not legal judgment. The right it announces has no basis in the Constitution or this Court’s precedent.”); *see also id.* at 2625 (Roberts, C.J., dissenting) (“Today’s decision . . . creates serious questions about religious liberty.”). A way to blunt this judicial supremacy and its potentially adverse effects on religious adherents is for a legislature to provide statutory protection, as Congress did in 1993 by passing RFRA in response to *Smith*, and as the Ohio legislature is seeking to do here through the Ohio Pastor Protection Act.

In summary, there are only *good* reasons for passing this important legislation and no legitimate basis for opposing it.

Sincerely,



Robert J. Muise, Esq.
Co-Founder & Senior Counsel