

I want to start with a word of gratitude for each of you both for your service to our state and for your time today to hear our thoughts and concerns about the piece of legislation that is before us in the Pastor's Protection Act.

My name is April Blaine and I am honored to serve as an ordained elder in the West Ohio Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, currently appointed as the Lead Pastor of Hilliard United Methodist Church in the heart of Hilliard, just 15 minutes west of here.

My congregation is a diverse one, filled with people from all walks of life – we have many different perspectives and we have many different priorities. Navigating these differences in an effort to order our common shared life together presents tremendous daily challenges... challenges that perhaps are not so different than the larger challenge of politics itself and the task for which each of you have been elected – to order our public life together. So, I want you to know that I begin with a deep respect for the challenges that lie before you.

In regard to the legislation we are here to discuss, I want to say a few simple things. You have heard and will hear about the ways in which this legislation is unnecessary, that it's acceptance would perpetuate an untruth that the religious liberties of pastors are truly under threat when they are not. I concur with this perspective for all the reasons you have and will hear.

What I'd like to address is the question I think that many of you are asking... Yes, we understand that the legislation itself might be redundant, but what is the harm? This will alleviate the fears of many people – so what is the harm in assuring them that they are covered?

What's the harm?

Jesus spent his years on earth inviting his followers to live into their identity as the people of God. He told us that we were the light of the world and the salt of the earth – that our lives had purpose and meaning to preserve what was good and beautiful in the world and to not hide what was true. And over and over and over again. Jesus told the people – do not be afraid.

He says it to Peter when he is walking on the water and begins to sink.  
He says it to the disciples during their last supper together.  
And He says it to Mary Magdalene when she realizes that the tomb is empty.

But the truth is we are a fearful people. And all the invitations from Jesus to not worry have not made us Christians, not even us pastors, into less anxious people.

I confess to you I was afraid the first time I was asked to officiate a same-sex wedding. I was afraid of what others in my church would say or do. I was afraid of

what might happen to me in a denomination where I am forbidden by church doctrine to officiate such a wedding in my church.

I was afraid of the hurt I would cause if I said yes. And I was afraid of the hurt I would cause if I told this couple that I cared about – that I could not officiate.

I prayed and I discerned what was the right thing – and in the end I said no. My church wasn't ready. And so neither was I.

This is the nature of fear.

Fear itself is a real thing.

I do not discount the reality of the fear that some pastors have today. I think their fear is very real. They are truly concerned about what may happen to them...

But the problem with fear is that often, it is not rooted in reality. Some of my fears were reasonable but many of them were not. In the scenario I referenced earlier, the best piece of advice I received was from a retired clergy woman, a long time mentor. She said simply, "whatever you do, April, don't make the decision out of fear."

So, I think you have a similar opportunity before you today. You have a piece of legislation that has been crafted and written and brought before you, and it is coming to you from a place of unfounded fear.

You can choose to advance that legislation further along – or take this extraordinary opportunity to be the voice of reason, to calm the voices that are marked by fear and to remind the wide range of people in our communities, those who fear the loss of their religious liberty and those LGBT couples who fear that they are being unnecessarily targeted that there is nothing to fear, and that the constitution of our country and our state, the laws of our land have created everything we need that we can live together, that our public life can be ordered in such a way that there is space for all people.

And so I urge you, to lead in this moment in a way that remind us all that we do not need to be afraid.