

My name is Rev. Aaron Maurice Saari. I was born in Bowling Green, Ohio in 1976. I have lived in Ada, Cincinnati, and Clifton; my home, though, is Yellow Springs. It is where I graduated from high school in 1994; where I graduated with a B.A. from Antioch University in 2002. It is where my wife helps her stepmother run a business that her father of blessed memory started over 20 years ago. It is where I grew up in a family business, the historic Little Art Theater. It is where I have pastored First Presbyterian Church since 2013. All of my education has been from Ohio schools. I hold two masters degrees from Xavier, where I have been on the theology faculty for a decade. I earned my Divinity degree from United Theological Seminary, which is also from where, God willing, I will have earned a doctorate by December 2018. My extended family is deeply rooted in Ohio. My late grandfather Ivan Maurice owned the Union 76 station in Urbana for nearly 40 years; my uncle's law practice in the same town has been there for just as long. Both my mother-in-law and father-in-law are Methodist lay pastors to rural congregations in the Portsmouth area. I offer all of this because too often I hear it said that anyone who raises their voices in opposition to legislation like HB 36 are people bussed in from out of state. Agitators from elsewhere. So let me make it abundantly clear: I am a Buckeye born and bred; I live here and I will most likely die here.

I do not have a political motive, at least not in the way that our secular culture defines political. I am not a Republican. I am only registered as a Democrat because we have closed primaries in this state and, frankly, neither party represents me but I have to go with one. I hold some views more in common with the Democrats than I do the Republicans because, I am sorry to say, the GOP to which my grandparents swore allegiance is long gone. But I am not a Democrat in any real sense. I am not here to advance a party platform or initiative. I am here to talk about how this proposed legislation is big government elbowing into the ecclesial matters of Christ's Church.

With all apologies to my loving and wonderful wife, the single greatest joy of my life is being a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Church of Jesus Christ. I have denominational standing in two Mainline traditions, the United Church of Christ (UCC) and the Presbyterian Church (USA). Within both of these denominations, there are pastors and laity who are divided on a large number of issues, including same-gender and same-sex marriage. In the past two decades, both of these denominations have lost parishes because of divisions on the marriage issue, but by now we have settled in to the new reality. Those who were going to leave have left. We have held denominational meetings on every level you can imagine, changing Constitutions, bylaws, books of worship. Protestant denominations look different than we did 50 years ago. There is none of us untouched by questions concerning our rights of conscience, our denominational obligations, and what the Word of God says or does not say. The Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, and even the Baptists have significant numbers of congregations across the country that reside on both sides of the divide. Christians talk to one another; granted, sometimes we yell when we should be praying, but we talk to one another about our differences.

We call this holy tension; we disagree on abortion, gun rights, the death penalty, immigration. But we know from the testimony of scripture in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ Jesus there is no true division. No Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free. We are all one. Now, I'm one of those Christians who believes Scripture matters; I try to follow what it tells me to do.

Sometimes I get it wrong. I imagine if you are a Christian, you get it wrong, too. That's the wonderful thing about grace. It is available to us all for when we get it wrong.

Most pastors are well aware of the free gift of grace, and we apply it to our own lives. We know that conflict is going to happen, so we try to make sure that Christ is present whenever it arises. Without any government intervention or mandate, my colleagues and I have brokered agreements. Those who do not wish to conduct certain weddings send the couples to me, to whom I never say a mumblin' word about the pastor or the congregation who did not want to host their nuptials. No one holds animosity in their hearts; I feel blessed to have colleagues who are deliberate, honest, and loving even in the face of substantial disagreements. We don't do this so that the other church doesn't get sued, we do this because we believe in Jesus Christ and we understand that Jesus did not send people away. We might have legitimate disagreements about Scripture but we do not lose sight of whom we follow and for whom we work. We've figured this out on our own, all without government intrusion. And we are not unique. This has happened across Ohio and across the country.

House Bill 36 is an example of government overreach into the authority of Christ's Church. And, frankly, it is insulting for me as one studying to be a Doctor of the Church that this body feels it has the right or authority to meddle in matters that are clearly ecclesial. This is a Church matter not a State matter.

No one can force any pastor to conduct a marriage they do not want to officiate. This proposed legislation is a solution in search of a problem. I have refused to wed couples because I did not believe they had been together long enough; I advised pre-marital counseling and never saw them again. I imagine they went and got married somewhere else; that's the thing: We pastors do not make marriages legal. The State does that; we sanctify unions and you can't purchase that with money. You can't force it through compulsion or law. There are no legal grounds in the secular codes to provide recourse to someone whom I have denied covenantal consecration; the fact that I am not the only person in the State who can legally seal a marriage contract means that there is no irreparable harm to anyone if I don't sign their marriage license. I appreciate the concern that seems to be undergirding this effort, but the truth is neither I nor any other pastor needs the legal protections that are being proposed by HB 36.

I fear another motive: defending against the so-called war on Christianity. I have already elucidated my credentials, so I am well within my purview to point out that the "war on Christianity" cry most often comes from pastors and communities that are nondenominational. I am not making any statements about the theology or authenticity of these churches; please hear that clearly. God meets people everywhere, and just because a denomination isn't there doesn't mean that God isn't either. What I am saying is that the lack of a denominational structure shows itself at times like these. Many of the churches desiring HB 36 are not held accountable by national governing, ecclesial bodies; they often have church structures that begin and end with a charismatic pastor, whose word is held second only to the Word of Holy Scripture. If this pastor says there is a war on Christianity, then the 2,000 members of the congregation have to think there is a war on Christianity. If pastor says pastor needs protection from compulsion to preside over marriages of gay people, then pastor needs protection from compulsion. But that doesn't make it true; they don't get to offer alternative facts.

Denominational structure requires Christians who may not agree on everything to work together; to work with each other across race and region, to look into the eyes of a sister or brother and see the image of God. Denominational structures help us love one another even if we don't particularly like each other. What many of these nondenominational churches are doing, by coming to you and asking for such legislation, is getting big government to do what Church polity has been doing for 2,000 years.

Some of you may not have thought of this last point, but this proposed legislation will make it harder for me as a minister. Let me explain. There is no reasonable argument to be given that these legal protections are necessary. There are not hordes of gays, like barbarians at the gate, lining up to begin massive influxes into conservative churches in order to bankrupt them through lawsuits. Even the people who cite these fears have to admit that they are hypothetical, meaning that any law will be based upon the conjecture of a small group of people. Even if it were to occur that a couple or couples deliberately targeted for lawsuits a parish that did not wish to sanctify a marriage, there is no legal standing to lodge a complaint. These cases would be thrown out and with extreme prejudice. I can guarantee you, a large number of us who are pastors that do solemnize same-gender marriages would rally to the sides of our colleagues on the other side *as it pertains to religious freedom*. Again, this is what denominationalism does; it helps you to see God's Church is not meant to be an echo chamber. I have colleagues that I have seen on the opposite side of a picket line as me on Saturday, with whom I have then worshipped on Sunday. We can figure it out. Pastors don't need protecting, except from those things that will interfere with our ability to preach the gospel. If you vote for this legislation, what are you saying to that gay kid wanting to give Jesus a shot, or to that trans\* woman of color who is looking for a safe space, or to any other person who is clearly being targeted by this legislation? You're saying that the Church needs protection from them. You are saying that their love is a sin, and you don't get to do that; that is not your purview. If you personally believe it is a sin, that's fine but you do not get to use your privilege as duly elected representatives of the people to advance your religious beliefs. You do not get to vote for this and say you are protecting me as a pastor. You are not; in fact, you might be interfering with my ability to preach the gospel. First Presbyterian Church of Yellow Springs is the only More Light PC (USA) congregation in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley, meaning that our ministry is to provide safe, loving spaces for Christians who also identify as GLBTQ+.

I often tell my students at Xavier University that I may be terribly wrong about what I believe; that's what faith does, or at least it does for me, it cuts down on the arrogant certainty that I sometimes display because I am afraid. So I try to keep my self-identification as simple as possible. I am a native Ohioan, and a proud follower of Jesus Christ. You might not agree with my perspective on Scripture, but I hope you will respect me as an ordained minister. I am asking you to stay in your own lane. Do the work of the people; help us to repair our infrastructure, to address our heroin epidemic, help us find more money to help the people Jesus prioritized: the blind in need of sight, the deaf in need of hearing, the lame in need of walking, the poor in need of hope. In my view, HB 36 is a violation of the separation of Church and State; it is big government overreach; and it is unnecessary secular action where ecclesial structures suffice. And it appears to be political in motive. I leave you with the words of a colleague, a fellow member of clergy; if you won't listen to me, perhaps you will listen to Rev. Billy Graham: "I don't want to see religious bigotry in any form. It would disturb me if there was a wedding

between the religious fundamentalists and the political right. The hard right has no interest in religion except to manipulate it.”

Thank you for your time.