

My name is Rev. Deborah Stevens. I was ordained as a United Methodist Clergy person in 1995, and pursuant to that, authorized in the state of Ohio to solemnize marriages. I have been privileged in my years of ministry to officiate scores of marriages. I've stood with young lovers, and retirees divorced from each other a lifetime ago and remarrying late in life, and a young couple beside the deathbed of a parent, and parents struggling to blend families. But not one of them stood before me to exchange vows without pastoral consultation before my agreement to officiate.

On one occasion in my ministry, I was presented a valid marriage license by a couple who walked into the church and requested that I solemnize the marriage. After a conversation with them in the church parlor, where I could certainly have officiated their marriage on the spot, I chose not to. This was a pastoral decision made on the grounds of my personally held religious convictions. That decision is not a matter of public record, nor should it be. I was forced by state statute neither to decline nor to affirm their marriage.

At no time in my years of ministry has any civil authority interfered with my pastoral judgment about officiating a marriage ceremony. Indeed, clergy are constitutionally protected from such interference.

In this case, I referred the couple to a civil authority, who might perform the ceremony without the reservations which I held from my pastoral perspective. The point of this story is that this law is wholly unnecessary. If its true intent is to protect pastors, I must argue, as a taxpaying citizen, that the Ohio House is wasting my time and my tax dollars pursuing legislation that claims to protect something that is not at risk, and is fully protected by the Constitution of the United States and of this State of Ohio.

Furthermore, this legislation has no clear definition of the term "religious society." As an ordained minister who holds three academic degrees and has been subjected to rigorous examination by my denomination, it is an affront to my professional vocation that anyone with a paypal account and internet access can obtain a certificate of ordination and be granted the authority to solemnize marriage by the State of Ohio. This law promises now to make it possible for any group to arbitrarily declare themselves a "religious society," and therefore claim protection to engage in illegal discrimination against same gender couples—to whom the right to marry has been legally granted by the Supreme Court of the United States. Given that pastors are already protected, I take this to be the true intent of this proposed law.

Should this law be adopted, legal challenges to clarify the definition of "religious society" will undoubtedly follow, perhaps Constitutional challenges as well, thereby wasting more valuable taxpayer resources.

As a clergy person with a deep commitment to the sacred life of every person, and as a patriotic American with a deep commitment to the values of our Constitutional democracy, I strongly oppose this legislation. It is profoundly unfaithful to our shared commitments to religious liberty and personal freedom, and therefore deeply un-American. I urge you to oppose HB 36.

Thank you.