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**Testimony to the Government Accountability and
Oversight Committee of the Ohio House
Proponent – HB 160
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Good morning, Chairman Blessing, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Minority Member Clyde, and members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee. Thank you for hearing my testimony in support of House Bill 160, the “Ohio Fairness Act,” which would protect LGBTQ individuals from employment and housing discrimination in Ohio. I am Reverend Laura Young, an ordained United Methodist minister, the mother of two grown children, and a citizen of Ohio residing in Westerville.

Our shared values of fairness and equality demand that we protect LGBTQ Ohioans from losing their homes and being fired from their jobs for simply being who God created us to be. We now have the legal right to marry in this country, and yet, we can get married in Columbus on Sunday and go home to Westerville on Monday and get evicted and fired and have no legal recourse. We simply “ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law,” as Justice Kennedy phrased it in his majority opinion in the Obergefell same-sex marriage decision. We must offer that dignity and protection in Ohio. My time in law school tells me that we do not need to push this to the court of last resort. We can do it right here in our great state, without the help of the federal government -- or the church.

I would be remiss not to share that I am testifying in support of a bill that leaves me, an ordained United Methodist minister and out lesbian, unprotected from my ‘employer’ -- from my denomination -- which is given a religious exemption, which I support, and thus permitted to continue discriminating against me. I am one of many LGBTQ clergy working inside our system to stop this injustice. Our book of church law still deems homosexuality “incompatible with Christian teaching,” and bars what it calls “self-avowed, practicing homosexuals” from being ordained and serving as clergy. So, my fellow LGBTQ colleagues and I live and work knowing it is possible to be defrocked. Having one’s job held over one’s head is a constant strain and source of stress. Our conference is currently preparing to put on trial a close colleague of mine, an experienced and fruitful minister in Cincinnati, who married his same-sex partner of 30 years. I postponed my own pending marriage to my fiancée because of the threat I feel. My church is given a religious exemption in this bill to impose these restrictions. Non-religious entities should not be imposing religious values on the general citizenry.

In addition to my sense of fairness and dignity, my faith compels me to stand for freedom and equality. I believe the Jesus I strive to follow would be right here on the side of the marginalized; in this case, members of the LGBTQ community. Jesus was always on the side of those whom others cast out: women, children, the poor, and people seen as “other.” And, for the record, Jesus

never mentioned same-sex relationships. I believe God created each of us unique, in God's image. All of God's children should be treated equally – if not by our faith communities, at least by our state.

As a pastor, I have been privileged to hear people share about the most intimate details of their lives. I have prayed with and listened to people who grew up in the '40s, '50s, and '60s in small towns in Ohio knowing they were different -- knowing they were not attracted to people of the opposite sex like their friends were -- people who prayed not to be gay and tried to deny being gay. These people suffered, and suffered greatly. Many saw no way to live other than as heterosexual to meet family and church expectations. I've known teachers, armed service-men and -women, athletes and coaches, business owners and others, who describe painfully similar stories of sacrificing romantic love in order to be able to remain in their job, their home, and their community. And because of continued threats today, some still make this heartbreaking choice.

I also think of young LGBTQ people -- people my children's age who grew up in a rapidly changing world that overwhelmingly now accepts them at home, at school, and in various jobs. What happens to these young people who have been happily living authentically who then find themselves working for someone or living in an area in which they are not protected? Would we prefer that people live a lie? It is in Ohio's best interest to have happy, productive citizens.

I'd like to say a word about religious freedom. Religious freedom is a foundational value in this country, but it is actually the *free exercise* of religion. This does not mean freedom to exercise discrimination. It is freedom to worship and practice religion without interference, and it also requires that the state not establish a religion. Religious organizations in this country benefit from tax exemptions and are protected by the constitution. Yet, anti-LGBTQ views of many religious people, my own denomination included, cause harm well beyond the walls of our houses of worship.

The state must not stand by while religious values are used to fire and evict hardworking Ohioans. Isn't it in the best interest of our state to make sure all people are treated equally? I urge you to protect *all* Ohioans, including those of us in the LGBTQ community, and support this bill.

Thank you for considering my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions you might have for me.