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December 13, 2017

House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee
General Assembly of the State of Ohio

Testimony in support of HB160, the "Ohio Fairness Act"

Chair, Blessing III
Vice Chair, Reineke
Ranking minority member, Clyde, and the
Members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee,

Grace to you and peace.

I am the Rev. Michael Schuenemeyer and I serve as Executive for Health and Wholeness Advocacy on the National Staff of the United Church Christ (UCC). I am from Cleveland, in Cuyahoga County, where the UCC National Offices are located. The mission of the UCC is to love all, welcome all and seek justice for all. Our vision is, "United in Christ's love a just world for all". On behalf of the UCC National Offices, I offer this testimony to urge the members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee to fully support HB160, the Ohio Fairness Act.

The UCC National Offices employs more than 100 people and has a strong policy against discrimination, including on the basis of a person's sexual orientation or gender identity and expression. This is not something new for us. The first statement from a UCC national body against employment discrimination was in 1969 and in 1975, the General Synod of the UCC issued a Pronouncement, our strongest denominational statement, which expressed unequivocal support for civil rights in relation to sexual orientation and against discrimination in employment and public accommodations.

The Pronouncement affirms an essential value at the heart of most religious traditions, which undergirds universal human rights: Every person as a child of God is endowed with worth and dignity that human judgment cannot set aside. It also gives witness to the harm and suffering discrimination causes.

A constant fear of losing one's job and home, and the economic and social consequences of such a loss, creates suffering in human life. Living as presumed heterosexuals, same-gender oriented women and men are intimidated into silence, forced into lives of duplicity and deception, by the hostility of the majority society. Such duplicity and deception, and their concurrent alienation, sometimes evolving into isolation and depression and culminating in suicide, are necessarily detrimental to the growth of the individual and to the growth of interpersonal relationships. [<http://uccfiles.com/pdf/1975-A-PRONOUNCEMENT-CIVIL-LIBERTIES-WITHOUT-DISCRIMINATION.pdf>]

Today, same-gender loving persons and transgender persons, our family in human community and in Christian community, continue the struggle for justice and equality; to be free from the fear and injustice which the reality of discrimination, particularly in employment and in housing, has inflicted upon our society. Today, the UCC National Offices continues its legacy of taking a moral stance against discrimination and the violence that it does to human dignity. We urge the passage of HB 160, which is important to securing protection of everyone's full civil liberties and equal protection under the law.

A few years ago, I was producing a video resource for the UCC which included stories from a variety of our members of different sexual orientations and gender identities. I asked one of our lesbian families to share their story and I could see that they were struggling to say yes. This is an amazing lesbian couple which has adopted eight incredible, racially diverse children. Their beautiful family portrait looks like a promotion for "It's a Small World". One of the moms is a public school teacher and she so wanted to participate in the video, but in the end she decided could not because she feared she would be fired if her school administrator discovered she had done the video. Her salary was the primary salary that supported the family and the consequences of losing her job were

too risky. The decision not to participate in the video was a very painful decision for her, but it didn't have to be that way. If the Ohio Fairness Act had been in place, she would have been protected.

The fear of discrimination can be as harmful as the reality of discrimination itself. The citizens of Ohio should not have to continue to live under such fear. It fosters a culture of stigma and a culture of stigma impacts all Ohioans. At its worst, stigma creates unsafe environments leading to violence and sometimes death. It violates human dignity, erodes respect for human rights, and can result in psychological damage. Enacting the Ohio Fairness Act is the best way for Ohio make clear that such discrimination has no place in our state, no place in our counties, and no place in our cities, towns and neighborhoods.

You, as members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee, and your colleagues in the Ohio House and Senate, have the opportunity to make Ohio a safer, fairer, more just place. On behalf of the United Church of Christ National Offices, I urge you to pass HB 160, the Ohio Fairness Act.