

Chair Bacon, Vice Chair Dolan, Ranking Minority Member Thomas, and the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

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 not forced by state statute 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, when far more pressing problems threaten the well-being of Ohio families.

From the sponsor testimony presented, this bill appears to be aimed at attempting to deny LGBTQ people access to public accommodations on their wedding day. In fact, however, this bill *actually* harms current protected classes access to certain venues and property on their wedding day. LGBTQ people have been ignored altogether under Ohio law, and we must remedy that. In the meantime, we must not let this bill harm other protected classes and roll back our existing civil rights protections.

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.

I strongly oppose this legislation. It is unnecessary, it will be litigated, it threatens the dignity and civil rights of same-gender couples, and it opens the door to widespread discrimination against all currently protected classes, potentially deepening the economic impact of Ohio's socially regressive policies.

We ought to be extending basic civil rights protections to Ohio's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer citizens. Instead, we're threatening to erode existing civil rights protections for all protected classes with this harmful bill.

I urge you to oppose HB 36.

Thank you.