

Chair Bacon, Vice Chair Dolan, Ranking Minority Member Thomas, and the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, my name is Joshua Culbertson, and I speak in opposition to House Bill 36. I am a lay person, a member of a United Methodist congregation, and I am a seminary graduate. I serve my congregation as member of our Church Council, a member of our Staff Parish Relations Committee, and I am a gay man.

Despite my identity as a gay man, you may be surprised to know that I have spent a significant amount of time at both poles of the subject matter addressed in this piece of legislation. Until 2009, I attended a non-denominational conservative church in Southeast Ohio. The teaching of this church taught me that I was broken spiritually and emotionally, leading to my attractions to members of my own gender. Also, during my time there, I witnessed a number of persons become married. The church had strict requirements for couples who wished to enter into the covenant of marriage. They were required to attend pre-marital classes taught by a retired pastor who attended the church, a process during which they could be denied the participation of the church's senior pastor in their wedding if they were found to be incompatible in terms of how they communicated, viewed finances, or how children should be raised. They could be disqualified at any time and for any reason at the discretion of the church's leadership.

I left that church in 2009 after having attended there for 13 years, attempting to heal the wounding that they said that I carried. In 2010, I attended the Stonewall Columbus Pride parade, and I was shocked and encouraged to see a number of churches marching. The church that I am a member of today was one of those churches. Now, I see persons of all identities welcomed into our congregation. I have also attended weddings, some for persons of differing genders, some not. The pastor still has the discretion to decide who she will or will not marry, but our congregation's Church Council has voted to support her when she marries persons of the same gender.

My point is this. Being a person of faith is not a monolithic experience. Nor is being a Christian or a United Methodist. In fact my own United Methodist denomination is so divided on this issue that representatives from all corners of our global denomination are meeting in St. Louis in February to determine whether or not we can find a way to move forward in unity despite the division over what we sterilely call "human sexuality." People of faith are not of one mind on this issue. The people of Ohio are not of one mind on this issue.

House Bill 36, in a stroke of public relations genius, has been dubbed The Pastor Protection Act. This piece of legislation does nothing to expand the rights of clergy in Ohio. The right of clergy to deny performing any wedding that they disagree with is already protected both within the Ohio and U.S. Constitutions. This bill could actually do harm to the rights of pastors. Many faith communities offer buildings and spaces to be available commercially, renting them out for events, including possibly weddings. Under this legislation, a clergy person could be denied their right to perform a wedding ceremony based on any number of things that the faith community or religious society who owns the structure finds objectionable. Yes, these reasons could include same-

gender weddings, but it could also include denying weddings to couples with differing racial backgrounds, differing religious beliefs, or any other arbitrary criteria that they may discern based on their reading of their religion's sacred text.

The Ohio Constitution says that "All men have a natural and inalienable right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their own conscience. No person shall be compelled to attend, erect, or support any place of worship, or maintain any form of worship, against his consent; and no preference shall be given, by law, to any religious society; nor shall any interference with the rights of conscience be permitted." If "no preference shall be given" to any one perspective or way of believing, it is a violation of the rights of the faith leader performing the service, creating an "interference with the rights of conscience." Unless you plan on repealing the above language from our state's constitution, I see no scenario in which this poorly written and unnecessary legislation survives the scrutiny of Judicial Review.

I support the rights of all faith leaders to exercise their understanding of sacred texts and personal beliefs to guide their decisions in determining whom they will marry. Nothing has been done to threaten that authority, and this fearful and reactionary legislation threatens that very freedom for many of our state's clergy and faith leaders by elevating the particular beliefs and interpretation of some sacred texts by some faith leaders over the beliefs and interpretations of their colleagues who view those same sacred texts through a different lens.

I thank you for your time.