

HB 369 Testimony  
Rev. Dr. Deborah Stevens

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Minority Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee, my name is Deborah Stevens, and I am an ordained clergy person in the United Methodist Church. I am not a native Buckeye. I came to Ohio to attend one of the many private colleges in our state, and graduated with a Pharmacy degree from Ohio Northern University. Fifteen years later, I answered a call to ministry and also attended seminary in Ohio, at United Theological Seminary in Dayton. I have been in the state for more than 40 years, and I am a Buckeye, unless we're playing Indiana in basketball. I am proud of Ohio; of its heritage and its people. My entire professional life has been spent here, first as a pharmacist and then as a local church pastor and preacher.

I support HB 369 because I believe that civil rights are due to every human being. Period. My journey to understand the lived reality of people with different gender identities and sexual orientations began long ago. My interest is personal – there are people close to me whom I love who identify as gay, lesbian, non-binary, queer, or transgender. My interest is scientific. As a trained health care professional, I am aware of research in the formation of identity—both the physical and biological, and the psychological and social dimensions of identity. My interest is theological. As a pastor and the resident theologian in the church where I serve, I am convinced that God has neither made a mistake in creating people with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, nor does God desire that any person be treated as less than any other person for any reason. While the debate may rage on within religious communities as to whether it is a so-called “sin” to express diverse sexual identities, there is no debate at all about the ethical requirement that one treat one’s neighbors as one wishes to be treated.

Finally, I have an interest as a citizen of Ohio. As a citizen, I am wary of the State’s drawing distinctions around questions of a person’s identity. Those who object to this bill might very well object on religious grounds. That is their right to do so. But it is not the right of the state to support one side of a religious argument or the other. The State has an obligation to the basic human rights of every citizen.

As it currently stands, Ohio is a kind of patchwork quilt. Because the state has not enacted this non-discrimination legislation, many cities have done so. But since it is not universal within the state, a person who lives in a protected city may lose their job in a nearby suburb because they are not protected from this discrimination. The absence of this bill as law in Ohio means that GLBTQ people must continually live less than fully human lives. They may not be safe to reveal their closest relationship, for fear that they will lose housing, or employment.

One of the greatest blessings of my ministry has been witnessing the joy experienced by long time same gender partners as they were finally able to marry. In my congregation, it has been a joy to celebrate members’ marriages, which have become

possible after long years of partnership. The joy and sense of security at making their commitment permanent and public is evident. Fortunately, the congregation I serve fully supports, welcomes, includes and rejoices with these families.

Sadly, they may in fact be unable to share the joy of their marriage at their place of employment, or with their neighbors or landlords. How is that fair?

My job is to help people claim their belovedness as children of God. The job of the state is to help people secure their basic human rights as citizens.

Please do the right thing, and ensure that full civil rights are granted to GLBTQ citizens of Ohio.

Thank you.

I would be happy to answer questions.