

To Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Minority Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee,

My name is Rev. Virginia Lohmann Bauman, Senior Pastor of St. John's United Church of Christ (Columbus), and I hereby present proponent testimony in favor of House Bill 369 (the Ohio Fairness Act)

First let me share some of my background with you, and why the concepts of religious freedom, and the equal treatment of all people under the law, are so important to me as a person, as a professional, and as a local church pastor. Religious freedom, and equal treatment under the law, are not mutually exclusive principals; rather, they are the foundation of who we are as Ohioans, and who we are as Americans.

I was raised in the Christian church, where I first learned about treating all people with dignity and respect, no matter their social status, gender, skin color, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Back when I was a child, there were plenty of churches that did not honor every person's universal human dignity like mine did. I learned about the breadth of our country's religious freedom concept as I watched conservative churches turn away families of color, and then young gay people, with impunity, always cloaked in some sort of religious justification. Later I would encounter churches who proclaimed that I was "less than" men because I am a woman, and I was grateful to live in communities that prohibited discrimination based on my gender – so that I could study, work, and live under the equal protection of the law as my male colleagues, even if "the church" toxically proclaimed that I wasn't equal.

As a young woman, I earned my law degree from Ohio State and practiced law here in Columbus with a distinguished law firm across the street from our Statehouse. After practicing law for 15 years, I went on to earn my Masters of Divinity degree from the Methodist Theological School in Delaware, Ohio, and entered professional ministry. I am ordained both in the American Baptist Churches USA, and in the United Church of Christ. I currently serve as the Senior Pastor of St. John's United Church of Christ in Columbus, Ohio. I am also a wife and a mother.

The religious freedom I currently possess to practice my Christian religion without impediment is enshrined in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and in Article One of the Ohio Constitution. For example, as ordained clergy in the State of Ohio, I am empowered to perform ceremonies that are in accord with the teachings of my church, including gay marriage. This right includes the ability to choose not to perform a ceremony that would violate my church's teachings. I can even refuse to receive people into the membership of my church if I faithfully determine they just aren't ready for the responsibilities of church life, with no interference from the State.

This concept of religious freedom is important in our country because the Church has often engaged in theological duels about who is "in" and who is "out" in our culture. In years past, people of color were excluded from many white churches based on certain Bible verses – and that still occurs today. Some churches allow only limited participation by women in their tradition, while other churches, like mine, call women to be ordained to live into the fullness of their God-given gifts in leadership in ministry. Today many churches rage over whether or not

gays/lesbians may play a role in the faith community, and Protestant denominations have split over the issue.

Fortunately, we are a nation governed by law, not by churches arguing over who has “the right” interpretation of the Bible. Now, please know that I love the Bible; I read God’s Word in it and hear God’s Word through it. But our nation is not governed by the Christian Bible.

Our nation is governed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The laws of our nation, and of our state, were created to protect an individual’s right to disagree, even on matters of deep faith and practice. Meaning that my religious freedom does not in any way abridge the rule of law that governs my Ohio community. We are not a nation that governs by the Bible, although many of us look to the Bible for moral and ethical guidance.

We are a nation, and a state, who long ago decided that discrimination is wrong. Yet today almost 75% of Ohioans live in jurisdictions that still permit discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation. Our patchwork system of protections means that some of my congregants can literally work in one Ohio county, live in another, and lose their rights on their morning commute! I hear these stories of pain and persecution, as my congregants have lost jobs (along with their family’s healthcare), and their housing, because they are gay Ohioans.

So it is time for the state to step in and close the discrimination gaps. All residents of Ohio should be treated equally, and most Ohioans and Ohio businesses fully support protections against discrimination in all forms.

In addition as a religious leader in Ohio, it was important to me and to my faith community that the Ohio Fairness Act upholds the existing religious exemptions under Ohio law, while protecting people from discrimination in employment and housing based on their gender identity/expression, and based on their sexual orientation. What this means is that if a church or faith community chooses to discriminate in their own house of worship against a gay or transgender person – for example, by not letting that person become ordained in that tradition or by prohibiting that person from preaching on Sundays – that right is still protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and by Article One of the Ohio Constitution.

Importantly, Ohio doesn’t need to discriminate to protect its pastors and its faith communities. Instead, we have well-established religious freedoms in our houses of worship and our faith practices. What we lack in Ohio is comprehensive, statewide anti-discrimination legislation that protects our gay and transgender brothers and sisters from being treated as “less than” our neighbors in their housing and employment.

Today, too many of our Ohio citizens in the LGBT community already face blatant discrimination and outright bigotry, even violence. Whether it is members of the LGBT community, or people of differing religious beliefs in a pluralist society – Ohio doesn’t need to discriminate against anyone to protect its pastors and houses of worship. Instead, today let’s resist the temptation to allow theological differences to rule the Statehouse, and instead treat others as we would like to be treated – in our work, our housing, and in our communities, without discrimination or interference in pursuing our inalienable rights as human beings.

Our task as Ohio citizens is to be in respectful relationship with our neighbors, even those with whom we vehemently disagree theologically. And your task as our elected officials is to model that respect for theological diversity by refusing to legitimize religious prejudice against gay and transgender Ohioans.

I respectfully urge you to support House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act.