

Rev. Terry Williams Testimony for December 3, 2020
Ohio House Civil Justice Committee Hearing on Senate Bill 27

Chairman Hambley, Vice Chairman Patton, Ranking Member Brown, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for taking time today to allow me to share testimony concerning Senate Bill 27.

My name is The Reverend Terry Williams. I am an Ordained minister of The United Church of Christ, and I currently serve as Lead Pastor of Orchard Hill United Church of Christ in Chillicothe. As a Christian pastor, I am called to ministries of preaching, spiritual care, faith formation, and teaching within my local congregation.

In addition to my work in the parish, I am a faith organizer with the Ohio Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and a member of Ohio Clergy for Choice, a group of clergy and religious leaders from across Ohio who support a person's ability to access a full range of reproductive health services, including safe and legal abortion.

I regret that I am unable to safely appear before you today in person, and I regret that arrangements were not able to be made so that I could address you in real time digitally; your time is very important, and it is always my desire to put forward the effort to attend your meetings when possible as a sign of the abiding gratitude I have for each of you and the very important work that you do.

Please rest assured that I will be joining you in spirit, watching the Ohio Channel livestream of your committee meeting in full. I will be in prayer for you and for the work before you in this time of critical importance in the life of our state and nation.

The Ohio statehouse has been the epicenter of many loud objections recently concerning the role of government in the everyday lives of the people of our state. During the last nine months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ohio, we have publicly struggled as a body politic to articulate the common covenant we hold that balances safety and liberty in the life we share together as Ohioans.

The role of unfunded mandates from the Governor, restrictions placed on the activities of businesses and ordinary citizens, and the rights of individuals to do with their own bodies as they please have all – rightfully, in my opinion – been the subject of robust debate across the breadth and depth of our state.

It is within this context of the unprecedented public reexamination of our understanding of the role of Ohio government in the lives of our state's citizens that SB27 comes before this committee today.

SB27 is a bill that would enshrine the religious practices of one particular subset of Ohioans into law, forever binding the futures of all Ohioans of every faith, regardless of their personal spiritual or moral convictions. A dangerous and unruly imposition of one religious understanding of life, death, burial, and reverence, SB27 opens the door of legislative precedence to a host of authoritarian measures that both cripple personal liberty and trample religious freedom.

Jewish Rabbis have already testified to the Senate in committee concerning the anti-Jewish nature of this legislation.¹ I cannot speak to the convictions of Jewish adherents in Ohio but, as a religious leader committed to interfaith dialogue and mutual support, I would implore you to seriously consider the very

¹ Ref. Testimony of Rabbi Jessica K. Shimberg of The Little Minyan Kehilah and Jewish Community; Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee of the Ohio Senate, March 26, 2019.

clear theological objections articulated by Jewish leaders throughout our state in opposition to SB27. Jewish Ohioans are people of sacred worth and value, and they deserve more respect than the abusive ideological restrictions that would be imposed on them via the misguided mandates of SB27.

As a Christian pastor, I also hope that you sincerely understand the detrimental effect that SB27 will have within the lives of a great number of faithful Christians throughout our state. I have been privileged to journey alongside many families as they have faced reproductive healthcare decisions, some of which proved undesirable or difficult. No two families are exactly alike – their theologies, personal convictions, and spiritual needs are always unique and their pastoral care needs are similarly varied.

At no point in my work as a pastor have I ever tried to force a family to observe religious rituals in the manner or form that I felt was best. As a minister of The United Church of Christ – the church of the Pilgrims – I have taken vows to minister to all impartially; it is literally a promise made in Ordination in our faith to *“reach out toward all who are in Christ and show Christian love to people of other faiths and people of no faith.”*

While I don't expect you to be familiar with or even understand the promises that The United Church of Christ calls our ministers to make, as elected representatives you have pledged to support both the Constitution of the State of Ohio and the Constitution of the United States – both documents which, from their very foundations, recognize the freedom of religion as a fundamental right reserved to the citizenry of our state and nation.

I don't expect you to agree with my theological convictions, but I do expect you to recognize the extraordinarily dangerous precedent that will be set if SB27 is passed and the state of Ohio thereby requires a clearly religious rite be performed by people who do not hold that clear religious belief. When the state is able to require the performance of religious rituals in the lives of its citizens, we have lost any modicum of religious freedom – a fate I pray never befalls the great state of Ohio.

Whether or not to cremate and bury fetal tissue is a decision that is personal, spiritual, moral, and none of the government's business. Provided such tissue is safely disposed of in a manner that precludes the spread of infection or other sanitary concerns, the state should allow people of differing religious convictions to do as their religion and their conscience directs, free from the ideological pressure of members of the Ohio General Assembly.

During this busy time at the end of the legislative session, this committee has much more important work to do beyond entertaining a dangerous, anti-religious freedom bill like SB27. Please, hear the voices of religious leaders across Ohio, reject this deeply flawed bill, and move on to the many other important matters crying out for your time, attention, and effort during this most crucial and historic time.

Sincerely,

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