

The Reverend Terry D. Williams of Faith in Public Life (Ohio)

Testimony for March 17, 2021 Ohio House Criminal Justice Committee Hearing on House Bill 22

Chairman LaRe, Vice Chairman Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for taking time today to allow me to share testimony concerning House Bill 22.

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 an Ohio Clergy Coordinator with Faith in Public Life (Ohio), helping to coordinate local clergy in southeastern Ohio to advocate, organize, and work for justice in our communities beyond traditional faith community boundaries.

I come to you today as a clergyperson in rural Ohio who is deeply concerned with the increased criminalization of actions of public witness and moral conscience. While the modern Ohio criminal code already deals with the acts outlined in HB22, it seems the bill's sponsors are not satisfied with protest-related actions being dealt with as they have successfully been for decades.

Instead, today you are asked for a special escalation – a carve out for increased penalties against a subset of acts that are directly related to the moral witness and public protest actions of religious organizations.

Churches, mosques, synagogues, and communions of all kinds often find their most effective moral agency through actions of public proclamation and moral witness. When our communities were ravaged by the opioid crisis, rural Ohio clergy and faith communities rallied support for change through marches at the statehouse, public actions at the offices of legislative officials, and protests targeting the Ohio Governor's office.

Our work was successful at opening the ears of public officials, helping people in power hear the voices of those who were suffering in our communities under the weight of addictions that were rooted not in their own moral failings, but in the systemic policy dysfunction of our state and countless other states.

HB22 would create felons out of church and religious leaders, stifling our advocacy and harming our state's ability to have the street-situated public discourse that has so often led to good change.

Far from a reasonable measure, HB22 represents an attack on people of faith and on our organizing in Ohio, threatening to jail opponents of the state's agenda. This measure will have a chilling effect on free speech, a harmful effect on religious speech, and present unintended consequences that will no doubt keep this committee busy in legislating fixes for the better part of the next decade.

On behalf of rural clergy throughout the state, I ask you today to VOTE NO on HB22 and save us all the trouble of having to experience this deleterious and disgraceful policy in action. Your work in this committee is far too important to be marred and tangled up with a moral and legislative quagmire like this mess of a bill.

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