

November 15, 2022

Ohio House of Representatives | Families, Aging, and Health Services Committee

Dear Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Cutrona, Ranking Member Denson, and the Members of the Committee:

My name is Pastor Hank Osmundson and my pronouns are he/him. I am a resident of Columbus, and serve as an associate pastor of St. John's United Church of Christ in Columbus and as the Executive Director of Unitarian Universalist Justice Ohio (UUJO). I am grateful for the opportunity to submit my testimony in opposition to HB454, the Saving our Adolescents from Experimentation (SAFE) Act.

I am not a medical professional, nor am I a mental health clinician. My skill set is rather narrowly focused on matters of faith and humanity - relationships between people and the Divine - and how they inform our relationships with each other. My personal faith has me on a path that follows the teachings of Jesus Christ of Nazareth and it is through that lens that I try to navigate my way through life. While I have reached an age and time in my life that has made certain that nothing is certain, including in matters of faith, my understanding of the teachings of the Hebrew and Christian biblical texts in light of being a Jesus follower have instilled me with some certainty. One is that human beings were created to thrive and live in abundant joy. The Hebrew texts and the Gospels and Epistles of the Christian texts are filled with examples of God expressing a hope and desire for people to thrive. This isn't a pulpit and we are not in a church, but I know that many members of this committee publicly express their Christian faith and so this sort of language is not lost on you. I also know, and many lawmakers all across our nation express, that faith informs their decisions when proposing and enacting legislation that will affect the lives of their constituents. In your case, many millions of people collectively.

My opposition to HB454 that would deny the right of minors who are trans - or frankly trying to make sense of their identities - to affirming and lifesaving medical and mental health care is based in my understanding of what Jesus considered to be priority for his followers. It was considered important enough by writers of the Gospels that it appears in all three of the ones we call synoptic: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. What is most important to Jesus, the Son of God? It is to love God with all our being - heart, mind, and soul - and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. That's it. Christianity is just that simple. It seems almost too simple. And, we are well

aware that the Golden Rule - the whole “do unto others” thing - is a related commandment from Jesus. We also know that particular rule expands beyond the confines of Judaism and Christianity and into nearly every society that has attempted to live and thrive together.

So, when I look at HB454, when I read its full title, when I read its assertions, and particularly when I read and hear statements from Christians in support of this legislation, I am simultaneously mystified and saddened. Why is it that those who say they follow the commandments and words and life of Jesus feel that this is in keeping with anything Jesus had to say? Nothing about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ involved compelling anyone to follow him, and he consistently and to his detriment, pushed back against political and religious leaders who overburdened people with rules or sought to restrict their freedom and ability to thrive and flourish. I get that part of the motivation is framed as protection of children. But I also ask you what makes you believe that pediatricians, pediatric mental health clinicians, and scores of scientists and researchers - of a myriad of faiths, and no faith - are somehow not concerned with protecting children? As a matter of simple reasoning, I would think that these people are even more deeply concerned with the welfare of children than perhaps you or I may be. I am most definitely certain that they possess the knowledge and skills to help children and their parents navigate these waters that the supporters of this bill seem so eager to dam.

The egregiousness of this bill, its title notwithstanding, lies primarily in its attempt to insert government control over the personal decisions of citizens while cloaking it in a soft and fuzzy veil - or perhaps, more accurately, the vision of a knight on a steed - seeking to protect those who are vulnerable. I also find it fascinating that many people who are incredibly vocal at local school board meetings about the rights of parents regarding the education of their children are included among the names of citizens testifying in support of this bill which utterly disregards any rights of parents. I also have great concern for the children - including a nephew - who know this bill is being considered and believe it is an attack on their very being. My nephew has already attempted to kill himself once because of things he read and heard and saw. He is beginning to thrive as he has received incredible care from his pediatrician, mental health clinicians, his classmates and teachers, his parents and siblings, and his church. He is one of the fortunate ones. But I fear the effect the passage of this legislation would have on him when the lawmakers of this state, beginning with the ones on this committee tell him and other kids in

Ohio like him: “Your life doesn’t matter to me. At least not until you make changes that suit our desires.”

I urge all of you, regardless of your faith tradition, but particularly those of you who follow the path of Jesus of Nazareth, to please vote no on this bill. It dishonors professionals who have dedicated their lives to children, it dishonors parents who are struggling to provide love and affirmation to their children, and it dishonors the children of Ohio by telling them that their particular struggles are unworthy of being addressed. Please, vote no on this bill.

With gratitude and hope,

Pastor Hank Osmundson, M.Div.

UU Justice Ohio

St. John’s United Church of Christ