



State Representative Mark Johnson
Sponsor Testimony – House Bill 504
Senate Judiciary Committee
May 31st, 2022

Chairman Manning, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Thank you for allowing us to present sponsor testimony on House Bill 504, the Sacred Spaces Act. This legislation, developed in conjunction with Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost, is designed to protect both in-person and online religious services from disruptive behavior.

Over the past two years, Ohio has unfortunately seen a number of disruptions to religious ceremonies across denominations. For example:

- January 2021: Eight protestors disrupted the Respect Life Mass at St. Joseph Cathedral in downtown Columbus. The abortion-rights protestors marched with signs while chanting before they were escorted out by police and diocesan officials.
- October 2020: A Jewish funeral held on Zoom was disrupted by unknown participants who made anti-Semitic comments.
- September 2020: A Jewish virtual prayer service held on Zoom for mourners was disrupted by unknown participants who shared pornographic images and stated “he deserved to die”.
- April 2020: Congregation Tifereth Israel in Columbus was targeted for a “Zoombombing” where several disruptive screens were added in a virtual ceremony depicting anti-Semitic content.
- April 2020: At B’nai Jeshurun Congregation in Pepper Pike, an online service was interrupted by the playing of electronic-generated or a tape loop of anti-Semitic and racial epithets.
- January 2021: At B’nai Jeshurun Congregation once again, there was a Zoom bombing during a live stream funeral service. The FBI and Pepper Pike Police are presently investigating the incident.

Several states, including New York, South Carolina, and Massachusetts, have laws in place specifically addressing the interruption or disturbance of religious services. California, in fact, has a stringent “Religious Service Interruption Law” in place that provides for a misdemeanor punishment of not more than 1 year in jail, \$1,000 fine, or both if an individual “*intentionally disturbs or disquiets any assemblage of people met for religious worship at a tax-exempt place of worship,*

by profane discourse, rude or indecent behavior, or by any unnecessary noise, either within the place where the meeting is held, or so near it as to disturb the order and solemnity of the meeting."

Under Ohio Revised Code 2917.12, the current offense of "disturbing a lawful meeting" is a fourth-degree misdemeanor and prohibits a person, with purpose to prevent or disrupt a lawful meeting, procession, or gathering, from doing either of the following:

- Doing any act which obstructs or interferes with the due conduct of such meeting, procession, or gathering;
- Making any utterance, gesture, or display which outrages the sensibilities of the group.

House Bill 504 creates new distinctions of "disturbing a lawful meeting" when committed with the intent to disturb or disquiet an assemblage for religious worship. This includes both in-person and virtual gatherings. Under these new scenarios, the penalty would be increased from a fourth-degree misdemeanor to a first-degree misdemeanor.

Chairman Manning and members of this committee, places of worship - no matter the religion nor whether physical or online - should be always remain sanctuaries free from harassment or menacing.

Thank you again for your consideration, and at this time we welcome any questions or comments from the committee.