

## **Testimony of Rev. Jess Peacock, Community Church of Chesterland UCC**

Chairman Young, ranking member Miller, and members of the committee, my name is Jess Peacock, and I am the pastor of Community Church of Chesterland in Geauga county. I am here this morning to testify in opposition to HB 6.

As a faith leader, as an ordained representative of the United Church of Christ, a denomination with a long history of fighting for justice, and as the pastor of a congregation that has been open and affirming to the LGBTQ+ community for thirty years, I believe we must protect the most vulnerable among us.

And right now, one of the most vulnerable populations within this state and within this country is queer youth. If you're not aware, suicide is one of the leading causes of death among ALL of our youth, and kids that are on the LGBTQ+ spectrum are four times as likely to kill themselves. That is, by definition, a vulnerable population. And it is a population that needs love and acceptance, not further opportunities for ridicule, or creating an atmosphere of hate that will have the horrible and unacceptable effect of causing more children to feel lost, unsupported, and ultimately suicidal.

These kids need our love and acceptance, not our condemnation. And they need the adults in the room to celebrate who they are and who they are becoming. What they don't need is further isolation, judgment, and hate.

Now, it doesn't take an expert to understand that a lot, if not most, of the objections to transgender youth and adults are based in religious beliefs. And as a theologian and religious historian, I could spend time today talking about how the Talmud has eight designations for gender, four of which are transgender in nature. Or I could point out how the writers of the Hebrew Bible consistently changed up the gender of god, such as when they referred to God as El Shaddai, which means breasted one. Or

how the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians refers to God as a weaning mother and as a father. In other words, God is trans.

But rather than go into the weeds of theology and scripture, allow me to say a few words about my own recent experience with homophobia and hate. My church, the Community Church of Chesterland, recently planned and implemented several drag shows and a drag story hour for families within Geauga county. We received a wave of hatred from people inside and outside of our community, calling us satanic, groomers, pedophiles, and even a few threats of bodily harm. One individual, who identifies as a Nazi, took his hate to the next level and firebombed our church, attempting to burn it down with Molotov cocktails.

We did not give into fear. We did not acquiesce to people who believe that their personal religious views should be forced upon the rest of us through oppressive legislation. Rather, we saw our cause for what it was: a beacon of hope for queer kids and adults who have been demonized, attacked, and constantly told that they are abominations in the sight of God. And as much hate as we received leading up to our events, the amount of support and thanks we have received since then has been truly overwhelming. Email after email, letter after letter, telling us that as a queer person living in a conservative part of the country, our courage gave them courage. That they felt seen and affirmed for who they are.

I firmly believe that the hate we experienced and confronted was fueled and emboldened by political leaders on the local, state, and national levels who see an opportunity to advance a type of Christo-fascism or Christian Nationalism at the expense of those who are most vulnerable: namely, queer youth and families. As Christian clergy, SB6 represents nothing remotely Christian or loving or just. These bills that are popping up all over the nation are simply cudgels to force the LGBTQ+ community back into the closet.

Over the last several weeks, I have heard over and over again, “think of the children, think of the children.” Well, let’s do that for a second:

Not one Ohio student athlete has testified as to how SB6 would be good for them. But many Ohio student athletes have testified to the negative impacts it will have on them, or their teams, or their schools. Can we really think of the children without listening to them?

And these proposed laws, and the anti-trans sentiments they prey upon, are praised by alt-right and self-professed Nazi groups such as the Proud Boys and White Lives Matter. Our church’s firebomber admitted that he represented the latter group. And I wonder, shouldn’t that give us pause? If we’re really, “thinking of the children,” shouldn’t it bother us, shouldn’t it bother you, that Nazis approve of these laws? If you agree with Nazis on anything, maybe you need to take a step back and reassess how you view things.

And finally, HB6 is simply overkill for a non-existent problem. In Ohio, only 6 trans women are playing in sports right now. Six. Meanwhile, gun violence is now the most likely reason a child or teenager will die in this country. Where are the bills seeking to curb this violence and national tragedy? Where’s the courage from our politicians to stand against the gun lobby, instead of oppressing and further marginalizing queer kids and their families?

Yes, let’s think of the children. Because Ohio should be embracing our queer students, not seeking to isolate them, not putting laws in place that not only continue to demonize them, but puts their health and lives at risk.

Because of these reasons, I encourage you to vote NO on HB 6 and other legislation that seeks to divide our community. Thank you and I would be happy to answer any additional questions.