

Madam Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the important issue of religious release time in public schools.

I am the Rev. Vicki Zust and I am the rector of Saint Mark's Episcopal Church in Upper Arlington. I am here to testify in opposition to HB445.

I have been an Episcopal priest for more than 25 years and in that time the largest challenge to my faith has been entanglement of Christianity with the government and particularly the support, real or perceived, of the government of a version of Christianity that is at odds with Christianity as practiced by me, the congregations that I have served and the Episcopal Church.

It is easy to say that HB445 allows all religions to participate in religious release time, but in reality, the programs permitted by HB445 are conducted nearly exclusively by Christian groups who hold positions antithetical to the beliefs and practices of the Episcopal Church.

Two of the promises in the Baptismal Covenant of the Episcopal Church are that we will seek and serve Christ in all persons and love our neighbors as ourselves and that we will strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.

Living into these promises have led the Episcopal Church to full acceptance of our LGBTQIA+ siblings, to practice marriage equality, to take public stands in support of the religious freedom of those of other faiths and, obviously, to ordain women to all orders of ministry, just to name a few of our positions. We take these actions not in spite of our faith but because of it.

The programs that seek religious release time teach a version of Christianity opposed to all of those actions and more.

Religious release time programs challenge our religious freedom. When the parents of children in my congregation choose to not allow their children to participate in religious release time programs, they are set apart from those children who do participate and have been subjected to mocking, threats and coercion by those involved in the program, both peers and adults. This creates a hostile environment for the children of my congregation as well as children of other denominations and faiths. That is a violation of their First Amendment and educational rights.

Beyond the direct harassment of children, it is an article of practice for the Episcopal Church, that a free and equal public education is foundational to a nation that respects and defends the rights of all. These religious release time programs interfere with that free and equal public education. These programs disrupt the school day and create distinctions and divisions among the students. In so doing they interfere with the free and equal public education that is one of the pillars of our civil society on which all of our rights depend.

My last point is that there are plenty of hours in the day for parents to seek out religious education for their children that conforms with their own beliefs. The parents of my congregation make those choices every day. There is no good reason why religious education programs need to be conducted during the school day. The only reason for these programs to be conducted during the school day is to attempt to recruit & coerce other children into participating and, indeed, all of the existing programs taking advantage of religious release time are explicitly evangelical in nature. This alone is a reason to vote down this bill and to allow local school boards to take the actions that they believe are necessary to ensure both the education and religious freedom of all children in their districts.

Thank you.