

Opponent Testimony for HB445
Primary and Secondary Committee
11/09/2024

Gayle Manning, Sarah Fowler Arthur, Phillip M. Robinson and members of the Primary and Secondary Committee,

Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony today. My name is Becca Meacham, and my pronouns are she/they. I am a concerned parent and educator residing in Westerville, Ohio. I am writing in opposition of HB445. My hope is that sharing my personal experiences will shed light on the harm that changing the language of the current RTRI policy would have on the youngest, most vulnerable minds.

I grew up a Christian. I was raised in the church and accepted Jesus as my savior when I was about 5 years old (and many more times after, just to be safe). I would have 100% been that child who attended LifeWise during my elementary years. I would have proudly worn my bright, red shirt and paraded around the school with joy in my heart. I would have looked forward to getting on the bus and learning about the Jesus I loved so much and so badly wanted to embody in everything that I did. I would have wanted to “save” everyone. My intentions were good. But you know what else I would have done: I would have shared the “good” news of Jesus with these “unchurched” children in a way that, I can say most certainly, would not have been a good representation of the unconditional love that I was trying to show. Because, you see, good news implies that there is something, well good. Therefore, I would not be sharing good news, at least, not to everyone. Jesus dying and saving someone from their sins is not going to be good news to someone who is Muslim or Hindu or agnostic or atheist or any other religion/spirituality (or lack thereof). I hurt a lot of people with the “good” news of Jesus. I always said, “I love you, but” or “Well, have you considered that you are following the wrong Jesus? (whatever that means!)? or my personal favorite...” Jesus wants to love you right where you are...sin and all...” My intentions were good and were rooted in what I believed to be the truth. My heart was always in the right place. However, the bottom line is, I hurt people. People who I claimed to love.

I had a very dear friend, we’ll call him Alex, who came out as gay to me in high school. He saw me as a safe person and trusted me with this very personal information. And what did I do? I told him that I loved him, BUT I didn’t agree with or condone his decision. Now, this happened almost 15 years ago, and I still think about it. I will never get a chance to right that wrong, and that is a deep hurt I feel in the very core of my being.

To truly love someone unconditionally is to literally love them without conditions. In my experience, and the experience of many others who grew up in the church, there always seemed to be conditions. For example, when I was a Christian, I was constantly bombarded with things that were “wrong” with me or ways that I needed to reconcile something that happened before I was even born. Some of those “wrongs” and reconciliations included:

- 1) being born into sin
- 2) being broken in some way or another
- 3) needing saved because I couldn't be a good person without Jesus

Now, there are some things I loved so much about the character of Jesus. He didn't care who he was seen with. He didn't care if someone had an issue with someone that he was showing love to. To me, Jesus represented exactly who I wanted to be to others and was the basis of why I chose the jobs that I have over the years.

I will never forget my conversation with a 5 year old student when I was a home visitor.

She looked at me in the middle of a lesson and said, "Ms. Becca, do you love me?" My response was, "Absolutely! Why would you ask that?" Her response was, "Well because sometimes people who look like you don't like people who look like me."

My heart sank as I carefully thought through the next thing I was going to say. This was an opportunity to represent the love of Jesus.

I took a deep breath and responded, "Well, I am a Christian so I believe that I am supposed to love everyone no matter what."

She did not look satisfied with this answer. She then said, "Well I am Muslim. Is that wrong to you?" I immediately responded, "No, not at all." She looked at me and said, "But you believe in Jesus, and I believe in Allah." I then responded with an answer that I believe kickstarted my deconstruction journey.

I said, "Well, I don't think it matters what you call god. God for you is Allah, god for me is Jesus and god could be something else to another person."

She smiled and told me that she loved me. I will never forget that moment.

For as long as I can remember, I used to kneel at the edge of my bed every night and plead, in the name of Jesus, that all those who did not know him would accept him into their heart. This weighed so heavily on my shoulders throughout my youth and young adult life. I truly believed that it was my duty, my purpose, to make sure that I told every person I came across about Jesus so they would not die and go to hell.

That is an enormous burden for a child to carry...

And it did not make sense to me that an all-knowing god needed me to carry that burden.

Some people say that they feel bad that we are lost or broken. I feel bad about people who feel so strongly about their beliefs that they forget to look at the person. I feel bad for parents that

feel like if their child leaves the church or walks away from god, that reflects, not only on them as parents, but also shows that they've fallen short of god's plan for their life and their family.

That is also a huge burden for a human being to carry.

Now, some of you may be thinking, "Well, it isn't my fault if they misunderstood what I was teaching them. I don't have any control over how others choose to interpret the teachings of Jesus."

And I would say:

It does not matter what your intentions are.

It does not matter if they are good or pure or holy.

It does not even matter if you are doing it because you believe that it is right.

What DOES matter is how the message is received.

It matters how the person hearing the message feels.

It matters if the message speaks negatively about someone that person loves.

It matters that the real-life experiences of others are heard, listened to and BELIEVED, even if they contradict what you believe.

I would like to leave everyone with these thoughts:

What if neither side is right or wrong?

What if each of us simply...is?

What if morality isn't tied to one religion, but exists with AND without religion?

What if heaven for one person is the place your eternal soul goes to be happy, but another person's heaven is being a spirit near their loved one here on Earth?

What if hell isn't a place we are condemned to suffer in burning lakes of fire, but rather it's everything divisive, cruel and unjust that goes on in the world we are in right now?

What if it doesn't matter what we believe or don't believe?

What if God is Jesus, Allah, Buddah, nature, love and everything in between?

What if we left the current RTRI policy as it's been for years and let the kids just be kids?

Thank you.