

Chairman Thomas, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Synenberg, and members of the House Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Rev Dr Joelle Henneman, my pronouns are she/her, and I am the pastor of the United Methodist Church for All People here in Columbus Ohio. I preach the good news, I care for people who live in poverty, and I speak across Ohio, and nationally, about faith, justice, and compassion.

I am here today because Ohio House Bill 249 could make my ministry a crime.

HB 249 restricts adult cabaret performances from places “where minors may be present.” This bill is worded so broadly that it defines adult cabaret performers as those who, “exhibit a gender identity that is different from the performer's or entertainer's biological sex using clothing, makeup, prosthetic or imitation genitals or breasts, or other physical markers.” This definition could be used to include me preaching on a Sunday morning, providing pastoral care during the week, or sitting before you today.

Under the language of HB 249, someone could claim that my presence itself is an adult performance simply because I am a transgender woman standing in front of an audience.

If a child is present, the bill could expose me to criminal charges.

That is not a theoretical concern. The bill’s language is broad and ambiguous. It does not clearly distinguish between theatrical drag performances and the everyday public presence of transgender people. When legislation is written this broadly, it invites selective enforcement and legal uncertainty.

This bill sends a message to transgender people that their presence in public spaces is unwanted. Last year, after a worship service, a transgender woman in attendance shared with me that until she saw me she did not know a transgender woman could be a pastor or in any kind of leadership position. My presence led her to see herself and her potential differently. This bill would do the opposite. It tells people like me that our calling to serve our communities may be treated by the state as something indecent if our gender identity does not conform to someone else’s expectations.

Throughout American history, laws about morality have often been used to silence marginalized voices. They have been used against Black ministers who challenged segregation, against women who sought the right to vote, and against LGBTQ people whose lives were labeled obscene simply for existing.

HB 249 risks repeating that pattern.

Children deserve safety and protection. In the United Methodist Church we take this seriously through our mandated Safe Sanctuaries program. But this bill does not protect children. Instead, it creates a vague legal framework that could criminalize people based on who they are rather than what they do.

One of the central truths of the Christian faith is that every person is created in the image of God. This comes from the creation story in Genesis 1:26 that states, "God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness." This bill sends a message to transgender people that their presence is obscene, that my speaking about God before you today is obscene.

That includes me as a transgender woman and my friends who are drag performers. Drag does not equate to nudity or erotica. In preparing for this testimony I could not find one instance of a drag performer harming a child in Ohio.

Because of this, every person has sacred value and divine worth and deserves the freedom to live honestly and safely in the world. In our call to worship at Church for All People we confess every week, "No matter who we are or what we have done, we are all beloved children of God."

HB 249 threatens that dignity by turning identity into suspicion; and, public presence into criminality.

I ask this committee to consider the real consequences of this legislation for transgender Ohioans.

Do not pass this bill that would further criminalize our identity.

Thank you for your time and your consideration.