

Chair Eklund, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Minority Member Thomas, and the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on this bill today. I am here to speak in support of SB 11.

My name is Nicholas Bates, and I serve as a Deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). I currently serve as the director of the ELCA's state public policy office in Ohio called the Hunger Network in Ohio (HNO). In this role, I have had the opportunity to interact with many faithful members of our Church throughout the state and see God's work being done through the hands of the Church.

In 2009, the ELCA passed a social statement on human sexuality. This social statement was debated, discussed, and reviewed by many scholars, theologians, church professionals, laity, and eventually passed by our Churchwide assembly. Our assemblies are designed to represent the diverse opinions within the church and include 2/3 lay members and only 1/3 ordained pastors. This statement reached a conclusion that people can be faithful members of our denomination and reach separate conclusions on issues of same gendered marriage and other issues *within* the church. However, the statement also calls on our Church to stand for legal protections in civil society for the children of God who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered.

And that is why I am speaking today in support of SB 11.

While Lutherans hold various convictions regarding lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, this church is united on many critical issues. It opposes all forms of verbal or physical harassment and assault based on sexual orientation. **It supports legislation and policies to protect civil rights and to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, and public services.** It has called upon congregations and members to welcome, care for, and support same-gender couples and their families and to advocate for their legal protection.

Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust<sup>1</sup>

The social statement deals with more than just LGBT issues. It also focuses on the importance of trust and safety in how we express our sexuality in monogamous relationships. In my decade of working with high school youth at my home congregation, I had the opportunity to work with many youth, including some who do not identify as cis-gender heterosexuals. I always felt humbled when youth would trust our space enough to discuss with the group their own struggles with understanding their sexuality. I believe statewide anti-discrimination laws will help set a standard that it is not okay to hate and the youth will know they have safe places to go for support.

When I first began seminary, I also worked with a group of youth around Ohio who were homeless. **It is estimated that 40% of homeless youth in America identify as LGBT<sup>ii</sup> and lack support and understanding in their home and community.** These are kids who had no place to go and felt their families, their churches, and their communities rejected them. SB 11 would tell these kids that they are valued individuals. As neighborhoods and workplaces become more open, I believe parents and communities will feel more confident and comfortable in helping, supporting, and loving these children as they mature and go through adolescence. In addition to homelessness, **LGBT youth are more likely to experience bullying at school (34%), depression, and are more likely (29% to 6%) to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.**<sup>iii</sup> One piece of legislation will never fix everything – but SB 11 is an important step in creating an Ohio culture that is based on diversity, inclusion, and welcome.

In conclusion, I want to share with you the language of a Lutheran t-shirt that is worn annually in the Columbus PRIDE parade. The shirts say, ‘there is a place for you here.’ I think that language applies to this debate. Ohio should be open and accepting to all. This bill will strengthen Ohio, Strengthen Ohio businesses, and strengthen Ohio families. Please support equal opportunity here in Ohio.

Thank you for your time, and I would be happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>i</sup> ELCA Social Statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust Page 19

<sup>ii</sup> <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/new-study-confirms-40-percent-of-homeless-youth-are-gay/>

<sup>iii</sup> Center for Disease Control <https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>