

The Reverend Terry D. Williams of the Ohio Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice

Testimony for June 24, 2021 Ohio House Criminal Justice Committee Hearing on HB109

Chairman LaRe, Vice Chairman Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland, and other distinguished members of the committee, thank you for taking time today to allow me to share testimony concerning House Bill 109.

My name is The Reverend Terry Williams. I am an Ordained minister of the United Church of Christ, and I currently serve as Lead Pastor of Orchard Hill United Church of Christ in Chillicothe. As a Christian pastor, I am called to ministries of preaching, spiritual care, faith formation, and teaching within my local congregation.

In addition to my work in the parish, I am a faith organizer with the Ohio Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and a member of Ohio Clergy for Choice, a group of clergy and religious leaders from across Ohio who support a person's ability to access a full range of reproductive health services, including safe and legal abortion.

As people of faith whose support for abortion flows from our religious convictions, we take particular interest in laws before the Ohio General Assembly that could impinge on the rights of our coalition's members, member organizations, and the coalition as a whole.

We count it one of the most precious rights enshrined in the United States federal constitution that our religious liberty is secure in all we do in this country – whether our actions and views be agreeable to the state or not.

In HB109 we see a dangerous and precipitous turn from what has been for many generations the historical position of the State of Ohio on issues of religious liberty and freedom of conscience. HB109 targets religious organizations and their members with threats of harsh financial penalties, dire civil liabilities, and escalated charges that seek to make many forms of historically-accepted religious protest into felonious acts in our state.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is often quoted among the members of the Ohio General Assembly, but his tactics for organizing and his commitment to bring about radical change through creative non-violence are less popularly quoted. Dr. King's work that paved the way for the modern civil rights movement was rooted in actions that HB109 now seeks to further criminalize, stigmatize, and cast shadows of civil liability onto religious organizations if they choose to participate, organize, or otherwise support such actions.

Historically a method of non-violent resistance perfected in the United States by Dr. King himself, blocking roadways during a protest will, under HB109 now in certain instances be treated as

felonies under state law. Also facing felony changes under HB109 will be any church or religious organization that provides support for a protest if that protest is later deemed a “riot” under Ohio law.

Coming on the heels of last year’s statewide protests against continued racial injustice, it is not lost on the members and constituents of our coalition at Ohio RCRC that HB109 directly targets Black and brown activists, Black church leaders, and Ohioans in every community throughout the state who stood together against racial injustice throughout the Racial Reckoning of 2020.

It is also not lost on our members and constituents that HB109, by targeting methods used by opponents of state policy with possible felony convictions, the state is effectively threatening the voting rights of Ohioans who engage in speech deemed unsuitable by the state. Coupled with the simultaneous advancement of anti-voter laws within the current general assembly, HB109 is part of a pattern of punitive measures being taken against citizens of the State of Ohio that intends to chill free speech rights and stifle religious organizations that speak out on issues of conscience.

At a time when the legislative authority of the buckeye state should be taking painstaking care to hear the voices of the people of the State of Ohio, discern how to forge a more just social contract with respect to racial justice in Ohio, and move forward with substantive policy changes that get at the root of the problems being protested by people of faith and conscience in our state, we see monstrous bills like HB109 that seek to criminalize speech that legislative partisans fear will damage their own prospects for holding on to political power.

As people committed to reproductive freedom, we are weary of the state’s continued refusal to provide truly safe environments for Ohioans to raise children – environments where living wages, affordable access to health care, and freedom from police-involved shootings could allow communities to thrive. Pressing forward with the further criminalization of free speech and the racialized targeting of voters for strategic disenfranchisement at a time when Ohioans cannot even parent the children they have in peace is a true failure of our entire state system of governance.

With apologies to Dr. King, an adaptation of a portion of his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* – a letter he penned while he was imprisoned by unjust laws that are the ancestral uncles and aunts of bills like HB109 which is before you today – sums up our key objection to this legislation:

You deplore the demonstrations that have taken place in Ohio. But your legislation, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations.

Make no mistake, religious organizations and individuals see this bill for what it is: a crackdown on certain speech that the current government simply does not like.

Members of the committee should reject this bill in its entirety and get busy doing the real work of representing the religious, cultural, and spiritual values of the vast majority of Ohioans who value free speech, deplore racial injustice, and are entirely dissatisfied with the inability of our government in Columbus to produce anything more than punitive measures designed to silence people disfavored by the current state power structure.

We will never arrive at a more just Ohio by throwing people like Dr. King in jail – but we will certainly tell the rest of the world, and future generations of Ohioans, where we stood in moments that called for courage.

Rev. Terry Williams