

Chair Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the House State and Local Government Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify as a supporter of House Resolution 194.

My name is Gary Bush and I am Lead Pastor at Grace Community Church in Alliance, Ohio. I believe this position offers me a front row seat to the positive effect that religious freedom provides. This right guaranteed in the first amendment of the United States Constitution is cherished and special. From the earliest settlers of this continent, to present day people, the ongoing desire is to be able to establish and freely exercise this right of pursuing the religion we choose. I believe it is one of the foundational rights that sets our country apart from many others. Religious freedom and the ability to worship our God freely is the foundational right that should be protected and honored. In fact, the following can be said. This right has been given to us by the Creator God, the God of the Universe, and it should not be separated from us.

Religious Freedom does in fact provide many benefits to the society at large. The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention indicate the following. "The founding fathers realized the importance that churches provided. This included moral teaching, community support, and community awareness. These benefits were indeed vital for the early United States of America's survival and success." Furthermore, I believe that Humans are in fact created by God in His image with a strong desire and need for fellowship. It is in this gathering that we can love one another, support one another, and quite simply do life together. We are not meant to be alone or live life alone. During this pandemic specifically, because of long times of isolation, we see the effect this has on people's lives including increases in reports of depression, anxiety and loneliness. I have seen first-hand, how being able to gather and support one another in the local church has quite honestly changed and even saved lives! The local church, after all, is the primary way the God of the Bible chooses to love, support and reach people today!

I am very thankful and proud to be a citizen of not only the United States and more specifically a citizen of the state of Ohio. Even in the most challenging of days these past two plus years, this freedom to gather and worship has been protected by the state. I appreciate that while there were difficult decisions that had to be made, by the Governor specifically, he always recognized the Church's right to gather safely and exercise our desire to worship. This effort does not go unnoticed.

Today, I am testifying to the importance of this right and specifically on behalf of HR194. It has become very clear, over the past couple years, that not everyone has protected this right. In some states and Canada, there have been some concerning events. Canada specifically has seen several prominent abuses of religious liberty take place throughout its provinces during the COVID pandemic. Ohio has stood for religious freedom and worked to protect the right to attend religious services. While it has been clear that Canada has not always done the same. There are several violations that have occurred and are included in the resolution.

I am also sure there are more instances that I am not aware of that could be added to these. I appreciate this resolution and specifically the representatives that sponsored this resolution. When events like those mentioned earlier happen so close to our state, I think it is wise to stand up for this right. The resolution, as presented, makes a clear statement and a line in the sand, if you will. I appreciate the leadership of this state being willing to stand for fundamental rights in this state, our country, and to all in the world. I am also remain hopeful that Ohio will continue to stand firm in the future and continue to protect the right of religious freedom.

Chair Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the House State and Local Government Committee, I wanted to say thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Specifically, to Reggie Stoltzfus thank you for representing the 50<sup>th</sup> District in Ohio. In closing, I want you to know that I am praying for you all in the decision about this resolution, and for serving the constituents of the state of Ohio. The job you have is hard, and there are many fighting for your attention and time. I encourage you to seek wisdom and guidance from the One who is above all things. The God of the Bible is the source of all wisdom and knowledge. In the book of James, the writer indicates that God desires to impart this wisdom to us, if we are willing to humble ourselves and ask Him for it. Thank you for this time and allowing me to testify today.

*Respectfully submitted by Pastor Gary Bush.*