

## **Opponent Testimony**

Topic: SB 23

Ohio House Health Committee

Hearing Date: March 26, 2019

Witness: Pastor F. Allan Debelak

### **Chairman Merrin, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Boyd, and committee members:**

Thank you for the time to speak today. My name is Al Debelak. I presently serve as an Interim Lutheran Pastor here in Columbus. I also serve as a volunteer escort at the Planned Parenthood Clinic on the Eastside of Columbus, and I sit on the Board of NARAL Pro-Choice Ohio.

I am here to voice opposition to Senate Bill 23. I understand you have heard more than enough testimony to have your minds made up about SB 23. In fact, many would argue that no testimony was really necessary. This bill was and is a done deal.

And yet, here I am.

When I'm not pastoring or volunteering, my wife has me reading mystery novels so that I am not merely reading theology all the time. Mystery novels have a way of pulling me in, helping me to see and hear themes beneath and behind the scenes. For example, when my family lived in Detroit, some of the older, neighbor girls would walk up and down the street with my then three-year old daughter. I found out that they were teaching her how to walk and watch and see that which is not so obvious — that which could turn a simple walk into a frightening and perhaps deadly life experience.

From my time as a clinic escort, I often write and speak about the *people at the fence*. They come bearing religious language, using religious images, making religious types of judgments in an attempt to cast a pall of shame on those who dare enter the clinic. As escorts, we remain silent — speaking only to those entering and leaving the clinic in an attempt to shield them from the shameful remarks of protestors. Their condemning comments are a form of violence that sees the world in only one way and will, thus, demand that all other people see it the same way or suffer consequences.

We have allowed the disease of stigmatization to fester and guide us.

Just this last week, after the terrorist activity in Christchurch, New Zealand, I received on my Facebook page two vile images. One was a cobra with the head of Rep. Ilhan Omar. The other was a video defiling Islam to the tune of John Lennon's "Imagine." The opening line — "Imagine there's no Muslims" — was the least offensive, yet I find that line utterly disgusting. And yet, how well it works to make others look deplorable and offensive and a blight upon us that some think they must end simply because they do not practice our beliefs.

I know this is not a religious body. But when I follow the wisdom of that small group of girls who taught my daughter how to walk down a city street — when I take another look at the characters in a good mystery novel whose true colors become more fully revealed, I see something going on here in this hallowed institution that betrays the people of Ohio.

I have been calling it a conspiracy of tyranny. Its stage is much larger than our state. One need only look at how well orchestrated various statehouses have been able to pull the same strings to shame women and doctors and nurses who choose to make life decisions differently than others. When this takes place, the character of those who feel compelled to take away the rights of women moves from one of service, seeking the welfare of all — to one willing to commit violence through stigma and denigration and the imposition of a patriarchy that betrays the well-being of *We the People*.

Throughout these hearings on SB 23, I have listened to many opinions about the viability of a fetus. Even though the fetus in these halls is often given the status of a baby or a child or a living human being, I consider viability to be something that should be left for consideration between a woman and her doctor and her family. This is not the place to decide that.

I firmly uphold that the women who walk into clinics to learn and discuss and take action to terminate a pregnancy do that with an intense and intimate understanding of the viability of life and the possibility of *new* life — including their own, their families, and the characters they will be as tomorrow becomes today.

Please do not think that we the people do not see the forces at play behind the actions of this body. Please do not think that we the people are naive to the harm that may take place in, with, and under the common appearance of this place. We can read between the lines that reveal one's true character, and we are able to walk with eyes wide open.

Thank you for your time.

F. Allan Debelak