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Testimony by Rev. Annie Ricker in Opposition to HB2238
Senate Education Committee, Sen. Molly Baumgardner, Chair

March 6, 2023

Mme. Chair, members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony before you today. I am Rev. Annie Ricker, a United Methodist minister here in the Topeka area. I am also the incoming Board Chair of Kansas Interfaith Action, a nonpartisan multifaith issue-advocacy organization that partners with most of the mainline denominations as well as with Christian, Muslim and Jewish congregations and individuals across our state. Between these two roles, I speak on behalf of more than 200 different faith communities across the state of Kansas. I also speak to you as a mother of an 11-year-old daughter, who currently attends public school. Today I urge you to oppose House Bill 2238.

Our faith communities are large and small, urban and rural, from more than a dozen different denominations, scattered across the state. We do not agree on everything, but we do agree that every single one of our children deserves a chance to grow and thrive; to learn and play in an environment where they are loved, cared for, and protected from bullying. Our faith traditions teach us to value human intelligence and scientific knowledge, so we know this bill is based on outdated and simplistic understandings of biological science, skewed for political purposes.

The media focus on a small number of high-level adult trans athletes has distracted too many of us from the real issue here: under this bill school kids, including elementary school kids, would be banned from playing on a team with their friends simply because they are different. The incidents of trans girls playing on competitive sports teams in Kansas is virtually zero. Why does this issue rise to the level of needing legislation, year after year? We believe this issue has been exploited and exaggerated for political advantage.

A better approach would be to simply trust our children and young adults to tell us who they are, and love them in all their diversity.

If you want to really protect my daughter's abilities to play sports – to give her a fair chance – there are plenty of great ways to do so. How about making sure their locker rooms are even half as nice as the boys' rooms? What about offering them the same number of teams to play on; paying their coaches equitable salaries; making sure they have the same amount of access to good equipment, weight rooms, and practice fields? All of these measures would benefit hundreds of thousands of kids across Kansas.

Banning trans children from playing sports will not improve any child's ability to play. But here's what we know it WILL do:

It will create a harmful environment of gender policing that will impact cisgender girls as well. ALL girls who have a less curvy, more “athletic” build; who have short hair or don’t wear make-up, will suddenly be the recipients of suspicion about whether they are “real” girls. This happens to my 6th grade daughter already. She has short hair, and she prefers oversized hoodies to dresses. When I was in school, that’s how most kids dressed. 30 years later, it’s an excuse for her fellow classmates to taunt and bully her, despite her kindness and character. Bills like this continue to weaponize artificial gender norms that harm the very people we claim we want to protect.

A trans sports ban doesn’t just affect athletes, either. LGBTQ youth are more than four times as likely as their straight, cisgender peers to attempt suicide. The Minority Stress Model explains this outcome as the result of internalization of anti-LGBTQ messaging in governmental, educational, community, and religious contexts. Every piece of legislation that targets even a tiny number of trans kids in Kansas, is a way of telling ALL trans people, ALL LGBTQ people in Kansas, “Your life doesn’t matter to us. There is something unlovable about you.”

As a religious leader, let me say it plainly: this bill is a sinful attack on children’s lives. The Bible I read describes a God whose image is male AND female, never just one or the other. The redeeming Christ in whom I rest my hope for the salvation of all creation is so expansive, as St. Paul proclaims in Galatians 3:28, that for the early Christians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

My daughter doesn’t need protection from trans kids. But ALL of our kids need your protection from the single leading cause of death in children: suicide. They need the adults charged with the care of our civil communities to stand up against bullies, instead of becoming bullies themselves. To let all kids know they are loved, instead of teaching them that anything about them that’s different, is a reason to wonder whether they’ll ever really belong – whether they’ll ever be safe.

We all know the benefits of playing youth sports: staying healthy, learning how to work hard, being part of a team, even learning how to lose well, and pick yourself up, and try again. Every child in Kansas deserves a chance to play, without anyone questioning them, excluding them, or even harming them, just because they’re a little bit different from some of their peers.

Please, put politics aside for the sake of our children, and vote no on HB 2238.

Thank you for your time.

Rev. Annie Ricker
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