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**Testimony by Rev. Dr. Annie Ricker in Opposition to SB 390, Exemptions from Immunization Requirements**

Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee, Sen. Beverly Gossage, chair

February 14, 2024

Mme. Chair, Members of the Committee:

My name is Rev. Dr. Annie Ricker, I'm a United Methodist pastor serving in the Topeka area, and I also serve as the Board Chair for Kansas Interfaith Action, an multifaith advocacy group that works for justice and equality for all people across the state of Kansas. I rise today in opposition to SB 390.

First, I'd like to speak from my denominational background specifically. Public health has been a priority of United Methodists going all the way back to the days of our founder, John Wesley, who taught a holistic view of salvation that included working for the health and wholeness of people physically as well as spiritually.

As a denomination, The United Methodist Church affirms and values scientific scholarship and evidence-based medicine. This includes our appreciation of immunization as a vital component of good health care. We view vaccines as an extension of God's provision and care for all humanity. Vaccines not only keep us safe personally, they also protect the vulnerable in our community.

The overwhelming majority of Christian denominations—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant—likewise affirm the importance of vaccines.<sup>i</sup> Even religious traditions that reject other aspects of modern life, such as the Amish and Old Order Mennonites, still participate in routine childhood vaccination and other immunization programs. And beyond Christianity, widespread vaccination is supported by Judaism, Islam, and in predominantly Buddhist and Hindu communities, again, even when a vaccine ingredient is derived from an ingredient that otherwise be forbidden as a part of religious practice. This is because the protection and preservation of human life is considered more important than almost any religious obligation, as in Deut. 30:19, where it says, "I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live.

We oppose this legislation because it is ill-considered and dangerous. Our opposition focuses on the expansion of a so-called "theistic or non-theistic moral or ethical exemption" to immunization requirements. We believe that these claims are an argument of convenience for those who decide for various other reasons to not have their children vaccinated, and that such claims have no basis in established religious practice or tradition. In fact, such "exemptions" should be considered anti-religious, counter as they are the well-established prioritization of human life.

In the past, someone claiming a moral exemption to vaccinations had to establish a long-term commitment to a religious denomination or a moral tradition, such as Christian Science, that had this as a teaching. This bill not only widely expands the basis on which such a claim can be made, but it prohibits the institutions affected by this legislation, particularly schools, preschools, and colleges and universities, from even inquiring into the sincerity or previous establishment of the claimed belief.

We are very concerned that this bill will undermine our state's commitment to childhood immunizations, including for measles, polio, rubella, etc., which have so dramatically lessened childhood illnesses, and extended human lifespans. Vaccines are an issue of science, not one of "belief"; although we recognize there are some long-established traditions that oppose vaccines, we do not believe that this exemption should be expanded to include the stew of politics and conspiracy theory that characterizes the contemporary anti-immunization movement.

Immunizations for childhood diseases are a vital part of public health and have saved countless lives from preventable diseases. This commitment must not be undermined by the expansion of specious "moral or ethical" exemptions.

I urge you not to allow this bill to leave this committee. Thank you for your attention.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vumc.org/health-wellness/resource-articles/immunizations-and-religion>