

My name is Joseph Larson, and I serve pastor with St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Fargo, ND. I am one of a few openly gay ELCA pastors called by Lutheran congregations in North Dakota. My congregation voted to become welcoming towards LGBTQ individuals and their families over 30 years ago—which was a big deal then and still is today.

I am writing to voice my opposition to HB 1249, which would effectively ban transgender youth from participating in sports teams that align with their gender identity in North Dakota.

My congregation currently has three families with transgender children, and other members with transgender grandchildren and relatives. I know each of the parents supports their transgender child in every way they can. They love and care for their children just as much as parents of "cisgender" (not transgender) children support theirs. Sports are an important part of a young person's school and social development. Transgender youth do not pose a risk to other children or adults.

Transgender youth simply want to sincerely, participate in sports activities that they enjoy and they should not be prohibited from participating on sports teams.

I believe that we as Christians are called by Christ to love one another and not pass judgment on one another. This bill continues to promote fear and bullying that many transgender youth already face. School bullying statistics are frightening: 78% of respondents to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS) reported being harassed, 35% physically attacked, and 12% sexually assaulted.

If we want to retain young people to live and work in our state, we need to create communities that welcome and embrace people from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

It's time for those of us who call ourselves Christians to live out our faith by supporting policies that support the dignity, humanity and needs of all people. As the prophet, Micah once said: "What does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). And as our Lord Jesus Christ commands us: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:9), and "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Luke 6:31).

I pray that you would vote to not pass HB 1249 and also support other legislation that creates a welcoming and caring environment for our young people in our schools and communities and state.

Sincerely,

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