Dear Chair Larson and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

My name is Joseph Larson, and I serve as pastor of St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Fargo, ND. Today I speak in opposition to Senate Bill 2199 from a moral, spiritual and personal perspective as a Christian, faith leader, and family member.

I'd like to begin with a quote from my national Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, who is Bishop of The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which is made up of three million baptized Lutherans with nearly 9,000 congregations, including 350 churches in North Dakota. Related to the issue of how the Church should treat transgender individuals, Bishop Eaton once made the following statement, which I believe is rooted in Lutheran theology:

"No human institution decides who is human, who is visible, who is valued. Human sexuality and gender identity is a beautiful mystery. Trans people, like all people, are beloved by God."

If Bishop Eaton were with us today, I believe that she would join me in saying that our Church has a place for everyone. The call of Christ's people today is to celebrate the diversity of God's creative work and embrace all people in the spirit of love, regardless of race or ethnicity, economic status, sexual orientation or gender identity; and to speak with a prophetic voice against all forms of hatred, bigotry and discrimination.

I grew up in Dassel, Minnesota, south of St. Cloud. So, I am at heart a small-town boy, and I know how people who live in Midwest rural areas look at issues like the one we are discussing today. And now as an openly gay pastor, I am one of a handful of LGBTQ clergy called by Lutheran churches in the state of North Dakota. I serve a Lutheran congregation that voted to become intentionally welcoming towards LGBTQ individuals and their families a little over 30 years ago. Which was a big deal back then. And still is true today.

But as a pastor and theologian, I believe that it is critical that we as Christians learn to not let our differences in religious beliefs and political opinions lead us away from human kindness and respect. For me, as a lifelong Christian and pastor, this runs completely contrary to the message of the Gospels. Where Jesus taught that his central message was love and grace. That we are here to help those in need, to lift up the injured stranger along the road, to care for the widow and orphan, to feel compassion for the oppressed and downtrodden. Not to push them farther down into the muck of this weary life.

Today, our Church is facing a crisis never seen before. Younger Americans are abandoning organized religion. One-third of Millennials say that the church's treatment of gay people is a main reason for that. They find it too difficult to participate in an organization or group of people that is supporting efforts that make life worse for their LGBTQ friends and family members.

Some may say that it's too difficult to change the Church. Yet ten years ago, the ELCA finally voted to allow the ordination of people like me, and also adopted a social statement on human sexuality that states:
"While Lutherans hold various convictions regarding lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, this church is united on many critical issues. It opposes all forms of verbal or physical harassment and assault based on sexual orientation…. The ELCA recognizes that it has a pastoral responsibility to all children of God.… It understands itself as called to this mission through the vocations of its members, its own institutional practices, and its public policy positions…. It understands that all children and youth, both inside and outside the church, are deserving of this church's concern."

In addition to that national resolution, this summer, my Eastern North Dakota Synod passed a measure with almost a unanimous vote (!) which included two major recommendations:

> 1) that congregations are encouraged to seek out ways to become truly welcoming communities for all, especially those who have suffered alienation and harm because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, offering them hope and safe harbor in our world; and
> (2) that members of … [our] congregations, look for opportunities to show their support and advocate for the care and protection of LGBTQIA+ people through members' vocations, our church's own institutional practices, and public policies in our communities and state.

Senate Bill 2199 which we have before us today is a bill that would sets up policies exactly contrary to both of those recommendations. This bill would subject our transgender youth to emotional harm, by refusing to allow others to address them with the names and pronouns that fit their identity—a simple courtesy that harms no one else and shows respect for human differences.

Today, it's time for those of us who call ourselves Christians to follow Christ's example of treating every person we meet with dignity and compassion. 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) I believe that is what God is calling you and me to do today.

I urge you to vote pass on this bill.

Pastor Joseph A. Larson
St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Fargo, ND