

Greetings Chairwoman Larson and Members of the Committee,

My name is Joe A. Larson, and I serve as pastor of St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Fargo, ND. I am also the first openly gay ELCA pastor called by a Lutheran congregation in the state of North Dakota. I serve a Lutheran congregation that voted to become welcoming towards LGBTQ individuals and their families 30 years ago.

I am writing to voice my opposition to HB 1298, which would effectively ban transgender youth from participating in sports teams that align with their gender identity in North Dakota.

My congregation currently has four families with transgender children. I know each of these parents supports their transgender child in every way they can. They love and care for their children just as much as parents of cisgender, or 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 follow Christ's example 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)

I pray that you will not support HB 1298 and seek to promote legislation that creates a welcoming and supportive environment for our young people.

Sincerely,

Rev. Joe A. Larson
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