

Members of the committee, I thank you for your time. My name is Melyssa Howry and I live in New Town, ND. I strongly support SB2181 and I am grateful to the senators and representatives who came together in order to shore up our protections in regards to the constitutional right to gather in worship. I would just like to share my personal viewpoint on the importance of gathering in person, and why I believe this extra support from the legislature is welcome and needed.

Throughout this past year, our church family is what kept us going. We moved here more than 2 years ago from New England, and knew no one when we arrived. Having a church home has been vital for our family. If we had not been able to gather regularly with them over the past 9-10 months, it would have had an immeasurable negative impact on us and our children. There are a couple reasons for this. First of all, the Bible commands us to gather with other believers (Hebrews 10:25), and first and foremost, we must obey the Word of God. Second, personal contact is essential for mental, emotional, and even physical health. Long-term isolation is dangerous. "Attending" church online sounds nice at first, but I assure you, it is lacking. As one pastor put it recently, watching church on a screen is like watching a fire without feeling the warmth. It is empty of all the things that church should be. While it is a nice option once in a while, it cannot and will not ever replace a true worship gathering.

The third reason (and perhaps the most compelling in light of the events of the past year) that the church is vital is that we are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus. During the Spanish flu pandemic, the Christians were the ones who stayed in the cities and ministered to the sick, while others fled out of fear. We are called to stand in the gap and serve those who are in need, not run away and hide. I often think of how Jesus dealt with infectious disease, and I can recall many circumstances where he laid hands on people to heal them, and did not avoid them. His disciples and the apostles did this as well. One particular example is when Jesus healed the leper. People criticized him for even going near a person with leprosy, let alone touching him. However, Jesus did not shy away. He boldly stepped out in faith. This is what Christians are called to do as well, and it is something I am strongly convicted to keep doing, pandemic or not. To keep us from gathering and ministering to those around us is to cut us off from what we have been commissioned to do.

Again, I thank those who sponsored this bill, and I ask that you please vote "Do Pass". Thank you for your consideration!