

Testimony in Opposition to HB2576

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Many, many religious leaders have been working hard for years, on the federal level, to fix our broken immigration system. Why? Because our sacred traditions, across all traditions, call us to resist our all-too-human fear of the "Other" -- to rise above that fear and to welcome the stranger.

The Interfaith Platform on Humane Immigration Reform puts it like this: "As our diverse faith traditions teach us to welcome our brothers and sisters with love and compassion --- regardless of their place of birth... we call on the Administration and Congress to enact humane and equitable immigration reform...each day in our congregations, service programs, health-care facilities and schools we witness the human consequences of a broken and outdated system. We see the exploitation of undocumented workers and the plight of separated families, as well as the escalation of community fear due to indiscriminate raids and local police acting as federal immigration agents. This suffering...offends the dignity of all human beings."

It is not the responsibility, nor within the power of the state of Kansas, to enact compassionate immigration reform. It is within our power, and it is our moral responsibility, to do everything we can to alleviate the suffering of those within our borders, suffering that is the result of this inaction on the part of the federal government.

The Hebrew Bible tells us: "The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself." In the New Testament, Jesus tells us to welcome the stranger, for "what you do to the least of my brethren, you do unto me." The Qu'uran says "do good to those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers...The Hindu Upanishads say "The guest is a representative of God".

None of which is shocking. We humans turn to religion to help us overcome our fears, our tribalistic instincts, and our need to protect only what is ours even at others' expense...we turn to religion to help us understand our connectedness to and responsibility for all that is, and to act accordingly.

Yet this bill would have us do just the opposite. We are being asked to break the very foundational laws of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and many other religious traditions -- to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are being asked -- we would be required -- to see our neighbors as criminals, as aliens as if they were somehow different from us. As though they were less deserving of freedom and the ability to support their families, or to grow up, free of fear, less deserving than us because they had the audacity to be born in places that offered no hope for the blessings of life that we, here, enjoy and even take for granted. The blessings of life that the people who make the laws and the people who elect them, had the good fortune to be born into. Finding ourselves so blessed calls us to help extend those blessings in compassionate ways to all who need them. Not to protect our own privileged places by throwing up walls, by offering a fist instead of the hand of friendship, and maybe worst of all, by asking the citizens of this state to give in to the demons of their fears rather than heed the higher

This sacred tradition is not only that of our diverse religious heritages. To welcome the stranger, to protect the refugee--- this is a sacred tradition of the state of Kansas. Today we remind you, our legislators, that this is not the first time the citizens of Kansas have heard these calls to abandon our responsibility to those who come to us seeking freedom, sustenance, and sanctuary. This is not the first time that people of faith and conscience have been required to betray their principles and cooperate in harming the vulnerable.

We remind you of those first settlers who came to Kansas from Massachussets. We might all find inspiration in the example of Emily Hunt Grover, who arrived here in the care of future first governor of Kansas Charles Robinson, who also brought the Unitarian tradition, which I represent today, to Kansas. In 1850, the federal government had enacted the Fugitive Slave Act - which stated that any person who aided a runaway slave in any manner was subject to six months imprisonment and a \$1000 fine. Emily and her husband Joel became conductors on the Underground Railroad. On January 24, 1859, twelve tired, hungry souls, including a newborn child -- escaped slaves -- arrived on their doorstep. The Grovers took them in, hiding them in their barn, violating the Fugitive Slave Act, risking six months in prison and \$1000 fine for each of their twelve guests.

They did not hesitate to follow their conscience. At the same time, they violated an unjust law -- a law that pitted human beings against one other, because of the circumstances into which they were born. The moral crime was not that violation -- the crime was the enactment by the government of a law that requires people to do what is wrong. The bill that's being considered here today would require us to do what is wrong. To become instillers of fear. To act as oppressors to the weary and the wounded. To betray our own humanity.

Put in such a position, people of faith and goodwill would find themselves having to make hard choices. Our government, founded on the very principles of that faith, must not put us in that position. We call on you to uphold the sacred traditions of our religious heritage, and of the state of Kansas, and to say no to those who, once again, would have us betray those traditions.