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Testimony by Rev. Caela Simmons Wood in Opposition to SB12
Senate Committee on Public Health and Welfare, Sen. Beverly Gossage, chair
February 14, 2023

Mme. Chair, members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony with you today. I am the Rev. Caela Simmons Wood; I currently serve as President of the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference of the United Church of Christ. I speak today on behalf of Kansas Interfaith Action, a statewide, multifaith issue advocacy organization.

My faith compels me to work to create a world where all of God's beloved children are treated with dignity and respect. As a Christian, I learned at church and from my sacred texts that God values diversity. The God in my Bible has many expansive names and is not narrowly constrained by categories like "male" or "female." Believing that we are all created in God's image, I – and many other Christians – believe transgender people are created in God's divine image and have sacred and inherent dignity and worth. In my faith tradition, the protection and support of children is an especially sacred duty for adults. Our teacher, Jesus, ardently defended and loved children and calls us to do the same.

It is for these faith-based reasons that I urge you to oppose SB12, which not only prevents parents from protecting and caring for the health of their minor children but strips away the basic right of young adults to seek life-saving healthcare in partnership with their medical providers. We know that transgender youth and young adults are at a significantly increased risk of suicide and other at-risk behaviors. Gender-affirming healthcare, which is supported by all major medical associations, is the only evidence-based treatment available for transgender youth and young adults. Do we really want the legislature to be in the business of taking away the rights of medical professionals to practice medicine according to the standards of their professional best-practices? The rights of parents to make healthy choices for their minor children? And the rights of young adults to make their own healthcare decisions? I surely don't. I urge you to oppose this bill and preserve our God-given rights to freely choose, with the help of medical professionals, what is best for our own bodies.

In my work as a pastor and as a volunteer at an organization that serves LGBTQ+ teens, I have met the youth and young adults that this bill will affect. They are unique and precious, like all their peers. They deserve the right to access necessary healthcare, just like we all do. Gender-affirming healthcare for youth primarily consists of:

- Access to mental health care and counseling
- Puberty blockers, which allow families and their medical providers time to consider the right course of action before the development of permanent secondary sex characteristics, and
- Hormone treatments or hormone replacement therapy

All of these forms of care are safe and reversible. They give parents, youth, young adults and their healthcare providers the gift of time as they continue to learn and grow – something all youth and young adults need. Contrary to what you might have heard from those who use inflammatory language to instill fear in the public, trans children in Kansas are not receiving gender-affirming surgeries.

Our bodies are a holy gift from God. My religious beliefs affirm that God is present in each person and that *all* bodies have sacred worth. Science and our continually expanding knowledge of how to care for our holy bodies is also a gift. Preventing people from caring for their own bodies or the bodies of their minor children is not just a right that I believe we should all have as citizens of this great nation – it is a right that is God-given. Taking away that right is an affront to my Christian faith.

Children are a gift from God. As a mother, I recognize I have a sacred duty to do everything within my power to care for and protect my children. All parents want what is best for their children – and that includes ensuring they have access to necessary medical care. Gender-affirming care is medically necessary, safe, effective, and – as the *only* evidence-based care for trans youth – it literally saves lives.

We cannot let SB12 become a reality in Kansas. Our youth and their families deserve every opportunity to receive the healthcare they need, and medical professionals deserve to provide medically necessary care without fear of criminal prosecution.

I know the youth and young adults who will be affected by this bill. And they are brave, fierce, beautiful people who know more about tenacity, courage, loyalty, and strength than I'll ever know. They need our support, not our attacks.

Thank you for your time.

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