

PUBLIC COMMENTS

HB 1691

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON STATE AFFAIRS

Hearing Date: March 25, 2021 8:00 AM

Frank Pomeroy

myself as a concerned citizen

Seguin, TX

As a pastor and concerned citizen I am here today in support of this bill that has been presented by Senator Paxton SB26.

Martin Luther the father of Protestantism wrote a pamphlet during the Plague of 1527 of the duties of a church and what his role was during the Plague. He ended up loosing his own daughter to the plague but yet stood true to what he knew his people needed in leadership. He knew that he was needed to help bring peace to a horrible situation. One of his quotes resonates with truth and stands true still today.

He said, ""We die at our posts. Christian doctors cannot abandon their hospitals, Christian governors cannot flee their districts, Christian pastors cannot abandon their congregations. The plague does not dissolve our duties: It turns them to crosses, on which we must be prepared to die." ~Martin Luther, 1527

During times of trials and crisis the number one place that needs to be open is the place where people can find peace and solace. The place where their friends and family can gather in prayer and strengthen one another, and I believe that Spiritual strength that is needed to battle the adversity is found in their places of worship.

We saw in the last pandemic that liquor stores and casinos were considered essential while churches were being closed down and police were called to block doors and drive around drive through services to arrest those that did not fulfill the governments mandates on worship.

Though our constitution protects the rights of Americans to gather and worship we saw those rights swept away across the country. We need to pass this bill so that the citizens of Texas can have legal backing to stand and fight with when the government tries again to overreach and close down the one place that truly needs to stay open in times of calamity, the Church.

Jorge Gonzales, Mr

self

Houston, TX

TX HB 1691 is yet another example on the legislative agenda demonstrating religion's unconstitutional influence on state lawmaking. Religious organizations do NOT provide an essential service when they are engaged in purely religious activities. These rituals do NOT provide any of the basic needs of survival, and should not be classified as essential. Religion should not dictate the law, religion should not be allowed to endanger lives, religious rituals can be safely performed at home, and religious services SHOULD be allowed to be suspended during emergencies by order of the governor.

Michael McCloskey

Self, Sales

CEDAR PARK, TX

Religious Activity is essential and it would violate U.S. Constitution First Amendment rights to assembly and worship to prohibit it.

Rachel Bresner, ADL Jean & Jerry Moore Southwest Civil Rights Counsel

Printed on: March 29, 2021 10:22 AM

ADL (Anti-Defamation League)

Houston, TX

On behalf of ADL, we write to express our opposition to HB 1691, relating to the protection of religious freedoms and religious institutions during a declared state of disaster and opposition to HB 1239, relating to prohibited suspension of laws protecting religious freedom and prohibited closure of places of worship, opposition to HB 525, relating to the protection of religious organizations, and opposition to HB 1487, relating to the protection of religious organizations. These bills would restrict the ability of the Governor and other state and local officials to issue emergency orders that limit in-person religious services, even if the orders were treating religious services the same as all other gatherings and regardless of how dire the danger to public health and safety.

ADL is a strongly pro-religion, national anti-hate and civil rights organization which supports faith, fairness and freedom. For over a century, we have been an ardent advocate for religious freedom for all Americans-- whether in the majority or minority. HB 1691, HB 1239 and HB 525 are overbroad and likely unconstitutional and would have serious, detrimental consequences for all Texans. It is an essential responsibility of the government to protect the public during an emergency, including a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic. HB 1691, HB 1239 and HB 525 dangerously limit the ability of the government to respond to threats to the public by the COVID-19 pandemic and future pandemics. What is even more troubling is that they go even further by tying the hands of the Governor in non-pandemic emergencies as well, including but not limited to during fires, floods, explosions and hurricanes.

These bills are incredibly broad and would put the public health at risk. State and local officials must be able to issue emergency orders to protect public health under emergency circumstances. Tying the hands of government officials and forbidding or otherwise restricting them from limiting in-person religious gatherings regardless of the public health dangers or disaster or emergency situation will put lives at risk.

It applies to a wide category of religious organizations and prohibits the governor from placing limitations on any of their operations related to a declared state of disaster. These bills do not put religious organizations on equal footing with secular institutions. Instead, it targets them for vastly more favorable treatment, putting them out of reach of any regulation during an emergency even if that regulation applies equally to secular organizations.

Governors would have a harder time controlling the spread of COVID-19 because they would be unable to limit attendance at superspreader events. These bills would also limit the governor's ability to respond to all emergencies, not just COVID-19. For example, a governor might not be able to require a mandatory evacuation in preparation for a hurricane if it would close houses of worship or limit their hours

Anna Hicks

Self

Newark, TX

A disaster or pandemic does not cancel our constitution. Or constitutional rights should never be infringed upon and religious organizations should have no government governance in the case of a disaster or otherwise.

Robert M Santini

Republican Party of TX

San Antonio, TX

I support this bill. Please bring it up for a vote in committee and ask committee members to vote to pass it out of committee.

Debra Wolgemuth

Self Employed

Waco, TX

I quit attending my Waco, Texas church due to the excessive church lockdowns from Abbott's Executive Overreach. Abbott's actions paralyzed many Texas congregations who chose to live in fear and timidity. I was determined to walk by faith, not choose fear and to fight for my constitutional liberties. I started following a California church, Calvary Chapel Chino Hills/Pastor Jack

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Hibbs, who provided wisdom and clarity during this past year. Amazingly a California church reopened before my Central Texas church. I am a widow who did not need to be cutoff and alone in my home. A special legislative session was NEVER called to give me representation regarding Abbott's dictator actions. I felt like I was living in back in California and my rights were stolen again. Please, never allow this to happen again in Texas. (Hebrews 10:25)

Michelle Orcutt

Self

Corpus Christi, TX

Right to assemble and worship as please desire is a constitutional right federally and by state. There should be NO limits allowed to be placed by government agencies!!!!

WILMA JOY PUTNAM, MRS.

self

GEORGETOWN, TX

I support HB 1691 in that I think it will protect Texans from having their religious freedoms and their freedom to attend church guaranteed by the First Amendment from being curtailed as was done through TEXAS in the recent Covid LOCKDOWN.

Michael Sweeney

Self - Business Owner

Georgetown, TX

I support HB-1691 and ask the committee to pass this legitimization to stop government overreach infringing on our Constitutional Rights as provided under the 1st Amendment to gather freely in the exercise of our religious freedoms without interference or control.

Don Huffines, Senator

Self

Dallas, TX

To The Committee on State Affairs,

I urge the Committee to report HB 1691 favorably out of committee and to work to see it finally passed in the strongest form possible. It's well past time to protect one of Texans' most essential rights- the right to worship freely- from the type of government overreach that we saw over the course of this past year. Never again should Texans be shut out of their places of worship.

God Bless Texas,

The Honorable Don Huffines

Julia Dahlberg

Self

LA VERNIA, TX

IN SUPPORT OF
TEXAS HOUSE BILLS: HB525, HB1239, HB1487, HB1691, HJR72
PROTECTING RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

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As a member of our church's safety response ministry, I would like to bring the committee's attention to the importance of protecting our religious liberty from a different vantage point.

Our safety response ministry upholds a mission of ensuring an environment of comfort, refuge, learning and worship to all members and visitors who come through our doors. We take that mission very seriously and have a zero-tolerance policy on interruption of services, in order to maintain that safe and secure environment for our church family. If ever there has been the need for comfort and refuge for people who are hurting in these uncertain times of trials and fear, this last year has been it.

Due to the Governor's unchecked mandates regarding which businesses and activities are essential or not; the confusing and unclear expectations in enforcement of pandemic-related mandates against gatherings; and an inconsistent understanding by state and local authorities, our First Amendment protections have been threatened.

When we all saw instances across the state and nation where law enforcement officers were locking church doors and threatening church family and church leadership with citations and arrest for simply attempting to exercise their right to worship, church protectors like me are forced to envision a scenario where we could potentially have to become the last barrier between law enforcement officers – who have sworn an oath to protect our Constitutional right to freely worship – and our church family trying to exercise that right. And, forced to decide between our great respect for our law enforcement officers and protecting the right of our church family to worship without interruption. A scenario like that should never be imaginable in a free America and certainly not in the great State of Texas.

This overreach has placed church leadership at odds with law enforcement and local leaders – relationships that generally would be one of strength and collaboration in support and protection of the church family's free expression of their faith.

Even though I find it unbelievable that we even need to be having this conversation, the pandemic response has clearly shown that without this additional protection in our state law, the constitutional guarantees for Texas citizens are open to interpretation by those in authority who may not respect those protections. We cannot allow this to continue, unchecked. Passing HB525, HB1239, HB1487, HB1691, HJR72. would ensure in Texas law, that the appropriate 'hands off' language is made perfectly clear as it applies to religious liberty.

I urge each of you to publicly support and vote for HB525, HB1239, HB1487, HB1691, HJR72 to protect religious liberty in Texas. Thank you for your time and your service.

Doreen Kent, Mrs

Self

Richardson, TX

I am concerned about election integrity in Texas! I am writing to comment about HB6 from Cain!

David Wylie, SREC SD12

Republican Party of Texas

Argyle, TX

Fully support this bill

Maureen Riebel

Texas and USA citizen

Boerne, TX

Dear Senator - Religious freedoms should be up-held — no matter the situation. Whether the sun is shining or it is a cloudy day ~ religious organizations have the right to gather and worship.

Darren Meyer

Self/Physician

McKinney, TX

I wish to express my support for this bill. I wish this bill were not necessary, as the right to assembly and to worship is already guaranteed by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. But since our state government exercised its power to place an indefinite emergency order in contravention to the United States Constitution, it seems a bill such as this is necessary, right, and just; therefore I support the passage of HB 1691.

Isabel Ray

self (communications)

Austin, TX

I oppose HB 1691. While this bill is couched in language about “religious protection,” what it’s actually trying to do is gain special treatment for churches--treatment that, in the event of a pandemic such as COVID, puts all of Texas at risk. It is not “discrimination” for members of a church to follow the same public health guidelines as everyone else. When gathering in person is unsafe, churches have the same moral responsibility as everyone else to practice safer methods of communion, such as virtual meetings. Please do not endanger Texans’ health by exempting religious organizations from doing the right thing during a pandemic. Thank you.