

Oral Testimony of
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To the
Committee on Judiciary
U.S. Senate
Room 226
Dirksen Senate Office Building
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Honorable members of the Judiciary Committee:

I come before you as an Evangelical Christian and an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (USA). I seek your support for the Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Prevention Act.

Christians affirm, along with many other faith traditions, that every single human being is created in the image of God. That means each person is entitled to the fundamental rights and dignity that go with being an image of the Almighty and a member of the one human family.

In this area, Christian teaching resonates with the dream that is America. Our Declaration of Independence states that “All men are created equal [and] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.”

Our forbearers understood what Christianity also affirms: that peoples’ ability to live out their calling requires respect for their fundamental rights and freedoms. The protections of a lawful society provide us with the secure space necessary to develop our full human potential, to grow in love for our neighbors, and to offer our gifts for the good of all.

That space of freedom in which lives can flourish disappears when people are subject to physical attack, or live in constant fear for their safety. This is one area where the church needs the government’s help in order to do its work. We need you to create for us and for all citizens that safe space of

freedom in which we can help people embrace the love and goodness that is their calling as children of God.

As the name on this bill testifies, that safe space has been tragically lacking for our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender brothers and sisters. In 2007 alone, 1,265 hate crime incidents based on sexual orientation were recorded by the FBI. Though we already have laws to protect people from violent assaults, the truth is that in areas where particular minority groups are widely disapproved, justice sometimes bends in response to local prejudices, or has too few resources to make an effective stand. In such cases we need the help of our federal law enforcement system provided in this bill in order to make real that American promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all our citizens.

This bill not only benefits the LGBT community, it also promotes religious liberty by expanding and updating federal protection against violent crime committed because of a person's religion. That is all the more reason why so many religious bodies have been eager to support the bill. I have attached to my testimony a letter of endorsement signed by my own church and host of others, representing a broad range of faith traditions.

Now some have worried that this Act would function to outlaw the sincere religious faith of Americans who believe that homosexuality is contrary to God's will. Let me say that if I thought for one minute that this bill would limit anyone's religious faith, expression or observance, I would not touch it with a ten-foot pole.

But that is not what it does! Section 10 explicitly reaffirms that our religious freedoms are fully protected by the constitution!

The Matthew Shepard Act targets not thought or speech, but physical assault. Violent attacks on another person are not a legitimate expression of anyone's religion, Christian or otherwise. There is nothing in this Act for law-abiding Christians to fear.

In fact, we need this bill for the health of our churches, our mosques, and our synagogues. In my own church, good Bible-believing Presbyterians

are split right down the middle on questions surrounding homosexuality. Like many religious bodies, we are engaged in vigorous debate, working to find our way to God's truth together. But we can't have the debate we need when some people fear being assaulted in a dark alley if they are honest in church about who they are and what they believe. We need the protections that the Matthew Shepard Act provides.

So for the sake of my church's health, and for the sake of this country's promise to all its citizens, I urge you to do the right thing and pass this legislation.

Thank you for your time and attention.