

Mr./Madame Chair, members of the committee, I am Dick Weaver, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ serving in Helena. I stand in support of **Senate Bill 179**. As a voting citizen, a person of faith and an ordained Christian minister, I believe there is no reason not to amend the language of existing legislation in the state of Montana in order to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. My faith in God as a follower of Jesus Christ, as well as the biblical and theological education I have acquired, tells me that God loves all people equally. The God of Moses, the ancient prophets, Jesus himself, and Christians in all times and places, has special concern for those who are marginalized, ostracized, or violated by people in the societies.

Those who argue from a scriptural basis that God condemns homosexual behavior are free to understand scripture that way if they wish, but millions of Jews and Christians understand our sacred texts differently--as the witness of how people understood and grew in their relationships to God, rather than as a prescription for all future laws or behaviors. The Bible itself in fact makes no such claims.

The Bible of course says nothing at all regarding gender identity or transgender issues, and the chief model of the Christian faith, Jesus of Nazareth, is recorded as having said nothing at all about homosexuality or other such gender issues. Where one may find language that seems to condemn some homosexual behavior, one can also find the same strong language condemning the eating of pork and shellfish or the wearing of garments made out of more than one kind of fabric. If the Bible is to be a law-book, then surely we are all in equally big trouble.

People of faith can and should have conversations with one another regarding how to interpret scripture. One thing I'm certain of is that the Bible is not and should not be part of the legal code of the State of Montana. It is not the business of the state to inject religious interpretation into the laws of this state, and in my opinion to do so is a clear violation of the US Constitution if not our own constitution.

For me, God is a god of love, and if God judges societies and cultures, we are judged by how we take care of those who need help, whether they are living in poverty, are strangers and immigrants among us, or are people who are attacked and mistreated on the basis of race, skin color, education level, economic status, religion, gender identity or expression, or sexual orientation. Please pass SB 179. Thank you.