

February 14, 2022

To the Members of the Iowa House Education Committee:

I am a called and ordained clergy person in the United Church of Christ. I am also a responsible adult. As such, I take seriously the call to protect and advocate for the most vulnerable among us. I am reminded of how the writer of Psalm 82 calls God to "defend the weak and the parentless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed." Certainly such a call is not simply meant to concern God alone. It is meant to be a concern of God's people as well.

To be sure, our sacred texts speak plainly about the way in which we are to treat one another. We are to love one another as ourselves, we are to recognize the image of the Divine in one another, and we are to protect the most vulnerable among us. Our trans and non-binary youth are some of the most vulnerable amongs us in the state of Iowa and in the U.S. I am writing in hope that you will join me in protecting them from the damaging details and provisions that comprise HF2309.

According to January 2022 data from The Trevor Project, 85% of trans and non-binary youth reported that following recent news about issues that impact the transgender community has negatively impacted their mental health. If it is true that participation in sports can and does have a positive impact on the self-esteem and mental health of young people, why would the focus be on limiting or eliminating participation for such a vulnerable population? Trans and non-binary youth are effectively denied the opportunity to participate in school sports at all just as soon as you deny them the opportunity to play on sports teams that align with their gender identity. Which, of course, means that they are also denied the positive impacts mentioned above. Meanwhile, cisgender youth continue to enjoy the positive impacts of participation in sports.

HF2309 not only damages the most vulnerable among us, it actually seeks to foot the bill for any "lawsuit or complaint and incurred by an accredited nonpublic school, a school district, or an employee, board of directors member, or a member of the authorities in charge of a nonpublic school, including any award for attorney fees and costs for which that entity or individual would be otherwise responsible." In other words, this bill offers state-sanctioned discrimination on the basis of sex, as discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity is, as US Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote in 2020, "necessarily bound up with discrimination on the basis of sex."

But beyond all of the legalities and the quoted scripture, one thing remains sure: For generations we have been discriminating against vulnerable and marginalized people, and for generations we have been getting it wrong. First it was preventing Black people from full participation in sports, then it was women, and then it was gay and lesbian athletes. We continue to be content to discriminate and damage the most vulnerable among us based on a fear or a lack of understanding of the differences that exist in humanity as well as the notion that difference, when included, spoils the experience for others. My siblings in Christ, this cannot continue to be so.

As a pastor, as a responsible adult, and as a fellow human being, I implore this House Education committee to focus its attention on Iowa's slipping educational ranking and its under-funded public schools. I implore this committee to remember the call to love one another as you love yourselves. I implore you to protect some of the most vulnerable among us, our trans and non-binary youth, by refusing to send HF2309 beyond your committee for a vote.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rev. Melissa R. Sternhagen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Rev. Melissa R. Sternhagen
Pastor, St. Paul Congregational United Church of Christ
Oskaloosa, IA