



In legislative push for religious liberty, some see potential for discrimination

By Annmarie Timmins
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CONCORD — Like most states, New Hampshire never ordered churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship to close after COVID-19 hit the state, but it did limit how many could attend services. That was unconstitutional, several pastors told a Senate committee Tuesday, given that retailers and liquor stores were unrestricted.

“We know that the churches and places of worship have been mentioned in the U.S. Constitution,” said Pastor Peter Chamberlain of Granite State Baptist Church in Concord. “And they’re mentioned in our New Hampshire Constitution. Home Depot’s not. The liquor store is not.”

A “religious liberty” bill that would limit the state’s ability to put restrictions on places of worship in future emergencies has been embraced by religious leaders, rejected by LGBTQ and civil liberties groups, and flagged by the Attorney General’s Office. Opponents argue the language of the bill will extend religious protections beyond the church and allow for discrimination.

Sean Locke, director of the Attorney General’s Civil Rights Unit, cited the bill’s use of “persons” to identify those protected by the proposed legislation.

“This broad definition of persons is particularly concerning,” Locke said, “because it would allow secular businesses and secular service providers to cite religious beliefs and evade compliance with the state’s anti-discrimination laws, which provide protection from discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, and public education.”

Chris Erchull, staff attorney for GLBTQ Legal Advocates and Defenders (GLAD), agreed and cited cases where religious freedom was used to deny same-sex couples essential health care and allow a employer to stop a transgender woman from wearing a woman’s uniform.

“I am not exaggerating on this point, and I want to be clear that legislation like this is frequently applied to override nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ people,” he said. “These are all real-life examples that have had devastating effects on people’s lives.”

After COVID-19 set off a public health crisis, half the states included religious exemptions in their social-distancing requirements. The exceptions were the 10 states, including Vermont, that prohibited religious gatherings all together and the 15 that set no restrictions. The rest, including New Hampshire, restricted only the number of attendees at a service. In May, Gov. Chris Sununu increased the limit from fewer than 10 people to 50 percent capacity. He recently lifted all capacity limits.

House Bill 542’s prime sponsor, Rep. Keith Ammon, a New Boston Republican, said in an interview that the bill’s opponents are misconstruing his intent. Should the state experience another state of

emergency, Ammon wants churches deemed an essential business, along with retailers and liquor stores, and provided the same freedoms to operate.

“There’s no intention of the bill to allow for the discrimination in the public sphere,” he said. “I don’t see that as a rational argument against the bill.”

Several pastors said Wednesday the governor’s emergency order restrictions not only violated a protected right to practice religion but made it difficult to care for their congregations at a time they needed it most.

“My church has been a lifeline for many in our church family during these unprecedented times,” said Jim Anan, assistant pastor at Elevate Church in Littleton. “We’re not meant to live in isolation, devoid of human contact in this digital virtual world we have been told to accept as the new normal.”

Pastor Nate Pickowicz of Harvest Bible Church in Gilmanton Iron Works said it was the places of worship that were discriminated against by the state’s emergency orders.

“To be able to get a haircut or go to Lowe’s and get wood, but yet still not be able to go to church, just struck against my personal conscience,” Pickowicz said. He said the restrictions prevented a fellow pastor from properly caring for a family who had lost a son to suicide. “You had a family that was by themselves after losing a child,” he said. “But under the mandates he was unable to minister to that family, and that just breaks my heart.”

https://www.sentinelsource.com/news/local/in-legislative-push-for-religious-liberty-some-see-potential-for-discrimination/article_507e3a1a-68a8-5834-8204-e510c918d300.html