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STATEMENT OF THE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE
IN SUPPORT OF THE EQUALITY ACT, H.R. 5

The Religious Institute is a national, multi-faith organization which represents more than 10,000 people of faith and religious leaders dedicated to advocating for sexual, gender, and reproductive justice in faith communities and society. We work every day with faith communities dedicated to the liberation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people from all forms of systemic and interlocking oppression. We envision a world where all people are free, where bodies and souls are not subject to systems of control, and where those on the margins are able to flourish. In our work with faith communities, we work with countless people of faith whose beliefs, values, and consciences motivate them to advocate for a common good which includes a more just society for LGBTQ people. We know that millions of people of faith support non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ people because of—not in spite of—their faith. According to a March 2019 study from the Public Religion Research Institute, “solid majorities of all major religious groups in the U.S. support laws protecting LGBT people from discrimination in housing, public accommodations, and the workplace.”¹

Faith-based support for non-discrimination protections has grown over the past several years as theologians, religious leaders, and people of faith have increasingly articulated a moral and theological vision which acknowledges the inherent dignity, worth, and belovedness of LGBTQ people specifically. Just as our society has grown in its understanding of and respect for the experiences of LGBTQ people, so have faith communities grown in their support of the LGBTQ community. This support is grounded in values deeply rooted in faith and in an awareness that LGBTQ people are an integral and indivisible part of all faith communities. When faith communities advocate for non-discrimination protections, they do so on the basis of the “Golden Rule,” believing that we must respect and love others as ourselves in our words, deeds, and laws. Faith-rooted support for non-discrimination protections is also grounded in a range of theological concepts which call on people of faith to defend the vulnerable and marginalized, including the “preferential option for the poor,”² the call to “do no harm,”³ and the long religious tradition of

¹ Public Religion Research Institute, “Fifty Years After Stonewall: Widespread Support for LGBT Issues – Findings from American Values Atlas 2018,” 26 March 2019, <https://www.prii.org/research/fifty-years-after-stonewall-widespread-support-for-lgbt-issues-findings-from-american-values-atlas-2018/>, Accessed 10 April 2019.

² For more on the preferential option for the poor, see Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. New York: Orbis Books, 1988.

³ For more on the principle of do no harm, see Marie M. Fortune, *Love Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics for the Rest of Us*. New York: Continuum, 2006. See also United Methodist Church, “General Rules of the United Methodist Church,” *United Methodist Book of Discipline*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016.

social justice.⁴ Many conservative religious traditions even have official teachings which counsel against unjust forms of discrimination against LGBTQ people.⁵

As people of faith, our task is not only to articulate our beliefs but also to apply them to every aspect of our lives. That means working to ensure that all LGBTQ people can live free from discrimination or fear of being turned away simply for who they are or how they love. Sadly, that is not the case at present in the United States. Currently, there is a patchwork of state-based protections and federal laws which do not provide clear and explicit protections for all LGBTQ people. Without clear protections, LGBTQ people continue to be vulnerable to discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations, and other key areas of life. According to a 2015 poll by the Human Rights Campaign, around two-thirds of LGBTQ people report having experienced discrimination in their daily lives.⁶ In a nationally-representative survey published in 2017, the Center for American Progress found that one in four LGBTQ people experienced discrimination in the prior year alone.⁷ In that same study, 48% of LGBTQ people reported that discrimination “negatively impacted their spiritual well-being.”⁸ The realities of discrimination are especially acute for transgender people and LGBTQ people who live at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities—including people of color, people in poverty, and people with disabilities.

Our religious teachings and faith-based convictions require that we respond to this injustice and work to end the harm caused by discrimination. That is why we at the Religious Institute have joined with more than fifty faith-based organizations to publicly endorse the Equality Act (see Appendix A). The Equality Act offers a moral response to the current gaps within our federal law, providing clear and explicit protection to LGBTQ Americans on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. Together, our organizations represent hundreds of thousands of people of faith, from all fifty states, and nearly every religious tradition. We are united in our support for the Equality Act and our belief that federal law must protect LGBTQ people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

As people of faith, we believe it is possible to both protect LGBTQ people from unjust discrimination and uphold the freedom of religion. As people of faith, we understand first-hand the importance of the freedom of religion. We rely on this freedom every day to hold the beliefs we choose and to practice our faiths free from discrimination. We are especially aware of the ways the freedom of religious minorities—especially Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh Americans—has been under threat in recent years. The freedom of religion is one of our nation’s most fundamental values, which is why it is protected in the Constitution. Nothing in the Equality Act impacts our freedom of religion as guaranteed under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The

⁴ For more on religious histories of social justice, see Ed. Michael D. Palmer and Stanley M. Burgess, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2012. See also Albert J. Raboteau, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals & Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

⁵ See, for example, paragraph 2358 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which reads, in part, that LGBTQ people “must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995. See also paragraph 162J of the *United Methodist Book of Discipline*, which reads “Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for all persons, regardless of sexual orientation.” *United Methodist Book of Discipline*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016.

⁶ Human Rights Campaign, “New HRC Poll Shows Overwhelming Support for Federal LGBT Non-Discrimination Bill,” 17 March 2015, <https://www.hrc.org/blog/new-hrc-poll-shows-overwhelming-support-for-federal-lgbt-non-discrimination>, Accessed 10 April 2019.

⁷ Center for American Progress, “Widespread Discrimination Continues to Shape LGBT People’s Lives in Both Subtle and Significant Ways,” 2 May 2017, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/news/2017/05/02/429529/widespread-discrimination-continues-shape-lgbt-peoples-lives-subtle-significant-ways/>, Accessed 10 April 2019.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Equality Act simply reinforces the fact that that freedom can't be used to harm or discriminate against others.

Our faith traditions teach us that we have an obligation to be part of healing the world. That healing begins with respecting the sacred dignity and worth of all people—ensuring that no one is subjected to discriminatory or unjust laws. The time for justice is always now. We call upon Congress to pass the Equality Act, updating our federal laws to ensure that all people are clearly protected from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. If, as Dr. Cornel West says, “justice is what love looks like in public,” passing the Equality Act is a critical step towards ensuring a more just and loving society.

Appendix A. Faith Organizations Endorsing the Equality Act

1. African American Ministers In Action
2. American Conference of Cantors
3. Anti-Defamation League
4. Auburn Seminary
5. BALM Ministries
6. Bend the Arc Jewish Action
7. Cathedral of Hope United Church of Christ
8. Catholics for Choice
9. Central Conference of American Rabbis
10. Charlotte Clergy Coalition for Justice
11. Christ Church: Portland
12. DignityUSA
13. Disciples Justice Action Network
14. Disciples LGBTQ+ Alliance
15. Estuary Space
16. Faith in Public Life
17. Forefront Church NYC
18. Freedom Center for Social Justice
19. Global Justice Institute, Metropolitan Community Churches
20. Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America, Inc.
21. Hindu American Foundation
22. Integrity USA: Episcopal Rainbow
23. Interfaith Alliance
24. Jewish Women International
25. Keshet
26. MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
27. Missiongathering Christian Church
28. Men of Reform Judaism
29. Methodist Federation for Social Action
30. Metropolitan Community Churches
31. More Light Presbyterians
32. Muslim Advocates
33. Muslim Public Affairs Council
34. Muslims for Progressive Values
35. National Council of Jewish Women

36. NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
37. New Ways Ministry
38. Rabbinical Assembly
39. Reconciling Ministries Network
40. ReconcilingWorks: Lutherans for Full Participation
41. Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
42. Religious Institute
43. Soulforce
44. T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights
45. The Episcopal Church
46. The Freedom Center for Social Justice
47. Union for Reform Judaism
48. Union of Affirming Christians
49. Unitarian Universalist Association
50. Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation
51. United Church of Christ, Justice and Local Church Ministries
52. United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries
53. United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism
54. Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER)