

# How the Equality Act Harms the Black Church

**T**he Black Church has served as the central institution in the life of the African American community since the ante-bellum period. And it still provides critical support for residents of poor black neighborhoods. However, the Equality Act poses a threat to the ability of the church to continue to play this role.

A vital motivation of the Black Church has been the biblical mandate to pursue justice for all people. For this reason, we passionately deplore acts of violence against individuals of any sexual orientation or gender identity. We stand against bullying of innocent teenagers and reject social ostracism of any person on the basis of sexuality or gender. We are committed to practicing compassionate understanding in dealing with gays and lesbians and to energetically defending their rights. We support all necessary legislative steps that ensure that LGBTQ individuals are treated fairly and with respect, while guaranteeing the religious and conscience protections provided in the constitution for people of faith and for those who adhere to no faith. As victims of injustice, we call for the fair and just treatment of LGBTQ people in particular.

However, our radical commitment to justice is rooted in our firm belief in the sovereign wisdom and love of our Creator. The freedom to live in accordance with our faith is the core of the Black Church. Concomitantly, the freedom of

every individual to obey her conscience is vital to the integrity of our nation. This freedom is at stake in the Equality Act.

The United States Congress is currently considering the Equality Act, H.R. 5, to expand nondiscrimination provisions for the LGBTQ community on the back of federal civil rights protections enacted to combat race discrimination. The provisions of the Civil Rights Act were created to address the legacy of slavery and the historical pattern of discrimination on the basis of race. The insinuation that sexual orientation and gender identity are analogous to race is obviously false. This comparison implies, incorrectly, a historical and existential equivalence between the experience of African Americans, who suffered the unique horrors of white supremacy, slavery, rape, terrorism and apartheid in the U.S. and the harm that LGBTQ individuals have endured.

For the black church, the ability to take action based on our faith is central to lives. Over 90% of our churches offer youth services, over 80% provide cash assistance, over 70% operate food pantries and over 65% carry out voter registration. These churches provide critical support for all poor and suffering residents of their communities. The role that the Black Church has played during the pandemic has been equally important. Congregations have provided emotional and practical support for the most vulnerable; clergy have mobilized resources to address vaccine hesitancy; churches have served as vaccination sites, in collaboration with government at all levels. But the Equality Act would jeopardize the church's ability to offer services to members outside their congregation. At great loss to our communities.

Since the Black Church upholds the biblical vision of human sexuality, gender and marriage churches would be forced to limit their services to their needy neighbors and the public in general. If they failed to do so, they would be vulnerable to law enforcement action under the Equality Act.

Furthermore, clergy will be pressured to censor orthodox Christian teaching on gender, sexuality and marriage. Otherwise, they will face potential legal

action. The chilling effect on pastors' speech will negatively impact the important spiritual programming that supports the provision of social services. The very foundation of the impetus to serve the poor will be undermined. The church will be the weaker for it.

In addition, clergy and church members will be forced to act and speak in contradiction to such teaching to support "gender transitions." Churches will be forced to host functions that violate their beliefs. Failure to do these things will engender lawsuits against themselves, lawsuits that they do not have the resources to defend against. Further, clergy will be distracted from the key task of nurturing their members.

Not only are churches in danger, the rights of individuals who hold the biblical view of marriage are at risk. They, especially those who work in the health professions, will be forced to act in a way that betrays those beliefs. They will be compelled to participate in abortions, sex-change operations, and uphold a false dichotomy between gender and biological sex. Some students who would prefer religious colleges will not be able to attend because those colleges will not be eligible for federal loan programs. The rights of these individuals must also be protected.

This threat to black churches comes on the heels of the damage done to the finances and membership rolls of many of them during the pandemic. Battling lawsuits and negative press coverage will spell the demise of countless houses of worship.

For all these reasons, the Equality Act is a great threat to the Black Church. It is critical that law makers radically revise this legislation to protect the rights of LGBTQ individuals, protect the freedom of conscience of all Americans and protect the freedom of the Black Church to teach and to serve.

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