



**Testimony Before the Committee on Health and Human Services
April 24, 2023**

IN OPPOSITION TO:

LD 172: An Act to Allow Health Care Workers to Return to Work by Reinstating Exemptions from Immunization Requirements

LD 601: An Act to Reduce the Shortage of Municipal Emergency Medical Services Personnel by Removing Certain Vaccination Requirements

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Jane Field and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Council of Churches, an ecumenical coalition of seven mainline Protestant denominations: Episcopal, Lutheran (ELCA), Methodist (UMC), Presbyterian (PCUSA), Quaker, Unitarian Universalist and the United Church of Christ, and two associate member churches, who combined have 437 congregations across the state with 55,000 parishioners in their care.

As you consider LD 172 and 601, it is important for you to know that *none* of our seven denominations opposes mandating vaccination requirements. All of us support using vaccines to protect children and adults from diseases that can spread throughout a community and have the potential to cause extreme illness or even death, particularly among at-risk individuals, older residents, and our Black, Brown and indigenous neighbors. Therefore, **we oppose LD 172 and LD 601.**

It is important to note that we are not alone. NONE of the world's major religions opposes requiring vaccinations—not Buddhism, Mormonism, Judaism, Islam, not even Jehovah's Witnesses nor the Christian Science Church. The concern that some may raise about the gelatin used in some vaccines being derived from pork products is a red herring. This issue has been examined by a world council of Imams and by a council of rabbis of every sect of Judaism (Muslims and Jews are forbidden from consuming pork). The Imams made a ruling that the gelatin is "not of theological concern" because the process the pork products undergo to become gelatin converts it from being *haram* (forbidden) to *halal* (allowed), thus making vaccines acceptable and encouraged for Muslims. Rabbis argue that the enormous good done by vaccines far outweighs any theological concern about kosher laws and they, too, encourage adherents to be vaccinated. In fact, Jews have one of the highest rates of vaccine compliance amongst people of faith worldwide.

So, all major religions explicitly *encourage* vaccination; some religious leaders (Pope Francis among them) even call it a "moral obligation" and the Dalai Lama has personally administered polio vaccine to children. There is simply no valid reason why someone's religious beliefs should be allowed to exempt them from receiving a vaccine.

Like our fellow people of faith who practice other traditions, the member denominations of the Maine Council of Churches uphold the fundamental religious value of loving neighbor as self, so although we are firm proponents of an individual's right to practice their religion, we do not believe the exercise of religious freedom should be allowed to pose a risk to public health or cause harm to our neighbors. The right to practice religion freely does not include the liberty to expose the community to communicable disease, sickness or death. (The conservative Supreme Court Justice, Antonin Scalia, shared this view, by the way.)

Despite what some try to claim, in the United States we have historically acknowledged **there are limits to the practice of religious liberty as protected under the First Amendment.** Throughout American history, religious liberty did not include religious exemptions from secular laws that apply to everyone. As the Supreme Court has observed: "To permit this would be to make the professed doctrines of religious belief superior to the law of the land, and in effect to permit every citizen to become a law unto himself."

We are concerned that the health of all Mainers would be severely jeopardized if the Legislature reverses its decision to eliminate the religious exemption and ignores the overwhelming majority of Mainers who voted to uphold that decision in the people's veto referendum three years ago.

For these reasons, we at the Maine Council of Churches have consistently offered strong public support for removing the religious exemption from Maine's vaccine rules and regulations and why **we now urge you to vote OUGHT NOT TO PASS on LD 172 and 601.**