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OFFICE OF JUSTICE, PEACE, AND INTEGRITY OF CREATION

Testimony in Opposition to SB 172

Chairman Patton and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to address SB 172 today, my name is John Shively, and I am the Director of the Office of Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation at the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth. We oppose SB 172 because of the chilling effect this legislation would have on people of faith to authentically witness on behalf of the earth and all of God's creation.

Let me give you an example of one religious community: the Adorers of the Blood of Christ is a vowed community of Roman Catholic women founded in 1834. The Adorers, whose members live in Lancaster County Pennsylvania, adopted a Land Ethic in 2005. That land ethic explicitly spoke to honoring the sacredness of creation and reverences the Earth as a sanctuary. Unfortunately, in 2015 the Sisters discovered that the Atlantic Sunrise natural gas pipeline was to run directly through the Sisters property. The Sisters continued to protest and demonstrate against the pipeline even after losing in court. One afternoon they stood in the middle of the pipeline site, handing out handmade bread to the pipeline workers before gathering in a circle to sing *Amazing Grace* and pray. ¹ Under this law, we could be charging aging nuns like those at the Adorers protest, or any person of faith with sincerely held religious beliefs, with felonies. Not only does this have a chilling effect on free speech and the ability to protest, but the penalties in the bill also seem disproportionate and excessive.

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/the-renegade-nuns-who-took-on-a-pipeline>

Kansas already has trespassing and other relevant laws criminalizing actions that this bill addresses, ultimately making this carve out unnecessary. The only real effect this bill would have is to curtail the rights of peaceful protestors who are engaging in direct action. The freedoms of speech and to peacefully assemble, enshrined in our Constitution, are integral to expressions of faith and the democratic process. Kansans and Americans have long enjoyed and protected these rights, and we ought to do our part in upholding these values in the legislation we pass.

We have had, in the past, some of our Sisters arrested for their faithful witness and protest against nuclear weapons. Peaceful protestors are not oblivious to the fact that their actions may have consequences. However, we believe the state does not serve the public interest by locking away women religious, priests, and other people of faith for excessive periods should they be prosecuted under this statute.

In Closing

We oppose SB 172 because

- The bill would criminalize protests such as those at Standing Rock and the Adorers of the Blood of Christ.
- The criminal penalties outlined in the bill are excessive.
- The bill is unnecessary given that the current statute already covers the myriad of crimes the bill is meant to address.

Thank you for reading my testimony today.