

Disciples look to pull convention from Indiana over religious freedom bill

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(RNS) Though the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has made Indianapolis its headquarters for nearly a century, the denomination is considering pulling its next biennial convention out of Indiana over a new state law that allows businesses to turn away gay customers.

Gov. Mike Pence signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act on March 26, the day after receiving a letter from church leaders pleading with him to veto it and threatening to move their 2017 General Assembly outside the state.

The bill protects business owners who invoke their religious beliefs to deny service to LGBT customers. A photographer, for example, may refuse to take pictures of a lesbian wedding on the grounds that his faith rejects gay marriage.

“Purportedly a matter of religious freedom, we find RFRA contrary to the values of our faith—as well as to our national and Hoosier values,” stated the letter, which was signed by Sharon E. Watkins, the church’s general minister and president, as well as the leaders of its overseas and domestic missions.

“As a Christian church, we are particularly sensitive to the values of the One we follow—one who sat at table with people from all walks of life, and loved them all.”

The General Assembly will bring more than 6,000 church members to whatever U.S. city the church decides upon and is expected to generate about \$5 million in tourism dollars. After Pence signed the law, ministry leaders said they are weighing the costs of moving not only the General Assembly, but smaller meetings — such as the more frequent gatherings of the 125-member board of directors—which most often meets in Indianapolis.

Todd Adams, associate general minister and vice president, said the church's board will decide whether to yank the General Assembly from Indianapolis at its next meeting, which begins on April 10.

Other businesses and conventions, including Gen Con, the world's largest gaming convention, which brings an estimated \$50 million to the state each year, have also threatened to find another place to hold their events.

NCAA president Mark Emmert on Thursday afternoon said in a statement that his organization, which hosts the men's basketball Final Four in Indianapolis next week, is "especially concerned about how this legislation could affect our student-athletes and employees" and that it will examine how Indiana's RFRA could impact future NCAA events in Indiana.

Pence, after signing the law, told reporters that Indiana "should have done this a long time ago," and he rejected the idea that Indiana would pay a financial price for the law. The state's economy is doing well and the media have misconstrued the bill, which does not sanction discrimination, he said, but protects government from forcing people to act against their deeply held religious beliefs.

Pence, a Republican, cited similar laws in dozens of other states, and the national Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which came into play in the controversial Supreme Court Hobby Lobby decision in 2014. Then, the court allowed the business an exemption from a part of the Affordable Care Act that Hobby Lobby owners find objectionable on religious grounds.

"Faith and religion are important values to millions of Hoosiers and with the passage of this legislation," Pence said in a statement, "we ensure that Indiana will continue to be a place where we respect freedom of religion and make certain that government action will always be subject to the highest level of scrutiny that respects the religious beliefs of every Hoosier of every faith."