

Disciples leaders join call for changes to Indiana's religious freedom law

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Leaders of the Indianapolis-based Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) spoke out against Indiana's religious freedom law, saying it could lead to discrimination against gays and others, and they voted to hold the denomination's biennial general assembly in another state. After the Indiana legislature revised the law to address the discrimination issue, Disciples leaders were reconsidering their stance.

Governor Mike Pence signed Indiana's Religious Freedom Restoration Act (which has the same name as a 1993 federal law) on March 26, seeing it as "raising the judicial standard that would be used when government action intrudes upon the religious liberty of Hoosiers," according to a statement April 2, the day he signed a "clarification bill."

In the days in between, the law had "become a subject of great misunderstanding and controversy," he wrote. "I called upon the Indiana General Assembly to clarify that this new judicial standard would not create a license to discriminate or to deny services to any individual as its critics have alleged."

Legislators amended the act to add "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" to the existing list of unacceptable bases of discrimination, which include race and religion. While the amendment clarifies that the law does not authorize discrimination, the law does not establish gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people as a protected group statewide.

Most areas of Indiana do not have a law giving individuals legal recourse if they believe they have been discriminated against in services, housing, or employment because of sexual orientation or gender identity. But in those places where there are legal protections, the amended law does not allow providers to cite religious beliefs as a defense in civil or criminal cases. Nonprofit religious organizations and their employees or leaders when "engaged in a religious or affiliated educational function" are exempt.

Several Disciples leaders had sent a letter to Pence before the legislation became law, saying that they found it to be "contrary to the values of our faith." The

Disciples general board had unanimously decided on March 31 to seek a new venue for the 2017 General Assembly previously scheduled for Indianapolis. Sharon E. Watkins, Disciples general minister and president, wrote in a statement that the board was concerned because there were not “state protections against discrimination for all people.”

State and national businesses and organizations, including the NCAA, which held its national basketball tournament in Indianapolis, opposed the original law as well.

After the amendment was announced, Watkins and Disciples moderator Glen Miles said in a statement that at the next general board meeting “there will be a recommendation to hold the 2017 assembly in Indianapolis.”

“This city has been home to our headquarters for at least eight decades, so our roots here are deep,” Watkins said. “We want to be able to welcome our members here.”