

March 10, 2021

To: Montana House Business and Labor Committee

From: Matthew Brower, Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference

Re: Testimony in support of SB 172

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Matt Brower and I currently serve as the Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference. I speak on behalf of the two Roman Catholic bishops of Montana.

I am here today to voice our support for Senate Bill 172.

Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded many of us of just how precious are those freedoms we in this country have too often taken for granted. It has also highlighted the important role government plays in safeguarding public health and safety and the tremendous responsibility our elected officials have in exercising their offices in a manner that serves the common good. Stories from around the country have reminded us how government actions can, intentionally or not, restrict the exercise of religious freedom.

For a significant number of Montanans, the past 12 months have presented challenges unlike any we have encountered in years and the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual toll it has taken on all of us is not yet fully known. However, throughout the darkest times of the pandemic, many people have found strength, support and connectedness in their faith communities. These communities and places of worship have helped sustain countless Montanans providing hope, joy and a sense of purpose at a time when those have seemingly been in short supply. In other words, religious exercise has provided something essential, feeding the souls of people of faith and empowering and compelling them to reach out to their neighbors in need.

Religious freedom is one of our fundamental rights, built into who we are as human persons and embraced in our nation's founding principles. Senate Bill 172 commits our state to protecting those principles by ensuring basic protections for religious exercise during times of public emergencies. By so doing, Senate Bill 172 helps to preserve not only a treasured right but one which will help us to navigate with grace, hope and peace the grave challenges that future crises could present.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, on behalf of the Montana Catholic Conference, I urge a "do concur" and thank you for your time.