

U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on the Judiciary  
Hearing on the Equality Act  
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Testimony of the Rev. Dennis W. Wiley, Ph.D.  
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**Who I Am**

Good morning. My name is The Reverend Dr. Dennis W. Wiley, Pastor Emeritus of the Covenant Baptist United Church of Christ in Washington, DC, which I pastored along with my wife, The Reverend Dr. Christine Y. Wiley, for 32 years. I am also a liberation theologian, a community activist, and a social justice advocate. As a religious leader, I am here today to express my full, unequivocal support of the Equality Act.

**What I Believe**

My support is based on my religious upbringing, my personal experience, and the influence of prophetic trailblazers like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In a speech titled “The American Dream,” delivered at Lincoln University in 1961, King observed that while morality cannot be legislated, “behavior can be regulated.” In other words, according to King, “It may be true that the law can’t make a [person] love me, but it can keep [that person] from lynching me . . .” Born and raised in Winston-Salem, NC until the age of 14 during the 1950’s and early 1960’s, I never witnessed the horror of lynching, but I did experience the injustice of racial segregation. Because of the color of my skin, I lived in a segregated neighborhood, attended segregated schools, shopped at segregated stores, ate at segregated restaurants, drank from segregated water fountains, used segregated restrooms, rode segregated buses, and sat in the balcony of a segregated movie theater after entering the side door and climbing 14 flights of stairs. And while I was constantly surrounded by the love of family, neighbors, church members, teachers, and friends, I could not help but notice that there was a sharp line of division between the black world in which I lived and the white world to which I was exposed primarily on television and in movies. But, as demonstrated in the landmark 1954 “Brown v. Board of Education” Supreme Court school desegregation decision, the intrinsic injustice of segregation is not racial *separation*, but racial *inequality*. Consequently, the so-called

“separate but equal” doctrine of the 1896 “Plessy v. Ferguson” Supreme Court decision proved to be little more than a 58 year old farce. And, to add insult to injury, courts and the public framed laws enforcing segregation and banning interracial marriage as morally sound and founded in Christian heritage.

And so it was not until I moved to the nation’s capital in the same year that the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed that I experienced white teachers, white classmates, and integrated public facilities for the very first time. And it was from that vantage point that my soul was able to look back and find some solace in the slow, and usually begrudging, American evolution from a country in which systemic racism permeated our laws to one with comprehensive civil rights protections in employment, public accommodations, and at the ballot box. All too often the racist laws that reinforced racism were justified and maintained by arguments purportedly rooted in religion. And the same is true for laws that fail to protect our LGBTQ brothers and sisters from those who would condemn them for who they are and who they love.

### **How I Practice What I Believe**

This is why, in our tenure as pastors of Covenant Church, my wife and I have unashamedly and unapologetically strived to build a “Beloved Community” where blacks and whites, men and women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and “queer” persons are not rejected but welcomed, not tolerated but celebrated, not excluded but included, not denigrated but elevated, and not discouraged but encouraged to be their true selves as they seek to realize their full, God-given potential. So when any of these precious human beings joined our church, we opened our doors, our arms, and our hearts so that they might become members with all the rights, responsibilities, and privileges that any other member enjoyed. This is why our black members have been encouraged to celebrate their heritage just as white members celebrate theirs. This is why women are eligible and able to serve in any and every position open to men, including pastor, deacon, and trustee. And this is why my wife and I successfully co-chaired DC Clergy United for Marriage Equality ten years ago, after conducting Holy Union Ceremonies for lesbian and gay couples years before Marriage Equality was legalized.

When my wife and I accepted the challenge to lead Covenant to become a “Beloved Community” that welcomes and affirms all, including LGBTQ persons, I was reminded that King once said, “Cowardice asks the question, ‘Is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question, ‘Is it politic?’ and Vanity comes along and asks the question, ‘Is it popular?’ But Conscience asks the question, ‘Is it right?’” Well, we did what we did at Covenant, not because it was safe, politic, or popular, but because we believed it was right. And I feel the same way today about supporting the Equality Act. As our LGBTQ brothers and sisters move around this nation, they should never have to fear losing a job, being evicted from a house or apartment, refused service at a restaurant, denied approval for a loan, or rejected admission to a school because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

### **A Personal Story**

In closing, I am reminded that a couple of years after we agreed to perform Union Ceremonies at our church, we went to New York to see our younger daughter act in a play toward the end of her second year at Juilliard. Shortly after we arrived in the city, she stopped by our hotel room for a visit because she said she wanted to share something with us. It was then that she came out to us as a lesbian. We were shocked because we did not see this coming. However, I immediately got up, went over to her, gave her a big hug, and told her how much I loved her. My wife was a little slower responding, not because she was disappointed or upset, but because, being a mother, she was afraid of what danger our daughter might face in this heterosexist, homophobic, transphobic society in which we live. Well, I am happy to tell you today that my daughter--who’s name is Samira Wiley—is doing just fine as a successful, Emmy Award winning actress who is happily married to the love of her life, Lauren Morelli. And, of course, her mom and I were proud to perform the wedding ceremony. And when I told Samira that I would be giving this testimony today, she wanted me to be sure to tell you that if we had not accepted her for whom she is, she would not have the courage, the confidence, or the self-esteem to be not only a successful actress, but also a positive role model for other LGBTQ persons. So let’s make sure that the Equality Act becomes law so that all of our beautiful, promising, gifted LGBTQ citizens, like my daughter and daughter-in-law, can live their lives free of fear, free of bigotry, and free of discrimination.