

MO Rally for Religious Freedom

Remarks by:

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Thank you for inviting me here today. As a woman, I want to make sure that everyone understands that this birth control mandate, and the public debate that surrounds it, isn't about "women's issues" at all. It's about all women--and men—it concerns all of us American citizens and our constitutional rights. We're all here today to oppose the government's attempt to control our choices; especially those of the most personal kind, those that violate our consciences. We are here to advocate for basic religious freedom. And I don't care what gender is speaking about religious freedom, as long as SOMEBODY is talking about it.

I am Lutheran Christian and an employee of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod with our headquarters in St. Louis, but we are a national church body of some 2.3 million members in over 6,200 congregations spread out across the United States.

I'm here because this is not just a Roman Catholic issue, nor is it an issue about birth control, nor is it an issue about women. Quite frankly, when I see it represented in the media that way, I instantly know the reporter hasn't done his homework.

You see, German immigrants came to the United States ---to Perry County, Missouri on the banks of the Mississippi-- way back in the mid-1800s. They came here because they were looking for a place where they were free to exercise their religious beliefs. That unique community of believers formed The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and quickly grew to build schools, churches, hospitals and orphanages across the nation.

We now operate over 2300 schools and early childhood centers and 10 universities. And we're not just active in this country. We care for the unmet health needs of thousands in a number of third-world countries. We've donated over 1 million dollars in needed pharmaceutical drugs in our medical and relief efforts overseas in the last few years. We do much for this country, and we do much for this world.

You see, that's because, along with the whole Christian church on earth, we believe in our responsibility to bring care and healing to a broken society, to both body and soul. We have a fancy theological name for that from the ancient Greek. It's called *diakonia*. It simply means "service." It is not charity; it is mercy. Mercy is intrinsic to Christian's life. It's not what we do. It's who we are. It is our identity. It is the mark of the church.

For religious people, mercy is not confined to our houses of worship. It is not about caring for ourselves. It's about caring for others, those outside the walls of the sanctuary and in the most needful areas of our society. Just as an example, there are thousands of faith-based non-profit hospitals across our nation that grew out of this legacy. Historically, these religious people shaped the very fabric of what our compassionate, modern American healthcare delivery system looks like today.

So here's the point: Religious folks have some street "cred" to bring to the table when we're talking about public health and the good of our society. Faith-based organizations, no matter what denomination or creed, have a long history and a vested interest in our society, and we have much to contribute in the future. We can be a valuable asset to the government as we help to address the many needs in our society. But we can only do so if we are given the freedom to work within the framework of our deeply-held beliefs. This anti-conscience mandate doesn't allow that. It strips us of the protection of the free exercise of our First Amendment religious rights.

Remember, this debate is not about contraception. Nobody is advocating for denial of access. Nobody is threatening women's health. Nobody is outlawing anything for the general population. Rather, this debate is simply about us being forced to pay for products and services contrary to our religious beliefs. We cannot be expected to check our faith at the door!

Religious people believe that our bodies are temples of the Lord, that we were created in His image. That means there are spiritual and theological considerations that come into play when we make our health-care choices. This mandate has opened Pandora's Box and introduced forced compliance with government regulations that are way outside the bounds of the First Amendment. This time it's ostensibly contraception. But what will it be next time? Government intrusion into our end-of-life decisions, or parental authority for a minors' health decisions? The list is ominous. Simply put, the government should NOT be telling the church what its morals and practices should be.

And, quite frankly, this HHS mandate says a lot about the trajectory of movement on future issues of religious freedom and our ability to engage our faith within society. We are afraid that this current mandate is just the tip of the iceberg, leading the way to more and more government intrusion into our freedom of conscience. Right now before the highest court in our land, lawyers are arguing that this attempt at health care "reform" is not only ineffective, but completely unconstitutional. The simple fact that the Supreme Court has devoted an unprecedented 3 days toward hearing these arguments should tell everyone what an overgrown and overreaching piece of legislation this is.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is opposed to this anti-conscience mandate because it runs counter to the biblical truth of the sanctity of human life. And we are committed to ensuring that we remain free to practice the teachings of our faith and that our religious rights are not violated. We want to continue to respond to Christ's call to care for our neighbor...wherever that may be—in the pew, or in the streets. But to do this, the federal government must remove itself from, and stay out of, our consciences.