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Oral Testimony to the Joint House and Senate Committees on Redistricting

Sen. Rick Wilborn, chair

Overland Park, August 12, 2021

Mr. Chair, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Rabbi Moti Rieber; I serve as executive director of Kansas Interfaith Action, a statewide, multi-faith issue-advocacy organization that “puts faith into action” by educating, engaging and advocating on behalf of people of faith and the public regarding critical social, economic and climate justice issues. We have partnerships with several of the major mainline denominations in Kansas, including the Central States Synod of the ELCA Lutheran Church, the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference of the United Church of Christ, and the Mercy & Justice Team of the Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church.

KIFA has been involved in voting rights issues for several years now. This because we believe that this is the way to put into political practice what Scripture teaches -- that every person is equal in the sight of God. When districts are drawn intentionally to favor one or another party, then some voters are being given greater value than others. This takes the voice and vote from people who are in the minority – politically, economically, or ethnically or racially. It demoralizes and disenfranchises voters, fragments communities, contributes to the hyperpolarization and ideological segregation of our politics, and undermines trust in government.

Our specific concerns are in three areas:

- First, that redistricting be a fair and transparent process. As I believe you’ve heard at the other meetings this week, a major concern about this process is that it is designed to lead to a predetermined outcome – the political gerrymandering of Kansas’ electoral boundaries. The fact that these meetings are being held with short notice and during working hours contributes to this belief. We urge the committee to have another round of town halls after the census data has been released, to make sure of the broadest possible public mandate.

In addition, when lines are drawn, they should be drawn in as non-partisan a way as possible. In fact, we encourage you to keep the lines as close to those drawn by the courts 10 years ago as possible; accommodating, of course, population shifts in the meantime.

- Second, that communities of mutual interest remain connected. Wyandotte and Johnson County, as different as they are in some ways, are geographically linked and have many shared political and economic interests. Splitting them up would undermine the viability of one of the

most diverse and most economically and culturally vibrant parts of the state.

- Thirdly, and related to the previous point: that the electoral strength of disadvantaged communities, particularly communities of color, immigrant communities, and working people, not be diluted, but rather, be maximized, by the redistricting process. Putting Wyandotte County in the First Congressional District, as has been persistently rumored, would not only break up the common interest of the two counties, but would, with devastating impact, dilute the strength of already marginalized communities. Another ready example is Topeka – a largely Black and brown city, it would be very easy to slice it like a pie, with the pieces going out into the surrounding countryside. This might be politically advantageous, but it would serve to deprive already marginalized communities of meaningful political representation.

Just to recap: the communities of faith that comprise Kansas Interfaith Action take very seriously our role in the American experiment of self-government. In a democracy, no one or party should get a weighted vote. Fairly drawn districts best represent the ideal that we are all of equal worth and value. The goal must be not the maximization of the power of one of the other of the major parties, but a process that makes sure all of us, great and small, have an equal voice, and equal ability to participate in choosing our representative government.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to engaging with you further as this process moves forward.