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Testimony in Support of SB 683 10 March 2021

Dear Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chair Thomsen, and members of the committee,

For the record, my name is Rev. J.W. Matt Hennessee, I serve as Senior Servant of Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church in Portland, Oregon and as co-chair of the board of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. In 2017, following the horrific acts of white supremacist violence in Charlottesville, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon published a [statement](#) condemning white supremacy and urging “families, faith communities and schools to nurture and teach love, not hate, to our children.”¹ **Today, EMO once again calls on our state to teach the truth about racial oppression, resilience and reconciliation by passing SB 683, the Anti-Racism Curriculum Act.**

As a response to last summer’s Black Lives Matter protests, this bill is fully consistent with EMO’s belief that “inherited assumptions, old divisions and current understandings of our world and ourselves demand continual re-examination in light of changing social conditions.”² SB 683 requires that children K-12 learn not only about the racist history of this state and country, but also the present-day consequences of that history and potential solutions for building an anti-racist society. In the past year, many of Oregon’s children have learned the names of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, regardless of their parents’ political affiliations. Now, Oregon’s teachers and school districts have a decision to make; either pretend that these names have no connection to our country’s history or teach students about the multigenerational white supremacy that continues to tear apart families, communities and the nation. It is with love for our state and country that we urge the latter.

In the Christian tradition, “contemplation” is famously defined as “taking a long, loving look at the real.”³ “Taking a long, loving look at the real,” includes the shameful aspects of our country, which have not respected the rights of citizenship for all citizens, nor respected the human rights of all people, especially those racialized as non-white. The history of racism is too often ignored, avoided, or misrepresented, and Oregon is no exception.

We know that racial indifference enables systemic racism but can be overcome through education on our history of racism and anti-racism skills. We stand with other advocates of SB 683 and affirm that education can and should help play a critical role in understanding and providing the framework for dismantling systemic and institutional racism in Oregon and across the nation. Racism is America’s original sin that remains baked into our structures and our self-understanding, including the way we teach history. As people of faith, we affirm that it is our moral imperative to acknowledge this sinful history in hopes of a more just, equitable, and moral future.

We thank you for your work and for your consideration of this essential legislation.

In partnership,

The Reverend J.W. Matt Hennessee
Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church
Portland, OR

¹ Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, “EMO Statement Condemning Violence in Charlottesville,” Aug. 14, 2017, https://emoregon.org/pdfs/Press/2017_Violence_in_Charlottesville_statement.pdf.

² Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, “Statement of Social Principles and Concerns,” revised 2012, https://emoregon.org/pdfs/Public_Policy/EMO_Statement_of_Social_Principles_rev2012.pdf.

³ Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, “Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real,” *Church* (Winter 1989), https://www.alliesonthejourney.net/uploads/7/4/7/4/74742015/burghardt_-_contemplation_a_long_loving.pdf.