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Four U.S. bishops, chairmen of U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops committees or subcommittees, have signed on to a letter voicing religious freedom concerns with the Equality Act, introduced in the House this year.

They are part of a group of a dozen Christian leaders who signed the May 7 letter to House members.

In the letter, the signers said they have "grave concern over the devastating consequences to religious freedom" should the bill pass in its current form.

The Equality Act "would devastate the core ministries of a wide range of religious groups, especially those ministries that serve the most vulnerable and that help form members of our faiths to serve the common good," they said.

The bill would "add the terms 'sexual orientation' and 'gender identity' to the definition of 'sex' in federal civil rights laws and have wide-reaching consequences for both employment and delivery of service standards in religiously affiliated schools, shelters, foster care and adoption agencies, potentially houses of worship, and other facilities and ministries," it added.

"These religious freedom concerns are not hypothetical or academic. The Equality Act undercuts the religious freedom of millions of Americans who live out their faith by serving others through religiously motivated charitable ministries and

organizations."

The letter cited several potential ill effects:

– "Houses of worship and other religious spaces will be turned into places of 'public accommodation.'"

– "Federal funds will be denied to thousands of houses of worship, schools, and charities that currently receive them."

– "Religious adoption and foster care providers would be devastated, harming innocent children and families."

– "Many privately funded shelters for the homeless and victims of domestic violence would be rendered illegal, ripping a hole in the social safety net."

– "Core rights would be stripped from religious colleges and universities."

– "Houses of worship, religious charities, and religious individuals will lose the protection of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act."

– "Religious individuals would be forced to take part in weddings and funerals that violate their religious beliefs."

"The Equality Act regulates a huge new swath of religious activity and facilities as 'public accommodations' and transforms the conditions by which hundreds of thousands of faith-based entities partner with the federal government to serve the common good," the letter said. "It accomplishes these goals while bringing the daunting power of the federal government to bear against religious people and groups with nonconforming views about marriage, sexuality, and gender."

The bishops who signed the letter are Bishop Frank Dewane of Venice, Florida, chairman of the U.S. bishops' conference Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development; Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky, chairman of the U.S. bishops' conference Committee for Religious Liberty; Bishop Michael Barber of Oakland, California, chairman of the bishops' conference Committee on Catholic Education; and Bishop James Conley of Lincoln, Nebraska, chairman of the bishops' conference Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage.

Kurtz, Dewane and Conley, on March 20, sent their own letter to members of Congress on the Equality Act, contending the bill would "regulate thought, belief and speech," "explicitly retract religious freedom" granted by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, "hinder quality health care," "endanger privacy, "threaten charitable services" and "exclude people from various career paths and livelihoods."

"The Equality Act would impose sweeping regulations to the detriment of society as a whole" and its "definitions alone would remove women and girls from protected legal existence," the three bishops said in March. "Furthermore, the act also fails to recognize the difference between the person – who has dignity and is entitled to recognition of it – and the actions of a person, which have ethical and social ramifications. Conflating the two will introduce a plethora of further legal complications," they said.

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