

# Pastor Protection Bill advances

May 22, 2015

AUSTIN—A bill intended to protect ministers from being forced to participate in same-sex marriage ceremonies or being sued for denying gay couples the use of church sanctuaries for their weddings cleared another hurdle.

The Texas House of Representatives tentatively approved [SB 2065](#) by Sen. Craig Estes, R-Wichita Falls. Sen. Craig Estes, R-Wichita Falls, on a 141-2 vote. The bill—which the Senate already passed—requires a second House vote before going to Gov. Greg Abbott, who already expressed his support for it.

Rep. Scott Sanford, R-McKinney, had introduced a companion bill that died before a midnight May 14 House deadline, but he subsequently sponsored the Senate-approved version in the House.

The bill stipulates a minister cannot be required to officiate at a marriage ceremony if it violates sincerely held religious beliefs. It also says refusal to provide services or facilities for such a wedding could not be the basis for civil or criminal action.

In earlier public hearings, many ministers from around the state—including Texas Baptists—testified in support of the legislation, seeking protection against potential discrimination lawsuits. Gus Reyes, director of Texas Baptists' [Christian Life Commission](#), likewise testified in support of the bill.

Some mainline Protestant churches with connectional polity objected to the bill, asserting it could create lawsuits for hierarchal denominations when their ministers or other church employees hold beliefs contrary to the denomination's official position on same-sex marriage. Those denominations, represented by [Texas Impact](#), wanted the bill amended to

say it is not intended to provide a cause of action for lawsuits within denominations.

However, when Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, offered that amendment, Sanford successfully resisted it.