

After Prop 8, Mormons take different tact in Hawaii gay marriage fight

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SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) After keeping quiet while Maine, Maryland, Minnesota and others approved gay marriage, Mormon leaders are once again speaking up — but with a new, post-Proposition 8 tone and emphasis.

This time, it's in Hawaii, which is poised to debate proposed legislation making same-sex marriage legal.

In a letter dated Sept. 15 and read to congregations across the state, Hawaii Mormon leaders urged members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to “study this legislation prayerfully and then as private citizens contact your elected representatives in the Hawaii Legislature to express your views about the legislation.”

The letter did not tell members which side of the issue to take, only to study the church's “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” a document that endorses one man/one woman as the ideal for marriage.

Whether Mormons favor or oppose the potential change, the letter said, they should push for “a strong exemption for people and organizations of faith” that would protect religious groups “from being required to support or perform same-sex marriages or from having to host same-sex marriages or celebrations in their facilities; and protect individuals and small businesses from being required to assist in promoting or celebrating same-sex marriages.”

Owen Matsunaga, one of the stake presidents over a number of Mormon congregations and the church's spokesman in Hawaii, said LDS leaders in Salt Lake

City “are certainly aware of the issues in Hawaii” but expect local leaders and members to make decisions specific to local circumstances.”

“Our position in Hawaii,” Matsunaga wrote in an email, “is entirely consistent with the church’s doctrine and in harmony with this pattern.”

This new approach in Hawaii is “significant,” said Quin Monson, a political scientist at LDS church-owned Brigham Young University. “It doesn’t seem to be asking for direct involvement in the direction of the legislation, but asking people to defend religious liberty.”

The letter’s language seems to “signal a kind of resignation that there’s a shift in society that we can’t stop,” Monson said, “but we can ask for exceptions.”

It’s far different from the tenor and tactics the Utah-based faith unleashed in 2008 to help pass California’s Proposition 8, which limited marriage to a man and a woman. In that case, the initial letter came from the governing LDS First Presidency and directed members to “do all you can to support the proposed constitutional amendment by donating of your means and time.”

Mormons helped raise millions for Prop 8, and the measure passed, only to be overturned by the courts.

Mormons, who account for more than 5 percent of Hawaii’s population, also quietly worked to defeat the Aloha State’s push for gay civil unions in the mid-1990s.