

Mormons back housing, job rights for Salt Lake gays: A patch of common ground

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With the passage in November of nondiscrimination laws in Salt Lake City that expand gay rights, Mormon officials and gay activists have found a patch of common ground in Utah's capital.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and gay organizations both advocated for the laws that prevent discrimination in housing and employment. That shows there are some issues on which conservative religious groups and gay rights supporters can agree, said Will Carlson, director of public policy at Equality Utah, a gay rights organization.

"I think there's this myth of God versus gay," he said. "This week helps to dispel that myth, at least at some level."

Michael Otterson, a spokesman for the Latter-day Saints, appeared among dozens of speakers November 10 before the Salt Lake City Council, saying the ordinances are "fair and reasonable" and do not harm heterosexual marriage.

"The city has granted commonsense rights that should be available to everyone, while safeguarding the crucial rights of religious organizations," Otterson told the council.

Carlson said it was "really inspiring" to hear Otterson's comments. "Especially in Utah, a lot of LGBT people were raised LDS," he said. "It was very cathartic to hear the LDS church say that they agree that people shouldn't be fired for being gay or transgender."

After the passage of California's Proposition 8, an initiative that banned gay marriage and received significant financial support from Mormons, Equality Utah had sought LDS church officials' support for other gay rights initiatives, including

probate, insurance and health matters.

LDS church spokeswoman Kim Farah said her church's support of the ordinances was not a response to Equality Utah's requests. Instead, she said, church officials affirmed the ordinances because "the city managed to draw a bright line between religious freedom and family issues and civic issues like housing and employment."

She said the church has not committed itself on any upcoming legislative proposals. "The church reserves judgment on any future legislation," she said. "We are not prepared to speculate on something we haven't seen."

Harry Knox, director of the Human Rights Campaign's Religion and Faith Program, said he hopes "the LDS church will commit the same level of resources to ensuring full employment protection to everyone as it did to deny marriage equality to loving, same-sex couples in California."

The Sutherland Institute, a Salt Lake City-based conservative think tank, expressed disappointment in the church's action.

"As a public relations opportunity, the LDS church's statement before the Salt Lake City Council may assuage the minds and soften the hearts of advocates of 'gay rights' in Utah," the institute said. "As a policy statement, it is problematic. The approved ordinances before the Salt Lake City Council are unsound in principle, clarity, and effect." -*Religion News Service*