

Swiss urged to continue to allow Mormon missionaries

by [Thomas Burr](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Thirteen members of Congress are urging Swiss authorities to allow Mormon missionaries to continue serving beyond 2012, when a new rule would forbid non-European Union citizens from serving as missionaries.

Sens. Bob Bennett and Orrin Hatch, both Utah Republicans, and Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah, joined other Mormon members of Congress in urging the Swiss government to meet with leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to figure out a way for missionaries to continue serving in the country.

"It would be a great tragedy for our two nations if the long-standing missionary program of the LDS Church in Switzerland were terminated," the members wrote. "Switzerland can have no more enthusiastic, lifetime ambassadors in the United States than these young people when they return home."

Switzerland, which is not a member of the EU, entered into an accord with the EU in 2002 that allows European nationals to seek employment in the country while restricting work permits for citizens of other countries, according to a report by Swissinfo.ch. A recent court ruling found missionaries are considered "gainfully employed" and subject to the accord.

The existing transition agreement allowed a maximum of 80 Mormon missionaries from the U.S. into the country this year, and 50 will be allowed in 2011 but no more after that, the news agency reported.

"This is really an employment law issue," said Robert Smith, managing director of Brigham Young University's International Center for Law and Religion. "It has to do with how to regulate the inflow of immigrants. The catch is that they've ruled that missionaries are employees and therefore subject to immigration restrictions."

The basic idea for the Swiss government, Smith said, is "to treat all religious groups equally."

Church spokesman Scott Trotter said the Utah-based church has a long history in Switzerland dating to 1850 and that missionaries who have served there return with "great love and respect" for the country.

"We hope a solution can be found that allows missionaries, regardless of their country of origin, to continue to serve the Swiss people," Trotter said.

The church built its first European temple in Bern, according to the letter from the lawmakers, a point they say underscores the importance of the relationship between the church and the country.

Bennett said Tuesday he wasn't sure what to make of the response by then-Swiss Ambassador Urs Ziswiler, who wrote in October that it would be up to the "relevant communities" to decide whether to allow missionaries in.

"It isn't a flat no; it isn't a 'You guys are right' kind of response," Bennett said. "We certainly will continue to press on that issue because Mormon missionaries have been in Switzerland for over a century and for (the Swiss government) to decide now they're not going to let them in anymore is ... a demonstration of the level of intolerance on the part of the Swiss that is in no way consistent with the Swiss tradition."

The Swiss Embassy in Washington responded to a request for comment by forwarding a copy of Ziswiler's October letter.