

Immigration pits Mormons against church hierarchy

by [Peggy Fletcher Stack](#) in the [June 14, 2011](#) issue

For decades, Mormon conservatives have believed that their politics matched the positions of their church—opposing abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment and same-sex marriage, for example.

Now one issue puts conservative politics and church views seemingly at odds: immigration.

The

Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has called for compassion in dealing with undocumented immigrants. It has urged politicians not to divide families, while some members support detention and deportation.

Church leaders have unequivocally lauded a new Utah guest worker law, which authorizes a program that allows undocumented immigrants to pay fines and stay in the state. It's the same bill some leading Mormon conservatives are pushing to repeal, likening it to amnesty.

Unlike Mormon liberals, who long have struggled to balance support for their church with disagreement over some of its stances, these conservative members find themselves in an unfamiliar place.

And it's as uncomfortable as it is unexpected.

"This is a real crisis for some people," said Todd Weiler, former chairman of Utah's Davis County Republican Party. "They want to be good Mormons, yet they are absolutely convinced that [the immigration law] is amnesty and is bad." They are, he said, "freaking out."

U.S. Sen.

Mike Lee (R., Utah), who campaigned on eliminating the constitutional amendment that gives any baby born in the U.S. automatic citizenship, has expressed reservations about the state immigration law. Yet Lee also said he applauds his church's emphasis on compassion and humanitarian concerns.

"I don't think they were saying if you are a Latter-day Saint, you should say nothing but wonderful things about [the law]," Lee said, "or that anyone who voted against it has betrayed their religion."

Like Lee, Cherilyn Eagar, who sought the Senate seat that Lee won, sees herself in step with the LDS Church, even as she spearheads a campaign to repeal the immigration law. Eagar said she understands that her 14-million-member faith has a responsibility to "protect its interests," and an international church that puts a premium on overseas missionaries "has to protect its diplomatic relations," she said.

To its credit, Eagar said, the church does not expect members to follow blindly but rather encourages them to think for themselves, study the issues and come to their own conclusions. "We don't have to agree with every policy and everything that is spoken from church leaders' mouths," she said. —*Salt Lake Tribune*