

Houston Redux? Salt Lake City's Gay Mayor-elect Wants Sit-down with Mormons Over Church's 'Policy'

Jackie Biskupski, the openly gay mayor-elect of Salt Lake City, isn't happy that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a group better known as the Mormons, clarified its stance on its membership requirements. Under policies disclosed last week, the LDS Church won't accept as members or missionaries children of same-sex couples. She now wants a meeting with church leaders to discuss "policies."

The move evoked echoes of Houston's Mayor Annise Parker who, in a two-year battle over a human rights bill, at one point subpoenaed sermons from local pastors opposed to the measure and sought a public vote. Court rulings put the Houston bill on the ballot, where it failed spectacularly in November 2015.

In explaining its decision, LDS Church leaders emphasized that the moves were to avoid confusion within families, where a same-sex couple's child might encounter LDS teachings that contradict a home situation.

"We don't want the child to have to deal with issues that might arise where the parents feel one way and the expectations of the church are very different," Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the LDS Church's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, said in a statement released by the group.

Biskupski, whose election as Salt Lake City mayor is expected to be certified on November 17, told the *Salt Lake Tribune* she wants a meeting with LDS leaders about the new policy. She decried the Mormon move as "peculiar" in its timing and "potentially" as a reaction "to my election," she added.

"I'm trying to get in for a meeting now" with LDS officials, she told the newspaper during an online interview. "I definitely want to meet as soon as possible after Nov. 17 [when the vote is finalized] to talk about direction and issues, policies and different things."

Salt Lake City is headquarters to the LDS Church, which claims 15,372,337 members in 29,621 congregations around the world. While its doctrines set the movement apart from evangelical and charismatic Christianity, there has been a warming between Mormons and Protestants in recent years, much of it centered on the 2012 presidential bid of former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, a Mormon.

But the city itself is perhaps only 50 percent LDS, and has a significant and vocal gay community. Biskupski's election, fueled in part by commercial interests opposed to restrictions on advertising billboards, would mark the first time an openly gay politician has won the position.

Biskupski declined to speak with the *Deseret News*, the local daily newspaper owned by the LDS Church, about the matter. That newspaper quoted political science professor Matthew Burbank of the University of Utah, as saying it's good for both sides to talk.

"It's a substantively and symbolically important relationship," Burbank noted, adding the LDS Church is one Salt Lake's largest employers and property holders. "It's a good sign that her first instinct is wanting to meet with church leaders and talk about the issue rather than, for example, having a press conference and denouncing them."