

Mormon Church Thinks It Has a Solution to Gay Rights Advocates' Attacks on Religious Freedom

Lawmakers in conservative Utah on Wednesday introduced a landmark anti-discrimination bill, with the backing of the Mormon Church, that they said would prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation while also protecting religious freedom.

The proposal, which supporters hailed as a model for the rest of the country, would prohibit employers, landlords or property owners from discriminating against job applicants or tenants based on their gender identity or sexual orientation.

The bill would also provide protections for religious expression.

The Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints supports the bill. It praised lawmakers for striving to strike a balance between the many competing concerns in today's world.

"The principle that we have urged legislators to address is that of fairness for everyone. In a society which has starkly diverse views on what rights should be protected, the most sensible way to move forward is for all parties to recognize the legitimate concerns of others," it said in a statement.

"LGBT people cannot be fired or denied housing just for being gay. At the same time, religious conscience and the right to protect deeply held religious beliefs is protected by robust legislation."

While none of the parties got everything they wanted, the Church said, there was now a chance “to lessen the divisiveness in our communities without compromising on key principles.”

The bill proposes adding sexual orientation and gender identity clauses to the state’s existing anti-discrimination laws for housing and employment, which already prohibit bias on the grounds of race, sex, age and other factors.

If it passes, it says the law “may not be interpreted to infringe upon the freedom of expressive association or the free exercise of religion” protected by the Constitution.

The bill says employees may express religious or moral beliefs and commitments in the workplace “in a reasonable, non-disruptive, and non-harassing way.”

The proposal would exempt the Boy Scouts of America, which voted in 2013 to end a ban on gay youth members but still bars gay scout leaders.

Utah Senate Majority Whip Stuart Adams, who helped write the bill, said it had been challenging to try to ensure that everyone’s rights were respected, while no one’s were infringed.

“I think it’s monumental that we’ve been able to do that,” Adams, a Republican, told reporters. “If Utah can do this, in my opinion, it can be done anywhere in the nation.”

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